

Interview with  
THE HONORABLE BARBER CONABLE

by

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Q: What is your overall impression of the way in which Ford's legislative experience affected his conduct as President?

A: "I had a rather lively relationship with Jerry over the years. Almost immediately after he got to the White House he called me down from upstate New York and consulted me on my choices for a new Vice President. I asked him if he knew who he wanted and he told me that he wouldn't be asking me if he already knew who he would be selecting. It became very evident right from the start that Gerald Ford was talking with members of Congress on a wide range of subjects. Jerry was a creature of the Congress and he was interested in building on the strength of that relationship. He had a wise habit of depending on those he knew and trusted. We quickly learned that the legislative liaison team would be the best way to communicate with the President. President Nixon had deliberately chosen to downgrade the liaison channels because he was never really in touch with the mainstream of the Congress. He avoided the liaison because they dealt directly with the Congress. In Nixon's view, the liaison people were the handlers of unclean goods. The Ford administration represented an institutional upgrading of the points of contact with the Congress."

Q: Throughout his career, Ford showed a propensity for finding or creating organizations that would bolster his leadership by sharing the power of institutions with groups of decision makers. He did this in 1948 when he ran for the Home Front reform group against the McKay political machine. He did it in the House when he participated in the Chowder and Marching Society and created the House Republican Research Committee with its various issue task forces. He did the same thing in the presidency when he created the Economic Policy Board and accepted a collegial spokes of the wheel structure in the senior White House staff. Did you see this tendency in Ford or do you think I exaggerate it?

A: "Jerry always was aware of his own limitations. The average President, if there is such a thing, likes to hear what he wants to hear. Jerry surrounded himself with people who would present different sides of an issue. You always felt free to disagree without fear of offending him. His greatest asset was his judgement and this more than overbalanced any lack of expertise. Jerry wanted to hear everything so that he would not have to think that he had forgotten to consider something when it came time to make a decision. He liked to feel that the final position he adopted was fully tested. His genius was the constant substitution of the technique of having diverse opinions around him to make up for any lack of experience.

As for including others in the leadership, he was always over generous with me in that respect. He actually wanted me to attend meetings with the Nixon leadership staff and I was the junior guy. He put me in charge of a group called "lunch with Jerry Ford." It was a way of arranging for local chamber of commerce types to meet with a major

Republican Congressional leader. The members of Congress loved it, and though it was not any great responsibility, I was constantly reminded by Jerry that he was grateful that I would do this small thing for him.”

Q: H.R. Gross, in 1974, told Clark Mollenhoff not to place Gerald Ford so high up on the pedestal of expectations after the Watergate incident. He said that, he “had seen Ford operate for 25 years and that he would deal on anything.” What was Ford’s leadership style? Was he a dealer, a broker, a partisan infighter, or what?

A: “Ford was definitely not a dealer. Ford was a bridge builder. He didn’t sell anybody out to achieve his own ends or to gain more influence with the White House. Jerry was always a team player. Gross, on the other hand, was the type of guy who liked to do things in his own way. He was so individualistic that he actually resented teamwork. Ford recognized that our strength in the House came from collective action.

When Ford was first elected to the post of Minority Leader he had not spoken a great deal on the floor. He wasn’t a highly creative person but he was a really decent guy whom people liked. His strength was his good judgement not brilliant ideas. The younger members were really upset with Halleck’s cronyism. I think Ford was somewhat reluctant to become a leader. At first I was not particularly impressed with Ford but then I realized that LBJ was constantly taking pot shots at him. To me this proved that Jerry Ford wasn’t a dealer.

Charlie Halleck was like Everett Dirksen, he would have sold his grandmother for two federal judgeships. Ford was a master at surveying the scene and being able to tell what could be accomplished. I remember that, back in 1969, a group of the younger members known as Rumsfeld’s raiders decided that we ought to have some institutional changes to reform the seniority rules. This put Jerry in a heck of a fix with the senior committee guys. I went to Jerry to ask him to help us and he told me that, for a lot of reasons, the Democrats wouldn’t be able to support such changes. He also told me that he felt that this was something that a Republican leader could do with the help of some of the younger Democrats. Jerry formed a task force so that both wings in this great dispute could seriously discuss the basic proposals. It worked out just great and we made some needed changes. That, more than anything else I can remember, illustrates the way Ford operated. He would survey the terrain and find a way to build a bridge that could bring the members together for some meaningful form of accomplishment.”

Q: I have read that Ford was one of the Founders of the Chowder and Marching Society. What do you know about that group and the role it plays in House Republican politics?

A: “I was never in the Chowder and Marching Society. I was a member of the SOS group. The central activity of the SOS group was the Wednesday morning off-the-record breakfast which featured journalists, ambassadors, and other political types. I was program chairman for these breakfasts and that really helped my relationship with Jerry Ford. Mine was an informal duty and there wasn’t any real recognition for it. Jerry

recognized it. It was the type of unspoken and unheralded workmanship that symbolized Jerry's style of leadership.

The minority does not control the communications apparatus in the U.S. House of Representatives. These groups were part of the hidden leadership of the House Republican party. SOS was an early warning system for the members. If the dairy bill was coming up that week we would get together and tell all those members to be ready and they would all know exactly how the bill would affect the dairy farmers and groups that were going to be coming by to see them in their offices. The Chowder and Marching Society represented the first group of that nature. It was the prototype for groups like SOS. I joined SOS because I felt that it was a substantive working group. By the time I got to the House, I felt that the Chowder and Marching group was more social and far less substantive."

Q: A Minority leader has to have many qualities in order to effectively rally the troops. He has to be a legislative tactician, an issues spokesman, an ego soother, and a partisan debater. You served under three different minority leaders and your comments indicate more than a passing knowledge of a fourth (Halleck). Could you describe these men in comparison to Ford?

A: "It does not serve the purposes of scholarship to make any invidious comparisons. To put it best and be truthful, Jerry was the best of the minority leaders that I served under. He may not have been the most articulate of our leaders but he was just so fundamentally decent. Nobody could stay very mad at Jerry Ford for long. He was well respected by everyone. His major asset as a minority leader was that he really was a floor leader. He was perfectly willing to commit large amounts of time to be on the floor. He was always there and knew what was going on. We felt we could always count on Jerry to be prepared and to raise the right issues.

Jerry may not have been an innovator, whatever that is, but he stuck by the key Republicans who were supposed to be the experts. Ford had a standing policy of deferring to the senior Republican spokesmen on each committee. That is how Ford got into so much trouble on the open housing bill. Bill McCulloch was our senior man on the Judiciary Committee and he maneuvered Jerry and got him to go on the record against the civil rights bill. Then, after he had Ford publicly committed, he backed out and changed his vote on it. That just made me furious."

Q: It has been suggested that Ford's leadership approach changed markedly when Nixon went to the White House. He went from being a spokesman for alternative programs to being the administration's chief defender. I take special note that in 1973, you and Jerry Ford voted with President Nixon more than any of the other 433 members of the House. Did you perceive any fundamental difference in Ford once he got a Republican president to work with? Was there a minority mentality that caused House Republicans to reach out and get in line with the President?

A: “It is totally invalid to call Ford a rubber stamp for Nixon’s policies. I have thought a great deal about why I voted with Nixon so much in 1973 and it was more a matter of Nixon creating a solid center of gravity for Republicans. His legislative package had four central elements with which people like Jerry and I were in fundamental agreement. It was much easier to buy Nixon’s policies than his personality.

We followed conservative policies. We were not cocker spaniels to a Republican president. The first element in Nixon’s package was decentralization. Everybody seemed to think that Nixon would centralize power in the federal government but he was the president that initiated block grants and got behind revenue sharing. The Republican party has always taken a position on federalism that would encourage the states to take more responsibility. We depend on the federal government more than we should. The second thing that Nixon did more of than any other President that I can remember was to foster institutional reform. He also lived in the real world on fiscal policy. He took the middle course and listened to advisors and economic experts from both sides. The fourth element of his legislative package that I endorsed was his belief in strength through negotiation in foreign policy matters.

Yes, I think that it is reasonable to say that there’s a minority mentality but I can’t link that to jumping up on the presidential platform. We have always had young turk factions in the House. There is a frustration that comes from realizing that your views are less relevant if you don’t have the votes. A permanent majority and minority situation can result in a decentralized and irresponsible GOP and an arrogant and flabby Democratic majority.”