



Interview with
WILLIAM J. BAROODY, JR.

by

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EDITED TRANSCRIPT OF AN INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM J. BAROODY, JR.
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Q: IF I UNDERSTAND THINGS CORRECTLY, THE WHITE HOUSE OFFICE OF PUBLIC LIAISON WAS A CREATION OF THE FORD ADMINISTRATION. IS THAT TRUE AND IN ANY EVENT, HOW DID FORD DESCRIBE THE JOB TO YOU?

A: "Actually, the concept of a White House office of Public Liaison was very much my own proposal. I was one of the few Nixon holdovers among the senior Ford White House staffers. I had previously pitched the idea to President Nixon on two occasions but he was only about 25% behind the idea. After Nixon resigned in August of 1974, I offered to stay on at the White House to help the new president in any way that I could. I made the proposal for such an office to Jerry Ford and, almost immediately, he was 100% behind the idea. The office was created in September because we clearly had a mutual meeting of the minds on the goals we might achieve through public liaison. We were attempting to accomplish several things. What we got was a two way communications stream. The basic idea behind the public liaison concept was to create an office to deal with the public that was on the same level and complementary to the White House Offices of press and congressional liaison. The office served the fundamentally important purpose of providing a continual and systematic stream of communications concerning presidential positions on various issues to all the players with constituent requests. It increased their understanding of the President's proposals and enhanced the likelihood of getting their support for those positions. The communication also flowed the other way. It was a systematic opportunity for groups to make their views known to our administration. It was a most positive and truly effective early warning system. We always tried to involve cabinet secretaries and other major agency officials with these groups. On every Tuesday we tried to have a weekly session with the human services groups in the family theatre. Every other Wednesday we would have a meeting in which anywhere from 12-24 people, either representatives for trade associations or chief executive officers from corporations, would have the opportunity to meet with the appropriate administration officials in their substantive area of concern. Perhaps our biggest success was the Presidential townhome meetings or White House conferences on domestic and economic affairs. We created a roadshow where we would go into a particular city and try and set up an all day long meeting with 12 to 24 groups that we thought represented a true cross section of that community. We would set up an agenda and bring in the appropriate people from the administration. When I first envisioned the Presidential townhome meetings I thought that I could consider them successful if we could get President Ford to attend between 25-40% of them. He would come in at the end of the day and deliver a short speech of ten minutes or so. In fact, what Jerry Ford did was come in and give the speech and usually just completely open himself up for any questions the audience had. To my memory, he attended every presidential townhome meeting we held except one. Moreover, he really liked the meetings and they represented a logical outgrowth of all the campaign traveling he had done for the Republican party in the House over the years."

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Q: THERE SEEMS TO BE SOME CONFUSION ABOUT THE STAFFING STRUCTURE IN FORD'S WHITE HOUSE. IT IS CLEAR THAT HE INTENDED TO DIFFERENTIATE HIS WHITE HOUSE FROM THE NIXON WHITE HOUSE BY NOT NAMING A FORMAL CHIEF OF STAFF. IT'S ALSO CLEAR THAT HE INTENDED TO REVITALIZE THE NOTION OF CABINET GOVERNMENT AND SET UP SOMETHING CALLED A COLLEGIAL SPOKES OF THE WHEEL ADVISORY SYSTEM. WHAT CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT THE FORD STAFF STRUCTURE AND DO YOU THINK A COLLEGIAL PRESIDENCY IS POSSIBLE?

A: "Well, let me say this. The Ford White House staff was a collegial system because that is what Jerry Ford wanted and was comfortable with. At the same time, although Don Rumsfeld was not a Haldeman-type Chief of Staff, he was a lot more than a staff coordinator. One of the first things that Ford did was to hold an economic summit so that he could get the views of the country into the White House. The Ford style was to preempt the field by bringing in every relevant expert possible. At the economic summit, Ford sat for an entire day with all the chief economic advisors to presidents that were alive dating back to the Roosevelt administration. The man just operated that way in all his meetings with both the cabinet and staff. The main drawback to a collegial system is that you can't operate that way across the board. The exigencies of time eventually combine to prevent a president from spending all his time in meetings."

Q: WHEN FORD WENT TO CONGRESS IN 1948 HE HAD 3 STAFFERS. WHEN HE BECAME THE VICE-PRESIDENT HE HAD 56. THE WHITE HOUSE HAD 485 STAFFERS WHEN HE LEFT OFFICE. THAT REPRESENTS A TREMENDOUS GROWTH IN ADMINISTRATIVE RESPONSIBILITY. IT'S BEEN SUGGESTED THAT A HOUSE CAREER SIMPLY IS NOT MUCH OF A PREPARATION FOR THE TREMENDOUS ADMINISTRATIVE TASKS FACED BY A CHIEF EXECUTIVE. DO YOU AGREE WITH THAT?

A: "Not necessarily. It's the man not the experience. I spent some time on the Hill on the legislative staff of Mel Laird. Laird went from being a House member to being Secretary of Defense with a staff of thousands. Yet in any historical account of Defense Secretaries, Laird is always rated as one of the two or three best people in that office. Ford's success is best demonstrated by virtue of the results. We should judge him, like any president, on the goals he set and how they affected the country. Under Ford, the inflation rate went from 12 to 4.8%. Under Ford, interest rates dropped from 16 to 6% in just a little over 2½ years. He made some very difficult decisions from a political standpoint that contributed to those numbers. One was his edict banning new programs because of the effect they would have on expenditures. Another was his positive use of the veto to achieve the intended result. The vetoes were positive in the sense that the vast majority of bills that he vetoed were later enacted in a revised form. Those revisions and the monetary savings they created were directly attributable to Ford's purposeful decision to use the veto for the positive purpose of cutting spending and achieving economic results. His use of the veto was a result of his House experience. His strategy was to use the veto as a positive tool for the achievement of legislative results. He always told me that you had to learn how to disagree without being disagreeable. He felt that you could find a way to accomplish your purpose without undermining the system."

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Q: WE ARE TOLD THAT A PRESIDENT'S STAFF REFLECTS HIS PERSONAL PREFERENCES AND DECISION-MAKING STYLE. WHAT CAN YOU TELL ME OF THE CHARACTERISTIC WAY IN WHICH FORD MADE IMPORTANT SUBSTANTIVE POLICY DECISIONS?

A: "Typically, Ford made his decisions in a truly collegial environment. He used both the formal institutional advisors and an informal braintrust of former colleagues, like Mel Laird, whom he would call on periodically as he felt the need. He would often times form a preliminary judgement on how to proceed. He would then participate in an informal exchange of views in a cabinet meeting. Near the end of the meeting he would talk his way through what his reasons were for making that decision. In doing so he made it clear to those participating in the meeting that he grasped the issue and that there was a clearly identifiable logic to his final reasoning. Ford, like Ronald Reagan, had the benefit of being secure within his own person. He could hire smarter people and not be intimidated by them at all. We learned that he was not locked into a mindset and that he could be comfortable when he changed ideas or approaches. Gerald Ford had a tremendous ability to adapt his advisory system to seek out good advice and to follow it."

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Q: FORD'S CAREER IN THE HOUSE PREPARED HIM TO PLAY THE ACCOMODATOR ROLE. HE WAS BY TRAINING AND BY DISPOSITION A MAN WHO SOUGHT THE MIDDLE GROUND. DID YOU SEE HIM AS AN ACCOMODATOR IN HIS WHITE HOUSE DUTIES OR DOES SOME OTHER ROLE MORE ADEQUATELY FIT PRESIDENT FORD?

A: "I don't like the connotation of the word accomodator. I would say that Ford was more a mediator and synthesizer. His approach to politics was quite definitely a result of his personality, party, and 25 year House career. He was one who had learned Mr. Sam's mandate of having to go along in order to get along. The genius of the American political system is that it forces compromise that usually flows in a positive direction. The people who rise to positions of sustained leadership in the American political system, like Ford, are those who find ways to deal with intractable issues in such a way as to accomodate the desires of others in an incrementally positive manner that does not challenge the system. A good leader learns to use the system in a positive way."

Q: YOU WRITE A LOT ABOUT THE CONCEPTS OF LEGITIMACY, AUTHORITY, AND FUNCTION. THERE'S NO QUESTION THAT FORD RESTORED A GREAT DEAL OF LEGITIMACY TO THE OVAL OFFICE BY HIS HANDLING OF THE JOB. AT THE SAME TIME, HE WAS NOT ELECTED IN 1976 AND PART OF THE REASON FOR THAT WAS THE PERCEPTION THAT HE LACKED STRONGLY SUBSTANTIVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS. WHAT IS YOUR VIEW OF THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE FORD ADMINISTRATION?

A: "I think that he restored the oval office within all three of those concepts. Everyone agrees that he restored its legitimacy after the Watergate crisis, but his veto strategy also enhanced the authority of the office. As far as function is concerned, we're back to judging outcomes. Ford left the office in a period of foreign policy tranquility

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and economic upturn. Another way to look at this is to enter the what if category. Undoubtedly, Ford will suffer historically from his image as a transition president. We don't honestly know what would have happened if Ford had been elected to a four year term in 1976. What he did in the transition period was to lay a very important economic foundation. If he had been reelected the directions he intended to pursue were clear. He laid foundations and that is all they were. Instead of Ford we got the Carter administration and a period of policy reversals in many areas. Where we are now in 1984, we would have been in 1980 if Ford had been elected. The Ford foundations--fighting inflation, restoring defense, and reducing taxes--gave Ronald Reagan the spectacular opportunities that he has used so well.

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