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LAST LUNCH



Speaks candidly about the WMDs and war in Iraq

Editor's Note: Washington Bureau Chief Thomas M. DeFrank interviewed Gerald Ford more than three dozen times during the late President's retirement years. He saw Ford in November at his California home and spent more than two hours with him May 11 for this, his final interview.



RANCHO MIRAGE, Calif. - Jerry Ford was a politician of rare amiability, but this day he was hopping mad.

"They won't let me go in the pool and swim," the former President fumed as I joined him in the study of his Sand Dune Road home. "It's terrible."

Fighting a nasty cough and more frail than I had ever seen him, Ford was furious with his doctors. An accomplished skier, a man who once religiously swam laps twice a day, had just been beached.

"I go in and I paddle back and forth at the shallow end," he railed. "It's terrible. It worries me that I'm under these limitations."

Ford was a few weeks shy of his 93rd birthday as we chatted for about 45 minutes. He'd been visited by President Bush three weeks earlier and said he'd

told Bush he supported the war in Iraq but that the 43rd President had erred by staking the invasion on weapons of mass destruction.

"Saddam Hussein was an evil person and there was justification to get rid of him," he observed, "but we shouldn't have put the basis on weapons of mass destruction. That was a bad mistake. Where does [Bush] get his advice?"

Ford was predictably defensive about Vice President Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, his two White



DAVID HUME KENNERLY

Gerald Ford defended his former aides Donald Rumsfeld (l.) and Dick Cheney - seen in photo from 1975 - who came under heavy criticism while serving the current Bush administration.

WITH

p. 3

House chiefs of staff. Asked why Cheney had tanked in public opinion polls, he smiled. "Dick's a classy guy, but he's not an electrified orator."

But he didn't like Bush's domestic surveillance program. "It may be a necessary evil," he conceded. "I don't think it's a terrible transgression, but I would never do it. I was dumbfounded when I heard they were doing it."

Ever the political junkie, the guy who used to travel 250 days a year as House minority leader said he couldn't wait for a rematch between Hillary Clinton and Rudy Giuliani in 2008. For years he'd been telling me Hillary would run and make "a darn good candidate." As for Rudy: "Giuliani is an electrifying guy and he can be tough. That would be a great contest between Hillary and Rudy."

We had been meeting in the desert regularly for more than three decades, beginning with a memorable, still-unpublished 1974 interview when he was vice president. Ford had always been extraordinarily generous to me, and a strong professional relationship had developed. Yet today was a first: Unexpectedly, he asked me to stay for lunch.

As he struggled out of his easy chair, his frailty became more apparent. It's only a few feet from his study to the dining room of the Fords' one-story ranch home, but he couldn't walk without a nurse at one elbow and Betty at the other.

We worked our way through the vichyssoise and poached chicken salad. As shop talk gave way to small talk about friends,

families and halcyon days of yore, Ford was still brooding about his doctors.

"Do you want some butter pecan ice cream?" he asked with a grin, harking back to the days when Air Force One never left a farmac anywhere in the world without an ample supply of his favorite dessert.

What do the doctors say about that, I wondered.

"We have it anyhow," he roared, relishing another barb for his medical Torquemadas.

Toward the end, Ford showed a sentimentality I'd rarely seen in him. We reminisced a lot about the Air Force Two days, when just five reporters and a vice president desperate to hold his beloved Republican Party together amid the wreckage of Watergate hurtled around the country in a twin-engine Convair propjet so slow we dubbed it Slingshot Airways.

He talked about how he regretted that his "magnificent" mother hadn't lived to see her son Leslie King become the 38th President. He misted over when he remembered how much he loved his adoptive father, so much that he took his name, Gerald R. Ford.

"When I wake up at night and can't sleep," he mused in a voice suddenly far away, "I remember Grand Rapids."

Suddenly, the hairs on my arms stood on edge, as they have done again each time I remember that powerful moment. Now I knew why he'd finally invited me to lunch.

In his typically gentle, understated way, Jerry Ford was telling me goodbye.



MANDEL NGAN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Despite united front, Ford gave President Bush an earful about his handling of Iraq war on Bush visit to his Rancho Mirage, Calif., home.

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