

Maureen and Mike

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**Interviewee: Gerald Ford**  
**Interviewer: Jim Caron and Geoff Sutton**  
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Jim Caron: Commissioned by the city of Missoula and then the state of Montana to put together a documentary film on his life and his career, and we didn't exactly know what the focus would be until we began looking into it and kind of discovered that, as much as his name is incredibly famous in Montana especially, the young people, and by that I mean people under 25, really don't have a sense of what he accomplished and what he did.

Gerald Ford: Right. [Ford was a Republican Congressman from 1949-73, vice president from 1973-74 and president from 1974-77.]

JC: So where—did we get it rolling?

Geoff Sutton: Yes.

JC: Great. So we're asking you to just make some comments. I'll throw out some questions, but anything you want to talk about Mike that would be just great.

GF: All right.

JC: Beginning with, you were congressional colleagues, of course, for many years and he then became, as we know, the longest-running Senate majority Leader. One of the things we hear about him maybe more than anything else is that he was such an incredibly fair man and really not averse to crossing party line, an American more than a Democrat if you will. Do you have feelings about that? Is that an accurate description from your point of view?

GF: Well first, I got to know Mike when I became a member of the House of Representatives in January of 1949. Mike had been in the House maybe four maybe six years [Mansfield's tenure in the House began in 1943], but we rather quickly developed a good personal friendship. I liked his style. He was a loyal Democrat, but he was also fair and broad-minded in his relationship with Republicans. My wife also got to know Mike's wife very well, and they struck it off as good friends. Mike then, of course, ran for the Senate, and he gradually achieved seniority and got to be the Senate Majority Leader. Now in the meantime, I was gaining some seniority in the House of Representatives, and we had our paths cross from time to time, not on a regular basis, but we had many good relationships when we would meet in conferences, meet at meetings at the White House, when we would be at a social event. So our friendship developed over a long period of time into a very good one, not only politically but socially and otherwise. He was a loyal Democrat, I was a loyal Republican, but we were able to understand one another. Now when I became vice president, of course,, my relationship with Mike changed because at that

time Mike was the Senate Majority Leader, and I was to be the presiding officer as a vice president, so our relationship deepened and broadened. And during the nine months that I was vice president, our relationship became better and stronger. Then, of course, when I went to the White House I had to work with Mike. He was the Democrat leader in the Senate, and I had to deal with him and the Republican leader in the house, Speaker [Carl] Albert, and fortunately both of those individuals were longtime personal friends because we had served in the House together and so forth.

Now that didn't mean that Mike and I didn't have some differences. Mike, while I was in the White House, conscientiously thought we ought to withdraw a good portion of our U.S. military forces from NATO. As president I was strongly opposed to that, and I directly said to Mike and to the Congress, "If you send legislation down to the White House that mandates a withdrawal of U.S. military forces from NATO, I'll veto it, period." Well they never sent it down because they knew exactly what would happen, and they didn't have the votes to sustain it. All I'm saying is, Mike and I understood one another both politically and otherwise, and yet we could work together on things that were of mutual benefit for the United States.

JC: In your book you talk about a session during the Watergate crisis with you and Mike and it was Hugh Scott. You paint a great picture, the three of you sitting around puffing your pipes, trying to figure out how to deal with that terrible crisis. How instrumental was he in those days?

GF: Well, as the majority leader in the United States Senate he was very influential. On the other hand he was always very circumspect because he knew, as the Democratic leader of the Senate, if the House were to impeach President Nixon, the Senate would have to sit in effect as the jury. And therefore it was obligatory on the part of, certainly the leader of the majority party, not to pre-commit what his decision would be on a very critical issue, that of impeachment. On the other hand, as I recollect, Senator Mansfield was very realistic. He would say privately that he thought President Nixon had a terribly difficult situation and that the House would probably take action, but he never committed what his view would be as a member of the Senate, as a member of the jury.

JC: He must have had—I know he had tremendous respect for both the presidency and the constitution. We spent about an hour and a half with him and he talked quite a bit about that (unintelligible).

GF: Well anybody who was there, whether you were in the Congress or otherwise, knows that it was a terrible time. Unfortunately, a lot of people who were not there are now passing judgment on the good and the bad, and they're really not qualified because the situation was far, far worse than I think the public ever suspected.

JC: Mike, of course, retired from the Senate and was almost immediately appointed ambassador to Japan. Now, I understand you visited him there.

GF: Well, first when he sought the nomination as ambassador under President Carter, he asked if I would support it as a Republican, which I was pleased and honored to do. I knew he would do a good job, and then Mrs. Ford and I were in Japan, I can't recall the exact date, but I think it was 1979, and we had lunch with the Mansfields that the residence. Either on that occasion or a later one, they put on a reception for Mrs. Ford and myself, which was very thoughtful and very nice, but that I think is an indication of our longstanding friendship and mutual respect for one another. I might add that when President Reagan took over, January of '81, Senator, or Ambassador Mansfield wanted to stay on, and he called me, I believe from Japan, and asked if I would get President Reagan to extend his tour duty as ambassador, which I was pleased to do. Because in the four years that he was ambassador under President Carter he did an excellent job, and he was very warmly and highly respected by the Japanese. They like people with seniority, and certainly Mike had seniority both in age and as a member of the embassy staff.

JC: It seems like his style, from everything we learned, was just perfect to deal with those folks. Let me ask you a "what if" question if I may. If the election with President Carter had turned out differently and if Mike had come to you and said "I'm available" would that have been the job that you'd have thought of for Mike?

GF: He certainly would have been a top contender. That's quite a speculative question. It goes back a few years, 14 or 15, but because of my longstanding friendship and high respect for Mike, he certainly would have been among the top two or three to be considered.

JC: He—just a couple more things for you, it's warm out here. Magnificent by the way.

GF: Isn't it gorgeous?

GS: I haven't been here in many, many years. It is just gorgeous. It's not dissimilar to where we live in Montana and its—

GF: It is hard to believe that in December there will be 6 feet of snow here.

JC: Is that right?

GF: Oh yes, we get snow, 5, 6 feet, usually by January.

JC: Now will you spend part of the winter here or will you—

GF: Yes, we come up here for two weeks at Christmas time, get all our children, grandchildren, and then we come back in March for 10 days during the ski races, and then we're here four months in the summertime.

JC: We've enjoyed ourselves. A friend of ours from Missoula, Mike Munsey—

GF: Oh, I know Mike very well.

JC: We are staying at his house.

GF: Oh, are you?

JC: Yes, and he sent us over to the Bristol. He said it'd be a nice little place to eat.

GF: I'm sure, that's a great golf course too. It's my favorite. We have five good golf courses here. That is the best.

JC: Let me get a couple more things in here.

GS: And I want to ask him about golf [laughter]

GF: All right. Okay, good.

JC: It has been said that Mike had opportunities at least to run for the vice presidency, probably as many as three times, and I asked him if he'd ever had the same opportunity in terms of the presidency and he about bit my head off. [laughter] He, I think it was McGovern who said that Mansfield never had the thirst for the presidency. Does that statement make sense to you?

GF: My judgment would be that Mike was primarily a legislator. I don't believe Mike really had the ambition to be in the executive branch, and I say that with some personal experience because in my own case I had no ambition to be president. I wanted to be Speaker of the House. I focused all my ambition on the legislative branch, and then things got mixed up a little bit, but I think Mike had the same great enthusiasm and favoritism toward the legislative branch. I believe Mike would have accepted a vice presidential nomination, or a presidential, if that ever would happen, but he would not go out and campaign for it. He would not solicit it because his real interest was the legislative branch.

JC: That's what he said to us. He said he wanted to be a senator and that's what he was and that was that. Do words come to mind when you think of him? I've asked this question before of a couple of folks and they have come up with words like integrity and fairness, is that the general direction you think his is overall—

GF: I would say fairness, integrity, thoughtfulness, objectivity within the confines of the political pressures, very rational individual with whom you could discuss a controversial issue in a good atmosphere, which is all you ought to expect from somebody who was elected as a partisan and was the head of one of the two political parties in the United States Senate. Wonderful person and I haven't seen him for a few years. How is his health?

JC: I was going to ask that. Good; he's very very sharp. He's working probably three or four hours a day in a D.C. office. Maureen, I think, is not as healthy. She's lost a lot of her hearing, and I think just generally is on the weak side.

GF: He is what, 87?

JC: Eighty-seven. He just turned 88 today, but he is sharp as a tack, as they say. He knew a lot about us when we walked in there. He'd done his homework. It was very impressive. He made us coffee, of course. Geoff asked if he'd pose for a picture with his pipe. He said "Nope, don't do that anymore. Not good for the kids." [Laughter]

JC: Well you tell him when you see him I stopped smoking January 3. I never smoked cigarettes or cigars but started smoking a pipe in World War II when I was at sea in the Navy, but finally stopped last January. This is what, my eighth month, going on my ninth.

JC: How is it going? I am a terrible pipe smoker.

GF: Well, I did it because our daughter smoked two packs a day at least and at 33 that's too much. I never thought my smoking at 77 would make much difference, but she and I made a wager, so she stopped and I stopped and I miss it. I enjoyed a pipe.

JC: I like to just hold them.

GF: But in order to get her to stop I was willing to do so.

JC: A great sacrifice.

GF: Yes.

JC: One final question and you may not have an answer. I just wondered if any quick anecdotes come to mind, anything maybe humorous or personal kind of anecdotes that—

GF: No, not that would be a highlighter. I had nothing but the best of relations with Mike right from the very outset, and it was so smooth and so regular you don't really develop any, certainly any major controversies. The only one where we really had a significant public difference was on troops to Europe and his proposal to withdraw them. I was impressed with the fine job that Mike did, and he was there what, 12 years, wasn't he?

JC: The longest-running ambassador to a major country.

GF: Yes, first class, and when we were there, three or four times, every time they were hospitable, friendly, so when you see him say hello.

JC: We certainly will.

GF: Our third son, when we were in the White House, worked at a cow ranch.

UI: Stevensville.

JC: Up at Leola, no Lolo.

UI: That is just 10 miles from us. I was going to mention that. In fact I met him one night some place. Nancy, my wife, met him some place as well.

JC: He worked there one, almost a year I guess. He loved it.

UI: Have you been to that part of the country at all?

JC: Not out to Lolo, no. [Laughter]

Geoffrey Sutton: I had a question that I thought I'd throw out too. My dad played football at the University of Michigan.

JC: Oh, he did?

GS: Yes, and I was wondering perhaps if you might have remembered him. His name was Joseph Sutton.

JC: S-u-t-t-o-n?

JS: Yes.

GF: Do you know what year he graduated?

GS: He graduated in '44. He was there during the war years and they stopped the team during—

GF: Well, you see, I graduated in '35 and I was overseas in the Pacific from '43 through '45, so I was gone most of the time he might have been playing, but—

JC: He was very active in the Republican Party.

GS: Yes, he was the head of the GOP in Indiana and president at Indiana University.

GF: That name sounds familiar.

GS: He was on Nixon's three-man commission of higher education, and I think Nixon also offered him the ambassadorship to Thailand in '68.

GF: Well, those were a long time ago.

GS: Well, he passed away in '71. I thought just on the outside chance.

GF: No, I don't recall.

JC: Would you have just a moment more to maybe pose for a couple pictures?

GF: Oh sure.

[End of Interview]