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New Orleans, Louisiana

### THE FIRST GUY TO CALL HIM MR. PRESIDENT

They buried former President Gerald Ford this week. The funeral took place Tuesday morning, while I was on the air at the new 90.95 FM.com. I told my listeners that I had met the former president on three different occasions. And I really believe I was the first person to call him "Mr. President."

My first encounter with this accidental chief executive to be was on July 31, 1972. Louisiana Senator Allen Ellender had unexpectedly died in the middle of his race for re-election. The Senator had made it a point for years to come by my law office in Ferriday and pay a visit on his annual tour of the state. I therefore felt it appropriate to make the three hour drive down to Houma in the center of deep south Louisiana and attend the Senator's funeral.

When I arrived at St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church an hour before the funeral, over a thousand people were packed into the street in front of the entrance. Metal barriers have been set up to keep the crowd at bay, and the church was surrounded by state troopers, local police officers and numerous Secret Service agents. It became obvious why there was so much security. President and Mrs. Nixon led a long list of dignitaries that included Vice President Spiro Agnew, 36 US senators, a number of state officials, and the minority leader of the US House of Representatives, Congressman Gerald Ford.

I had no official invitation, and was just one of the crowd standing on the outside of the barrier. I was a new state senator then, and I hollered out a greeting to a colleague, state Senator Claude Duvall, who was inside the barrier. It was a stroke of luck, because Claude was in charge of the seating arrangements. He graciously opened up the barrier, and led me in to the church. About 30 minutes passed, when the official delegation that had just arrived from Washington, was escorted into the church sanctuary.

Claude could not have put me in a better spot. The President was one row up and just to my left. The Vice President was directly in front of me. Senator Ted Kennedy and other members of the Senate surrounded me, and right behind me was the Minority Leader, Gerald Ford. I had dated a girl in years past from the Congressman's hometown, Grand Rapids Michigan, and we shared some pleasantries about mutual friends from there for a brief moment following the service. So went encounter one.

My second meeting with the president to be was at the Louisiana governor's mansion in May of 1974. Ford was Vice President, then, and had come to Baton Rouge to address the Louisiana Legislature. Following his speech, then Governor Edwin Edwards invited him to the governor's mansion for a reception. The Governor and the Vice President had served in the in the U.S. House together, and it was obvious from their batter at the reception that they were good friends. In fact, Edwards supported Ford in his race for re-election against Jimmy Carter in 1976.

Ford shared the story that when they both were in Congress and he asked about Edwards' future plans, the governor to be said he planned on returning to Baton Rouge and running for the state's top post. Ford shared with us his response that he was going to hang around Congress, because "you never know what just might happen."

My third encounter? The Fairmont Hotel in New Orleans on August 5th, 1974. Vice President Ford was making a speech in the hotel's grand ballroom. I was not at the speech, but did happen to be in the hotel lobby heading towards the main entrance. A rush of people came towards me hurriedly escorting the Vice President past where I was standing and outside the door. The secret service agents were not just escorting the vice president, but rather they were aggressively leading and almost pushing him out the door towards his waiting limousine. I knew something important is happening.

The Watergate rumors had been spreading for months, and President Nixon was on the verge of being impeached. It struck me that it was not just possible but probable that Nixon had made the decision to resign, and Ford was heading back to Washington to become the 38th president of the United States.

I was maybe 15 feet away from Ford as he passed me going down the stairway. On impulse, I hollered out: "Good luck and Godspeed to you, Mr. President." He glanced my way and gave me a serious look. Then he entered his limousine and sped away.

As I found out later, his speech was interrupted by a phone call from Chief of Staff General Alexander Haig, who informed Ford that the President would step down the next day, and Ford would ascend to the presidency.

The nation took to the new President, giving him an approval rating above 71%. It was obvious the country wanted to put the Watergate scandal and President Nixon's resignation behind. As Ford himself said, he had made a commitment to put an end to "our long national nightmare." Yet when he later pardoned Nixon, Ford reopened the very wounds he was trying hard to close.

Was the pardon a mistake? For Ford, politically, yes. Perhaps a pardon would have made more sense after Nixon had given testimony, and much more about Watergate became known. We are supposed to be a country that is strong enough to endure almost anything but burying the truth. Often those in charge of our justice system seem oblivious to letting the whole story come out. I can speak from personal experience about evidence that was hidden by prosecutors. If there is any justification for the pardon, it should have been given a much later date.

I never met Ford while he served as President or any time thereafter. There were three brief encounters. Any number of people have similar remembrances and anecdotes. But I will always believe that on the spur of the moment, and on a hunch, I was the first person to call Gerald Ford "Mr. President."

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"I guess it just proves that in America anyone can be President."  
President Gerald Ford

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown

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