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A Chance Encounter...with “the Second Most Important Man in Washington”

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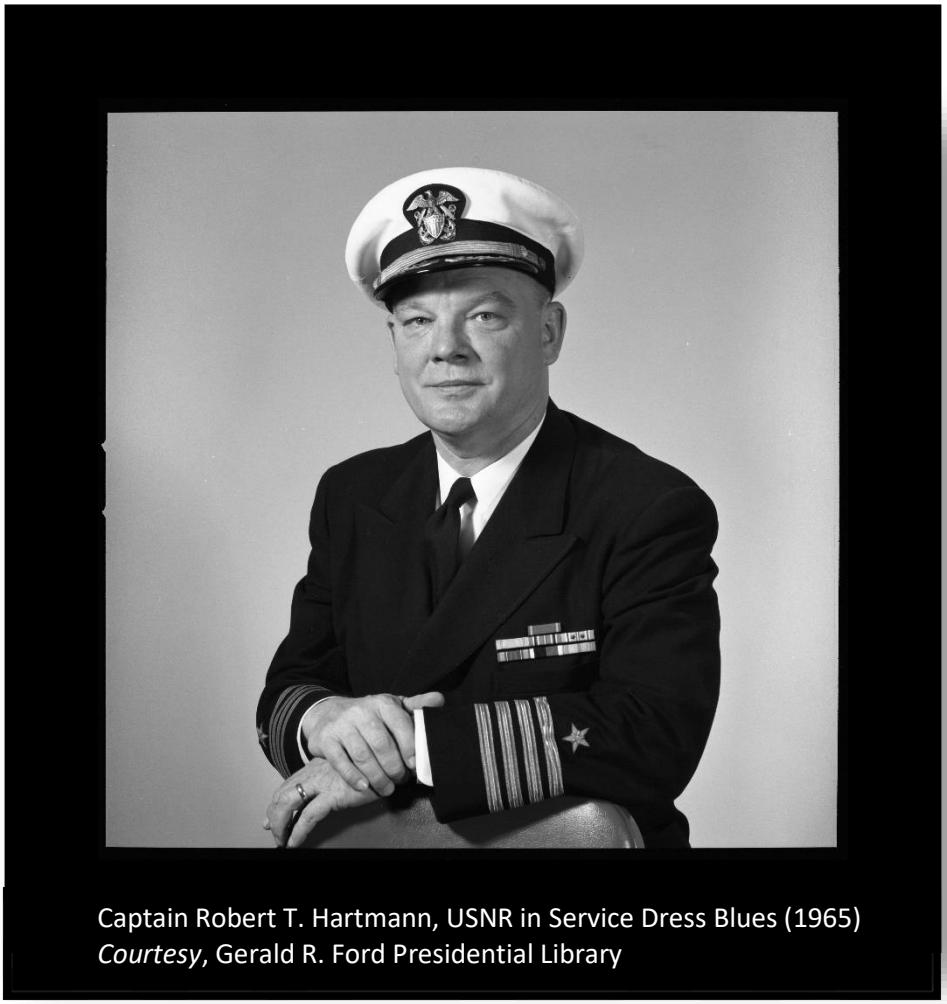
A Chance Encounter...with "the Second Most Important Man in Washington"[1]

— Ritch Eich, Thousand Oaks, CA, USA



Captain Robert T. Hartmann, USNR in Service Dress Blues (1965)
Courtesy, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library

In the summer of 1971, I met a 54-year-old Naval Reserve captain in the Navy Office of Information spaces in the Pentagon. It was my first time being in the "puzzle palace"— but obviously not his. As Naval reservists, both of us were there for our annual two weeks of reserve training. I was a freshly-minted ensign, and I'd overheard that this man's civilian job involved politics in some way. Our encounter was brief, and I could tell his mind was on other things — perhaps the congeries of piled-up newspapers that someone had brought to his office.

[1] Former White House Press Secretary Jerald terHorst's (tongue-in-cheek) characterization of Hartmann, as he was the person closest to President Ford and hence "the Second Most Important Man in Washington."

He looked tired and drawn, but there was something about him that intrigued me. Years passed, and I never saw him again. Truth be told, I even forgot his name. But during the pandemic year that began in March 2020, I spent much time reading and writing at home, and quite by accident discovered a fascinating article about the role of the press and the Navy during World War II.[2] It turned out the man I'd met, Robert T. Hartmann, had played more than just a bit part from 1942-1945.

Hartmann, a former *Los Angeles Times* reporter, was a Navy public information officer and press censor and, as I learned, one of the best at his trade, long before he made his mark in Washington politics as a speechwriter and close adviser to President Gerald R. Ford.

Navy Public Affairs: From WW II To Present

In the 1940s, the Navy public information program was in its infancy. There was no "book" to follow; leaders used their best judgment amidst quickly changing circumstances.

Naval officers engaged in WWII public relations were called Public Information Officers (PIOs). Their duties included gathering news about the Navy's role in WWII, escorting media, and working with operators and intelligence officers to determine what information could be released. Censorship was the rule as reporters were required to run their dispatches past Navy officers to ensure nothing useful to the enemy slipped out. Operational security is always front and center in military public affairs.

PIOs were taken from regular and reserve line officer and aviation communities and the Navy recruited men from the journalism profession and the Hollywood film industry. They were granted reserve commissions. Also, working press people were recruited as enlisted Naval correspondents, which post war became the enlisted journalism rating.

There were no public affairs specialists as there are today. Officers did not become public affairs specialists until after the war.

Prior to the war, neither fleet commander (Pacific or Atlantic) had a PIO. But, by December 1944, a total of 2,156 people - 625 officers, 1,313 enlisted and 218 civilians - were serving fulltime in public relations roles in the Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard.

Public relations was not held in high regard at first. Some Navy brass sought to impede the media; others saw value in sharing service members' sacrifices and valor – often leading to support for the war effort from "hometown America."

Navy Secretary Frank Knox transferred the public information function from the Office of Naval Intelligence to a new Office of Public Relations in May 1942. Since then, active duty and reserve Navy public affairs officers and enlisted journalists have enjoyed outstanding careers in business, engineering, government, the arts, law, medicine, journalism, and other professions.

Sources: **RADM Brent Baker, USN (ret), former CHINFO, Navy Department, Washington, D.C. and others.**

Hartmann's role in public relations and in the press went far beyond a "desk job." In March of 1944, Hartmann wrote and filed a piercing, five-part story for the *Los Angeles Times* which was recently unearthed from the newspaper's archives. It detailed a dangerous reconnaissance excursion disguised as a commando raid that began on January 31, 1944, in which Hartmann participated. He volunteered to serve as an escort for reporters Verne Haugland of the *Associated Press* and Frank Tremaine of the *United Press* (which later became UPI). Hartmann's account of the New Zealand soldiers' and Allied specialists' encounter with

[2] *Editor's Note*: Frank Knox, Secretary of the Navy, had made a baseless claim at the onset of America's involvement in World War II that sparked one of the most shameful events of American history – the forced internment of Japanese-American citizens. His action reflects what can happen with the widespread and unchecked dissemination of untruths. Ethnic labels and general misinformation plagued the country in the 1940s, resulting in loss of freedoms and assets for so many, devastating families from time of internment to the current polarizing situation of today. Currently, the wholesale condemnation of entire groups of people has grown precipitously. Conspiracy theorists' insidious rhetoric is now infused with violent calls to action, threatening the very democratic society which ushered in freedom of speech as a right to be cherished.

Imperial Japanese forces on the Green Islands in the South Pacific was captured by New Zealand barrister and historian, Reginald Newell, in the June 2020 issue of *Naval History* magazine.

According to Newell, Admiral William "Bull" Halsey, commander of the South Pacific area, needed to keep the Japanese off balance to sustain his pace forward. The Green Islands were considered strategic because of their approaches to Rabaul, a Japanese stronghold that thwarted Allied progress. Unfortunately, Allied knowledge of the area was practically nil, so this amphibious operation was initiated to collect vital information.

PRESS COMMANDOS—Lt. Robert T. Hartmann, Times reporter now on leave with the Navy, left; Verne Haugland of Associated Press; Frank Tremaine of United Press, wearing camouflage suit, and two New Zealand war correspondents, in South Pacific, preparing themselves for work as commandos to fight Japs, as described by Lt. Hartman.

Robert T. Hartmann, WW ll Navy Public Information Officer, reporting from the South Pacific, Front page *LA Times*, March 8, 1944 *Courtesy*, Los Angeles Times and AnyDate.com, (unidentified military photographer)

The following is an excerpt from Hartmann's graphic *LA Times* article in which he describes how this information-gathering mission devolved into an open assault.

> *We spotted a small sandy beach under overhanging mangrove trees. Most of the coast was sharp coral cliffs so we decided to explore this beach. In we went, again crouching low.*
>
> *It's a good thing we were, for the moment our bow hit that quiet little strip of sand, all hell broke loose.*
>
> *In considerably less time than it takes to tell, the air filled with lead. Over the side – not 10 feet away – was an expertly camouflaged Jap barge. Alongside of it was another. The Japs – two of those barges would carry about 100 – had dug themselves pillboxes in the coral cliffs that rose steeply from the beach behind their hideout. They were in the overhanging trees also.*

On their first burst of heavy machine gunfire, they blew the coxswain's head off. They knocked out both of our bow gunners before they got off a shot. In fact, they hit everybody forward of the motor except Comdr. Smith, who was standing without a helmet up by the ramp. He was the only one left who knew how to run the boat!

I was crouched just behind one of the natives, just at the center of the boat. When the coxswain's head disintegrated, a piece of the skull pierced the native in the breast. Terrified, he rose and dived, head first, for the back of the boat, pinning me and Frank Tremaine (UP reporter), who was behind me, in the narrow space between the motor box and the side of the boat. He lay there inert and, I thought, dead. I couldn't budge and my gun arm was pinned to my side. All I could do was pray, and believe me, I did…

… Another murderous burst from the machine gun not 10 yards away cut down one of the overhanging branches and covered the stern half of the boat. Through this, two of the New Zealanders, with as much guts as I ever hope to see, were pouring fire from their tommy guns back into the inferno. One Jap dropped from a tree — but there was no noticeable letup in the deafening fire we were taking.

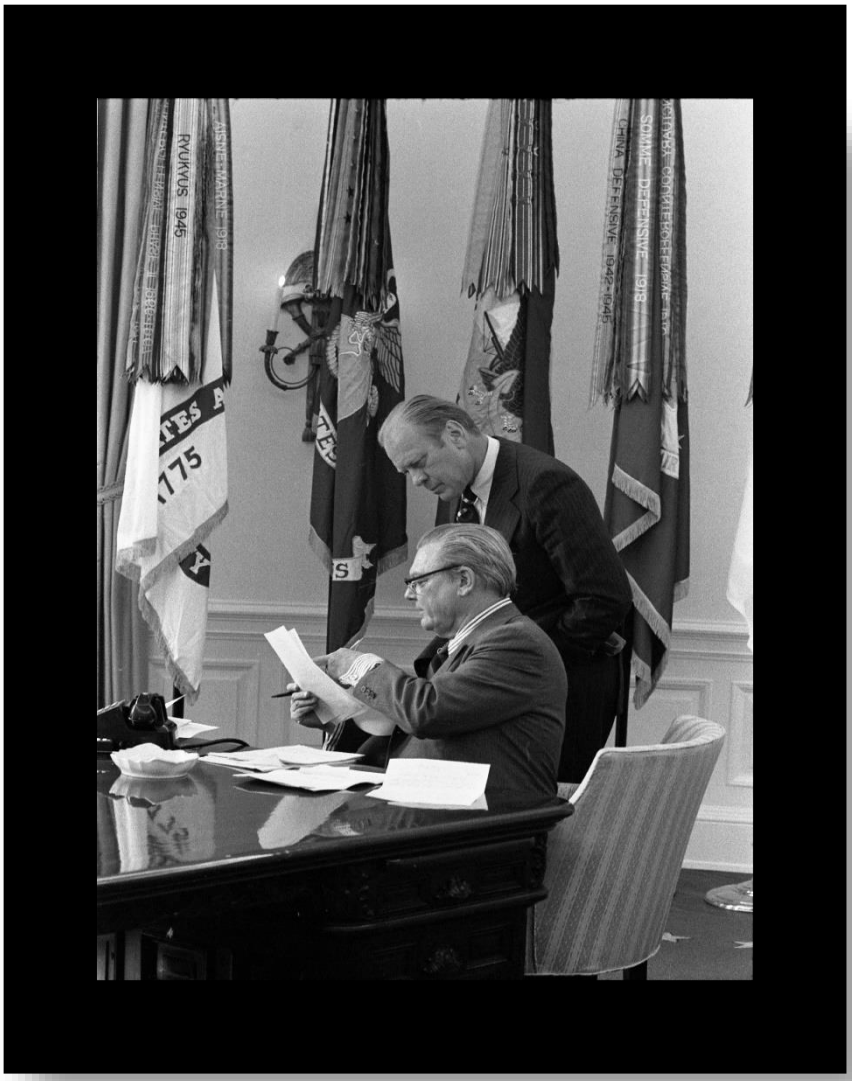
Comdr. Smith had ducked down at the first burst but he had his back to the coxswain and didn't know he was dead. He kept shouting "Back 'er off" and finally he looked around at the shambles and saw that nobody was left to back 'er off but himself. Cool as a cucumber, he crawled back to the wheel, keeping below the gunwales. He got the thing in reverse after anguished seconds that seemed eternities. The wounded gunner summoned his last strength and tried to help. The Japs were still pouring it into us and no one will ever shake my belief that it was pure miracle that prevented them from killing every soul in that boat.

The story of Hartmann's career, however, is not a war story about combat heroes, at least in my mind, but rather a story about what leadership experts Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas call "crucibles of leadership." Real leaders often find meaning through difficult, trying, or negative events. Battling through adversity, their values are often strengthened and clarified. Robert T. Hartmann was no exception.

Hartmann was 24 years old when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. He had graduated from Stanford University three years earlier, where he edited the student magazine, and he had already been a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*. Later he would become their youngest editorial writer. He was that good.

He enlisted in the Naval Reserve in 1941 and within a short time found himself serving as a public information officer and press censor in Pacific operations. From 1942 until the end of hostilities, Hartmann would serve on the staffs of three admirals: Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Fleet; Fleet Admiral William "Bull" Halsey, Commander, Third Fleet (under whom Hartmann participated in the dangerous mission previously described); and World War I Congressional Medal of Honor recipient Vice Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher, Commander, North Pacific Force.

After the war, Hartmann returned to the *Los Angeles Times* where he would serve for two decades as an editorial writer, as the paper's Washington, D.C. bureau chief and, later, as its Middle East Bureau chief in Rome. The prize-winning newsman also covered Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon for the *Los Angeles Times*.



President Gerald R. Ford looking over the shoulder of Counselor to the President, Robert T. Hartmann.
Courtesy, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library

In retrospect, I wish I had known that this man with whom I'd had a brief encounter in 1971 had been hired by Rep. Mel Laird (WI) for his media expertise, fresh ideas, and to edit and consult for the House of Representatives' Republican Conference. I wish I'd known that Hartmann had later become sergeant-at-arms and legislative assistant to House Minority Leader Gerald R. Ford, and then chief of staff for Vice President Ford, and eventually "Counselor" to the 38th President (a title he reportedly held in low regard, according to veteran Washington journalists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak's August 15, 1974 column, "Cutting Back the White House 'Palace Guard,'" as it was "a pretentious and faintly Europeanized cabinet rank created by President Nixon").

The adage "first impressions are lasting" was certainly true for me regarding Robert Hartmann. Referred also by Evans and Novak in their column as a "tough old ex-newspaperman without a visible royalist bone in his body," Hartmann was emphatic about the need to dramatically reduce the number of staff and imperial trappings Ford inherited from the Nixon White House.

Beyond his craft as a writer, the colorful Hartmann was a straight shooter, seldom shy about speaking his piece. Hartmann consistently provided his boss with his politically savvy, unvarnished, timely advice and insider Washington, D.C. knowledge. But, of course, Hartmann had his detractors. They included Donald Rumsfeld (US Secretary of Defense under the Ford and Bush administrations) and his protege and deputy, Richard Cheney (former Vice President serving under George W. Bush), as well as Alexander Haig (former US Secretary of State under President Ronald Reagan and Nixon's chief of staff, whom Ford asked to stay on for a time after Nixon resigned). Cheney established a shadow speechmaking operation after promising Hartmann speechmaking would be his domain. As a result, they frequently quarreled. All three men actively sought to diminish Hartmann's influence and their obloquy he had to endure. But Hartmann was definitely Haig's *bete noire!*

At first blush, many observers noted that Ford and Hartmann seemed oddly matched. But a closer examination is revealing. Though they didn't know one another when they served in the Navy during World War II, they shared mutual experiences and qualities. Ford and Hartmann were close in age, both possessed strong work ethics (they were work horses, not show horses), and both had seen combat. Ford, especially, had an impressive wartime record that included saving shipmates' lives aboard the USS Monterey (CVL-26). Like most veterans, however, Ford never talked about it.

Forged by a combination of strong faith, scouting (Eagle Scout), athletics (a letter winner on back-to-back undefeated University of Michigan Wolverines national championship football teams), and a strong marriage, Ford had an aura of self-confidence with a hefty dose of stubbornness. So did Robert Hartmann.

Roberta Hartmann: A Bright Light in Robert Hartmann's Life

Roberta Sankey Hartmann was a vivacious, fashionable and delightful woman who brought much joy to her husband's life. The couple met on a blind date when Robert was a junior Navy officer; their date had to be postponed for a week when Pearl Harbor was attacked and Robert was restricted to base. The successful date led to a 65-year marriage.

Roberta, the Canadian-born and UCLA alumna, worked as an elementary school teacher and as an early reading specialist in California public schools. She also was a devoted volunteer for the Red Cross and other nonprofits. A frequent and successful hostess, she loved hosting parties and attending social events that included dancing. Her husband didn't like dancing, so Roberta found fun on the dance floor with Nelson Rockefeller, Gerald Ford, Henry Kissinger, Donald Rumsfeld and even Prince Philip, at a state dinner for Queen Elizabeth II.

Roberta died at the age of 101, as bright and stylish as ever. When she realized she was dying from pneumonia, she accepted her impending death, wishing only that she'd had time for a manicure. "This was no way to go," she said.

Sources: **Archives and interviews with those who knew her well**

Hartmann was also a happily married man of devout faith and a fellow Eagle Scout. He was aware that his long and trusting relationship with Ford often invited jealousy and intra-staff jockeying. The two men had developed, from more than ten years of working closely together, a "sixth sense" of what Ford wanted, and Hartmann artfully delivered the words as Ford's preeminent speechwriter. Hartmann told the *Washington Post*'s Sally Quinn in her November 24, 1974 article, "The In(Fighting), Out(Bursts), Up(Swings), Down(Slides)… and Other Times of Robert T. Hartmann," that Ford didn't like big, multisyllabic words and preferred things stated in a positive, straightforward way in his speeches. To paraphrase Ford's first press secretary, Jerald terHorst, Hartmann had the unique ability to know the "inner" Ford and to use words that captured Ford's feelings and message(s). Moreover, Hartmann grasped "the cadence and speech patterns" that brought Ford out to the public in a manner that Ford appreciated. Helen Thomas,

the trailblazing first female White House correspondent, wrote in her book *Front Row at the White House*, "Hartmann came up with the right words and the eloquence, but Ford supplied the sincerity that lent poignancy to the moment…" Or, as Ford wrote in his 1979 book, *A Time to Heal: The Autobiography of Gerald R. Ford*, "Bob had an uncanny ability to craft a sentence or a phrase so that it expressed my sentiments."

In that same book, Ford described Hartmann as a man he admired who stuck to his convictions and "made us all mad at one time or another," but also kept the president and his staff from becoming complacent. "Bob was suspicious of everyone. Over the years, that Hartmann characteristic had saved me from many pitfalls. …True, he didn't know how to get along with others on the staff. He was always snapping at people and he was a terrible administrator himself. But I could — and did — overlook these faults because Bob was shrewd and he possessed good political judgment, a rare commodity in Washington."

While their personalities were rather disparate and Ford acknowledged that Hartmann could be brusque, Ford also knew Hartmann was a really good person. Thus, Ford often disregarded Hartmann's bluster. Others who worked with Hartmann said he was an "old salt" (Navy slang) who could be capricious, stern, and territorial. Many also saw him as driven and one who did not "suffer fools gladly." It's no wonder then, that Hartmann earned the nickname "S.O.B." Hartmann's son, Rob (Robert Sankey Hartmann), who graciously answered many questions for this piece, says that his father would explain this sobriquet, with a twinkle in his eye, as meaning, "Sweet Ol' Bob."

Rob Hartmann also told me that his dad had a mischievous sense of humor and liked to stir the pot just to see what would happen. Hartmann had a gift for crafting limericks, which may be traceable back to his college days, when he was editor of the esteemed *Stanford Chaparral*, a humor magazine founded in 1899.

Celebrated presidential scholar Richard Norton Smith conducted nearly 160 interviews from 2008 to 2013 with family, friends, and close associates of President Ford as part of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Foundation's Oral History Project. Among them were five people whose insights about Hartmann struck me as particularly relevant to this piece: David Gergen, Jim Cannon, Bob Orben, Jack Marsh, and Bob Hynes.

To paraphrase David Gergen, Ford's Director of Communication, Hartmann enjoyed exaggerated influence in the West Wing, was often mercurial, and served as a protector for the president — but for good reason. Ford's domestic policy advisor and later biographer Jim Cannon echoed Nelson Rockefeller's assessment that Hartmann had the best political mind in the White House — no faint praise, as according to *Washington Post* columnist David Broder, President Ford "had one of the most competent staffs we have seen." Indeed, many former key Ford staffers would serve in future administrations.

In Smith's December, 2008 interview with Bob Orben, the former special assistant to the president and director of the White House speechwriting department, Orben recalled his collegial working relationship with Hartmann. Orben learned to work effectively with Hartmann by standing up to him. Orben believes Hartmann's quick response to Haig's feeler about a Nixon pardon was "beyond courageous, it was astute. Bob had a very good sense of the total scene and wasn't carried away by minutia. He had a picture where [the pardon] might put Ford, and he was right. He [Hartmann] was a hero."

Jack Marsh, former Virginia congressman and national security advisor to Vice President Ford, was, along with Hartmann, a Counsellor to President Ford. Marsh was another Hartmann enthusiast and close friend. While acknowledging that Hartmann could be a "rough guy to deal with at times," Marsh also told Smith that "if you got beneath the surface, it was great." Hartmann "was not as concerned about relationships and personal relationships." Importantly, Marsh believed Hartmann never received all the credit that he truly deserved.

Bob Hynes, minority counsel to the House of Representatives Rules Committee and later part of the team that handled the Congressional vice president confirmation hearings for Ford, knew Hartmann rather well. To wit: "If there was such a thing as Mr. Ford's enforcer… Bob was that person." Hynes informed Smith that Hartmann exercised good judgment and while he could get angry at people, the next day he would be fine. "He tried to make sure that Jerry [Ford] was protected, he knew everything that Jerry had to know and made sure that Jerry knew it right away." Hynes confirmed that Hartmann saw his mission as ensuring "that Jerry doesn't get hornswoggled. Nobody fools him. He [Ford] gets the straight scoop. He [Ford] knows what's going on. And Hartmann did a hell of a job of doing it. Every president needs somebody like Bob Hartmann."

President Ford (standing) with Presidential Counselor, Robert T. Hartmann (seated) in the President's Private Office prior to his announcement of the Nixon pardon on September 8, 1974. *Courtesy*, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library

To the aforementioned voices, I would add the view expressed by Hartmann longtime aide, Joann Lynott Wilson, who spent two decades at the newspaper and in government assisting Hartmann. She told me during our telephone conversations he didn't make friends easily, was sometimes short-tempered, and could be sarcastic but worked extremely hard, never shirked his responsibilities, and was very intelligent, loyal, and even warm at times.

Hartmann's loyalty to Ford and the American people was never in doubt. Hartmann could often see through others' motives if they weren't pure. He was rightly wary of Nixon's "Praetorian Guards" – those holdovers from the Nixon administration, many of whom he felt were at times motivated more by self-interest than by helping the new president, as Hartmann's memoirs attest. Nixon himself had repeatedly sought to hire Hartmann, but Hartmann politely declined each time. Though their families were friends, he sensed that Nixon was a "bad penny." Hartmann had a strong moral compass.

Hartmann enjoyed Ford's confidence. And Ford confided in Hartmann. Clearly, the two men respected, appreciated, and valued what each brought to the table to complement one another. Ford relied heavily on Hartmann's judgment, his way with words, and his willingness to "absorb the heat" and take the arrows aimed at Ford. In many ways, Hartmann was, to use a baseball metaphor, the "catcher"— he tried to stop the wild pitches. He was always unflinchingly honest and candid with Ford, which too few others can justly claim.

Mike McCurry, White House Press Secretary for President Bill Clinton and currently Distinguished Professor and Director of the Center for Public Theology at Wesley Theological Seminary, told me, "Most presidents need someone to be the bad cop when the president would rather be a nice guy, good cop. But the strong hand of a senior aide needs to be used with grace, justification, and prudence. Being the enforcer requires good judgment and carefully chosen moments of discipline, reprimand, or criticism." Hartmann had Ford's ear and could be forceful! A president typically has more than one adviser and Ford was no exception. But Hartmann was arguably his top confidant.

Throughout Ford's life, the 38th president was viewed by most as polite, gregarious, unassuming, decent, ethical, athletic, and trustworthy — a man of utmost integrity. Most of those who worked with him found him much smarter than they were initially led to believe. Nevertheless, the so-called "beltway media" often dismissed him, and he was caricatured by popular comedians as bumbling, dull, and visionless. But Hartmann, the former newspaper man, believed in what he wrote for Ford, including Ford's credo that "truth should be the guiding force for the nation."

Ford genuinely enjoyed reporters, even though some treated him poorly, and he may be the only president in modern history who didn't criticize the media or consider journalists as adversaries. Ford was honest with the press and impressed upon his staff that while he was president, the White House would be open, convivial, and cooperative. Hartmann's extensive experience as a journalist, from copy boy to police reporter, from Navy public information officer to editorial writer, from foreign correspondent to bureau chief, enabled him to serve as Ford's consultant on the inner workings of the Fourth Estate.

I have little doubt that Hartmann's World War II experiences served as a "crucible of leadership" that helped prepare him to function effectively in his multiple roles, including that of Ford's top political adviser. I feel fortunate to have met the man who will always be remembered for the 1974 nationally-televised speech he wrote for the new president when Ford assumed the presidency after Nixon resigned. Gerald R. Ford uttered Hartmann's now famous words, which Ford almost deleted from the speech (and over which Hartmann threatened to resign if he had): "My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is over." This was the most quoted line from the address in nearly every publication and news outlet around the world. Ford's chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, Alan Greenspan (who would later serve five terms as chairman of the Federal Reserve), said, "that Hartmann speech

was a very critical turning point [that] defined a change in the spirit of the country." The line would turn out to be Hartmann's legacy.

But for me, two other passages held more sway. There is this one: "I am acutely aware that you have not elected me as your president by your ballots, and so I ask you to confirm me as your president with your prayers." And my favorite: "As we bind up the internal wounds of Watergate, more painful and more poisonous than those of foreign wars, let us restore the Golden Rule to our political process, and let brotherly love purge our hearts of suspicion and of hate." Robert Trowbridge Hartmann at his best!

Hartmann passed away in 2008 at the age of 91 and is buried at Arlington National Cemetery with well-deserved full military honors. I wish I could go back now and shake his hand again.

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Credits

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