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On 9 August 1974, President Richard Nixon, facing impeachment because of his part in the Watergate scandal, resigned, becoming the first and only chief executive in American history to do so. That same day, his vice president, Gerald Ford, became the country’s new leader. What made the events of that day even more remarkable was that eight months earlier, Ford was the minority leader of the House of Representatives, where he represented Michigan’s Fifth District. He had become vice president only because the incumbent, Spiro Agnew, had also been forced to resign. Now, in August, Ford entered the White House as the country’s only unelected president.

Maybe it is because of the unprecedented way in which he became president that the overwhelming majority of the scholarship on Gerald Ford has focused on his tenure in the Oval Office rather than on his whole life. Indeed, only three works have made an attempt at a comprehensive political biography of America’s thirty-eighth president. The first was brothers Edward Schapsmeier and Frederick Schapsmeier’s Gerald R. Ford’s Date with Destiny, but its disjointed, jumpy nature and publication nearly twenty years before Ford’s death make it wanting. Far more readable is Douglas Brinkley’s Gerald R. Ford, which covers the entirety of Ford’s life. However, it is part of a series designed to offer short histories of each president, thus restricting the depth of coverage. The last, and most recent, is James
Cannon’s laudatory *Gerald R. Ford,*¹ but the author passed away before he completed it, and the portions of the book on Ford’s presidency read more as his memoir than as a scholarly monograph.

It is possible that the dearth of biographies is due to the fact that, despite a twenty-five-year career in Congress, Ford never sponsored a major piece of legislation, and he failed to achieve his dream of becoming speaker of the House. Perhaps it is because, though he was intelligent, he was not an intellectual on a par with James Madison, John Quincy Adams, Theodore Roosevelt, or Woodrow Wilson. He was not a visionary like Thomas Jefferson or Franklin Roosevelt; indeed, he had a difficult time seeing beyond specific policy proposals and placing them within a broader plan for the country. He did not have the complex personality of Lyndon B. Johnson or Richard Nixon. He was not the center of a major scandal. He was not a member of a famous family. He did not lead the country during a war. Or maybe it originates from the thesis that Ford was a caretaker president,² one whose only decision of significance was to pardon Nixon and who otherwise kept the chair in the Oval Office warm pending the outcome of the 1976 presidential election.

If any of these explanations are correct, they are unfair, for they give short shrift to an individual who not only sat in the Oval Office, but whose life experiences and career in and out of Washington covered almost the entire twentieth century. Born in 1913, he was raised by an abused mother who found happiness following a contentious divorce and a stepfather who treated his stepson as his own. His parents suffered through the Depression, which nearly forced his stepfather to close his business. He fought in World War II and joined Congress shortly after the Cold War began. During his tenure in the House of Representatives, he participated in numerous debates both inside and outside of Congress regarding containment policy, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the emergence of détente with the Communist world. Likewise, he spoke repeatedly on the extent to which the government should involve itself at home on matters ranging from civil rights to the environment, the economy, and welfare policy. Moreover, he witnessed a Republican Party that increasingly was at war with itself as the GOP’s right wing emerged as a force with which to be reckoned.

Though short, Ford’s 895-day presidency was marked by more than the Nixon pardon. He oversaw the withdrawal of the remaining U.S. presence in South Vietnam. He had to address crises involving the Cambodian seizure of the American ship *Mayaguez,* Americans’ use of energy, and New York City’s finances. He sought as well to continue détente with the Soviet Union
and tried to figure out how to help the economy emerge from stagflation. Repeatedly, he found himself pulled not only by conservatives in his own party—who challenged him for the Republican nomination for the presidency in 1976—but an increasingly assertive, Democratic-controlled Congress. After leaving the White House, he remained active within Republican politics. But he also began to move more to the political left on social issues, and he developed a close relationship with another former president, Jimmy Carter. Additionally, he used his title of ex-president to make a significant sum of money.

During Ford’s ninety-three-year life, three themes emerged. The first was his ambition. Through hard work, he became an Eagle Scout and the captain of his high school football team, endeavored to become an attorney, and clawed his way into Yale Law School. He broke up with his first girlfriend so he could practice law in Michigan. During World War II, he served with the U.S. Navy, used his connections to rise up the chain of command on the aircraft carrier on which he served, and left the service with the rank of lieutenant commander. Not long after joining Congress, he decided he wanted to become speaker of the House and allied himself with a group of younger lawmakers, the “Young Turks,” who helped him eventually rise to the position of minority leader. In that post, he sought to convince others to endorse a variety of initiatives he believed would be best for his party and the nation. Instead of becoming speaker, he ended up serving as president of the United States, during which time he cajoled those who opposed him to see the wisdom of the positions he adopted. After losing the 1976 election, he toyed with running again in 1980, but, forgoing that option, he instead became a well-paid member of numerous corporate boards. His desire to assume positions of authority took its toll on Ford’s family. He was an absent husband and father, which was difficult for his four children, but it was his wife, Betty, who took Jerry’s absenteeism the hardest. She never considered divorcing her husband, but the time he was away made her feel ever more alone. She became addicted to alcohol, which she combined with painkillers she took for a bad back. Yet she refused to permit her suffering to stand in the way of his dreams. Indeed, in many ways she was as determined as he, taking positions as first lady that were out of accord with those of Republican conservatives. She hoped that once she and Jerry left the White House, they would have more time together, but he continued to spend time away. It took a family intervention to help her give up her addictions, and she became a leader in the fight against alcohol and drug abuse.

Second, in addition to seeking authority, Ford was loyal to the Republi-
can Party. He was a moderate conservative, raised in a conservative district of Michigan and in a family that reflected a conservative ethic of achieving success with little government assistance. He was a former isolationist who, as a result of his service in World War II, became an internationalist. Consequently, he developed a hawkish temperament on the issues of containing communism and supporting a free-market economy. On domestic issues, he endorsed welfare programs, civil rights for African Americans, and environmental protections. He preferred, however, to have the states rather than the federal government enforce them. He participated in Wendell Willkie’s bid for the presidency in 1940 and, as a congressman, established a voting record that was largely in line with that of the Republican presidents under whom he served. After becoming president, he promoted initiatives that harmonized with his moderate conservatism; as an ex-president, he campaigned for Republicans seeking both state offices and the presidency.

Ford’s fealty to the GOP caused him to be inconsistent. As a hawk, he called for heavy spending on the military but stood behind Dwight D. Eisenhower’s call for curtailing expenditures on the armed forces in the name of balancing the budget. He resisted policies that in his mind smacked of appeasement to the Soviet Union, such as talks aimed at restricting the testing of nuclear weapons. Yet under President Richard Nixon, he became a champion of the Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty (SALT I) and, as president himself, pursued a SALT II agreement. As a congressman, he railed against China, but he later stood behind Nixon’s rapprochement with that Communist country.

His loyalty also led him to overreach at times. He attempted to impeach Supreme Court Justice William Douglas in what appeared to many observers to be revenge for the Senate’s refusal to confirm two of President Nixon’s nominees to the Court. Ford could also be naive, which, in combination with his friendship with Nixon, convinced him that the former president had had no part in the Watergate scandal, even as evidence to the otherwise became overwhelming.

Ford, however, was a pragmatic partisan, and it is his pragmatism that constitutes the third theme of this biography. Inspired by loving parents who were known for decency and goodwill, Ford developed a reputation for honesty and a strong sense of right and wrong. He was not an ideologue, though. Just as winning a football game required cooperating with other members of the team, so rising up the political ranks and achieving one’s goals necessitated a preparedness to compromise and to build coalitions with those whose views might not accord with one’s own. Doing so
offered a mixed bag for Ford. In Congress, he became known among his fellow Republicans as someone who was approachable and willing to listen to all sides before making a decision. He also exhibited a readiness to work with Democrats, particularly on foreign policy but also to some extent on domestic matters. Yet before and during his tenure as minority leader, that willingness to reach across party lines oftentimes brought Republicans in alliance with conservative Democrats, whose positions, particularly with regard to race, were not necessarily those Ford favored.

As president, Ford wanted to see the country continue down the path of fiscal conservatism and internationalism he had preached as a lawmaker. Building the alliances he had sought to create while on Capitol Hill, though, proved increasingly difficult. By the mid-1970s, conservatives in his party had grown in strength and did not favor many of Ford’s decisions, including those related to his pick for vice president, relations with the Soviet Union, or tax policy. A Democratic-controlled and reform-minded Congress determined to rein in presidential power also constrained Ford, who signed legislation that was not fully in accord with what he wanted. That Ford refused to give up his pragmatic partisanship, however, became apparent after he left office. He developed a close friendship with a Democrat, Jimmy Carter, and adopted positions that oftentimes were not in line with a GOP that had continued to move rightward.

Today, polls of laypersons and academics place Gerald Ford among the ranks of mediocre presidents. Fifty-six percent of Americans ranked Ford as “average” in a 2013 Gallup survey, and a Quinnipiac University poll of registered voters taken the following year found that of the twelve chief executives who have served since World War II, Ford ranked eleventh among the best presidents, and eighth among the worst. A C-SPAN poll of U.S. historians in 2009 placed Ford twenty-second among the forty-three presidents. Even if a closer look at Ford’s life in politics does not change these impressions, his career will allow readers to experience a period when, despite sometimes vigorous partisan debates, words such as “compromise” and “cooperation” were heard much more often in Washington.
This book emerged from a request by Peter Coveney, an editor at Wiley-Blackwell, that I edit a book of historiographical essays on Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. Having spent years researching Carter, I was familiar with the literature on his life and presidency, but I knew less about Ford. Desiring to learn more about the country’s thirty-eighth president, I began reading books about him and his life. I discovered that while a few biographies about him had been written, there was much about his political career that had been overlooked or given short shrift. I brought up the idea, therefore, of writing a biography of Ford to Fred Woodward, then the director of the University Press of Kansas, and the result is this book.

There are numerous people who made this book possible. First and foremost is the staff at the Gerald R. Ford Library, who went out of their way to assist me: research archivists Donna Lehman, Elizabeth Druga, Tim Holtz, Mark Fischer, and Hannah Brookhart; supervisory archivist Geir Gundersen; grants coordinator Jeremy Schmidt; and the library’s director, Elaine Didier. I will forever appreciate their kindness, suggestions for places to see and eat in Ann Arbor, and all the amazing work they are doing to put numerous documents online.

Having conducted research on Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, I have spent many hours at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum in At-
lanta, and I want to thank all the archivists there for their help with this project. My appreciation goes out as well to the staffs at the New York Public Library, the Bentley Historical Library in Ann Arbor, the J. Willard Marriott Library at the University of Utah, the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston, and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Kathryn Hodson at the University of Iowa Libraries and Monica Blank at the Rockefeller Archive Center were very helpful. Both John Fierst of the Clarke Historical Library at Central Michigan University and Kristen Nyitray at the Frank Melville Jr. Memorial Library at the State University of New York–Stony Brook corresponded with me and provided some very useful materials.

A special note of appreciation goes to Dr. Alissa Warters, professor of political science and associate provost for academic affairs and enrollment management at Francis Marion University, who spent several weeks conducting research at the Ford, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan Libraries. The documents she gave me for this manuscript were invaluable.

I also want to thank Dr. Warters for participating in some of the interviews conducted for this book, as well as those who talked with us about Ford as father, congressman, and president. Ford’s youngest son, Steve, was kind enough not only to speak with us for several hours but also to reach out to others who knew his father: Buzz Thomas, the grandson of Willis Ward, who played alongside Ford for the University of Michigan football team, and the former deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget, Paul O’Neill. Several people who served on Capitol Hill—Congresspersons Patricia Schroeder and Lee Hamilton and Senators Bob Dole, Richard Lugar, and Bill Brock—recounted their experiences in government and their memories of Ford. Neal Thigpen, a personal friend who was a member of the South Carolina delegation to both the 1976 and 1980 Republican National Conventions, offered some terrific stories about being part of the process of choosing the party’s nominee. I wish to thank as well two history majors at Francis Marion University, Ben Jackson and Troy Tanner, who spent time helping me transcribe these interviews.

The Gerald R. Ford Presidential Foundation offers travel grants to researchers and provided funding to both Dr. Warters and me. Francis Marion University is exceedingly generous in funding faculty research, and I wish to thank the university’s president, L. Fred Carter, the History Department, and the Francis Marion University Foundation for their wonderful support.

Prior to submitting the manuscript, my father, Burton Kaufman, himself a former professor of history, reviewed it and made numerous helpful sug-
gestions. Though I was saddened to receive word from Fred Woodward of his decision to retire, the press’s editor-in-chief, Joyce Harrison, has been a wonder to work with. I wish to thank as well her editorial assistant, Cole Anneberg, and production editor Larisa Martin. The University Press of Kansas sent the monograph to two readers who offered terrific recommendations. One of them was kind enough to identify himself: John Robert Greene, whose knowledge of Gerald Ford and the Ford administration is second to none.

This is the first book my wife, Julie, has experienced from start to finish. I cannot thank her enough for her love and patience while I spent innumerable days away on research or in my office typing on my computer. That she did not have a heart attack as my office turned into what I call “organized chaos,” what with papers and books spread all around, is a testament to her stoicism. My love goes as well to our four-legged “dogter,” Lexi; my aunt and uncle, Shirley and Barry Michaelson, with whom I stayed while conducting research in Boston; Kai, Kim, Taro, and Karsten Yamamoto, who opened their doors to me while I was in New York City; my sister, Heather, and her husband, Steve Moore; my stepmother, Jane Bloom, and her family; my brother-in-law, Bill Colman, his wife, Nancy Bason, and their children, Andy and Carolyn; my sister-in-law, Jill Bacchetta, her husband, David, and their son and daughter, Brandon and Taylor; my grandmother, Ruth Kaufman; and my “second parents,” Al and Mickey Keithley, and their family.
She had had enough. The physical and emotional abuse had become more than she could take. So in July 1913, Dorothy King took her infant son, fled her Nebraska home, and crossed the Missouri River to her parents, who were waiting in neighboring Iowa. It was a first step to a much better life for her and her newborn child, one that set him down a path toward political leadership.

The child’s name was Leslie King Jr., but he would become known as Gerald R. Ford Jr. Between his birth and his thirty-fifth birthday, when he entered the U.S. House of Representatives, Ford benefited from a combination of luck, on the one hand, and, on the other, his mother and stepfather, coaches, military officers, girlfriends, and acquaintances from whom he learned the values of patience, determination, honesty, spiritedness, and faith in human nature. He also discovered within himself an overwhelming ambition and a desire to assume positions of leadership. His drive to success was not without its challenges and disappointments. But it was clear to those who knew him that he was one who would not give up on achieving his goals.
A King Becomes a Ford

Ford’s mother, Dorothy Gardner, was the granddaughter of Alexander Gardner, who had arrived in America from Scotland, and Sally Miller, whose family traced their lineage back to England. The Millers had moved from New York to Illinois sometime after Sally’s birth, and it was in the Prairie State where she met Alexander. Married in 1839, they had six children, the youngest of whom, Levi Addison, was born in 1860. At age twenty-four, Levi exchanged vows with Adele Augusta Ayers in Harvard, Illinois. The couple had two daughters: Tannis, born in 1887, and, five years later, Dorothy.

Levi developed a successful real estate business and apparently enjoyed politics, serving for a year as Harvard’s mayor. Long after he had been president of the United States, Gerald Ford recalled Dorothy’s parents as very kind. This kindness passed on to their daughter, who by all accounts was religiously devout, warmhearted, “gregarious,” and “a great conversationalist.” As events were soon to make clear, she was also an emotionally strong individual who was prepared to stand up to those who tried to intimidate her.1

In 1912, Dorothy married Leslie Lynch King, one of five children of a well-off Omaha family. King’s father, Charles, was a merchant who in the 1880s had made a fortune establishing stores and banks along the route of what became the Chicago and North Western Transportation Company Railroad. He also helped found several towns, including Chadron, Nebraska, where Leslie was born in 1884. Charles moved the family to Omaha in 1908, constructed a mansion there, and continued to build his fortune, amassing some $20 million.

Dorothy and Leslie met while she was a student at St. Mary’s Academy, a woman’s college in Knoxville, Illinois; her roommate was one of his sisters. The tall, handsome, and blond twenty-eight-year-old King and the beautiful twenty-year-old Dorothy appeared to be a match made in heaven. After a brief courtship, King asked her father for her hand, assuring him that he was well-off, had a good job in his father’s company, and could give her a comfortable life. Levi had no reason to doubt the young courter. A prosperous businessman himself, he knew that Leslie’s father was a multimillionaire. Nor did Adele see any cause for concern. With her parents’ consent, Dorothy and Leslie married in September 1912 and then boarded a train for the West Coast and their honeymoon.2

Dorothy’s expectation for a blissful marriage rapidly dissolved when King
hit her repeatedly during that West Coast trip. Not only was he malicious, but he was mendacious: upon returning to Omaha, Dorothy discovered that her husband and father-in-law were on poor terms; the elder King refused to provide his son with financial support; the younger King had been stealing money from the father’s business; and despite his thievery, Leslie was deeply in debt. A brief reconciliation gave way to more violence, and to complicate matters, Dorothy in December learned that she was pregnant.³

Possibly because she did not want to leave her child without a father figure, Dorothy tried her best to salvage her marriage. She found support from her father-in-law, who agreed to let her use his large home for the baby’s delivery and made sure she had a doctor and nurse to provide care, and from her mother, who arrived from Illinois. On 14 July 1913, she bore a son, whom she and Leslie named Leslie Jr. But if she believed that having a child would change her husband and rescue their marriage, she was wrong. King
continued to terrorize his wife and even threatened to kill their child. Fearing for both her life and that of her son, Dorothy called a lawyer, who told her to leave Nebraska. Not even taking time to pack clothes, she boarded a carriage and headed across the Missouri River to Council Bluffs, Iowa, where her parents were waiting to take her home to Harvard. Afterward, Dorothy filed for divorce, winning not only custody of her son but an order for Leslie Sr. to pay $3,000 in alimony and $25 a month in child support. Having recently been fired by his father, Leslie claimed impoverishment and inability to pay. Charles stepped in, promising to make good on the court order.4

In a way, Dorothy could relax, for she was free of her tormentor and had money coming in from his father. Yet she faced the stigma of being a divorcée. While commonplace in the twenty-first century, divorce was not usual throughout much of America’s history. Rather, it was associated with scandal, psychological defect, and societal failure, and it was considered particularly disgraceful where there were children involved. Knowing she could not stay in small-town Harvard, Dorothy moved to Chicago, where she had family, and found a place in Hyde Park. Her parents also left Harvard, not for Chicago but for Grand Rapids, Michigan, where Levi’s company had an office. Shortly thereafter, Levi was diagnosed with kidney failure, and Dorothy and her son traveled with increasing frequency to see him. By the time he passed away in 1916, she had left her job in Chicago and moved to Grand Rapids to live with her mother.5

Situated on the Grand River, which is also Michigan’s longest river, Grand Rapids is about 25 miles east of Lake Michigan and is the seat of Kent County. Native Americans had lived in the region for thousands of years, including the Hopewell and Ottawa tribes. Europeans arrived in the area in the early 1800s and established a trading post. By the mid-1840s, that post had become a town with a population of approximately 1,500; it was over 87,000 at the turn of the twentieth century. While gypsum mining explains some of this growth, the area’s forests were key. With 35 million acres of both hard- and softwoods, Michigan appeared to have an unlimited reserve of trees, and the Grand River provided a means of transporting fallen timber to mills at Grand Rapids. As the 1800s neared their end, the city had become a center for furniture manufacturing—earning it the nickname “Furniture City”—supported by a number of attendant industries, among them the manufacture of paint and varnish.6 After 1900, a small automobile firm, the Austin Automobile Company, also began operations.

Industry meant jobs, and immigrants flooded into Grand Rapids to find
work. The largest group was the Dutch, who constituted over 25 percent of the city’s population in 1900, but Poles, Germans, Swedes, and Lithuanians had made it home as well. Ethnic neighborhoods and a wide array of churches and temples reflected this diversity, but even more apparent were the class divisions. Downtown lay along the Grand River, and just to the east was a hill. That area became known as the Hill District, where the lumber-mill owners and other wealthy individuals resided. Further east—the East Side—was populated by middle- and upper-middle-class families; the West Side contained predominantly blue-collar families.7

Overshadowing the ethnic differences in Grand Rapids was a population that largely adhered to what has been referred to by scholars and by Ford’s contemporaries as a midwestern form of conservatism. Like political conservatives, they touted limited government and fiscal frugality. But what set them apart from others of conservative bent was their nonfundamentalist piety and, more importantly, their political moderation and pragmatism and their willingness to engage in compromise. Further drawing the city together was an excellent transportation system, particularly the electric streetcars that made it relatively easy and inexpensive to get from one’s home to the city’s downtown industries. Though not offering the diversions one could find in nearby Detroit or Chicago, the city provided a symphony, clubs, and theaters. Dorothy and her mother took advantage of what Grand Rapids had to offer, joining various organizations and regularly attending Grace Episcopal Church,8 located about 5 miles southeast of downtown.

While attending mass, Dorothy caught the attention of Gerald R. Ford. Ford was the son of George Ford, who had been born in Ohio, moved to Michigan, and married Zana Frances Pixley. Making their home in Grand Rapids, they had three children, the youngest of whom, Gerald Rudolph, was born in 1889 on the city’s West Side.9 His father had died in a train accident when Gerald was only seven. To help support his family, he dropped out of school in the eighth grade and never completed his education. He worked selling paint and wallpaper for Heystek and Caulfield, located in the East Side. Ford was by no means as wealthy as the Gardners, but he was financially stable.10

Dorothy did not care that her family was better off than Ford’s, for she had learned the hard way that money did not buy happiness. And there was much to like about him. He was physically attractive, standing just over six feet tall, with a rectangular face marked by penetrating eyes and an aquiline nose, and a slightly receding line of black hair that he parted down the middle and combed straight back. He was also religiously devout, friendly,
emotionally mature, and well respected in the city, in part because of his active community service. He was in many ways the very opposite of the man from whom she had escaped a few years earlier. In 1915, the two began dating regularly. Whether her family approved is not clear, though there is evidence that her mother was less than pleased because of Ford’s social status. What was certain was that Dorothy had no intention of rushing into another marriage, waiting until February 1917 to exchange vows.11

Ford’s stepfather and mother rented a home on Madison Avenue, near the corner with Franklin Street, where there was a firehouse with the city’s last horse-drawn steam engine. Ford recalled that when it went out on a call, “the sight was spectacular.” The Fords stayed there until 1919, when they moved to a home on Rosewood Avenue. It was an economically well-off part of town, with excellent schools, good health-care facilities, parks, and safe neighborhoods. Those who lived there were, in the words of one author, “thrifty, self-reliant, and active in civic affairs.”12

The Fords could not have been happier. They loved each other deeply, and Gerald treated his bride with unfettered kindness and respect. The same was true for Dorothy’s son, whom she began to call “Junie Ford” as opposed to “Junior,” as well as Ford’s half-brother, Tom, to whom Dorothy gave birth in 1918. The Fords were strict disciplinarians who made sure Jerry and Tom told the truth, did their chores, and came to dinner on time. But they also had fun. Gerald taught his children how to swim and play sports, including baseball and football. He was part owner of a home on Lake Michigan, and each summer the family went there, where the elder Ford and his stepson fished. It was through his stepfather that Ford learned the importance of independent thinking and doing what he believed was just. While many of the younger Ford’s interests and mannerisms began to reflect those of his stepfather, one feature did not: his temper. Like his biological father, he periodically would fly into a rage for no reason, throwing items or pushing or hitting people if he did not get his way. His anger appeared enough in kindergarten that his teacher years later referred to him as “naughty Junior Ford.”13

Dorothy and Gerald began what became a years-long effort to get Junie to control his temper. If he exhibited anger, Dorothy would have him look at himself in a mirror to see “how silly he looked, or she would laugh at his fits . . . and try to tease him out of them.” Gerald was more direct, using “classic motivational talk.” As both were devout churchgoers, they also turned to the Bible and had Junie memorize Proverbs 16:32: “He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than
he that taketh a city.” Ford also discovered inspiration in Rudyard Kipling, whose poem “If” begins “If you can keep your head when all about you / Are losing theirs and blaming it on you.” By high school, the younger Ford had made great strides in controlling his temper—though it did reappear periodically—and credited the love and devotion of his parents as fundamental to his success at doing so.14

Junie, who decided to take the name “Jerry” after the man he believed was his biological father, also had to address his stuttering, which began when he was in second grade. It is not clear how long the problem continued, but it certainly affected his self-confidence. Worried about his stammering, he became less and less willing to express himself orally. Another teacher realized that the cause of the problem was that Ford was naturally left-handed, but school custom called for using one’s right hand. When he was permitted to use his left hand, the stuttering stopped. Still, the experience had long-term consequences, for throughout elementary and secondary school, Ford became known as someone who was friendly (minus his increasingly infrequent periods of anger) yet taciturn.15

About this time, Ford’s father ran into financial difficulties. Harry Heystek Jr. had acquired Heystek and Canfield in 1921 after his father passed away, and he began making some poor business decisions that eventually forced the company to close in 1925. One of those decisions was to fire Gerald Sr. He got employment as a salesman for the Grand Rapids Wood Finishing Company, but his salary was not enough to cover the mortgage on the family home. Foreclosure followed. The Fords found a place for rent on Union Avenue, not far from where they had lived after Dorothy and Gerald married. It may have been because of the strain on their finances that Jerry’s parents suggested he become a caddy at a golf course in Grand Rapids; additionally, he could learn to play the game. He refused, preferring instead to play football and read, particularly books by Horatio Alger and poems by Edgar Guest. Alger, Ford later commented, wrote “stories about heroes, poor boys who struggled and eventually succeeded.” Appearing in the Detroit Free Press, Guest’s verses offered a sentimental perspective on daily life.16 Despite his dismissive attitude toward golf, Ford as an adult became known for his love of the game.

Though golf did not interest Ford, the Boy Scouts did. The Cub Scouts did not exist at the time, so a male youth seeking to become a Scout had to wait until his twelfth birthday. With his parents’ encouragement, Ford joined Troop 15, sponsored by Trinity M. E. Church, in December 1924. The scoutmaster was Chuck Kindel, the son of the owner of a Grand Rapids
furniture company. Jerry excelled in the Boy Scouts, achieving the title of Eagle Scout in only three years. He participated in a summer camp, where he received his first leadership positions, those of assistant counselor and swimming coach. He enjoyed the responsibility and made enough of an impression that in 1929 he was one of twelve Eagle Scouts selected by the state governor to serve as guides at Fort Mackinac, a former military outpost that had played an important role in the War of 1812. The job, which required him to greet visitors and lead talks on the fort, was one he came to adore.17

By 1929, Ford had two more siblings, Richard and James. None of the children received any favoritism. All were taught to work hard, be on time, and never lie. Because Gerald Sr. had not finished his education, he insisted his children do so. He made sure all his sons involved themselves in sports, an activity that his stepson recalled taught important lessons of their own: “how to compete but always by the rules, how to be part of a team, how to win, how to lose and come back to try again.” Sports also provided insight into human nature. “By the time I entered seventh grade,” Ford later wrote, “I was becoming aware of the deep emotions that competition can stir,” be it rivalry for the heart of a young woman or a determination to prove oneself better than another during a game. Such competition could breed hate. Ford decided, though, that “everyone . . . had more good qualities than bad. If I understood and tried to accentuate those good qualities in others, I could get along much better.”18

By the time Ford entered high school, he had largely developed the personality that continued throughout his life. His parents had inculcated in him the values of patience, diligence, and honesty. While Boy Scouts taught him teamwork and playing by the rules, sports firmly rooted those principles in his mind, as well as the idea that one should persevere, even after failure. These were the qualities of leadership. Yet Ford’s faith in human nature engendered in him a certain naïveté, which periodically haunted him during his political career.

South High

Where Ford would attend high school was a question for his parents. Their home lay where the districts serving Central High, South High, and Ottawa Hills met. Ottawa Hills was newer and served the wealthier neighborhoods in town, upper-middle-class parents sent their children to Central, and lower-class children predominated at South. South was also the most racially and ethnically diverse. Vacillating, his parents asked Ralph Conger, a
teacher and basketball coach at Central, for advice. Though Conger taught at Central, he encouraged the Fords to send Jerry to South. “They have the best teachers,” he told them. “And there he will learn more about people, and about living.”

It turned out to be a good decision, one that exposed Ford to a more heterogeneous group of peers. “If I had gone to Central,” he related years later, “I probably would have been one of those smartass[es]—in the first place I could not afford to do the things that most kids did then.” At South, though, “I wasn’t any worse off than the rest of the people.” He enjoyed the teachers and began to think about what he wanted to do after graduation. His future wife, Betty, later commented that Ford won a trip to Washington, D.C., and while there became interested in politics. Ford himself never confirmed that story—it appears in fact that his desire to become a politician developed later—but he had resolved to go to college and get a law degree. He doubled down on his studies and did well enough to become an honor student.

Also important to Ford’s future was football. He loved the game and remained a fan throughout his life. As a freshman he signed up for South High’s football team. The varsity coach was Clifford Gettings, a competent leader who was also, in Ford’s words, “a stern taskmaster.” Seeing the blond, 5-foot-8, 130-pound Ford standing on the practice field, Gettings decided he would play center for the junior varsity (JV) squad. Ford excelled at the position, enough so that when the varsity team’s senior center, Orris Burghdorf, suffered an injury before Ford’s sophomore year, Gettings called on his JV center to fill the void.

The center was a key position. Football in the 1920s was dissimilar in many ways from today’s game. One difference was the size of players. In modern football, it is not uncommon for a center, even in college, to weigh over 300 pounds and to be over 6 feet tall; in the 1920s, a football player who reached 6 feet was considered tall, and he usually weighed less than 200 pounds. For another, modern football is specialized, with each individual having specific responsibilities. For the center, that means snapping the ball to the quarterback—or, in a wildcat formation, to the person who is lined up in the quarterback position—and then immediately blocking an opposing defensive lineman. That was not the case for Ford. In addition to blocking, a center might have to snap the ball to players already in motion. Finally, it is rare in football today for a person who plays on offense to play on defense, and vice versa. Ford, though, was on an eleven-man squad, meaning that everyone played on both sides of the ball.
Ford continued to impress his coach. “Jerry was a hard-working kid and totally dependable,” Gettings commented. His center “knew everyone’s assignment on every play; having him in the game was like having a coach on the field.” For Ford, the game and his coach reinforced lessons he had acquired from earlier experience. “I learned discipline,” he recounted. “I learned that you had to consider yourself a part of a team.” Gettings taught his players to “give it everything you’ve got, but [to] always play by the rules.” And while the desire was to win, “losing a game . . . was a tragedy, terrible, but you couldn’t sit back and let that destroy your whole mental attitude.” Not just Gettings but spectators admired Ford’s competitive spirit. In 1929, the football team won the city championship, and its center, who had gained 1–2 inches in height and another 10 pounds in weight, received all-city football honors.23

Indeed, all the Fords’ lives seemed to be on the upswing. Gerald Sr. had begun to do well enough that he was able to buy the home on Union Avenue in 1925. Desiring to continue his climb up the social ladder, he decided, with the support of his boss, to start a company that specialized in interior paint. In October 1929, Ford Paint and Varnish Company opened its doors.24

The timing could not have been worse. That same month, the New York stock market crashed, and the nation spiraled into the worst economic depression in its history. Unemployment, which had stood at a mere 3 percent prior to the stock market crash, climbed to 25 percent four years later. Some 4,000 banks went under in the same period. The automobile industry, on which the Michigan economy relied so heavily, was hit especially hard. For instance, Ford Motor Company had in 1932 a workforce more than 60 percent smaller than it had been less than a decade earlier. In Grand Rapids itself, the mayor, George Welsh, found himself having to look after the needs of 20,000 people. With no offers of state or federal relief, Welsh instituted a series of public-works programs, using scrip to pay those in need of employment.25

Gerald Sr. managed to hang on. In his own acts of self-reliance, he took a cut in salary, paid himself and his employees five dollars a week, and promised wage increases when the country recovered. The following year, Charles King passed away, putting an end to the child support he had paid to Dorothy for his son. Although Gerald held on to his business, the Fords needed extra income, so they insisted that their son get a job. Jerry found part-time employment with Alex DeMar, a member of the city’s Greek community, who ran a local dance hall. Another part-time employer was Bill Skougis, the owner of a Greek diner who loved football and knew it would...
be good business to have one of the team’s stars working for him. In return for two dollars a week and lunch, Ford washed dishes and cooked and served food.26

While he was at work the following spring, the younger Ford got one of the greatest shocks of his life. A man came into the diner and, after staring at Jerry for about fifteen or twenty minutes, walked up to him. “I’m Leslie King, your father,” he announced. “Can I take you to lunch?” Ford recalled his mother telling him some years earlier that Gerald Sr. was not his biological father, but they had not discussed it further. Now, this stranger had arrived from out of thin air. Skougis gave Ford permission to leave, and the high schooler reluctantly agreed to the offer of lunch. Walking to King’s car, Ford met a woman whom King introduced as his wife and their daughter. The conversation between father and son during their meal was, Ford later wrote, “superficial. . . . We didn’t mention the divorce or anything else disagreeable.” Rather, King explained that he and his family had taken a train from Wyoming to Detroit to purchase a new car, and then, as they were driving back home, he had decided to stop in Grand Rapids to try to locate his son. He then suggested his son join him, but Ford refused. Returning to the diner, King gave Ford twenty-five dollars, told him to buy himself something nice, and left.27

That evening, Ford told his parents what had happened. Though his mother was disturbed by the unexpected social call, she gave him details of her first marriage and told him why she had left King. His stepfather “reassured him that he had done nothing wrong.” They expressed their love for their son and their trust in him. Yet he was still troubled, unsure what King’s intentions were, and was concerned that his mother and stepfather might think he was prepared to consider his biological father’s offer. “That night was one of the most difficult of my life,” Ford recounted. “When I went to bed that night, I broke down and cried.”28

Ford, however, had to put the incident behind him and did so. He continued to focus on his classes and sports, though he did find time to date a young woman named Mary Hondorp during his last two years in high school. In his junior year, he suffered an injury to his knee that forced him to sit out several football games, but he still made all-city again. In his senior year, Ford’s team chose him as captain, which he called “probably one of [my] most emotional experiences.” Adding to that excitement was South’s triumph in the state football championship.29
The Wolverine

Despite the Depression, in 1930 Gerald Sr. believed he had been able to make enough money to purchase a home on Lake Drive, but by the next year he had begun to question whether he could hold on to it. It would have helped the Fords had Leslie King Sr. paid his child support—which a court in 1931 had increased to $100 a month—but he had failed to comply with the judge’s order. With their financial situation precarious, it was obvious that the Fords could not afford to send their oldest child to college.

Once asked if he had benefited from luck in his early years, Ford said yes, pointing to his mother’s divorce, her decision to move to Grand Rapids, and her second marriage to “one of the truly outstanding people I ever knew in my life.” Serendipity now entered his life again, this time in the form of South High principal Arthur Krause. Without telling the Fords, he wrote Harry Kipke, the football coach at the University of Michigan. “We have a boy in this school by the name of Gerald Ford,” he informed Kipke. Other universities, including Harvard and Northwestern, had shown an interest in him, yet “I have had my heart set on his entering Michigan and I have done everything possible to steer him that way.” He asked Kipke to meet with the young Ford and suggest he become a Wolverine: “All I want you to hold out to the boy is that you will try to get him an honest job to enable him to pay part of his way. He will not need much help if any.” Kipke agreed, drove to Grand Rapids, and was impressed with the young man. Michigan did not offer football scholarships, but to pay for his meals—which would be a freshman’s largest expense in Ann Arbor—Ford would be able to work at the university’s hospital. Knowing that his star center would need $100 to cover his freshman-year tuition, Krause established a scholarship funded by profits from South High’s bookstore and made sure Ford was its first recipient.

Ford was one of almost 1,200 students to enter the University of Michigan in 1931. As a freshman, he and his roommate, a basketball player from Grand Rapids, lived in a small room, paying four dollars a week in fees. He pledged the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity the next year. He admitted that “the Deke house had a lousy reputation,” but it was known for its athletes and its parties. In truth, Ford had little time for diversion. For one thing, he needed money. His stepfather was still suffering from the Depression, and Jerry received no response to a letter he had sent to his biological father asking for financial help. To pay bills, therefore, he washed dishes at the Deke house and took other part-time jobs. He made additional money by donating blood.
Ford also had football on his mind and was among twenty-five freshmen to try out for the team. The South High center impressed his new coach. That year, the 6-foot, 198-pounder was the starting center for the freshman team and received a trophy for being “outstanding freshman player in spring practice.” He joined the varsity team the following year but largely sat on the bench, as the center was an All-American named Chuck Bernard. Ford believed he was a better offensive player than Bernard, but Bernard was, he admitted, the better overall athlete. He wished he had been a starter throughout his years at Michigan, yet he did not mope. “I learned,” he later said, “that there was the potential always that somebody could be better than you.” Ford’s attitude impressed his coach, who called him “one of the finest boys I have ever met. I’m not talking of football ability, but of character. . . . He has never complained, never crabbed, never felt that he wasn’t getting a square deal, always boosting for Bernard, who was keeping him on the bench. . . . Give me eleven boys with the disposition of Jerry Ford.”

Ford went into his senior year full of optimism. Bernard had graduated,
meaning Ford would be the starting center for the varsity squad. The Wolverines had won college football’s national championship the previous two years, and there were high hopes for a three-peat. But injuries to key players hurt. “Our defense struggled mightily, but we just couldn’t score,” Ford remarked. Michigan lost its first two games, against rivals Michigan State and the University of Chicago, by a combined total of 43–0.34

The next game, against Georgia Tech, tested Jerry’s character. One of his best friends, and his roommate on away games, was Willis Ward, an African American who was one of the Wolverines’ top receivers. Georgia Tech at the time had not integrated and refused to play Michigan if Willis came onto the field. The two schools considered a compromise by which Georgia Tech would have one of its top players sit out if Willis did, a proposal Ford considered “morally wrong.” For advice, he called his stepfather, who suggested that his stepson “do whatever the coaching staff decides is right.” Still uncertain, Ford spoke to Willis, who urged him to play. “Look,” Ford recalled Willis telling him, “the team’s having a bad year. We’ve lost two games and we probably won’t win any more. You’ve got to play Saturday. You owe it to the team.” Ford agreed. In its only win that season, the team defeated Georgia Tech 9–2. Yet the Wolverines’ center throughout had proven himself a hard player and a team leader. Not only was he named the squad’s most valuable player, but also he had earned the respect of players among the Wolverines’ opponents. One was Rip Whalen, a guard on Northwestern’s squad, who was impressed enough to suggest to his coach that Ford play in college football’s All-Star scrimmage, the East-West Shrine Game. Ford’s team, East, lost, but he played well enough to receive offers from two professional football teams, the Detroit Lions and the Green Bay Packers.35

Looking back, Ford regretted that he had not taken one of the teams up on its offer and played for a year. At the time, though, playing professionally was not what he had in mind. By his senior year in high school, he had decided he wanted to become a lawyer. According to one of his brothers, it was Ford Sr. who convinced his stepson to seek that career path. Whether or not that was the case, his aspirations toward the law offered a third reason why Ford had little time for partying, for he realized that he needed to maintain good grades to get into a high-ranking law school. He did well in the courses for his double major, in history and economics, but he had more difficulty with French and English composition. With the exception of a class on the history of the U.S. South, he scored As and Bs in his history classes and predominantly Bs in his business and economics courses. He
never scored higher than a C in composition, got a D in French, and completed his undergraduate career with a B average.\footnote{36}

Even if Ford’s grades had been good enough for him to get into a prestigious law school, he still had to pay for it. Ford asked to work for Kipke as an assistant, but the Michigan coach did not have the funds. Once again, he got lucky. Kipke called Ford to tell him that Yale University’s head football coach, Ducky Pond, would be in Ann Arbor to find an assistant line coach. Ivan Williamson, Yale’s end coach, happened to have captained Michigan’s football squad when Ford was a sophomore. He recommended his former teammate for the job, as did Kipke, who forwarded his recommendation on to Pond.\footnote{37}

Pond interviewed Ford and confirmed what Williamson and Kipke had told him about the Grand Rapids native. The salary Pond offered was also good: $2,400 a year, starting that September. In fact, the pay was yet another reason to forgo professional ball. The Packers and the Lions had offered Ford $2,800, a significant difference at that time. If, however, Ford got injured and proved unable to play after ten days, the team could drop him.\footnote{38} Job security was far less a concern if he went to Yale.

\section*{Law versus Love}

In the intersession between graduation from the University of Michigan in June 1935 and the start of Yale’s fall term, Ford worked in his father’s paint store. To the delight of his parents, he decided to change his name officially, and in December 1935, a probate court judge granted Ford’s request. From that point, he was Gerald Rudolph Ford Jr.\footnote{39}

Ford enjoyed his new position at Yale, and the players liked him. Though for the first time he was financially secure and was able to put some money away, he remained wedded to the idea of getting into law school. Pond told him there was no way he could coach, which was itself a full-time job, and take law classes. Yale Law School was also dismissive, arguing not only that he would not have the time, but that it was highly selective, accepting only about 25 percent of applicants.\footnote{40} Ford’s B average at Michigan was not going to cut it.

For the moment, Ford put off law school. One of his roommates, Ken Loeffler, Yale’s basketball coach, told Ford about the exciting time he had had working in national parks out west, and he suggested that Jerry spend the summer of 1936 as a park ranger. “Well, that sounded like a good idea,” Ford reminisced, “better than filling paint cans.” He wrote one of Michi-