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GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. --The president who broke us up brought us together.

The fine art of bonding was about the only serious side of the "Humor and the Presidency" symposium on Thursday and Friday at the Gerald R. Ford Museum here.

Host and former President Gerald Ford called the nutty gathering "almost a humanitarian undertaking, an important moment of levity in a world that takes itself too seriously." So to lighten things up, the Gerald R. Ford Foundation recruited the likes of Art Buchwald, Chevy Chase, Robert Klein, Tip O'Neill, Pat Paulsen, and Mort Sahl to participate in workshops and to appear in a two-hour entertainment gala that was taped for Home Box Office.

But it was the soft-spoken Bob Orben, a former writer for Jack Paar, Red Skelton, Barry Goldwater and Gerald Ford, who best put things in perspective at a symposium on the history of humor and the presidency.

"When the president of the United States gives a speech, there is always a huge psychological, emotional and physical separation between him and the audience," Orben said. "Humor reaches out with a warm and affectionate arm around an audience and says 'I understand you.' If you can laugh together, you can vote together. But it's important in the political area that humor go even a step further in this bonding influence

- that humor is an ideal influence in turning around a negative situation."

And we all recall what kind of act Ford followed.

Gerald Warren, former deputy press secretary to President Richard M. Nixon and Ford said, "I suppose it would be an understatement that there was very little humor during the Nixon administration, and the humor we did enjoy was inadvertent.

"One time we were in Kansas City and the motorcade is heading to the airport and we make a turn on the freeway and one of the motorcycles spins and flips over and lands on the policeman," Warren recalled. "When we got up there the president was very worried. You could tell the man's arm was broken and maybe his leg. The president leaned over and in typical Nixon small talk said, 'How do you like your job?'

"What is so very important," Warren continued, "is that the style of the White House is set by the man at the top. If the man at the top doesn't have recognizable humor, chances are the staff of the president will react in somewhat the same way. I think that in some part that resulted in the 'them vs. us' mentality we had in the Nixon administration."

Intentionally and/or non-intentionally, the Ford administration applied the bonding process just when the country needed it - immediately after the Nixon resignation. Yet in between symposiums, Ford admitted the barbs stung - just a little bit. Speaking of the hundreds of political cartoons lampooning Ford that graced the foyer of the museum, the ex-president said, "Even 10 years later I can say I winced a little and maybe wondered, 'Why are they doing this to me?' But in retrospect they're all in good humor and they're a very important part of American humor."

And before Chevy Chase's well-worn satire of a bumbling and stumbling Ford during the gala performance, the president said of Chase's impression, "I winced on occasion, but on the other hand, Betty and I used to watch 'Saturday Night Live.' Presidents are sitting ducks, and you might as well sit back, relax and enjoy it."

Another motive for the symposium was for future generations to enjoy the memories and the mirth of the Gerald R. Ford Museum. All of the profits from the two-day affair went back to the museum. The symposiums were free, but dinner tables before Thursday's performance were worth \$5,000 each.

From the symposium's kickoff breakfast to the event's nadir, a two-hour evening entertainment gala taped for Home Box Office, the onlookers waited with bated breath for President Ford to bask in bumbledom.

After all, Gerald Ford slipped here.

The classy breakfast was served at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel along the crested banks of the Grand River, where summer always turns to pratfall.

Attorney Edward Bennett Williams, the owner of the Baltimore Orioles and the Washington Redskins, was the distinguished speaker. When Williams finished his talk, he was on his way back to the head table - a mere five feet from the podium - when he collided with Ford.

The smashing beginning carried the happy nostalgia of a Beatles reunion.

Not to be outdone - or undone - later in the day as he was addressing a \$5,000-a-table dinner, Ford leaned on the lectern, knocked over a tape recorder and stumbled en route to retrieve the machine.

"Is this a setup?" asked comedian Chevy Chase, sitting near the podium.

Williams set the mood for the two-day conference at the Gerald R. Ford Museum and the hotel by quoting baseball's Yogi Berra, who once said, "You can observe a lot just by watching."

And all eyes were on Ford.

The 73-year-old former president called the symposium "almost a humanitarian undertaking, an important moment of levity in a world that takes itself too seriously." Williams elaborated: "Ever since, presidents have known that when in trouble, nothing is generally a very good thing to do, and all is the very cleverest thing to say." He then referred to a fable that Joe Stalin told Harry Truman in 1945.

"A peasant was walking on a lonely road on a dreary night through the dead of winter," Williams said. "On the side of the road, he saw a frozen little bird. He picked up the little bird and breathed on him with his warm breath and he felt the bird's warmth come back. The peasant wanted to stay with the bird but he had to move on, so he put the bird in some manure compost on a nearby farm. Pretty soon the bird felt so

good, it began to chirp.

"Chirp, chirp, chirp," said the Washington attorney.

"This attracted the attention of a lurking wolfhound, who went down, reached into the manure compost, took out the bird and ate it," Williams told the breakfast gathering. "Uncle Joe Stalin told Truman that the Russian people were aware of the three

part moral: Just because somebody puts you through the mill doesn't necessarily mean he's your enemy. And just because somebody takes you out of it doesn't necessarily mean he's your friend. But for Lord's sake, when you're sitting in the middle of it, keep your big mouth shut."

Like a good political speech, everyone got something out of "Humor and the Presidency."

The Stalin Wit was the thesis for the most popular Ronald Reaganism that made the rounds during the symposium. A few weeks ago, Reagan was quoted as saying, "I'm not worried about the deficit. It's big enough to take care of itself."

Here is Reagan using humor as a tool to detract from the specific problem. Reagan has become "The Great Communicator" because of his ability to employ wit along with acting skills such as presence and timing.

Gerald Gardner, author of *Who's in Charge Here?* and a writer for the 1964 television satire "That Was The Week That Was," told the symposium, "Humor is a wonderful device for a president to employ to persuade, to influence and to communicate. And it's a marvelous device for laughing away issues you prefer not to confront directly. Mr. Reagan has employed humor to laugh away the issue of age. He's been employing humor for that purpose for about 45 years. In the second debate with Walter Mondale, he said, 'I won't make age an issue in this campaign - I will not exploit my opponent's youth and inexperience.'

Hollywood technique remains in Reagan's mind. "I am paying for this microphone," Reagan told rivals during the 1980 presidential primary debate in New Hampshire. It was a line from the movie "State of the Union."

When does it become dangerous for style to overshadow substance?

"The public will have to determine that," said Robert Orben, a writer for Dick Gregory, Jack Parr, Red Skelton and Barry Goldwater before he joined Ford's speechwriting team. "As much as we admire all the characteristics of a Ronald Reagan, as soon as something goes wrong, people will hate those same characteristics."

Orben explained how he designed material for Ford. "When we talked humor, I would go into the Oval Office or we would spend time on Air Force I, trying to get a sense of what the president thought about a situation. The magic - in many cases - was first the thought and then the construction. Jack Benny being cheap isn't funny. How is Jack Benny cheap? That makes it funny. We talked about a situation and we sort of mutually developed the image."

Orben said he was aware the Ford administration followed the macabre mirth of the Nixon years. "Oh, I was very cognizant of that," Orben said. "In fact, I was on David Letterman's show a couple of years ago with Dick Gold, a speechwriter for George Bush. At the very end of the show, Letterman asked about Nixon and I deferred that to Dick (Gold). Letterman wasn't about to let loose. He said, 'All right, Bob, come on now, did Nixon ever say anything funny?'

"I finally said, 'Well, he did say, 'I am not a crook.' The audience broke up. We were all aware of the Nixon image because of the high visibility of Watergate."

On a happier note, the symposium revived the career of comedian Pat Paulsen, who just a few years ago played to a few dozen apathetic listeners at Who's on First in Elmhurst. Leading a panel on "A History of Humor and the Presidency," Paulsen said, "A Gerald Ford symposium on humor and the presidency is sort of like attending an Ayatollah Khomeini symposium on the sexual revolution."

In two days I heard enough of these presidential jokes and presidential anecdotes to fill a book.

Here are the top three:

Like Father, Not Like Son: "Gov. (Adlai) Stevenson ran into a rather hostile introduction that you would not wish on your worst enemy," Gardner recalled. "He was addressing a Houston Baptist convention, running against Gen. Eisenhower at the time. He was

introduced in this fashion: 'Gov. Stevenson, we want to make it clear you are here as a courtesy because Dr. Norman Vincent Peale has instructed us to vote for your opponent.' Gov. Stevenson strolled to the microphone and said, 'Speaking as a Christian, I find the Apostle Paul appealing and the Apostle Peale appalling.'

An American in Paris: "With President Nixon, we made three trips to Paris in about three years," said Gerald Warren, former deputy press secretary to Nixon and Ford. "The first one was a ceremonial visit to mend the fences with Gen. (Charles) de Gaulle. We had to come back shortly thereafter to attend de Gaulle's funeral, which was a very solemn moment because he had such an impact on all of France, particularly Paris. The whole town was set back.

"Well, as history tells us, shortly thereafter we had to go back to attend the funeral of President Pompidou, who died unexpectedly. The Parisians had not had the same feeling for Pompidou that they had for de Gaulle. There was gaiety in the streets and nothing was closed. There were crowds in the street, much like a presidential campaign. Here we were in the middle of the funeral ceremony for the president of France, and the president of the United States was so charged up that all these people wanted to shake his hand, he looked at one and said, 'It's a great day for Paris.'"

A Toast to the Host: This wouldn't be a roundup of the best of the symposium without a Gerald Ford joke. "President Ford has a very genial sense of humor," Gardner said. "He was giving a speech in Omaha and after the speech, he went to a reception. A sweet little old lady went up to him and put her gloved hand in his and said, 'I hear you spoke here tonight.' And he said, 'Oh, it was nothing.' And she said, 'Yes, that's what I heard.'"

Ford admitted he was unsettled by Chevy Chase's pratfall routine, which the comedian performed twice during the symposium. "I winced on occasion, but on the other hand, Betty and I used to watch 'Saturday Night Live.' Presidents are sitting ducks, and you might as well sit back and enjoy it."

Which is pretty much what Ford did during the event.

In opening the show, autoharpist Bryan Bowers captivated the full house at DeVos Hall at the Grand Plaza with an immaculate and melodic version of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." The curtain then rose to reveal a majestic set of steps flanked by the regal Army Herald Trumpets and the natty 30-man Army Chorus.

President Ford appeared at the top of the steps and walked down, carrying a shopping bag with the insignia of the University of Michigan (his alma mater) on the front and the insignia of Michigan State University on the back. Ford then honed his stand-up routine.

"Bob Hope and I play a lot of golf together, but I resent him going around the country commercializing on my golfing inadequacies," Ford told the audience. "The other day we were playing in Vail, Colo., and we were at the first tee when somebody said, 'Hey, Bob, what's your favorite foursome?' Bob said, 'Gerry Ford, a faith healer and a paramedic.'" Ford went on to quote that noted kookster, Joe Stalin.

"Joseph Stalin once said, 'There is nothing more dangerous than humor,' " Ford recalled. "In my opinion, there is nothing more precious. Fortunately, in this country, we have always been able to laugh at ourselves - and our leaders." Ford then sat next to wife Betty in the theater's presidential box to enjoy - and no doubt occasionally wince - at the evening's comedy.

Less captivating but more predictable was the appearance of Chevy Chase, who revived his "Saturday Night Live" routine of Gerald Ford, Chief Executive Stumblebum. Chase fell downstairs, poured water into an upside-down glass and several times hit his head on the lectern.

Chase said he'd paid his dues for the hijinks with slipped discs. "I'm paying for it between my fourth and fifth vertebrae. Anyway, it was the worst impression in the world of Ford," he said. Chase had never met Ford until he attended the symposium.

Mort Sahl had a numbing effect on the Grand Rapids audience. His stream-of-consciousness monologues not only strayed from the routine of simple one-liners, but his occasionally rambling thoughts also were the most bitter attacks on the present Republican administration.

Ford even introduced Sahl by saying, "Mark Twain was frequently criticized for being much too radical, although his voice became part of a chorus which continues today - to challenge the self-righteous and to ridicule the unjust. No one since Mark Twain has been more criticized for doing that job more brilliantly than Mort Sahl."

After the show was over, Ford returned and called all participants to the front of the

stage for a curtain call. There were two microphones - a live one in the middle of the stage and a dead one at the stage apex.

Betty and Gerald Ford strolled out to the dead microphone.

They gave the people what they wanted.