

A LITTLE HISTORY FOR THE BOOKS –

Frank was a very good friend of mine, and when he received his appointment as a page, the entire Black community was proud. This is for those who may not have seen it in the SJR. (That's what I'm talking about *history*).

Found firsthand that Ford was a man you could trust

As the nation mourns the nation's 38th president and remembers his role in healing the nation, my memories are somewhat different.

I was 15 when I met Gerald Ford on April 15, 1965, then the minority leader in the U.S. House of Representatives. His biography will probably not contain the words "civil rights leader" but at the time to me he was.

He had OK'd my being appointed as the first African-American pageboy in the history of the House. The group who eventually selected me came to Springfield because it was the home of Abraham Lincoln. And to my high school (Feitshans) because we had the most black students. I was appointed on the 100th anniversary of Lincoln's assassination.

My appointment came at a time of racial turmoil in the nation — two months after the assassination of Malcolm X and four months before Watts erupted. As he would do nine years later and attempt to heal the nation from the cloud of Watergate, I believe my appointment was a small gesture to sooth the seething wounds that racially polarized America. Of course, politically, it could have been a way to attempt to garner some black support for the GOP after the 1964 trouncing in the presidential race.

In those days to be African-American and anything was to bring in question your mental ability, your moral character and to ponder the question, "Are we making a mistake?" Fast forward to the recent Foley-pageboy scandal. The thought of bringing a young "Negro" into



From left, Congressman Paul Findley, Frank Mitchell, House Republican Leader Gerald Ford and Republican Whip Les Arends celebrate Mitchell's appointment in 1965 as the first African-American House page in history.

the halls of Congress as a pageboy must have caused some pause.

However, my memory of Mr. Ford and some of the Illinois congressmen around him — Paul Findley, who represented my home of Springfield; Les Arends, the House whip; Bob McClory Bob Michel; and Donald Rumsfeld — was that they showed the utmost confidence in me and they all treated me with respect and dignity. It was clear they wanted me to succeed in the job, and I did.

In those days, the political battlefield

was not as contentious as today. The good of the nation seemed to be paramount, not who was going to get credit. A handshake meant something. Gerald Ford shook my hand that day in 1965 and said something to the effect, "Welcome to Washington. Let us know how we can help you succeed." I knew I could take that to the bank.

*Frank Mitchell
Formerly of Springfield
Grapevine, Texas*