



All the Best Podcast
Episode 13: “A Man in Motion”
Featuring Ambassador Chase Untermeyer

Chase: April 4th, 1968. Dear CGU, I am most grateful for your unsolicited views on open housing. I will vote for the bill on final passage. Have misgivings, giant political misgivings, also constitutional. Also, I know it won't solve much, but I'm for much of the bill and in my heart, I know you're right on the symbolism of open housing. The mail is more on this than any subject since I've been in Congress all against except two letters, 500 to 2 I'd guess. But this will be my character builder and Friends antagonist and your letter helped me decide. Thanks, GB.

George: In the first place, I believe that character is a part of being president.

Barbara: And life really must have joy.

Sam: This is "All the Best" the official podcast of the George and Barbara Bush Foundation. I'm your host, Sam LeBlond, one of their many grandchildren. Here, we celebrate the legacy of these two incredible Americans through friends, family, and the foundation. This is "All The Best."

Lyrics

We're Mountaineers, volunteers
We're the tide that rolls, we're Seminoles
We're one big country nation, that's right

George: I remember something my dad told me. He said, "Write your mother, serve your country." And he said, "Tell the truth." And I tried to do that in public life all through it.

Lyrics

We're one big country nation, that's right

Barbara: You are a human being first and those human connections with children, with friends, are the most important investment you will ever make.

George: We stand tonight before a new world of hope and possibilities for our children, a world we could not have contemplated a few years ago.

Sam: On behalf of our family and the George and Barbara Bush Foundation, this is "All The Best."

Lyrics

We're one big country nation, that's right

Sam: Welcome to "All The Best." Ambassador Chase Untermeyer is the founding chairman for the Qatar-America Institute. After being appointed by my uncle President George W. Bush as the U.S. Ambassador to Qatar in 2004, Ambassador Untermeyer served as an officer in the U.S. Navy and as a member of the Texas House of Representatives before serving as an executive assistant to then Vice President Bush. Currently, Ambassador Untermeyer is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and is the author of three volumes of diary-based memoirs of the Reagan and Bush administrations. Ambassador Untermeyer, welcome to "All The Best."

Chase: My pleasure, Sam.

Sam: Mr. Ambassador, I'd like to start out with this because not too many people can date their service to my grandparents back as far as you can. In your case, it's now over a half-century. You were a campaign volunteer in the mid-1960s and later an intern in the Office of Congressman George H. W. Bush. Can you talk about those early political days?

Chase: Your grandfather was the Republican nominee for Congress on the West side of Houston in 1966. And at that time I was a rising college junior, very interested in politics and a Republican in Texas at a time when Republicans had very, very few to almost no public offices. So I had campaigned for lots of Republicans who never got elected to anything, and along came this young oilman with his wonderful boisterous family who was the nominee for Congress in a seat that the Republicans could actually win.

So I volunteered doing all the things that people did in those days before computers got into the act and could send out mailings without human hands attached, and that's what I did. I helped address envelopes and there was even a rubber stamp which had a facsimile of your grandfather's signature. And if you did it the right way, which I didn't, it may kind of look like a signature made

with a ballpoint pen. And that's what I did until I figured I'd done that enough and if I could do research that might be more exciting, more fulfilling.

So I was asked by the chairman of the research committee to do a biography of the Democratic opponent, a Conservative Democrat who was the district attorney here in Harris County, Texas. It was not the kind of nasty research that people do today, they call APO. It was just a biography but I went to the files of the "Houston Chronicle" for a few days and dredged up all this information, data and quotations, put it into a report and sent it off to the campaign. And when I came back from a trip that weekend, my sister was all excited because George Bush himself had called me on the telephone. And when I nervously returned the call, he said he liked the report very much and he wanted me to work in his personal office to put together quotation cards, one fact per card that he could use in debates.

And that's what I did until I went back to college and waited until November of that year when he got elected. And right after he got elected in his very typical way, I may have written him a note, but regardless of that, he wrote me and he said, "You know, they have intern programs in the Congress and if you would like to do that, I can't imagine anybody else, I'd want more. " Well, of course, I wanted to do that and that's what occurred. So when he was a freshman Congressman, I would fly down to Washington from Boston and just open the mail and answer the phone and do all sorts of those things that to me were very exciting and it was the beginning of a long relationship.

Sam: In April of 1968, just a few days after Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated, my grandfather cast a controversial vote for the Open Housing Act. Afterwards he received death threats and was roundly booed at a town hall meeting in his district. You had some involvement in that vote. Mr. Ambassador. Can you talk about it?

Chase: Yes. My involvement was very modest and that is that once again I think it was spring break. So I came down to Boston to work in the congressional office and it was, as you say, right after the death of Dr. King. It was a very difficult time for the country that year 1968 is often thought of nostalgically by many, but it really was very grim. In any event, in the passion of that occasion, I just took out a piece of paper, wrote a memo to the Congressman, encouraging him to vote for the Open Housing bill because I felt it was the right thing and it certainly was the right time to do it.

Now, I do not contend, in the least that it was my memo that caused him to cast that vote because he was a man of conscience who had a long record of commitment to civil rights and equal opportunity. He had made a visit to the

troops in Vietnam and he came back saying that he found it very hard not to give that African American soldier whom he had seen going into combat the chance to have a house just like anybody else. So he was indeed motivated to vote for that bill. And in his very wonderful way, he wrote me a letter immediately afterwards telling me that he had cast that vote and that my memo had helped him. That to me was a very special and moving moment.

Sam: I'd like to fast forward to the vice-presidential days. By then you had served in the Navy as a reporter at the "Houston Chronicle" and as a member of the Texas House of Representatives. How did you reconnect with my grandparents and what did you do for them?

Chase: Well, it was the very nature of your grandparents always to keep in touch with everybody always. That is my experience is no different than that truly of thousands of other people whom the senior Bushes never forgot. Now it was easier for them to see me because after the election of 1976 they returned to Houston and that was right at the time I was beginning to serve in the legislature from a district in Houston. It also came to me that the pay of a state legislator in Texas then and now was all of \$600 a month. Even back then for me as a bachelor, that was very hard to do. And in fact, it couldn't be done on \$600 so I needed an income supplement.

And I came up with the bright idea that he should write a book of his experiences in the various jobs he had held since 1966, member of Congress, chairman of the Republican National Committee, Ambassador of the UN, Envoy to China and that I should be the ghostwriter. And the income that would come from this project could help supplement my \$600 a month. I exposed that idea to him and he thought about it and said, "Yes, let's work on that together."

So my very first trip to Kennebunkport, Maine was in the summer of 1977 in which I interviewed him at length there on Walker's Point, which at that time he did not own. It was empty property except for the annex to the house where I happened to be living that particular two weeks. A few weeks later it happened to be on the day Elvis Presley died so I always think of this phone call when it's Elvis Presley's death day. I got a phone call from your grandfather who said that the Chinese government had invited him and Barbara Bush to come back to China as their guest and he could bring a delegation of people with him and he thought it would help our book project if I was one of the delegation.

Well, that was a leap of thought, which was unnecessary if that is, I'm sure I could have written the book without going to China. But how absolutely spectacular to go to China with George and Barbara Bush and the other people who were on the delegation, James Baker, David Broder, who is the senior

political writer for the "Washington Post," Dean Birch, one of the great political advisers to many Republicans, including your grandfather. And perhaps the most interesting person of all was Lowell Thomas, who was then 85 years old. He was the man who discovered Lawrence of Arabia in 1918 and was with his son, the last Americans to go to Tibet. And we were only the second group of Americans to go to Tibet since the Chinese took over Tibet in 1950.

So I've often said that the go-to Beaumont, Texas with that group would have been the trip of a lifetime but to go to China, including Tibet, was absolutely spectacular. So that's the kind of thing that filled my period of time there. When your grandfather ran for president, I participated in his campaign from Houston mostly by being a ghostwriter of his letters. As we know, your grandfather was a great letter writer but when he was running for president, he simply could not have the time to keep up with his correspondence, and as corresponded zoomed-in counter proportion to his ability to answer it. So because I had had lots of years of experience of writing letters pretending to be George Bush, that was my job to answer his mail. And I must say that a couple of letters in that book, "All The Best" that are supposedly written by George Bush in 1980 were really written by me.

Sam: Besides the letter that he wrote to you, there's a couple more that you actually wrote yourself. Shortly thereafter, on March 30th, 1981 you were traveling with Vice President Bush in Texas when the news reached your traveling party that president Reagan had been shot. What do you remember from that day?

Chase: That particular day was his first trip back to Texas as Vice President. He'd been elected the previous November with Ronald Reagan and left for Washington soon thereafter. The visit was to Fort Worth first to talk to the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association, a very big organization here in the State to get them behind the Reagan economic program. And then he was to fly to Austin to speak to a joint session of the legislature, something that I as a former legislator had helped arrange.

Air Force 2 which was this lumbering old 707 was just taking off. I mean literally the wheels had just left the ground at Carswell Air Force Base outside Fort Worth when the head of the Vice President's secret service detail got a flash from Washington with the not very accurate report that there had been an attempt on the president and two agents were down, that is also shot. It turned out there was one secret service agent and one Washington DC policeman but that was the only thing we knew.

And the secret service agent worked his way forward just as the plane was taking off to the Ford cabin where the vice president was to tell him this news. And he also told us, the staffers sitting there, that same fragmentary report. Well, we were all stunned and shocked. There was a television in the airplane and we turned it on but to make things even more frustrating and scattered, the television set would turn off or become just scattered snow whenever the Air Force 2 crew radioed down to the ground. So we got very fragmentary reports until somebody called, I think it was Jim Baker, the chief of staff, to officially pass that word.

We landed in Austin, it was very clear that we were not going to go ahead with the program as planned. Air Force 2 was just refueled, the governor of Texas and others came on board the plane to visit, but that was just until the refueling was done at which the plane took off to return to Washington. It was during the flight back to Washington, the two very signal things occurred. Number one was the effort by the vice president's secret service detail chief and his military aid to get him to fly in his helicopter Marine 2 from Andrews Airforce Base not to the grounds of the Naval observatory as it's always did and where they lived, but to the South Lawn of the White House which they felt was much more secure.

But the vice president instantly dismissed that option. He said that only the president lands on the South Lawn of the White House. And also I think he was concerned for Mrs. Reagan who of course was deeply distraught and she might be trying to sleep at that particular time and that helicopter makes a lot of noise. The other memorable thing that occurred was that we got the television working and we had it tuned in right at the time that the then Secretary of State Alexander Haig went before the White House press corps and made his infamous claim that he was in charge in the White House pending the return of the vice president.

Haig's choice of words was inept to say the least, but there was a huge blowback against him because not just that day, but leading up to that day, there was a sense that he was very arrogant, that he assumed himself to be far more gifted and more brilliant than the president he was serving, let alone the rest of us who were yahoos in the White House. That helped Mr. Haig see his way out of government. It was clear from that moment that he was the odd man out in the Reagan administration.

Sam: My grandfather never liked to talk about the L-word, legacy. I think you're pretty uniquely qualified to speak on that, especially during his time as vice president. What was the most important thing he helped accomplish during those eight years?

Chase: He was the president's most senior and most discrete advisor. That was important because he recognized that he was vice president. He had in fact very clearly been defeated by Ronald Reagan in the Republican convention for the presidency, and as such, he was not the man in charge. He did not presume to be the man in charge. But he did have knowledge of foreign affairs and intelligence and national security in general that he used to give advice to the president, not just limited to national security matters either, all manner of domestic and political affairs as well. But he did so purely one-on-one and privately with the president.

Any vice president in any administration is often ridiculed as being left out of the loop, not very influential of somehow being a forgotten man in the world of the White House. It was the old fashioned view of the vice presidency that began to be changed with the Walter Mondale vice presidency and which accelerated during the time of your grandfather. But it was still there as of the time he was vice president. There were news stories like, "Where is George Bush?" or "Who has heard from George Bush lately?" He could have said himself or he could have authorized us, staffers, to get on the phone and start talking to reporters about just how influential he was with Ronald Reagan, but that was not his way. That was not his sense of loyalty to the boss and he felt it was most inappropriate for any of us, least of all himself to say anything like that.

Sam: I'd like to talk about my grandmother. She called her eight years as the wife of the vice president, the busiest of her life.

Chase: She was a major presence from the beginning, particularly in the world of Washington as a whole. Because first of all, the world of Washington. We're talking about Georgetown society and Capitol Hill and all of the national media already knew her from past times just like they knew the vice president. Your grandmother wanted to use her time productively. She wasn't just going to be sipping tea in some parlor. As such, she got immediately and deeply involved in literacy efforts, that was the beginning. She took dictation from her Cocker spaniel, C. Fred, and came out with a wonderful book, "C.Fred Story" the sales from which began to fill the coffers of the literacy effort. And then she accompanied the vice president on pretty much all of his foreign travel. During the two years in which I was working on the vice-presidential staff we made 10 foreign trips and some of them were pretty long, two and three weeks long. So she was very much a representative of the United States as you would expect on those occasions.

Sam: Ultimately my grandparents made it to the presidency, what stands out from those four years they lived in the White House?

Chase: You know, I would be very, very immodest if I would say that it was because of things I did, but I was the personnel director, that was the job that advised the president on his appointments to office. And after he left the presidency, in fact, almost a decade later, he was interviewed, in fact, let me correct that at almost 20 years later, he was interviewed by a historian and he was asked himself what he thought, his greatest achievement was in public life, we're not talking about the presidency but his entire public life. And his answer was he felt that they had a good administration, that they were good people who served there, as indeed there were. And that was because he wanted those honorable men and women reflecting the diversity of America to be in his administration and that was made very clear to those of us in the personnel staff.

And we tried to be his surrogates and coming up with those kinds of people. There were many historic achievements to say the least, the downfall of the Berlin Wall, the downfall of the Soviet Union, the invasion of Panama, the liberation of Kuwait, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and so many, many other achievements. But that's why I felt particularly moved, that when he was asked the question, what he felt his legacy was, he felt it was in the honorability of the people whom he chose to be in government.

Sam: Well, that's classic George H.W. Bush. Mr. Ambassador, I'd like to conclude with this question. You were one of the people advising my grandfather as he transitioned back into private life when he returned to Houston following the 1992 election. Every former president is different, of course. How did Gampy focus his time and efforts once out of high office?

Chase: He didn't stop traveling, he was always a man in motion. So there were numerous, numerous trips around America and the world. Even so, he found lots of time for friends and family as I'm sure you could personally attest. As a citizen of Houston, George and Barbara Bush were deeply devoted to this adopted hometown of theirs. Of course, they spent half the year in Mane, half the year in Houston. And while they were in Houston, they were deeply engaged in the life of the city. They went to every Astros game, every Texans game, every Rockets game they went to plays and concerts, they were volunteers when needed.

It was that kind of devotion to the city, which was reflection of what was in their hearts that endeared them so much to their neighbors. And I don't doubt

that in Kennebunkport where they didn't have a professional NBA team or a Major League baseball team, but they did their part for that community as well.

Sam: Well, Mr. Ambassador, thank you so much for joining us on all the best. It was really a pleasure to speak with you and thank you so much and hope to talk to you very soon.

Chase: Thank you, Sam. There's a whole lot to talk about, so thank you for giving me that chance.

Sam: I'm Sam LeBlond, reminding me to listen, share and subscribe to "All The Best" on Apple Podcasts, Spotify and everywhere great podcasts are found. Thank you for joining me as we celebrate "All The Best".

Lyrics

We're one big country nation, that's right

Barbara: Both George and I believe that while the White House is important, the country's future is in your house, every house, all over America,

George: Preparedness, strength, decency and honor, courage, sacrifice, the willingness to fight, even die for one's country. America, the land of the free and the brave. And God bless the United States of America, the greatest country on the face of the earth.

