



All the Best Podcast

Episode 7: “Lessons From the Fall of the Berlin Wall”

Featuring former White House Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater, former White House Press Corps Members Peter Maer and Gene Gibbons, Presidential Historian Jeffrey Engel

George: ...the latest news coming out of Germany. And, of course, I welcome the decision by the East German leadership to open the borders to those wishing to emigrate or travel. And it clearly is a good development in terms of human rights and I'm pleased with this development.

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."

We're Mountaineers, volunteers
We're the tide that rolls, we're Seminoles
Yeah, 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've tried to do that in public life, all through it.

Brad: Yeah, 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."

Yeah, we're one big country nation
That's right.

Sam: November of 2019, in coordination with the Ronald Reagan Institute and the Atlantic Council, the George and Barbara Bush Foundation hosted "30 Years Later: Lessons from the Fall of the Berlin Wall" at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. This event commemorated the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and explored the lessons this moment in history teaches now and will continue to teach in the future. While at the event, I got the chance to catch up with many of the day's panelists, including the former press secretary to both Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, Marlin Fitzwater.

Marlin: I had quite a background in Soviet affairs and in the U.S. relationship with the Eastern Bloc countries before this happened. So when President Bush first read about the law coming down and about the Berliners dancing on the walls, his immediate reaction was, "Well, what's that mean for Gorbachev and my relations with the USSR? And what does it mean for the future of other countries in the area, particularly Germany?" And I was right with him on that, and I've been with him through so many meetings with Gorbachev.

President Bush decided at that point, "We are gonna put our eggs in his basket, if you will. And this is a big opportunity and we should not miss it." And so, his reaction to the initial announcement was to be very cautious. They didn't want to force the Soviet Union to roll into Germany with their tanks blasting or anything like that, and they didn't want the hardliners in the Soviet Union to get even more harsh and more reluctant to change. And so, he was protecting his options. My interest was really just getting him to give the American people a little reassurance that we were on top of this, we knew what was happening, and the president had a course of action that he wanted to take. And essentially, that's what he did.

Sam: This reaction by my grandfather was very much influenced by his approach to diplomacy. Here's presidential historian, Jeffrey Engel.

Jeffrey: He worked really hard at the job of diplomacy, and he saw the job of diplomacy not as state-to-state but as person-to-person. He wanted to make a personal relationship with the person across the table, and that meant talking to them, putting time in when there was nothing on the agenda. And we all know

people in the world who only call us up when they need something, that was not Ambassador Bush.

Sam: For every decision that he made during this moment in history, he wasn't thinking only about the Soviet Union, he was thinking of its leader, Mikhail Gorbachev.

Gene: This was really the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union. It's the first time in the history of the world that a major empire disintegrated without bloodshed.

Sam: That's Gene Gibbons, former member of the White House press corps.

Gene: Well, it was one of the most traumatic days that I spent at the White House. I was back at my desk in the press room, listening to the audio feed and trying to compose a breaking news story on the president's reaction to this historic event. And it was very difficult, because there were no ringing declarations, there were no dramatic quotes that I could use to frame a story. We, reporters, like to have a headline even if the consequences are not what we'd want them to be. In that case, it would have been great television for George Herbert Walker Bush to go out and turn somersaults in the Rose Garden. That would have been terrific television and great domestic politics.

But it could have been very bad domestic politics for Mikhail Gorbachev, who might come under great pressure to react to what Secretary Baker said, sticking it in his eye, by rolling tanks as the Soviet Union had done previously to maintain their hold over Eastern Europe. And I think that's something that your grandfather will get great credit for in history, that his subdued reaction to the events of that day, went I think a long way to ensuring it would be a peaceful transition. Great headline, had he reacted differently, but it was real leadership I think to react the way he did.

Sam: Peter Maer, a retired CBS News Radio White House correspondent, wasn't just in the White House as these events unfolded, but he was in the same room as President Bush, as he gave his reaction.

Peter: I remember very vividly the two questions that I asked him, number one, "Is this the end of the Iron Curtain," and the other one was, "Did you ever imagine that this would happen?" And he said, "I thought it would happen, but not," as he put it, "in this state." Your grandfather had an interesting way of speaking, as I'm sure you know. I got to visit him many times after he left office. I visited him in Houston, I visited him at the library in College Station, and finally, not too long, months before he died, at Kennebunkport, Walker's

Point. And I always wanted to tell him, almost an apology, that sort of journalistically that day, I felt so disappointed because we didn't have that sound bite. We didn't have that pithy quote that would be the lead for President Bush's first reaction to the fall of the Berlin Wall. And so I said, "Yeah, I was disappointed that day, sir." And he said, "Really? Why?" And I said, "Well, we were looking for that sound bite, but probably by the time I got back to my little desk in the White House, I realized exactly what your strategy was. You just didn't want to antagonize the Soviet Union."

Sam: Sound bites and pithy quotes, that's right up Marlin Fitzwater's alley, the only press secretary to be appointed by two different presidents.

Marlin: I'd been in government for a number of years when the Reagan administration found me and said, "Would you like to come to the White House?" And so I did, in 1983. And then I sat in a few meetings with Vice President Bush. I tended to sit in the back row, and he was usually one row ahead of me, and he would pass me notes about funny things that happened during the meeting. And lo and behold, when he became president, he's asked if I would like to join him. So it just all worked out for everybody.

Sam: But what exactly does the press secretary do?

Marlin: Well, the most basic reason for the press secretary's being is, if you agree that the public has the right to know what the government is doing and that there's an honest and legitimate role for the press, they need to be given information and helped with the information in some way. The reasoning has always been that presidents don't really have time to do that because they've got to be making policy and decisions, so you have a press secretary to do the job for you. And that's the job I tried to do, was simply to help the president get out the message about what he was doing and what the government was doing and what people ought to know about it.

Sam: Speaking of press and getting out the message, what has changed with media over the past 30 years? Here's Peter Maer again.

Peter: Well, I often told journalism students that, too often, breaking news is broken news. It's one of the most overused terms that's out there right now in cable and broadcast news. And too much, I think, is driven by social media. It's really the ultimate tail-wagging the dog. Too often, I think reporters don't take time or don't have the time, they're not given the time, to be thoughtful about reporting on things. The current president has mastered the art of tweeting, and too often, I think, these tweets, which are official presidential documents, go out and what choice do reporters have? There are newsrooms, for every news

organization, that have people assigned, committed to monitoring Twitter. And I guess it's necessary and I guess I'm aging myself, but it's just disappointing.

Sam: Gene Gibbons has similar sentiments about the state of the media landscape.

Gene: I'm disappointed. I think that the 24/7 news cycle makes it impossible for leaders to think and to reflect on what actions they should take. I think cable television tends to accentuate the provocative over the profound.

Sam: What is so great about events like this is that it brings together individuals who all knew both my grandfather and grandmother. And I love hearing about their favorite memories. Here's a memory from Marlin Fitzwater.

Marlin: My experience with President and Mrs. Bush was more incredible than I ever imagined. One, because they were powerful influences on my life. Two, because they operated in a very personal way. I found that I would turn to them for advice on all kinds of things. And President Bush would always say, "Marlin, just do the right thing," which was a nicer way of saying, "Don't bother me with this." That also told me something, that he trusted my judgment, and I should too. And so, I learned a lot of lessons like that. I remember Mrs. Bush, I was complaining about something I had written I wasn't sure about. And she says, "My advice, Marlin, is if you're not comfortable with it, don't do it." And I have followed that advice so many times.

Sam: That's the kind of advice that I loved receiving from both my grandfather and grandmother. Their advice always exemplified their high character. Here's a memory from Gene Gibbons about my Gampy's character.

Gene: There was an incident at one point which, I think, kind of illustrated what kind of man your grandfather was. There's a tradition, I don't know whether it still pertains, but there was an American Indian tribe that used to present the first fish catch of the season to the president of the United States. And so, these two tribal elders arrived at the Rose Garden, and they had they fish on a tray and they handed it to President Bush. And he turned it so that the photographers could get a picture. And as he did so, the juice from the fish ran down on the carpet, and so he got down on his hands and knees, pulled his handkerchief out, and mopped up the spill. One of the stewards came rushing out, saying, "Oh, Mr. President, I'll handle that," and he said, "No, it was my fault. I'll take care of it."

Sam: My grandfather was always down to earth and humble, but he did not always like talking about the L-word, legacy.

Gene: I went to see him several years ago, and Atlantic magazine had just published an article, which named him, Eisenhower, and FDR as the three great modern foreign policy presidents. And I asked him if he had seen the article, and he said no, he'd heard about it but he hadn't seen it. And I had brought my copy of it with me, so I handed it to him. He looked at it, he asked me about who the author was, then he said, "You know, I really don't deserve to be in the same group with these guys." That was your grandfather, he didn't like to take credit for things that he deserved a lot of credit for.

Sam: Peter Maer knows what it's like to try to get my grandfather to take credit for his accomplishments.

Peter: I don't know how many times we heard him quote his mom as saying, you know, "She always told me, 'Don't be a braggadocio.'" The first time I heard it, "Well, what does that mean 'braggadocio?' Is that Italian or something?" It was just one of his words, and he said it so often, so often, when people would try to rope him into saying something that would have him take credit.

Sam: The one thing my grandfather had no problem talking about, when it came to legacy, was the Bush School of Public Policy. Here's presidential historian, Jeff Engel, again.

Jeff: He really looked at each of those students as another grandkid. In fact, I witnessed this up close and personal. I had developed a wonderful relationship with President Bush over the time that we were there, and he came to my classes several times. And we asked him, during simulations, to play the role of the president of the United States. So if students had to present to the president in the NSC, that was it. And what was amazing about it was he was terrible at the job. He would not ask tough questions. He would not ask anything probing. He would not push anyone. And at one point during a break, I pulled him aside and said, "Mr. President, I gotta tell you, you're not good at this." And he said, "Could you imagine how a student would feel if they had to call home to their parents and say, 'I spoke to the president today and he told me my idea was bad?' You, professors, have to be critical. I have a different role here." It was an incredible insight, I think, into his personality.

Sam: And as we close, I think Marlin Fitzwater has the perfect words to describe the legacy of both George and Barbara Bush.

Marlin: It seems to me that the respect and popularity among our countrymen has grown every year since he left office. Some of that is probably natural. But

in their death, I think we saw enormous support and love and affection. And I also think the wisdom of what they were trying to do with Mrs. Bush in terms of her foundations and President Bush in terms of his presidency, are now seen with greater wisdom even than they were then. They were thoughtful and kind, and his attitude on diplomacy and on working with other countries and on building relationships with the congress and other leaders in America is now appreciated more than ever before.

Sam: If you wanna hear more from Marlin Fitzwater, he has just published an excellent new book, "Calm Before the Storm." It's about Operation Desert Storm based on the diary he kept throughout the series of events that took place during the Gulf War. Thanks again to the Ronald Reagan Institute, the Atlantic Council, and Georgetown University for coordinating with the George and Barbara Bush Foundation for a wonderful event. For Jeff Engel, Gene Gibbons, Peter Maer, and Marlin Fitzwater, thanks for listening. We'll see you next time on "All the Best." I'm Sam LeBlond, reminding you 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."

Yeah, 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.

