



**All the Best Podcast**  
**Episode 5: "The Education President"**  
*Featuring Dr. Roger B. Porter*

Doctor Roger Porter: October 7, of 2016 from Barbara Bush. Dear Roger, George and I loved seeing you and are grateful that you've made the trip to come here. And I'm thrilled to have the Joseph J. Ellis book "First Family: Abigail and John Adams." I'm taking to to Houston read on the plane and afterwards. Several people have told me that it is a great read. I also read your senior dinner message and your commencement address. They keep you busy there. You are blessed to have a great wife and the world's brightest children and best educated. George and I love you and Ann. Barbara.

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

Barbara: And life really must have joy.

Sam Leblond: 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."

George: I remember something I did for him. 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.

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 Leblond: On behalf of our family and the George and Barbara Bush foundation this is "All the Best." Roger, so happy to have you joining the show today. Thank you for coming on "All the Best." How are you today?

Doctor Roger Porter: Great. And it's a real pleasure and privilege for me to join you this evening.

Sam Leblond: The first thing I want to talk about is a little bit about public service. I know everyone has their own path, but I think you have a pretty interesting one. How did you come to work for my gampy?

Doctor Roger Porter: I first met him during the year that I served as a White House fellow in the Ford White House. Interestingly enough we met on a tennis court. He was back from China and it was the weekend before he was going to have his confirmation hearings as CIA director. President Ford knew how much he liked to play tennis and so I got a call on Saturday morning and was asked if I was available to play tennis with the president. I had played tennis in college and he'd like to have me as his partner because I had younger legs than some of the others. I got out there a little early and George Bush came up, and we introduced one another and started hitting, and played a very spirited tennis match. And when it was over he came to me and said, "Can you get this court?" And I said, "Well, I think I can." And he said, "Well, if I make it through my confirmation hearings I'll give you a call." And two days after he was confirmed, he called me, and he said, "This is George Bush. Do you remember me?" And I said, "Yes." And he said, "Can you get that court?" And I said, "Yes."

So, he would come in on Thursday afternoons and usually his partner was Jim Baker. And so I got to know him well during the Ford administration. And then I came to work at the beginning of the Reagan administration and was there for the first five years and spent a lot of time with him when he was vice president. And then he invited me back at the beginning of his administration to serve as his assistant. I'm always thrilled that I ended up being a tennis player because I've often wondered how my life might have been different if I hadn't met him that day on the tennis court.

Sam Leblond: I'm not surprised that you met through sports. He was such a great sportsman in tennis and golf and he played quick, always...

Doctor Roger Porter: His idea of a good day was five sports in quick succession one right after another.

Sam Leblond: I think he maybe said a good day's a three shower day.

Doctor Roger Porter: I am not surprised by that.

Sam Leblond: So you were my gampy's senior most adviser for domestic and economic policy as president. That sounds like a massive responsibility. How'd you do it?

Doctor Roger Porter: Brent Scowcroft was once asked what he did and what I did and Brent said, "I do foreign policy and Roger does everything else." So, it's normally divided into three. Foreign policy, economic policy, and domestic policy. But the president asked me if I would be willing to do both. I initially just wanted to do economic policy. But I'm really glad that I got the opportunity to do both because it gave me the chance to work on issues like education and the environment. And many of my fondest memories of those years are working on some of the domestic issues that were highlights of his administration.

Sam Leblond: Roger, the 1990 budget deal is today being hailed as placing the country on a glide path to the last balance budget. But there was a tremendous political price to be paid for it. Do you think it was worth it?

Doctor Roger Porter: Well, George H. W. Bush, like the rest of us, likes to be known as someone who keeps his word. And he had made a pledge during the 1988 election that he would not raise taxes. Once in office, however, as the economy slowed and congress was unwilling to give him the budget restraint that he wanted, he was presented midway through his administration with what I think is one of the most difficult decisions any president has faced. On the one hand, he was told that the economy's health made reducing deficits imperative. And at the same time he was told that, facing the largest opposition majorities of any elected president in United States' history, the only way that he could get the Democrats in congress to agree to budget restraint was to include revenues. All of the previous budget agreements that had been negotiated under President Reagan during the 1980s had included both spending restraint and revenues. And the Democrats were not going to break from that pattern in this one. And I've rarely seen anyone agonize over a decision as much as he did. Because, he didn't want to break the commitment that he had made. Very public commitment. And yet, he determined correctly, in my view, that doing this budget deal was important, if, and he stressed this, if we can put in place a set of rules that will hold it in place for an extended period of time.

Those rules included a set of budget caps that would require an extra majority in the congress to override them. And, what was called PAYGO, that if you want to spend more money, you're going to have to take it out of some place else, or you're going to have to find the revenues to do it so that you could hold spending to the levels that were negotiated in the agreement. And once he was confident that we had secured those in the negotiations, then he was willing to move ahead. Well, it turned out to be precisely what the economy and the

country needed because it put us on a path during the decade of the 1990s that enabled us to essentially hold spending while the economy was growing and in effect, as economists refer to it, grow your way out of deficits. By the end of the decade we had actually modest budget surpluses. That never would have happened if he had not put us on that path and put the provisions in the budget agreement that kept us on that path.

Most political leaders are reluctant to do things even if they believe they're in the long term good for the country that come at a very high political cost for themselves. And I admire the fact that he was prepared to do that and sacrifice himself politically.

Sam Leblond: Yeah. Do you think when he made that decision...I know I've read so many letters about him going back and forth. Do you think that decision ultimately cost him reelection?

Doctor Roger Porter: It's very difficult to know precisely what effects electoral outcomes. It certainly didn't help. It caused a lot of Republicans, who I think had voted for him previously and would have voted for him again, to shift over to Ross Perot, who jumped into the race. And Perot got 19% of the vote. Bill Clinton got 43%, George H.W. Bush got 37%. Would all of the Perot vote gone to President Bush? Unlikely. Would a majority of it gone to him? Most certainly. So I think you can make an accurate argument, that had it not been for that decision to go ahead with it, Perot might not have gotten into the race, and he might well have prevailed in the 1992 election.

Sam Leblond: September of 2019 marked the 30th anniversary of the 1989 education summit. What exactly happened at the summit in 1989?

Doctor Roger Porter: He had indicated, during the course of the campaign, that he wanted to be the education president. Shortly after he came into office I had a meeting with him, and he said, "You realize that I'm the education president?" And I said, "Yes." And he said, "So what are we going to do?" And I said, "Well, Mr. President, education in the United States is essentially a state and local function. They determine what the curriculum is going to be, who the teachers are going to be, how the schools are going to be run and organized, and they come up with about 90% of the spending. So if you're going to be the education president you're going to have to do three things. One, you're going to have to demonstrate by your actions that you value education. You're going to have to go out and do a lot of education events." He did more education events than the previous six presidents combined. I said, "You have a huge asset in your wife, who is passionate about education. And she'll be very helpful to you.

Secondly, we've been spending a lot of money, adjusted for inflation on a per pupil basis, we increased spending almost 30% in the decade of the '60s, and the '70s, and the '80s. If spending money were going to solve the problem, we would have done it. So you're going to have to champion some new ideas to see what works. Choice in education, site based management, higher standards, etc. And third, you're going to have to engage the people who actually have operational control over the system. And in this instance, it's the governors. There had been some discussion during the campaign of convening the governors. It had only been done twice before in our history. Backed by Theodore Roosevelt in 1908, and again by Franklin Roosevelt in 1933. But this was outside the norm. And this needs to be done on a bipartisan basis." And he said, "I think that's a great idea. Let's go ahead and do it." And that's essentially how the education summit came about.

Sam Leblond: Even now, 30 years later, looking back, would you put a grade on it?

Doctor Roger Porter: One of the things that I really liked about working George H. W. Bush is he was a careful planner. He didn't go into something hoping for success, but he planned for success. And so, before the summit, there was a long, long series of negotiations between myself representing The White House and the co-chairs of the National Governors Association's task force on education. Carroll Campbell, the Republican Governor of South Carolina, and Bill Clinton, the Democratic Governor of Arkansas. We negotiated out very carefully what the structure of the two day summit would be, what the panels would focus on, and we negotiated the outlines of a joint statement that would be issued that would represent a consensus on the part of all Republican and Democratic governors, as well as the president. So by the time we got to Charlottesville for those two full days of meetings a lot of work had been done. And the president had been very determined that this be done a bipartisan basis. And so the Democratic governors, and the Republican governors felt like they were included on the take off as well as the landing.

Most people don't want to land with someone unless they've already taken off with them. And they don't want to feel like they've been used. George Bush, in my view, was one of the most thoughtful people in taking other people's interests into consideration and producing an outcome that everyone could not only celebrate, but that everyone could claim a part of the victory. And he was very gracious in doing that. And it was much appreciated, by both Republican and Democratic governors.

Sam Leblond: Do you recall a favorite story of yours that came out of the summit?

Doctor Roger Porter: I'm not sure this is a favorite story, but it is a good one...

Sam Leblond: A story? Okay.

Doctor Roger Porter: ...in the sense that Carroll Campbell was governor of South Carolina, and Hurricane Hugo had just hit and so he was out of the room often while we were negotiating out the joint statement. This was a five page single-spaced joint statement. And Bill Clinton, and myself, stayed up until 3:00 in the morning negotiating out, line by line, the document. And Carroll Campbell would come in and out of the room, but he was obviously out on the phone talking to the people in South Carolina who were being hammered by Hurricane Hugo. And it took us until 3:00 in the morning. And I give great credit to Governor Clinton for sticking with it. Because, we had to come up with language that he could take to the Democratic governors, and they would sign on, if Carroll Campbell could take it to the Republican governors, and that I could take to the president, and that he was willing to endorse, and everybody has their own special things that they want in it, and no one wants to give more ground than they necessarily have to, and that's why it took until 3:00 in the morning.

But we did finish, and to the credit of both Bill Clinton and Carroll Campbell, they were able to sell it because we got all 49 governors who made it. One governor was delayed and wasn't able to attend. But all 49 governors, Republican and Democrats, signed onto the agreement. In today's environment it's hard to imagine something like that happening. And I don't think it would have happened if there hadn't been this careful preparation in advance and if everyone felt like they had had an opportunity to contribute to the outcome of it.

Sam Leblond: So it sounds like it was a big success.

Doctor Roger Porter: It was viewed not only as a success by those of us who were involved. Because anything that you're heavily involved in for the most part you consider a success.

Sam Leblond: Sure.

Doctor Roger Porter: But the press considered it a success. There were not a lot of negative stories. The story out of Charlottesville was not Democrats and Republicans can't agree once again on yet another subject. But it was President Bush had convened the governors and had gotten them to agree to this joint statement which posited that we were going to establish national education

goals that would be negotiated between the governors and the president. And it would be done by the beginning of 1990. That's only three months away. And, to be sure they were, he announced them in his State of the Union Address in January of 1990 with Terry Branstad and Booth Gardner, as well as Bill Clinton and Carroll Campbell, four of the governors, up in the First Lady's box. And he graciously acknowledged them. This was not in the script. And they had seen the script before. So I think they were a little surprised that he singled them out and said how much he had appreciated the opportunity of working with them, and that these goals had been jointly developed.

Sam Leblond: September 2019 marked another education summit. How far have we come in the last 30 years?

Doctor Roger Porter: Well, at this education summit where some of us who were involved 30 years ago, in the Charlottesville summit, the consensus has been that the Charlottesville summit that occurred 30 years ago in fact was a success in that it put us on a path that we have largely stayed on for essentially 30 years. It was a path that emphasized that we were going to embrace greater accountability and greater standards to assess how well we're doing. And that we have managed to hold that in place now for 30 years.

We have a lot more in the way of assessments of how our students are doing. We have a system in place now that has got more innovation than we had 30 years ago. The working relationship between the governors and the executive branch of the federal government has remained strong over that period of time. And the education president, George H. W. Bush, has had a set of ideas that his successors have embraced and that essentially have held in place now partially through the good offices of his son, George W. Bush, who helped enact and was spearheading No Child Left Behind and other pieces of legislation that we've had.

But I think if you look back on it through the long scope of history you would say that the path that was charted in Charlottesville has been followed successfully over the last 30 years. Now, are we finished? Of course not. Does more need to be done? Do we need to stay on that path that we're on? Certainly. But at least we're on the right path. And we're moving down it. And I'm hopeful that 30 years from now we will be able to say we have continued down the path making major improvements in our education system.

Sam Leblond: That's great. I mean, just, the fact that everyone's coming back 30 years later, including President Clinton and, I know my uncle Jeb was involved, so just amazing to see everybody come back after 30 years you know it's had such a great impact. And to your point, 30 years from now, let's hope that we've

sowed some seeds that are going to grow and grow. Roger, we've talked about the education summit. We can't talk about education without talking about my grandmother Barbara Bush. Can you talk about the influence that she had on education policy in the first Bush administration and beyond?

Doctor Roger Porter: One of the things that interest me a lot and that I like about Barbara Bush is that once she begins something she sticks with it. She was very interested in advancing the cause of literacy before she became First Lady. She was relentless during the years that she served as First Lady. And she stuck with it for the next 30 years. Establishing the Barbara Bush Literacy Foundation, and maintaining a level of interest and commitment to it that is really quite remarkable. I'm trying to think of another First Lady who has stayed with an issue as long and as successfully as Barbara Bush has with respect to education and literacy.

And I actually think she had an enormously positive effect on her husband in keeping him committed to education. Because she, in the end, was his closet confidant. He was trying to figure out, as a sitting vice president, "How do I run, and what do I say are the new things that I'm going to do as president? I want to be the education president, I want to be the environmental president, and I want a kinder, gentler America." Those were the three big things. Well, she was a big part of all of those. And in particular, education. I don't know about their own personal exchanges, that's up to them. But I cannot imagine that she was not giving him an enormous amount of private encouragement to stick with it and showing through her examples that she was prepared to do it.

Plus, she's just an enormous amount of fun and you could tell when the two of them were together, I mean, they just adored one another and did so for over 70 years. In our society today it's really quite remarkable to see a partnership like they had that involves, not only a lot of love, but also a lot of mutual support in fulfilling the goals that you have, and education is a prime example of something that the two of them cared about deeply throughout their entire married life.

Sam Leblond: They were each other's biggest advocates. They were a dynamic duo that if they had their mind set on something it was hard to stop them.

Doctor Roger Porter: Absolutely.

Sam Leblond: We like to believe the four years George and Barbara Bush occupied The White House were four years that changed our country and world for the better. You are uniquely qualified to summarize their legacies

independently and also together. Can you shed more light to how monumental those four years were?

Doctor Roger Porter: It's very hard to be objective about something in which you were involved. But I'm trying to be as objective as possible in responding to your excellent question. I think we were extraordinarily fortunate to have someone with the background, training, and temperament of George Bush to handle the end of the Cold War, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany, the forming of a coalition to oppose the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, the negotiation of the North America Free Trade Agreement, passage of the largest piece of environmental legislation in our nation's history, the establishment of the education goals that have guided and directed us for the last 30 years, the largest piece of civil rights legislation in our nation's history, the American with Disabilities Act that affects 43 million, or at that time affected 43 million Americans, and laying the groundwork for the successful culmination of the Uruguay Round, the last successful multilateral round of trade negotiations.

All that in four years. And not least, negotiating probably the most challenging budget agreement that has ever been negotiated and showing to the country that he was willing to do the hardest part of leadership, which is make choices that you think are going to benefit the country in the long run even if it is at the cost of short term political pain. We measure people and presidents partly by what they do. But we also measure them in how they did it. And he had a quality of leadership that enabled him both domestically and internationally to serve the country that he loved so dearly and the causes that he embraced so fully in a really quite remarkable way.

At his funeral service George W. Bush said that he thought history would consider him the greatest one term president we have had in our nation's history. I agree with that assessment. I cannot think of any single term president who has a record of accomplishment that is greater than George H. W. Bush. He could not have done it without his wife. People need to have the support of someone who they know, no matter what happens, is going to be at their side. Because, in the world of politics there are lots of ups and lots of downs. It's like being on a roller coaster. It is one of the most difficult things that we can ask someone to do, and they are able to do it much better if they have somebody by their side that they truly do consider their best friend and their closest confidant. And the relationship that they established was just as good in private when I would be around them in small groups as it was in public. And I think they're truly a team, and it surprises me not in the least that now that they have both moved on, the foundation that is pushing forward the work that they started is

the George and Barbara Bush Foundation because that's the way they lived their lives.

Sam Leblond: Yeah, I think that was important for everybody to do because my grandmother had such an important role. Along the way obviously she didn't get all the credit but behind the scenes, and then obviously all the great work she did, she was such an integral part of all that he did.

Doctor Roger Porter: She was somebody who didn't need a lot of credit. She was somebody who was really quite thrilled to see things accomplished, and who got the credit for it, particularly herself, was less important to her. I think it's wonderful when two human beings are so close to one another that when one of them succeeds they feel like both of them are succeeding. And that's not always the case. We've seen instances where people end up having a somewhat competitive relationship. And they had a very collaborative relationship which is obviously the optimal, and they managed to do it.

Sam Leblond: Doctor Roger Porter, thank you so much for joining us on "All the Best." It has been a pleasure. Thanks so much.

Doctor Roger Porter: Well thank you very much. It's been a joy to be with you.

Sam Leblond: 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."

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.

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