



All the Best Podcast
Episode 12: “The Epitome of The American Dream”
Featuring former Ambassador to the United Nations, Sichan Siv

Amb. Siv: "Dear, Sichan, Barbara and I congratulate you as you are appropriately honored by the Asian Pacific American Heritage Association with the George H.W. Bush APA Heritage Award. When we think of you, we think about an outstanding leader and public servant. We think about honor, decency, and integrity. We think about service to others. The APAHA has chosen well in naming you the recipient of this award, and we, Bushes, join them in saluting you. Well done, my friend, and well deserved. With warmest personal regards, George Bush."

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."

We're mountaineers, we're 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 taught me, he said, "Write to your mother, serve your country," and he said, "Tell the truth." And I've tried to do that in public life all through it.

Yeah, we're one big country nation, that's right

Barbara: You're 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 Georgian and Barbara Bush Foundation, this is "All The Best."

Yeah, we're one big country nation, that's right

Welcome to "All The Best." It is my privilege to welcome Ambassador Sichan Siv, a great friend of the family, especially of my grandparents. Sichan, how are you today?

Amb. Siv: I'm doing very well. Thank you, Sam, thank you for the pleasure and the privilege to be on your program.

Sam: Sichan, I'd love to start with this. In 2017, you shared with us, at the celebration of reading, your amazing book, "Golden Bones." In that book, you detailed your amazing escape from Cambodia. I was hoping you could share that with our listeners.

Amb. Siv: I grew up in Cambodia when it was still under French rule. I grew up speaking French and Cambodian and France was really the symbol of modern civilization to us, everything was of France. My father was a police chief, but he died when I was nine years old. So, my mother brought me up. She worked very hard to send me to the best schools in the kingdom. She knew education was important and she instilled in me, never give up hope. So, hope kept me alive in some of the most difficult circumstances and brought me all the way to America. After high school, I went to work for an airline as a flight attendant. I went to China at the peak of the Cultural Revolution in 1969 and the Vietnam War spilled over to Cambodia in 1970. So, the Cambodians were fighting against the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese and then against the Khmer Rouge. In the '70s, I left the airline job and became a teacher, but I saw so much death and destruction, and I decided to leave the teaching job and join a relief organization.

I've worked in very dangerous circumstances, trying to save the lives of hundreds and thousands of people who fled the war-torn countryside to seek safety and shelter in the capital and the provincial cities. On April 10th, 1975, President Ford gave an address to the joint session of Congress. He said, "For this administration, the time is short and the options are few as far as Cambodia and South Vietnam are concerned." Two days later, I was told by the U.S. Embassy to be at the embassy within one hour if I wanted to be airlifted out of Cambodia. I had a scheduled meeting with the Đắc Nông [SP] Province to try

to arrange some food supplies to help some 3,000 refugee families that had been stranded in this province. I thought that by going to the meeting, I would be able to save the life of those people. When I went to the embassy, I was told that the last helicopter had taken off 30 minutes before, so I missed the U.S. helicopter by 30 minutes.

Five days later, the Khmer Rouge came in, they turned the country upside down. They turned Cambodia into a land of blood and tears, into the killing fields. They killed anybody who wore glasses, a sign of education, they killed teachers, nurses, businessmen, government official, many military personnel, anybody who had not been with them during the so-called revolution. I threw away my glasses, my mother gave me her wedding ring, her scarf, and a bag of rice and told me to run, no matter what happens, never give up hope. So, I rode a bicycle for a few weeks crossing Cambodia and I was captured near Thailand. They tied my arms behind my back and they were going to kill me because they suspected that I was trying to cross the border to Thailand, which was exactly my intention. But a truck driver whom I had met a few days before told them that I was an innocent person wandering around looking for my family.

So, for the next year, I was put in labor camps. We were forced to work 18 hours a day, we were given one bowl of rancid soup a day to eat. That night when I went to sleep, I never knew if I would be alive. The following morning when I woke up, I said I would make it to freedom. On February the 13th, 1976, I was alone at the back of the timber truck. And I said, now or never. I could not jump to the left nor to the right because the driver and the Khmer Rouge soldier with an AK 47 would have seen me through the rearview mirrors. So, I crawled on top of the timber and just dropped myself behind the truck. I was caught in a piece of lumber when I was coming down, and I was dragged for a few hundred yards until I was flung off. Then I began to run, to crawl, to walk, to swim for three days, having nothing to eat or to drink. I fell in a booby trap, I was severely wounded, and I was able to pull myself out and limped along until I got to Thailand, where I was jailed for illegal entry. They realized I was a refugee so they sent me to a refugee camp.

In the camp, there was some 3,000 refugee families living in an area, the size of a soccer field. They suffered severe mental depression for feeling sorry about the past and worrying about the future. I organized English classes, it was a win-win proposal because they were able to get some English before they would go to an English-speaking country, and they were able to take their minds of the sorrows and the worries. On June 4th, 1976, I arrived in Connecticut with my mother's scarf, an empty rice bag, and \$2. I was sick and tired, but I was full of hope. I wanted to adapt to America so that America would adopt me as quickly as I could. I picked apples in Connecticut, I ate a lot

of apples then I worked for a fast-food restaurant. I had never seen a hamburger in my life and suddenly I was hearing rare, medium-rare. I was holding the lettuce and the trainer said, "Hold the lettuce." It took me a while to understand that she didn't want me to put the lettuce on a hamburger. And I said, "This is very difficult."

So, next up, New York. It was in January 1977, I stood at the corner of the street in Manhattan and I saw these huge yellow cab coming down, sign at the back said, "Drivers wanted." So, I called the number and they asked me to go and take a test. It's all about direction. For example, how do you get from the Waldorf Astoria to Yankee Stadium? I had no idea where these places were much less how to get from one to another. So, I just checked the boxes. At the end, I brought the sheet to the examiner, he looked at me, he shook his head, he sighed, and he said, "You pass." But in 1977 you really did need to know where you were going, you need strong horn and good brakes to drive a taxi in New York. So, I learned to navigate through the Manhattan traffic. Then I apply to a number of schools because I had a French education and I want to have an American education, knowing that I would be spending the rest of my life here. Then I got a full scholarship to go to Columbia University to do a Masters of International Affairs. In 1982, I became a U.S. citizen. So, that was a major milestone of my life.

Sam: Now that you had established yourself in the United States, how did you come to meet my grandfather, and then in a twist of fate, work in his administration?

Amb. Siv: Well, along the way I met Martha Pattillo, a beautiful woman from Pampa, Texas. Friendship turned into romance and a wonderful wedding. We were introduced to the Reagans in the early '80s in New York, and we started getting invitation from the White House. On July 13th, 1988 I was a guest of President Reagan and Vice President Bush at an event in the Rose Garden. And that was the first time I met your grandfather. And when he came up the dais, I was the first to greet them. So, I said, "Mr. Vice President Bush, I am going to support you for the election" and he said, "Thank you." But then I already had volunteered for the campaign. I started to volunteer in 1987 when he started his exploratory committee. I never thought for a moment when I was standing there in the Rose Garden that a few months later I would be working at the White House. So, after he was elected, I was lucky to be among the few chosen to work for him. I walked in to work at the White House on February the 13th 1989, exactly 13 years from the day I jumped off that truck. I made it this far in such a short time, could happen only in America, and that's a great tribute to your grandfather.

Sam: Sichan, during your four years working in the administration, I'm sure you have tons of memorable experiences, but I was hoping you could share one or two with our listeners, especially those surrounding working with my grandfather.

Amb. Siv: I did not know how to play tennis. But I arrived at the White House, I got a letter telling me that I had access to the tennis court. So, I said, "I better learn how to play tennis." So, I started learning there and I'm proud to say that the White House tennis court was my home court. One day, he flew from somewhere in the Midwest. I think it must be from Iowa. I was in the tennis court, we waved at him, he waved at us. And suddenly I heard a Secret Service agent coming, I said, "Is he going to play?" And the lead guy said, "No, he still has his suit on." Apparently, he came to see how good I was.

Sam: Scouting, he's scouting you.

Amb. Siv: But he came to the court when we had a break. He said, "Do you like this court?" I just had it paved last week. And he was, like, he's talking to his buddy. So, that is George H.W. Bush. I mean, he's so down to earth. The other thing, during the beginning of the Gulf War, when he announced the Air Force to start bombing Iraq to get them out of Kuwait, I was walking somewhere along the corridor, and he saw me. He says, "Amb. Siv, how are you doing?" And I was stunned, really, Sam. I saw him a lot, but I was stunned that here is a man who just decided on the fate of the world. I mean, it was very serious stuff. And he took the time to ask me how I was doing, and I could never forget that moment. And there are a few other things, but those two probably, sort of, stood out, and he never mispronounced my name.

Sam: My grandfather never loved talking about The L word, Sichan, legacy. He always used to say, "Let's let the historians and everyone else figure it out after the fact." I was hoping with your 30-year friendship and 4 years working in the administration, you could help us figure it out. What do you think about the legacy of George H.W. Bush?

Amb. Siv: He was truly the best one-term president in our history. He has done more things in one term than most have done in two. But more than that, he was a great human being. It is my unique privilege to serve him, to know him, and to love him. I single out three people who have been the most influential in my life. My mother, who gave me life, Martha, who gave me love, and George Bush, who taught me about leadership.

Sam: After my grandfather passed away, you were among a group that joined my Texas family members on Air Force One for the state funeral. Can you tell us about that week of celebrating his life?

Amb. Siv: It was a very memorable week, month, year for me. I got a memo from Jean Becker. She wrote five of us who worked for the president at the White House telling us that we have been invited to fly on Air Force One to accompany the president, should he die. I had to go to Guatemala after I got that memo, and I didn't want to miss the chance to accompany the president, should he pass away. So, what I did, I took a clue from Mrs. Thatcher who traveled around in the final months of President Reagan's life with a black dress. So, I carry a dark suit, a white shirt, and a dark tie with me to the remote villages of Guatemala. And my teammates were just curious, why is this guy carrying a suit bag? But I thought that if something happened, I would be able to make it back to Houston and got on Air Force One. And the village where we were was, like, eight hours away from Guatemala City, which is, of course, only three hours from Houston. But I, sort of, kept on praying, I said, if I were really chosen to be on that plane, I would be on that plane.

So, I came back and he was still alive. So, in November, I had to go to Washington to attend some function. I sent a note to your mom, "Doro," telling her that I was coming to D.C., and she said, "Let's have lunch." And we set lunch for December 1st. On November 30th, I was sitting in the airport in San Antonio when I got a text message from her. She said that, "I'm sorry, I have to cancel lunch tomorrow because my dad is not feeling well, I'm flying to Houston." So, she was flying to Houston, I was flying to Washington. When I got to Washington I learned that your grandfather passed away, left our good earth. So, I flew back to Houston and got on the plane. But it's quite emotional for me, Sam, because of all the five people on that list, I was the one who knew the president the shortest amount of time, I had known him only for 30 years. That's very long, you know, but compared to Chase Untermeyer, to Shirley Green, David Bates, and Fred McClure, they had known the president much longer.

But it was such a privilege for me to be on that plane, accompany him, and your uncle, and your aunt, President George W. Bush, and Mrs. Bush, and your Texas family. Your uncle, Neil, was there.

Sam: And Sully, the dog.

Amb. Siv: That's right, Sully. Sully, you know, I was quite emotional when we were sitting in conference room. So, I came out and I sat in the hallway and Sully walked in back and forth, he passed me and he stopped. He looked at me,

he passed me again. He stopped and he looked at me. And I don't know much about animals, but some friends of mine told me that they feel the grief just like you. And everything was so precise, as in Jean's memo, we got to Andrews. We were taken to the Capitol, we followed you on the motorcade and we had a service there. Three days later, on December 5th, we had the service at the National Cathedral and that was an occasion to meet former colleagues. In fact, we had a small reunion even on a sad occasion, we were able to reflect on the time that we spend together at the White House and in the administration. It was a very special time and it's a blessing for me to be part of this.

Sam: But we were so lucky to share him with everybody, people like you. I mean, you're part of the family, Sichan. So, that's just how it is being in the Bush family. We have extended family members, more than most families, we wouldn't have all been here without that great man. So, thank you again for coming on "All The Best," Sichan, and sharing all your amazing stories. Thank you, and I'll see you soon, hopefully.

Amb. Siv: Well, thank you very much for again, the privilege and the pleasure. Thank you, Sam.

Sam: 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.

