



**All the Best Podcast**  
**Episode 40: “The Best Years This Country Has Ever Seen”**  
*Featuring former White House Chief of Staff, Gov. John Sununu*

Governor Sununu: I have here a note from George H.W. Bush that's dated June 6th, 1988. As we were preparing the then-Vice President for the campaign, he sent me a note, saying, "Dear John, for me, the Cape Port meetings exceeded all expectations. The issue stuff was on target, the press appearances helped a lot, the companionship of it all was terrific, and you showing all of us how to focus on Dukakis was perfection. I'm counting on you heavily to help me win this big one. Gratefully, G.B." - George Herbert Walker Bush.

President Bush: 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

President Bush: 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.

And 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.

President Bush: 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: John Sununu was commissioned Chief of Staff to the President of the United States in January 21st, 1989, and served in the White House until March 1st, 1992, under my grandfather, George H.W. Bush. As chief of staff, Governor Sununu oversaw the daily operations of the White House and its staff. Prior to joining the White House, John served as the 75th governor of New Hampshire, for three consecutive terms. After his departure from public service, Governor Sununu co-hosted CNN's nightly "Crossfire" program, a news and public affairs discussion show, winning a CableAce Award in 1994. He also authored the book about my grandfather, "The Quiet Man: The Indispensable Presidency of George H.W. Bush." Today, Governor Sununu serves as a member of the board of trustees for the George and Barbara Bush Foundation. Governor, how are you today?

Governor Sununu: I'm well. I hope you are.

Sam: Doing very well, and it's great to see you and connect with you over the Zoom. I think it's fair to say, Governor, that your friendship with my grandfather was forged on the political battlefield, in early 1988, when his campaign for the GOP nomination had just suffered a devastating setback, finishing third in the Iowa caucuses. Many in the press were starting to write then-Vice President Bush, my grandfather's political obituary. But almost overnight, everything changed in New Hampshire. Can you take our listeners back to that historic week on the campaign trail? What stands out most for you today?

Governor Sununu: Well, the vice president had been in Iowa, came in third in the Iowa caucuses. He was beaten by both Bob Dole and Pat Robertson. The vice president and Barbara Bush flew into New Hampshire not very happy about the Iowa result, a little bit concerned. There was a little over a week between the Iowa caucus, I think it's 10 days, and the New Hampshire primary, and I tried to let them understand that we had everything under control in New Hampshire. He and Barbara had certainly done a good job over the previous years, coming in whenever we needed them, and we felt we had both a cadre of volunteers around the state, a great working team, and we were prepared to make this thing work.

My message to Barbara, when she got off the plane, and kind of seemed a little down, was that she ought to relax. We were going to win New Hampshire by 10 points. By the way, I think it ended up being 9.6 points. But our point was the following, that the vice president and Barbara had been in New Hampshire over the previous year, going to events, going to the coffees that are so much a part of the retail politics of New Hampshire, both small gatherings and big gatherings. We estimated that he had shaken about 50,000 hands, and that we had taken about 5,000 Polaroid pictures. And our theory was that if someone had a picture of themselves and the vice president on the mantle, they'd work awfully hard to make it a picture of themselves and the president on the mantle, for those who don't remember what Polaroid pictures were, you got them instantly out of the camera, and we were able to hand them to the folks that were having their picture taken. Pre-cellphone days.

Sam: My grandfather was obviously grateful for your indispensable help in 1988, because he named you his White House Chief of Staff. Can you talk about the state of our country, and the world, in 1989, as the first Bush administration came into office?

Governor Sununu: Well, you know, the world was in a very interesting position. It was almost 45 years since the end of World War II. There was a combination of a bit of the apprehension of the old Cold War, but a little bit of optimism, because a new character had shown up in town, Mikhail Gorbachev, and he was different in a number of ways. Different in style, he actually wore clothes that almost fitted him, unlike some of the previous premiers, but more than that, he was talking a very different language. He was trying to portray, in some of his visits in Europe, an opportunity to begin to do business and cooperate on a number of things.

So, the vice president, when he won the election, came in with the benefits of what had been done under President Reagan, who had rebuilt America's strength. The defense system was back to a very strong position. But beyond that, he saw in Gorbachev someone he might be able to talk to. So, there was this feeling of optimism. There were other opportunities for making major changes in the country, and the president laid out a pretty detailed agenda, both in terms of things he'd like to accomplish in terms of foreign policy, and things he'd like to accomplish in terms of domestic policy.

Sam: Looking back at my grandfather's first year in office, so much transpired in so many different areas. Tiananmen Square in China, political reform sweeping through Poland and Eastern Europe, the S&L crisis at home, the so-

called "fall" of the Berlin Wall, and the historic Malta Summit, and even Operation Just Cause in Panama.

Governor Sununu: You left out dozens of them.

Sam: As a key member of my grandfather's White House team, how did he, and especially you, stay on top of all this change?

Governor Sununu: Well, what made a lot of this easier than it might have been was that we had a team that had very exceptionally close relationship. The president and I had certainly developed a good relationship in the year of campaign we had gone through. The president obviously was very close with Jimmy Baker and Brent Scowcroft, and I had come to know them quite well during the campaign, and I brought in as a Deputy Chief of Staff Andy Card, who had worked with president when he was vice president with Ronald Reagan.

So we had folks that liked each other, that cared about each other, and felt very comfortable communicating quite informally, but effectively, all the time. Nothing came up that didn't get immediately addressed, and it is always easier to deal with a large agenda, a complicated agenda, if you address the issues immediately, and we did that. The president made it a lot easier for all of us, too, because he made himself accessible, so that instead of having to write a long memo on an issue, I, as Chief of Staff, could get up any time, wander down to the Oval Office, and ask the president a question and get an immediate answer, so that if a cabinet member were there, trying to get a sense on policy, and I wasn't quite sure what the president wanted, we'd get the cabinet member an immediate answer, and they could move on. Otherwise, if you leave things hanging, everybody ends up using half a dozen staff members to try and put together some kind of a brief to argue their case. So, the president made it easy for us to communicate with him, and I think the relationships made it very easy for us to communicate with each other.

Sam: Have you heard of other White Houses having similar setups, or is this something that you think was unique to 41's presidency?

Governor Sununu: I think of all the presidencies I've been able to see in the few decades, they all seemed to have a little less collegiality than the George Herbert Walker Bush White House. And I think a lot of that was driven by the president setting the tone, setting the culture, and really establishing the ground rules under which he wanted us all to operate.

Sam: You and I are talking here in July of 2020. Thirty years ago this month, my grandfather signed the Americans with Disabilities Act into law, a landmark piece of civil rights legislation, giving some 40 million disabled Americans access to more of our society. This legislation had bipartisan support, yet it was still a tough fight to get it to the president's desk. What were the issues at stake, and what did this historic law achieve?

Governor Sununu: Well, George Herbert Walker Bush came into the White House with a lot of must-do items, and one of his must-dos was he wanted to get a piece of legislation that really addressed the civil rights of Americans with disabilities. And we started almost immediately, working with a Democratically-controlled Congress, to try and put together some legislation. The two key people in working out the details on that legislation were Boyden Gray, who was the president's legal counsel, and Dick Thornburgh, who was Attorney General. And the reason they were so critical is that the complications in getting a piece of legislation that addresses a set of civil rights is that there has to be, within the language of the legislation, a very careful crafting, so that you don't create more problems than you solve with the legislation.

The good Lord has been nice to me. I am not a lawyer, so I had the difficult situation of having to go down and negotiate language with folks like Ted Kennedy, having been instructed by the lawyers on what I could and couldn't do. When it got really hot, I dragged Boyden Gray down with me to work out the details, but eventually, we overcame the hurdles. I think we ended up at a point where about a dozen words in the legislation were what we fought over for about three months. And finally, the lawyers came up with a compromise that made it work, and it has been one of the great pieces of legislation that really opened up opportunity for millions of Americans that had found it difficult to exercise the opportunity of the American Dream before the Americans with Disabilities Act, and certainly, George Herbert Walker Bush I think always felt that that was one of his great achievements.

Sam: Governor, I read somewhere that my grandfather was only the second U.S. president to serve a full four-year term without having his party control in either the House or the Senate. And yet, he was not only able to get the ADA done. Later in 1990, he also managed to get the Clean Air Act passed as well. We've already highlighted my grandfather's foreign affairs achievements, but it seems there were important accomplishments to note in domestic policy as well.

Governor Sununu: There were tons of accomplishments on domestic policy. Clean Air Act, as you mentioned, the Americans with Disabilities Act, there was a Civil Rights Act, there was legislation that addressed issues in energy,

there was legislation that addressed issues in education. So he was committed to an aggressive domestic policy agenda, and he succeeded on it. One of the reasons I think he was able to succeed is that he was willing to sit down and negotiate one on one with key members of Congress when we were putting together the very significant budget agreement, which was sort of a political hot potato, but that budget agreement ended up generating the surpluses, unfortunately, after George Herbert Walker Bush was gone.

But the surpluses that his successor liked to take credit for were the result of the five-year budget agreement that George Herbert Walker Bush took the pain for. But in achieving that, and putting that together, President Bush met one on one with key people like Danny Rostenkowski, who headed the House Ways and Means Committee. He met with them dozens of times, trying to work out the differences, and was willing to negotiate and argue, both on principle, and frankly, in terms of a little bit of political needs, and produced legislation that I think has had impact over the years, and continues to have impact.

Sam: After my grandmother passed away in 2018, my cousin Pierce said that there would never have been a President Bush without a Barbara Bush. Of course, we'll never know for sure, but one thing is certain. My grandmother's support and low-key advice was vitally important to my grandfather. What was your experience with their relationship?

Governor Sununu: Really, a team. You know, you talk to one, it was equivalent to talking to both, because you know they chatted in the evening, and compared notes. But she did two things, I think, for the president. One, she encouraged him to take on the tough issues, and number two, she had his back. Nobody could cross George Herbert Walker Bush without hearing from Barbara Bush. I think I ended up having a great relationship with her because we both kind of took on the responsibility of protecting the president's back, and I think I developed a bit of a reputation as certainly one that would take good care of the president even when he wasn't around, and I think Barbara Bush particularly appreciated that aspect. You know, in preparing for this conversation we're having today, we had a chance to go through some of our old boxes of memorabilia here, and it's amazing how many notes I found from Barbara. So, we had a great relationship, not only while we were in the White House, but in the decades afterwards. One of the great advantages that I've always felt was sort of a dividend in my relationship with the Bushes was that it's about a 50-minute ride from my home up to Walker's Point, and we kept our relationship as warm as possible by visiting up there as often as I could when they were around.

Sam: Do you have any memories that stick out from trips up to Maine, or anything you could share with us?

Governor Sununu: Specific events are probably hard to come by, but the general tenor of the meetings up there was always warm. It was always like going to meet family. Some of the moments, though, in the later years, I think were very touching. Particularly when Barbara Bush was coming towards the end, I remember going down to Texas, actually, for an event, and Andy Card and I were both making presentations. And when we finished, we got a note from Barbara, saying, "Please come and join us for dinner." And Andy and I went and joined Barbara and the president in the apartment they had down at Texas A&M, and it was a small dinner, just the handful of us that were there, but it turned out to be the last time I saw Barbara. And we had a great conversation, and there was a lot of reminiscing that night. And in retrospect, I think, without her telling us how close to the end she felt she was, I think she was just telling us by reminiscing on some of the good times we had, that as a group, we had really enjoyed some of the best years this country has ever seen.

Sam: Governor, having worked so closely with my grandfather, during those years of breathtaking change at home and around the world, what do you think the legacy of George and Barbara Bush will be?

Governor Sununu: One of the reasons I wrote my book about George Herbert Walker Bush, "The Quiet Man: The Indispensable Presidency of George Herbert Walker Bush," I felt that even the historians of today really did not appreciate the breadth and depth of his accomplishments. Certainly what he did in foreign policy was appreciated, but I think he, in a way, made his foreign policy successes look a little bit too easy. And I think as the historians begin to delve into them, they'll see that those great results, as easily as they were achieved, were not easy to achieve. And I think they will understand the artistry that President George H.W. Bush brought to the game. Furthermore, I think the point we touched on earlier, the extent of his domestic policy impacts, both in areas like the Disabilities Act, the Civil Rights Act, what he did to re-establish the fidelity and strength of the American fiscal system, the impact he had on solving the Savings and Loan Crisis, and all that whole host of domestic achievements, I think historians will begin to understand that beyond the great success of foreign policy was the great success of domestic policy of George H.W. Bush.

Sam: Today, you continue to serve my grandparents, as a member of the George and Barbara Bush Foundation's board of trustees. Why is that so important to you?

Governor Sununu: Well, I think the president, in his later years, really defined a direction that he would like to continue having an impact on, and that is making sure that the assets that ended up at Texas A&M were really beneficial to the next generation, and the generation after that. And I am looking forward to trying to help make that vision of his continue to grow and expand. The legacy of George H.W. Bush and Barbara Bush is one in which they had a great belief in America, not only as America for what it can do for Americans, but as a contributor to a growth and stability around the world, and I think the Foundation is sort of that institution which will try and help us keep that vision and commitment going as we move forward.

Sam: Well, thank you, Governor Sununu, for helping keep that vision moving forward, and also for joining us today on "All the Best."

Governor Sununu: Enjoyed it. 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.

