



All the Best Podcast
Episode 43: "All the Right Reasons"
*Featuring the Dean of the Bush School of Government and Public
Service at Texas A&M University, Mark Welsh*

Dean Welsh: December 7th, 1999. Dear Brigadier General Welsh, I read the excerpts from your Air Force Academy speech, my brother sending me that, which appeared in "The Wall Street Journal." I didn't have any of those big stupid sunglasses. So as the tears flowed, my emotions were seen by a couple of people I work with here. They were probably thinking, "The old guy is finally lost." But I didn't care for I could feel right down to the marrow of my bones what you and those Desert Storm pilots were thinking or feeling as you went off to stand against aggression and for freedom. May God bless those who wear the uniform of the United States, and every one of you who served in that noble cause. Warm best wishes from this former commander in chief who doesn't miss much about his past life, but does miss dealing with our superb military. Most sincerely, George H.W. Bush.

George: In first place, 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."

Dean Welsh: 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.

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

Dean Welsh: We stand a night for 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." General Mark A. Welsh III is the current dean of the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. He was appointed in August of 2016 after retiring from the United States Air Force. During his distinguished military career, he served as the 20th Chief of Staff of the Air Force from 2012 to 2016. As the Chief of Staff, he was responsible for the organization, training, and equipping of over 600,000 active-duty forces serving in the United States and overseas. As a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he functioned as a military adviser to the Secretary of Defense, National Security Council, and the president. General Welsh has received numerous awards including the Defense Distinguished Service Medal, the Legion of Merit, and the Distinguished Flying Cross. He's also been awarded the National Public Service Award from the American Society for Public Administration and has been inducted into the living legends of aviation. Dean Welsh, welcome to "All the Best."

Dean Welsh: Thank you so much, Sam. I'm feeling thrilled to be here. Thanks for having me.

Sam: Dean, our theme for this podcast is the same theme you and your terrific faculty at the George Bush School of Government and Public Service preach every day at the Bush Center on the campus of Texas A&M University. In a word, it's service. Every guest we have on "All the Best" has some connection to service, their own path. Yours is one of the more distinguished paths to service due to the fact that you did it wearing our nation's uniform. What drew you to service and the Air Force?

Dean Welsh: That's actually an easy one. I was led there by the world's most unbelievable family, just a house full of love and respect. And I was incredibly blessed to have the parents that God gave me. My mom was an elementary school teacher and just a saint of a human being. To this day, I have never seen her upset, which is a remarkable story for a woman with seven children and a military spouse who was gone all the time. My dad was an Air Force officer. And he was one of that great generation that flew and fought in three wars and traveled all over the world and kind of drag us behind him. But we were smiling the whole way. And it was a real adventure.

Really, I chose the Air Force for two reasons. Number one, I wanted to be my dad to some level. He's always been my hero, still is. And I just wanted to be a little bit like him. And I figured if people would look at me someday the way I

looked at him, I'd have had a great life. And the other reason was a little more base level. I wanted to go fast. And I'd grown up around fighter airplanes, the ones that my dad flew, I loved the noise. I loved the speed. I wanted to feel the thunder. And it was everything I hoped for and more.

But that's not why I stayed in the Air Force. I stayed in the Air Force because I fell in love with people. And I think like so many people in public service, you get into the business, you see the people you stand and struggle beside every single day, you see how good they are, how hard they work, how much they care, and you just don't wanna leave them. And that's what kept me and my wife, Betty, and our kids in the Air Force. We clearly felt like we served together. And I believe all of us think it was a privilege.

Sam: Not many people get to lead an organization with tens of thousands of employees like you did as the Chief of Staff for the Air Force. Dean, what's the key to organizational leadership at that level? What were your biggest failures and successes?

Dean Welsh: I tried to remind myself to do four things all the time. The first one is be brutally honest with myself. And the reality is, you're not any more impressive when you're leading 700,000 people than you were when you were leading 7. You're just, hopefully, a little more experienced. And I think it's important for you to remember that. The second thing is I think large organizations really are like large ships, you've got to be consistent. You can't change course constantly. And so, I think leaders need to think about providing stability when things are unstable. They need to think about providing a consistent set of priorities in focus areas and a consistent leadership and management style at the top that doesn't move up and down with everything that happens around you. I think that's really important.

I also think it's important to be realistic. You have to be realistic in your expectations of yourself to start with. You can give it your best shot, but that's all you got. You have to be realistic in the expectations for your organization in the vision you set, the goals and objectives you put out in front of you. You can be demanding, but your people have to be able to see that they can achieve those things or they're just gonna get frustrated. And you have to have realistic expectations for those people. And you can't hold them to the same standard you hold yourself to. Most of them aren't as experienced as you are, and they're not gonna be able to get there and that's gonna frustrate you. So, avoid that.

And finally, I think you've gotta care. The bigger the organization, the more you gotta care because it's harder to get to know everybody and care enough about the individual but you have to try. You're asking people to give up their

talent, you're asking their families to sacrifice, especially in the military in many cases, and in government service in many cases. And when you do that, you better care at least as much as you're expecting them to care.

I think for me, the failures and successes were pretty straightforward. They don't have much to do with events or issues. As Chief of Staff of the Air Force, I had 2162 failures. That's how many airmen died when I was their boss. And in every single case, when I heard their name and I heard the circumstances, whether they died in combat, or they died in training, or they took their own life, or an automobile accident claimed them or cancer, or life just overtook them, whatever happened, I just beat myself up thinking what could I have done to prevent this? And I really felt like their death was my fault. I guess I still feel that way.

On the success side, for me, it was simple things. My dad always told me, "Nobody can try harder than you can." They can all be more talented. They can all be smarter and better looking, but nobody can try harder than you can. And I gave it my best shot. I did the job to the best of my ability, which is all I can demand of myself. If I'd have ever not accomplished something because I didn't work hard enough, I don't think I could live with that. But that was not the case. So I'll count that as a success. And the second thing is I never quit caring. I still haven't quit caring, I still love him and I miss him. So that's my failure success story, I think, Sam.

Sam: Shifting gears. I know at the Bush School, there's a heavy emphasis on academic excellence. But I couldn't help but notice the long list of schools and colleges where you studied in building your singular military career that seemed to prepare you for being Dean. It starts with Squadron Officer School, and Air Command and Staff College, and continues through MIT Syracuse, the JFK School at Harvard, the list goes on. Is it right to suggest today's military places have very high emphasis on academics?

Dean Welsh: Yeah, absolutely. Academic and professional and personal development. The military is not any different than large corporations or government agencies, in that they operate in a very complex, a dynamic and an incredibly rapidly-changing world. And in fact, I think that pace of change has become a threat in and of itself. It's very difficult for large organizations to stay strategically agile enough to deal with the kind of change we're seeing in technology, in demographics, in political and diplomatic climate, and all the other movements that rise and fall that we watch in the paper or in the news every night.

And I think the more perspectives you hear, the more preparation you have for that environment, the better. The military takes that very seriously. I think all government takes it very seriously. And they should. It's exactly what we're doing here at the Bush School is how do we better prepare people to serve their fellow citizens? And I think I was very, very lucky to be the beneficiary of that in the Air Force.

Sam: But what was it like to take the reins of the Bush School? You came in while my grandfather and grandmother were still alive. What did you take from your experience with them and what the school meant to them?

Dean Welsh: Your grandfather's reason I'm here. When I was getting ready to retire, I was not intending to work full-time, I was intending to grandfather full-time and work part-time because I owe that to my family. But I remember hearing your grandfather talking way back in 2001 or 2002 on an interview somewhere about the Bush School. I hadn't heard of the Bush School at that time. And I heard him talk about this college and this idea of public service. And he didn't use the term noble calling, but that's what he was talking about. And I remember thinking then, "Boy, what a hook for a school that is."

A couple of years before that, I had received a letter from him that I read a moment ago. And I remember receiving that letter after a speech I had given that somehow ended up in print somewhere in "The Wall Street Journal." He read it and a former president of the United States took the time to write me a letter about that speech. And I remember receiving it and very distinctly recall thinking, "Why in the world would he do that? There's no requirement for him to do this. There's no expectation that he would." And I was kind of blown away by the fact that he did and then more blown away as I started to realize over time, the thousands of other letters he'd written to other people who did some little thing that he noticed and approved of. And I found that that approval meant a lot to me.

And I didn't know your grandfather, Sam, back then. I had never met him. I never met him till I showed up for this job. But the fact that he took the time to write that letter, which is clearly on a phone letter, really, really struck me. And that combined with the idea for the Bush School, preparing people to follow in his service footsteps was just too good of an opportunity to pass up. So he's the reason I'm here, clearly. I found out because he told me that he considers this school his living legacy. He considers the men and women who graduate from here and go into public service to be the people who will carry on his public name, his public service commitment, and his dedication to not just the nation, but to the states and the cities, just like he did in his public service life. And so, it's an incredible privilege to be here.

You know, your grandparents were so gracious to Betty and I when we first arrived, they invited us to lunch like once a month in Houston for the first year, which they didn't have to do. Anytime they came here for an event before their health really became an issue, they would ask if we would come over and talk to them for a few minutes early on. When Betty first met Mrs. Bush, we were sitting in the apartment. We'd spent about 45 minutes talking and we're getting ready to go downstairs for an event. And right before we hit it downstairs, there's been this low beeping sound in the background, which turned out to be the battery in her oxygen tank connected to her nebulizer which she had thrown over her shoulder. The sticker service guy said, "Hey, time to head downstairs."

And your grandmother put her hand on Betty's arm and said, "Betty, be a dear, would you, and take the battery out of that thing so it quits beeping." Betty did the slow turn toward me with her big eyes. We were both imagining the headline the next day. So she secretly, all the way downstairs, tried to get somebody to change the battery rather than just pull it out and worry about what was gonna happen.

But what I loved about your grandparents from that minute forward is how normal they were, not how impressive they were. They are and were impressive. They were remarkably accomplished. But it was their normality that struck me. And my wife and I both just admired them immensely because somehow, they never lost that despite all the accomplishments, and all the fame, and all the publicity, and all the public accolades. They just never lost the George and Barbara Bush part of all this or the family part of it. It was really, really remarkable. It was a privilege. I mean, a great, great privilege to be here while they were still alive.

The last thing your grandfather said to me, by the way, we saw him at Kennebunkport the last visit that any of us got from down here, had a chance to visit with him. He was not feeling well but came out and met a group that was there. He was drifting a little in the conversation we had. But at the end of it, as I started to get up and say goodbye, he just grabbed my arm and he said, "Take care of it." And it was kind of a disjointed comment. Your grandmother thought he was ordering me to go get him a drink or something. And I said, "No, I know what he means. He wants me to take care of the school for him. I'll do that, Mr. President."

Sam: We hope there are people out there now listening who might have an interest in the Bush School. What's the ideal profile of a prospective Bush School student?

Dean Welsh: Talented, dedicated, patriotic, a servant heart, anybody who wants to make a difference in their family, their community, their city, their state, their nation, their world. Someone who brings the personal competence and the professional ethics of George H.W. Bush, or the fierce patriotic heart of Barbara Bush to their life. If any of those things describe somebody who's listening, there's a home for you at the Bush School.

Sam: Dean, recently the Bush School announced they will be opening a new teaching site in Washington DC. I know I'm excited as a DC native, can you tell us about this new and exciting development?

Dean Welsh: We're very excited. It's about four blocks north of the White House on Elm Street between 16th and 17th, that's prime real estate. We'll have about five floors of one of the office buildings there. Some of it is already configured as space we can use, and the rest we'll configure over the next six to nine months. But the idea is to bring our national security program. We'll start with a Master's of International Policy because it's an already approved degree, and we'll build a National Security and Intelligence Resident degree that will start in about two years. It's gonna be focused initially on government, mid-career professionals, military intelligence community, State Department, other government agencies, and eventually we'll bring in students right out of undergrad.

It's a competitive market, but we're a competitive college. We can't get into this because this is at the heart of what your grandfather wanted for his school, to create generations of men and women who go into public service for all the right reasons. And having the opportunity to bring in the people in Washington DC who can help educate and prepare them is just phenomenal for us. We're pretty excited about this.

Sam: The entire Bush family could not be more grateful for the great relationship the Bush School has always enjoyed with the Texas A&M family. When you get right down to it, the Bushes and the Aggies are cut from the same cloth. And I think it gets back to service. That said, right now, what are the biggest opportunities and challenges facing the Bush School?

Dean Welsh: Staying focused on those things that you just talked about that brought the Bush family and Texas A&M together. The things here that make a difference, that make the place different than many places are the corny things. It's belief, and pride, and patriotism, and faith, and family, and loyalty, and respect, and honor, and all those things that matter in life. A&M has always believed in those things. The Bush School embraces them and then adds this

component of public service kind of in the middle of it all. And your family believes all that same stuff.

You know, somebody asked me once, "Well, the family business of President Bush was what? I mean, he was in the oil business. He was a guy. What was he? Was he a politician?" I said, "No, he's in the public service business." And that's the way the entire family is, quite frankly. Every generation has adopted that and embraced it. The Bush School's the same way and so is Texas A&M. So, it's a very, very comfortable fit.

The biggest immediate challenge, the same thing everybody else is dealing with is how do you deal with this pandemic? How do you keep protecting your faculty and your staff while preparing students in a really meaningful way, and not losing touch or keeping from engaging with them in a positive way to get them prepared for their future? Which is not gonna be put on hold by the pandemic. Things are gonna keep moving. And so, we're getting through that. It's like everybody else says, it's been an exciting adventure and I'm proud of our world-class faculty for the way they've adjusted to this, and unbelievably proud of our students and the way that they've handled this.

All that's immediate, maybe a bigger issue for us over time is what's going on in our nation right now? This discussion on race, and diversity, and equity, and inclusion. Because we're preparing people to go into public service. Seventy percent of the Bush School grads, since we opened, have gone into public service in some form. And so, they want to go lead communities and make things better and be policymakers who can help impact the issues that we're hearing about on the news every night and should be talking about, I hope, at home a little bit every night.

To do that, we need to make the Bush School look like the demographic that it will serve. And so, we need more diversity in our student body. We need more diversity in our faculty and our staff. And we're working hard at that. It's not an easy problem to solve. And while we have some, we don't have enough. And so, we'll just keep grinding away at this one. And for us, that includes the international student population. We want about 20% of our students to be international students. When we talk about diplomacy or national security versus international stability, what does that mean? And what's their perspective other than our own? And our students bring all that with them. So, we'll keep grinding on all this but it's all good. It's all opportunity.

Sam: Well, you mentioned the pandemic and I wanna dig a little bit deeper because the Bush School, for many years now, has had conferences focusing on pandemics, vaccines, and the like, and you've had some robust programming

around it these past few months. This issue isn't going away, and the Bush School had a lot to offer here.

Dean Welsh: You know, we started our Pandemic and Biosecurity program almost six years ago now. We've had five pandemic summits held here every fall over the last five years. And then in the spring, we do a follow-up kind of summary of that in DC at the National Press Club, to get DC policymakers, think tanks, and everything up to speed in the things that we found and roll out our white paper from the last summit. Many of the lessons that we're learning, if you go back and read the first white paper, and the second white paper, and the third white paper, these shortfalls are not new to the people who understand pandemic and pandemic response. These are lessons that we didn't learn before for lots of understandable reasons, but there are things we have got to fix. And I think everybody now sees that.

We have the benefit here of having a combination of a scholar scientist in Dr. Christine Crudo Blackburn, a scientist-practitioner, and retired Army Colonel Dr. Gerald Parker, who is one of the leading practical experts in pandemic response in the country, and then a great political-diplomatic practitioner in Andrew Natsios, who was the director of USA ID and ran the kind of health support programs all over the world. And they have a very different view of every problem, but it's all from the same team. And so, when they talk about this, people should listen. They're really smart about the science of it, about how you should and could respond, and then how do you build the teams, and the coalitions, and the partnerships to do that beyond our borders? People are calling a lot now going, "Hey, can we talk to those guys?" And the answer is, yes, they're available.

Sam: That's great. Well, Dean, let me finish with this. You didn't get to spend as much time with them as you maybe hoped. And we're all together with you in that category. But what are your favorite memories of my grandparents? And what do you think their legacies will be?

Dean Welsh: I'll give you my personal view of their legacy. And I'll do it by giving you... Let me just tell you two real quick vignettes. First one, we were downstairs, the event was delayed a little starting because the speaker had got hung up in the parking lot or something, the same night that she asked Betty to pull the battery out of the auction case. And so we were stalled for just a minute and people were coming down to see your grandfather. He had them in the hallway, not in the auditorium, but he was in the hallway and a lot of people are coming down the hallway. He had dozed off, it had been a long day. They had driven up from Houston that day. And he had a meeting, we just had a long kind of introductory reception for him with some people and he was tired.

And so, he was snoozing to the chair a little bit. And people were coming down the hall and were clearly gonna say hi to him, interrupt him. And your grandmother just kind of stepped in front of him. She put her hand on his shoulder and she just angled her body so that nobody could get to him. I'm gonna get emotional. This was an emotional moment for me. It was incredibly subtle. I don't even know that she realized she was doing it. It was just protecting her man. It was a remarkable moment. Just one of those little things you see and go, "Okay, that's George and Barbara Bush. That's them right there." Forget all the other stuff. It's not the Mr. President that matters.

And then a story about your grandfather. I was still in the Pentagon working as Chief of Staff of the Air Force when I found out I got this job. The university hadn't called me yet, but your grandfather called me. I was leaving work for the day. We didn't have our cell phones in the office, they had to stay in these leadline [SP] boxes. And on the way out the door, I grabbed my cell phone as I got in the car, I saw there were three voicemails on the phone. And so I opened up the first one and listened to it. It was from an unknown number. And as soon as he started talking, I knew it was your grandfather. And, you know, his voice was affected by then. But it was about a two-minute voicemail congratulating me on being selected to be the Dean of his school, telling me how excited he and Mrs. Bush were that we were coming and inviting Betty and I to lunch as soon as we got into Texas and could come see him in Houston. I hung up the call and I went, "I can't believe he took the time to make that call and struggled to give me that message." I was immensely impressed.

And then I thought, "I wonder who those other calls are from." And I went to the next voicemail, it said unknown number and I thought he wouldn't have called again, and I opened it up and it was him again, about four hours later, exactly the same message. And the third one was him again about four hours after that with exactly the same message. All three of these halting kind of struggling voicemails, no hint of being upset that I had an answer, just this anxiousness to make sure I knew he was excited I was coming. That's George H.W. Bush.

I tell people a lot who are moving up in organizations who wanna do great things, I tell them "Please keep your priorities straight. It's not about you." And I mentioned to him that when I'm lying on my deathbed and I'm trying to decide whether I won or lost the game of life, the fact that I was the Dean of the Bush School or that I was a general in the United States Air Force, that's not in the equation. If Betty is standing there holding my hand, I won. And your grandparents understood that to the nth degree. And they demonstrated every single day of their life that I knew them. I believe that's the most important part

of their legacy. I think that's what their legacy is, I think it's what it will be. All the other stuff is add-on.

Sam: Well, Dean, your passion for the Bush School and my grandparents' legacy is obvious. Thank you so much, and you're taking care of it for my grandparents, so thank you for joining us on "All the Best."

Dean Welsh: All the best to you, buddy. Take care of yourself.

Sam: I'm Sam LeBlond, reminding you to listen, share, and subscribe to "All the Best" on Apple Podcast, 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.

