



All the Best Podcast

Episode 44: “Destiny and Power”

*Featuring Pulitzer Prize-Winning Presidential Historian and Bestselling Author
Jon Meacham*

John: George Bush 11/18/08. Dear John: Thanks for American Lion. I am so very pleased for you at the wonderful reviews the Lion has been getting. Following in Jackson's wake is a little overwhelming, warm regards and as we say in the Navy, well done. George Bush, 41.

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."

George: I remember something my dad taught 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 investments 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."

John Meacham is a Pulitzer Prize winning biographer, who is best known for his presidential and political biographies. In 2015, John released "Destiny and Power, the American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush." During his time writing my grandfather's biography, John became very close with our family. He conducted extensive interviews with my grandparents and was even granted access to their private diaries from their time in the White House. Given their close relationship, John was one of the four people who eulogized my grandfather after his passing in 2018. John is also a contributing writer for the New York Times Book Review and a contributing editor of Time magazine. John, how are you?

John: I am in one piece. How are you?

Sam: I'm doing pretty good. There's so much to cover with you. So let's dive right in. At my grandmother's funeral, you generously described her as the first lady of the greatest generation. Why is that?

John: Well, she embodies the sacrifice and the strength of the World War II generation. Tom Brokaw popularized the phrase, the greatest generation to describe the generation born before the depression, came of age in the depression. Let's see, your grandfather was born in 24, your grandmother in 25. So they were just really coming to the end of their teen years when Pearl Harbor happened. They're married as you know, in what, January of 45. So they meet a couple of weeks after Pearl Harbor. Your grandmother was always very grumpy for some reason that it was not at the Round Hill Club. It was the Greenwich Country Club, and that meant something to her and I never dove into the sociological impact. Maybe one had better pimento cheese than the other. I don't know what it was, but she was very precise about that.

So their lives were fundamentally shaped by the war, then by the ensuing drama of the Cold War years heading into his presidency, which obviously unfolded with the rending of the iron curtain and the first Gulf war, which was genuinely his attempt to create a post-Cold War world order, where as he put it in his speech, actually on September 11th, 1990 to Congress, that the law of the jungle would not prevail.

To my mind, both your grandparents represented the best of that generation and he was the last combat veteran to be president. They were the last World War II family to preside over the country. So it struck me as an apt description.

Sam: After my grandmother passed away, I think it was my cousin, Pierce, who posited the theory that without Barbara Bush, you probably would never have had a President Bush. Do you agree with that?

John: You know, I do, she didn't. So don't tell Pierce. We talked about that. I talked about that with Mrs. Bush. She was a little dismissive of it. You know, one of the most remarkable things about their story always, to me anyway, into their 90s, there was a part of her that couldn't believe that Poppy Bush had chosen her. And there was a part of him who couldn't get over how lucky he had been to land Barbara Pierce.

And that's a wonderful infrastructure for a marriage. He told me, as, you know, your grandfather cried, you know, if the Mets lost. So it wasn't unusual for him to tear up. But one of the things he did tear up about was the resilience and the spunk and the courage at some level that it took for her to go to Odessa and pick up and leave Rye and leave Greenwich and not have that, I sometimes describe it as you know, they could have lived in a New Yorker cartoon, and he would have been on Wall Street and would have maybe run for the house at some point or maybe the Senate, but their lives would have been circumscribed by that corridor that his own parents and her parents lives were part of. But when he thought of going to Texas, she was all in. Same with China, same with running for president. She was always on board for the adventures that he wanted to undertake.

Sam: Shift gears to my grandfather. You spent many years working on your fantastic biography of him, "Destiny and Power." No book is all encompassing, but yours comes pretty close. John, what did you learn about my grandfather that you didn't have room for in the book?

John: That's a great question. You know, one of the things that happens when you do what I do for a living is you often find when you're out talking about a book, that there were connections that you didn't actually make in the text, but as you're

describing it and sort of making the case for the book, things emerge. That's always happened to me with every book I've done. In the case of president Bush, the thing that to me is so compelling about him is driven by ambition. He, nevertheless, in moments of transcendent importance, would put the interest of the country ahead of his own interests. That's a vanishingly rare quality. Look, he ran a presidential campaign in '88 that was brutal. He shouldn't have said no new taxes. He kinda knew he shouldn't have said it, but they talked him into it. He ran some ads and some rhetoric through that whole cycle against a guy who became his big buddy, Bob Dole, and others.

But once he got to power, once he got to the pinnacle, he really pushed all that to the side. Almost instantly. My argument in that book is that you don't have to deify George Herbert Walker Bush to have an illuminating and inspirational example when you tell his life story, because however imperfect he may have been at the end of the day, he made the best call he could for the country and for the world. I make that argument. I make that point. I probably would have maybe spent a little more time on how anguishing that must've been for a political man. We think of him rightly as a statesman. I called him, I think America's last great soldier statesman to have been president, but he was a working politician and it had to have been hard to have made the sacrificial calls he made. I hope I gave due credit to that.

Sam: John, can you share more on the unique relationship you forged with my grandfather when writing "Destiny and Power?"

John: You know, if you do what I do for a living, Presidents don't hand you their diary and say, "ask me what you want" much. It doesn't happen a lot. And so it was an immense honor. What I also so appreciated is he didn't want to read it beforehand. The only restriction on the book actually was when I quoted from your grandmother's diary, she wanted to know what I was quoting, not what I was saying about what was quoted, but in her voice. And one of my great memories is sitting in the living room at Kennebunkport, I took her something like 60 pages. As you know, she kept a diary from Texas forward. And your mother actually, when she found out I was reading and said, "Please just don't tell me anything she said about me."

Sam: Oh gosh.

John: Which I thought was revealing about everybody in this story. But Mrs. Bush was reading it and she was about halfway through and she said, "my, I was an opinionated 38 year old." I was like, yes, yes, ma'am, you still are. So the relationship was...it's odd. I mean, biographers and subjects, it's a strange dynamic because there were points, as crazy as this sounds, where both of your grandparents would turn to me in a semi-social setting and say, when was my mother born? Or when did we buy that house? And so I was like a Bush Wikipedia, basically for a while, but that became important to me. And I've never said this on the record before, but I didn't fall in love with your grandfather, but I did come to love him. And those are two different things. If you follow me, I admired his practical capacity to put the interests of the whole ahead of his own.

Very few American presidents ultimately are able to do that. It's a handful. And I think he knew it. You know, one of the mysteries of George H. W. Bush is how much of it was calculated, how much of it was innate. The kindness was innate. The generosity was innate. He wanted to make sure you are comfortable, which often took the form of "had you been to the bathroom before lunch?" Your grandparents had an unusual interest in bathrooms. I was shown three or four different bathrooms by your grandmother through the years, which I'm still puzzled about. But the kindness and the generosity that was half/half Bush, right? That was the kid from Greenwich Country Day School. He didn't think particularly historically. I remember once sitting in his little office at Walker's Point with your uncle, and this was right at the end of the project.

So this was 2014 or so probably. And I wanted to have the experience of sitting with the two presidents and talking. At that point, of course, your grandfather's health was not all that it was. 43 and I were asking the most leading questions you could imagine. When you were walking the halls of the White House, what were you thinking about? You know, and the answer was, you know, "a martini." But so we were talking about presidents who had been in his mind and you could tell, he knew what we wanted, but your grandfather was a man of the urgent present. It was all about what was happening right now and who was hurting and who does he

need to help and what's the next thing, looking forward? He didn't like looking back. I remember, I can't remember if it was me or 43, who said, "Which president meant the most to you?"

And finally he said, "Lincoln, dominant figure." I was like, well, yeah, that's... Check. Yeah, he was that, sir. But he didn't need the analogies of the past to know what the right thing to do was. And I think it was in the DNA. I really do. One of the things biographers do is we try to track the tributaries of experience that come together to form the river that that person becomes. Mother Dorothy Walker Bush is an essential tributary. He was scared of his father, George W. Bush. I remember asking him once what his relationship with his grandfather had been. And the old man said he was scared to death of him. Like all of us. The war was a tributary. Your grandmother was a tributary. Texas was a huge tributary, the years and the different offices. I came to think, and this is a point I don't think I made in the book, but it was something that, as I talked about, it became clear.

They were more of a military family in their Washington years because they were always, at least from Congress until he became president, there were higher ranking officers for whom he was working. He was always executing someone else's agenda, whether it was Reagan's or Ford's or Nixon's. That requires a degree of humility that he was particularly well suited for. At the same time, I remember sitting outside with him once and sort of pushing him on why he had gone into politics. And he would always say service. And I finally said, you know, with all respect, Mr. President, if it had just been service, you could have opened a soup kitchen. Right? You wanted the nuclear codes in an age where Armageddon was possible and he finally copped to it. He finally said, "It's be number one, it's be the captain of the team." So you know there's something that's bad about that, but there's something that's good about that too.

And that's why the word "Destiny" is in the title. I think from a very early age, he believed it to be, and people around him believed it to be, totally plausible that he would be the commander in chief of the United States.

Sam: John, in your moving eulogy for my grandfather, you referred to him as a 20th century founding father, can you share more on the elements that factored into building that foundation?

John: I was proud of that phrase, thank you for noticing. You can see him at Philadelphia in 1787. He was the kind of person who was at the constitutional convention. He would have been at the Continental Congress. He would have signed the Declaration. He would have risked everything for that. He would have founded the government. He believed in to whom much was given much was expected, and he had been given much.

And when you take that ethos, and then you look at what he did as president, what did he do? He negotiated NAFTA. He set up a budgetary system that produced amazing surpluses later in the 90s, at a great cost to himself. He established a rule of international law because of how he responded to Saddam Hussein's aggression. He managed the end of the Cold War with great grace and deafness. And so when you think about the infrastructure of the first couple of decades, the first 15, 16 years or so of the 21st century, so much of it goes back to what president George H. W. Bush did. His thumbprint is on almost every building in the United States, right, with the Americans with Disabilities Act. One of the things that history doesn't do well, and I tried to do it in that book and I've tried to do it in other work is give people credit for avoiding disaster.

If I had told you or anybody in 1981 or '71 or '61 that on Christmas day, 1991, the Soviet Union would cease to exist without a single American soldier being in a forward fighting position, you would've thought I was crazy. And yet it happened. He won...we all won the Cold War. I don't want to say he won it, and he always hated that. Drove him crazy that Margaret Thatcher thought that she and Reagan had won the Cold War. Margaret Thatcher drove him crazy a lot. He had a great imitation of her, actually. I'm not going to imitate George Bush imitating Margaret Thatcher, but "Ronnie and I won the Cold War." Like, well, "what are we chopped liver?" You know, that's a quote, that's a direct quote. John Major and George Bush looked at each other and said, "what are we chopped liver? Ronnie and I won the Cold War." So having said I wouldn't do it, I did it. This is C-SPAN stand up my friend. So I think he should get an immense amount of credit.

And I hope you and the family are aware, I think you are, of the remarkable esteem in which he's held, particularly for somebody who, as he put it, got fired by the American people in 1992. Lots of historical reasons for that. We hadn't had 12 years of one party, White House rule since FDR and Truman. Here's something that is not in the book. I made bold to say to your grandfather that he actually didn't have that much he wanted to do in a second term. There wasn't much left for a Cold War president to do. He agreed. Guess who didn't? Barbara Pierce Bush. Mrs. Bush didn't like it. The other thing that was in the book and got no attention, and I'm fascinated by the fact that it didn't, I do think he was sicker than we know in that last year or two. I think the Graves' disease, which mercifully was taken care of, and he had that wonderful and long retirement, you know, he just wasn't well, and neither of your grandparents liked to talk about it. It was a source of some, not tension, but they didn't love dwelling on it. And I was a little worried that maybe I was wrong. I mean, it was in his diary, it was in his medical records. So I knew I wasn't wrong, but maybe I thought I was exaggerating it.

And you know, who rode to my rescue on it was Scowcroft. General Scowcroft said, you're exactly right. And he told me privately, but Barbara won't admit it. Look, it's an incredible American life without getting political. When you look at where we are now, it seems as if we're talking about the Peloponnesian war or something. I mean, he just feels like this figure from an entirely different age, but the values were timeless. And it's one of the reasons I wanted to tell his story, because the only way we learn how to be is through story, I hope that we get to a place where future presidents are looking to his example.

Sam: John, what was behind your decision to speak at the Democratic National Convention this year?

John: I'm not a Democrat. I'm not a Republican. My first vote was in the Tennessee Republican primary for your grandfather in 1988, actually. Vice President Biden called me, asked me if I would speak to what I meant when I talked about the soul of America, he's been very generous about the book I did with that title a couple of years ago. I said, yes, I had a couple of conditions. One was, it had to be what I wanted to say. That is no guidance from the campaign. And I wanted to be sure

that in writing it, if I didn't want to explicitly address the Biden candidacy itself, that would be okay. And he said, yes. And so it was a free five minutes to say what I wanted to say about where we are historically in the country. I believe every word I said, I've known Vice President Biden, I guess for 25 years or so.

He's always been a very generous reader of books I've done. He occasionally calls up and reads me parts of them. My family doesn't do that. And Sam, you've stopped calling and reading. So I want you to get back on that. It was unusual, but I believe this is an existential election. This is not Romney/Obama. This is not McCain/Obama. I think this is a hugely important inflection point in life for the country. I don't mean to sound grand about it, but I considered it a kind of act of citizenship. You know, if a presidential nominee wants to ask me my opinion and give me a platform for it and not in any way shape that opinion, I didn't see how I could say no.

Sam: You did a fabulous job. And it was great to see you up there. And you know, John, I want to say, thank you for coming on. I want to end with this because your perspective on all things about America is something that we all look to.

John: Then we're in more trouble than I thought.

Sam: I know, I know. Well, we face a lot of critical challenges as a nation before, but can you share your perspective on COVID-19 and where this fits in historically?

John: Yeah, it's a great question. And we kind of don't know. Here's what we do know. We do know that it is some combination of the 1918 influenza pandemic, which killed hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people and people were wearing masks and socially distancing. And it's very similar to that. To me, there are three elements to this. One is the health challenge, which is the self-evident one. The second is the structural economic challenge, that is, are these small businesses, are these jobs that are being lost or suspended, are they coming back? And if not, is this like, to some extent, industrialization and the shift to an information economy, you know, there are millions of American families who are going to have to rethink how they live their lives. And so in that sense, it's a huge

inflection point. And the third is trust and fact and science and reason. Are we able, as a country, to face facts that might be deleterious to the party or the person we like politically and respond to those facts in a rational and reasonable manner or are we just going to deny them?

There's a great line. Walter Lippmann, who was the great columnist in the 20th century, he wrote a book in the 20s, 100 years ago, called "Public Opinion." And he said that one of the besetting problems of modernity was going to be that instead of seeing, and then defining, we were going to begin to define and then see. That is we were going to look through partisan blinders and interpret reality as we wanted it to be, not as it was. And I remember thinking when this first started and it was kind of spring break for our kids when it got really serious. I remember thinking, God, please don't let this become a partisan pandemic. Please don't let this become red versus blue. And it has. One of the things on the ballot in November is are we gonna try to follow facts and face facts and deal with reality as we find it? Or do we want to be a country that indulges in wishful thinking?

I think that's an urgent question and I don't know what the answer is going to be, but I know what George H. W. Bush would have done. He was a classic conservative, more conservative really than Reagan, or then his son in the sense that classic 18th and 19th century conservatism was about meeting reality as you found it and trying to do the best you could. It wasn't about grand and sweeping social engineering, great movements to change that reality. And Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush wanted to change reality. George H. W. Bush wanted to manage it. That's a fascinating question and it's an important question in American history, but that's not the question we're facing now. That was, how do you deal with reality. Right now we're having the question of what reality actually is. And I think that it's a really important question and one that I would hope we would resolve by realizing that we're supposed to use our brains and not just react with our guts.

Sam: Well, John, thank you so much for joining us on All the Best and sharing your stories with us today.

John: All right, man. Give your mama my best.

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.

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.