



**All the Best Podcast**  
**Episode 47: “Portraits of Courage with President George W. Bush”**

*Featuring the 43<sup>rd</sup> President of the United States, George W. Bush*

George: April 9th, 2003. Following the fall of Saddam Hussein from power. Dear George, this is a great day for our country ,indeed, for the world. I talked to Saud al-Nasser, Kuwait's former ambassador and a great friend. He called to congratulate you and the USA. I said, "What about the Arab streets? He says, "That's all gone, all over. USA is again, widely respected." I thanked him. I hope he is right. But this letter is about your leadership and the way you've conducted yourself as you face an accumulation of problems that no American in the last 150 years has faced. You have borne the burden with no complaining, no posturing. You have led with conviction and determination. And now the whole world sees that more clearly. The other day, I started to tell a group of very close friends, assembled to help with my 80th birthday charity celebration, how I felt about you and your service to our country. The tide of the battle had not completely changed, but things were going our way. I almost got through my remarks, but then this father's love of son overwhelmed him. I shamefully choked up. The tears, tumbling down my aging cheeks. I was embarrassed, but then I realized, I shouldn't worry if people see this visible manifestation of a father's concern, a father's love. It was pride, yes, but it was also an overflowing of joy from all that you have given your mother and me over the years. Chemical Bar and I are at your side. I hope you can feel it. We will stay out of the way, but I am there beside you. My heart overflowing with happiness on this day of vindication. No doubt, tough times, lie ahead. But henceforth, here and abroad, there will never be any doubts about our Commander in Chief, about his leadership, about our boy, George. Devotedly, dad.

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."

My uncle, George W. Bush, served as 43rd president of the United States from 2001 to 2009. As Commander in Chief, President Bush worked to expand freedom, opportunity and security at home and abroad. His administration, reformed America's education system, restored robust private sector economic growth, and job creation, protected our environment and pursued a comprehensive strategy to keep America safe after the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001. After the presidency, President Bush and former First lady, Laura Bush, founded the George W. Bush Presidential Center in Dallas, Texas. The Bush Center is home to the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, and the George W. Bush Institute. He is also the author of three bestselling books, "Decision Points," "41, a Portrait of My Father" and "Portraits of Courage, a Commander in Chief's Tribute to America's Warriors." This March he'll be releasing, "Out of Many, One: Portraits of America's Immigrants." Uncle George, it's an honor to welcome you to All the Best.

George: Sam, thanks. I was wondering when I was going to get invited and as I understand, you had a lot of the family members on and you finally worked your way down to me and baby Hal who can't speak yet.

Sam: Well, we couldn't be more thrilled to have you on. So I want to start with this, our central theme on the podcast centers around a theme you know well, that being the concept of service. George, if a young person approached and asked you if they should get involved in public service, what would your answer be?

George: Absolutely, I think our country benefits when people put aside personal interests to serve the greater good. And that was certainly in the example of your great grandfather, my grandfather, Prescott S. Bush, and certainly your grandfather and my dad. You know, I doubt I ever would have gone into public service or politics had it not been for the example those two men set. You know, if someone wants to run for office, I'd be more than willing to sit down and talk about the politics. Talk about what it's like to lose and talk about what it's like to win. But in terms of serving others, I think it's essential.

Sam: Let's talk about your own path to service, George. Election night in 1994 had to be filled with mixed emotions. You beat Ann Richards in Texas, while uncle Jeb lost to Lawton Chiles Florida. What led you to make the run for statewide office in the first place?

George: Well, first of all, I was sad that Jeb didn't win. However, the jubilation of winning, trumped the sadness, because I had worked very hard, like he had done, you know. He's seven years younger than me and I knew he'd have another shot, which he took and won. I decided to run because, well, I ran in 1978 and lost. We'd just had a family member run for Congress who lost and I told him "Look he's not the only guy that's ever done." That experience by the way, was unbelievably powerful in terms of learning. Plus, I got married. Laura and I honeymooned on the campaign trail in 1978. You know, I said, I'm pretty much through with politics for a while. And then in 1992, Dad lost and I'll never forget sitting in a baseball game. I was involved with the Texas Rangers at the time, thinking about what governor Ann Richards had said, that she had tried something in public education and it failed.

And she said, "Now I want somebody to show me what to do." I told Laura, I said, "I'm going to show her what to do." And she said, "You're out of your mind." I said, no, I think I'm going to run for governor." Now what's interesting about this, Sam is that nobody thought I had a chance to win. As a matter of fact, your dear grandmother, my mother, who my dad just referred to as Chemical Bar, I called her and said, "I'm going to run against Ann Richards." She said, "You're not going to win." I said, "Okay, but I'm running anyway." I ran for the right reason. And that is, and the reason I mentioned that dad had lost, is that it freed me to run because had he not lost, I wouldn't have run against Ann Richards. And the reason why is, is that in order to be a popular incumbent, I had to be able to campaign on state issues and if dad had been President for the final two years of that run, I'd have been defending him. And so I ran for specific policy reasons. And the reason I mentioned people didn't think I could win is, is that there had to be a reason other than winning to run.

Sam: So six years after you were sworn in as governor of Texas in 2001, you became the 43rd President of the United States. What led you from Texas to the Resolute Desk? And what did you learn from that historic journey?

George: I'm asked all the time, did you grow up wanting to be President? I said, no. I wanted to grow up being like Willie Mays, except I couldn't hit. You know, I wasn't really planning on being President. I won an easy reelection in 1998 and the speculation started. The party was kind of searching around, looking for a new face in this case, old name, but new face with a record. And I'd had a decent record as governor and politically, I had a good record for Republicans. I picked up a lot of Latino votes and did pretty darn well in the African American community because I had a very inclusive administration. And the pressure started to mount. The opportunity kind of opened itself up and I thought long and hard about it and delayed and delayed and delayed. But finally it became decision time. Laura was on board and I said, I'm going to run. And again, this is a race where very few people gave me much of a chance.

Sam: What did Gampin' Ganny say at the time?

George: This time mom was a lot more empathetic. She said, "We're for you." Dad said, you know, "I'm all for it. Good luck. If I can help you, I'll help you. If you want me to stay out of the way I will." And so they were very encouraging and very supportive.

Sam: So right after you were elected 9/11 happened. Do you see any similarities with the COVID-19 pandemic.

George: In one aspect, the human condition elsewhere matters to the security of our country. And that was the sobering effect of 9/11 on the United States, and that is terrorists abroad, could plot, plan and attack. Up to that point in time, we never really thought that our country was that vulnerable. I mean, there was the Oklahoma City bombings and there was the first World Trade Center bombings, but the idea of a foreign enemy coming in and attacking us on our soil, really hadn't entered the mentality of the American people nor had it affected our security policy. And so the attack was a sign that we're vulnerable and therefore the job of the President is to assess all risks all the time and take action as necessary to prevent attacks. The pandemic, while not an attack by nefarious people who hate freedom, nevertheless is still an example of a disease starting in China, ending up affecting millions of Americans and therefore policies must understand that and reflect that in preparedness.

Sam: Do you think we've reached our new normal yet?

George: I think this pandemic is going to change how people live, much more dramatically than we would have assumed prior to the spread of CV-19. For example, I think people are going to be looking for more affordable housing away from urban centers. They can be pretty productive without having to go into an urban office. That'll be a change. The fundamental question facing our country in regards to that is will we have enough broadband available throughout the United States so that people can have the same benefits in more rural America, as they have in urban America.

Sam: George, in your memoir "Decision Points," you go into the major decisions you faced as President and Commander in Chief. If you had to pick what was the most difficult decision you had to make and why?

George: By far the most difficult decision, Sam, any President makes is committing troops to combat. And the reason why is the aftermath of combat can lead to personal suffering, tragedy, death. And so I've spent a lot of my time in the post-presidency dealing with wounded vets. Some of them whose wounds you can see. I ride mountain bikes with guys on one leg who constantly crush me on the mountain bike, by the way. I play golf with people on one or no legs, but the other wounds are those that are invisible. Posttraumatic stress being one. And so we're very much involved with mental health of our vets at the Bush Center. It's really important to me and Laura, that we spend the rest of our lives, helping vets.

Sam: George, you spoke movingly both for our family and the office of the President, when you eulogized Gampy in December of 2018. As only the second son to follow your father's footsteps into the presidency, was there anything about Gampy's own service as President that you sought to emulate? How about your other predecessors?

George: Well, definitely I tried to emulate the dignity he brought to office. One thing about your granddad and my dad that he understood that the office of the President is more important than the occupant and therefore the occupant of the White House needs to honor that office. He was great at that. Secondly, a clear lesson of his, and one that I began to learn as governor of Texas, is that it's really important to surround yourself with excellent people. And Gamps had a great administration, full of solid, solid people. Thirdly, that what needed to be deliberative and decision making, but once you've made a decision, stick by your guns. I remember when he went into Iraq to protect Kuwait, you know, he's highly criticized. And I talked to him, I said, "Dad, hope you're doing okay." He said, "Son, I've taken my time. I've thought about it, I've listened to good people. And I strongly believe I'm doing the right thing. So don't worry about me."

One of the key things of leadership is they have a set of principles that guide decision making. I learned a lot from Abraham Lincoln. One such principle for Lincoln was all men are created equal under God. And we take that for granted these days, but in 1864, that was a pretty daring concept. The other thing is he acted on it. Signing the Emancipation Proclamation was one of the great presidential acts ever. Secondly, Abraham Lincoln could look beyond the moment and Presidents have got to be able to look on the horizon. It's easy to get caught up in the short-term aspects of American politics, but Lincoln's great decision was to keep the union intact, which was a very unpopular decision at the time, but he could see that a United States of America would be much stronger than one divided by sectarian rivalries. And thirdly, he was a great Commander in Chief starting with the fact that he honored the privates and the sergeants and the officers.

Sam: I think there's a common misperception about our family, namely that the Bushes all sit around the dinner table, talking about politics, giving out assignments on who's running for what and scheming on how to position someone on an issue, but I've never seen anything approaching that, ever. What would you say to anyone who might subscribe to that notion, George?

George: Well, I would say that's one of the hazards of being in public life is if people assign to you some kind of characteristics that they think are important, not which is true. If people sat around our table, they'd laugh, they'd hear a lot of needling, a lot of sports, but mainly fun and love. We really enjoy being in each other's presence. Yeah. I mean, look, I understand. I mean, people never thought I read books and I remember I got in a book reading contest with Karl Rove and read it like 95 books one year of the presidency. Our girls worried about that some for a while, you know, worried about people's impressions. And the key thing that matters is that our family loves each other. We defend each other, you know, misperceptions are just that.

Sam: Speaking of love, you have a love for the arts, especially recently. Would you tell our audience how you came to be a painter and what you love most about it? Can you also tell us about your new book of portraits "Out of many one?"

George: So remind me to talk about the book, I hope it sells. But first, as you can confirm, if everybody in our family sat around and said, "Write down the name of the person who is likely to become a painter," my name wouldn't be on the list.

Sam: It would have been low.

George: Yeah. If at all. So Sam, I'm out of the presidency and I'm craving for something. I'm busy. I've written a couple of books that you mentioned. Busy, but not fulfilled. And the thing that I was missing in retrospect was the presidency is a great learning experience. Every day you learn something new for eight years, that happened, then all of a sudden it's not happening. Even though I was content, and even though I was busy, I hungered for, it turns out, learning. By chance a person told me to read Winston Churchill's essay, "Painting as a Pastime."

I'm a big Churchill admirer. I read the essay and I turned to Laura and said, "If he can paint, I can paint." And she looked at me like "you've lost your mind, man." And so we hired an instructor. Keep in mind. What's interesting about this, I think at least, is that I could care less about art up to that moment. Didn't want to go to museums. I'd never studied art. If you said, "Do you like Lucian Freud paintings?" I would have said, "Who?" But I got into it and I started painting and started, you know, with the cube and I liked it. And then I started studying art. My instructors, I've had three, encouraged me to study other artists. I took the MoMA course online and I paint every day. In many ways, it's opened up unbelievably new horizons. Every painting is a new experience. Every brush stroke can be a learning experience.

I'm evolving. And as I look back at my old paintings and look at my new ones, you know, I see a unique style, which is my style and it's satisfying and fulfilling. And so here in Maine, as you know, I paint every day and it's become a part of my life. Recently, I put out a book on veterans, I painted the portraits of 98 vets. All of whom were suffering from one form of injury or another. I did so to honor them, raise money for the programs, and you know, I was thinking about what's next. And a friend of mine, Ken Mehlman, who was my campaign manager in '04, just happen to be in the audience, said, "You need to speak out on immigration." I said, Ken, "I'm not speaking out on political matters these days." He said, "That's not political. He said, it's policy."

I said, "No, it's policy wrapped up in politics right now. And so I'm not speaking out." He said, "Well, why don't you paint their portraits?" I said, "You know what, I'm going to." And so I painted the portraits of 43 immigrants and tell their stories. And the reason I did so is I wanted to remind Americans about the significant contribution immigrants make to the fabric of our country. These stories are unbelievable what these people went through to get here and what they're doing to contribute to not only our economy, but to the compassion of America. And so it's coming out in March, I'm looking forward to getting out on TV and selling it.

Sam: George I'd like to end with this. First, thank you so much for sitting down and giving us the time...

George: Happy to do it.

Sam: ...and sharing your stories. Gampy had an unusual friendship with former President Bill Clinton, and I couldn't believe it the first time he came to Kennebunkport, Maine, where we're sitting here today. I'd love to hear your perspective of that relationship.

George: Well, actually their friendship began to really blossom when I asked both of them to serve on the Tsunami Relief efforts. So they traveled the world together and I watched it pretty closely from afar, of course. I was president then. I saw how respectful Bill Clinton was of dad and he didn't Lord his victory over dad. And on the airplane, Clinton slept on the couch and dad got the bed. And I said, wow, that guy, you know, he's showing respect to a guy that deserves respect. Dad on the other hand was never defined by victory or defeat. Sam, in life, setting priorities are important. His priority as you well know, was his faith, his family and his country. And those were his priorities. It wasn't winning or losing elections so that when he didn't win, it was much easier.

And because of those priorities, much easier for him to unite with Clinton because he had no bitterness in his soul. And then of course, when he invited bill up here to Kennebunkport, I was thrilled for him. Bill and I continue on with that friendship. Obviously we're a little different. We're both baby boomers, both Southern governors, both great BS artists. And, you know, we don't spend a lot of time together, but when we do, we enjoy our company.

Sam: Well, George, thanks for joining us on All the Best. I appreciate all your time today.

George: All the best to 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.

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.