



## **All the Best Podcast**

### **Episode 62: “A Truly Historic Friendship”**

***Featuring Secretary of State and White House Chief of Staff under President George H. W. Bush, James Baker, III***

Secretary Baker: On August 21st, 1974, after President Ford announced his pick of Nelson Rockefeller for vice president, following that announcement, George wrote me this letter. Dear Bake. Yesterday was an enormous personal disappointment. For valid reasons, we made the finals. Valid reasons I mean a lot of hills, RNC, and letter support. And so the defeat was, therefore, more intense. But that was yesterday. Today and tomorrow will be different, for I see now clearly what it means to have really close friends more clearly than ever before in my life. I take personal pleasure from the great official support, but I take even more from the way our friends rallied around, and none did more than you to help me with a problem that burned my soul and my conscience. But the sun is about to come out, and life looks pretty darn good. Thanks. George.

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, 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 your mother, serve your country," and he said, "Tell the truth." And I tried to do that in public life, all through it.

Yeah, 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.

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."

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

Sam: James A. Baker, III has served in senior government positions under three United States presidents, including as the nation's 61st Secretary of State from January 1989 through August 1992, under my grandfather, President George H.W. Bush. During his tenure at the State Department, Secretary Baker traveled to 90 foreign countries as the United States confronted the unprecedented challenges and opportunities of the Post-Cold War era. Secretary Baker also acted as the Chief of Staff to my grandfather from 1992 to 1993. Prior to my grandfather's administration, Mr. Baker was the Under Secretary of Commerce to President Gerald Ford. He also was Secretary of the Treasury, Chairman of the President's Economic Policy Council, and Chief of Staff to President Ronald Reagan. Mr. Baker is a native Houstonian, a veteran of the United States Marine Corps, and a published author. He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1991 and is currently Honorary Chairman of the James A. Baker, III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University. Secretary Baker, how are you today?

Secretary Baker: Well, I'm fine, Sam. Thank you. How are you?

Sam: I'm doing well. I'm doing well. Well, I'd like to start with this, sir, your relationship with my gampy literally changed the world in dramatic and positive ways during your 12 years serving at the top of the US government together, including the last four years, when together, you were guiding our country and world through the peaceful end of the Cold War. But for our listeners, who are not familiar with the roots of your historic friendship, can you take us back to the beginning? How did the Baker-Bush relationship begin?

Secretary Baker: Well, it began socially. My first wife, who died tragically of cancer at the age of 38, was from Dayton, Ohio. She had a close personal friend there whose name was Tinsey Bush. So I was familiar through that connection with the Bush family. But when I moved back to Houston from law school in 1957, I think that was the year before George and Bar moved to Houston from

Midland. And I didn't have a tennis doubles partner in the Houston Country Club tennis tournament, nor did he. And they put us together as doubles partners, and we won the doubles championship out there two years in a row. But during that time, I'd say probably from the early 60s to the beginning of the 70s, we saw a lot of Barbara and George socially. This was before he went into politics. But we used to go over to their house and swim in the pool and have hamburgers. And then our kids used to play touch football. Every Thanksgiving, there was a vacant lot at the end of our street, and the Bushes would come over, and the Bakers and Bushes would play touch football. So our friendship began socially and began on a tennis court. So to some extent, it began competitively.

Sam: Well, I want to take you back to 1968, April of 1968. My grandfather voted for the Open Housing Act, which, as you know, was part of the Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s. And at the time, you were already a very close supporter of then-Congressman Bush. Can you talk about the importance of that vote and the political climate during that time?

Secretary Baker: Well, that was a threshold vote. It was a very unpopular vote here in Houston at that time. And I never will forget attending a meeting that George had with his supporters at the Bio Club in Houston, where he was raked over the coals topside to bottom from some of his biggest financial supporters for casting that vote. Of course, that was when the remnants of the old South were dying away, but at that time, that was a very courageous vote, and it told us a lot about the values and the principles of George H.W. Bush. It was the right vote at the right time, but it was a politically very unpopular vote. But your grandfather had the courage to do it, and it was absolutely the right thing to do.

Sam: Well, Secretary, you mentioned the passing of your late wife, Mary Stuart, in February 1970. Shortly after, did my grandfather then encourage you to take your mind off the painful troubles by helping guide the Harris County effort for a second campaign for the U.S. Senate?

Secretary Baker: That's pretty much how I got involved in politics. I was really apolitical. I would vote most of the time, but I spent a lot of time hunting during the campaign season. But after Mary Stuart died, and by the way, your grandmother and grandfather were the last two people outside of her family to see her before she passed away, and she was particularly close to your grandmother, to Bar, and they came to see her, and then after she passed away, George came to me and said, "You know, Bake," he said, "You need to take your mind off your grief. How about helping me run for the Senate?" I said, "Well, George, that's a great idea." I said, "But two things, number one, I don't

know anything about politics" because I'd been basically apolitical, "And number two, I'm a Democrat." He said, "Well, we can take care of that latter problem." And we did. And I changed parties, and I ran the Harris County effort for his campaign for the Senate, which he lost to Lloyd Bentsen, but he ran a good race. But it was my first really significant political experience, particularly in the race having to do with national politics.

Sam: Did you catch the bug, like my grandfather, during that time? Were you ready to get back in there?

Secretary Baker: I began to catch the bug then. When I really caught the bug was in 1975-76 after your grandfather had recommended me for a job in the Ford Administration and President Ford had lost his delegate hunter against Ronald Reagan in the '76 campaign for the nomination. That was the last seriously contested convention of either major political party, and I became Ford's delegate hunter against Reagan's, one for whom I served as Chief of Staff and Treasury Secretary in later years. But that was really when I caught the bug, was in '75 and '76. But the Senate race was the beginning of it. I went from there to be Finance Chairman of the Republican Party of Texas and then ultimately up to the Ford Administration as Deputy Secretary of Commerce in a job that your grandfather had a lot to do with my getting. And from there, I had to leave that job after six months and become the delegate hunter for Ford's nominating presidential campaign against Ronald Reagan.

Sam: So you mentioned the re-election campaign for President Gerald Ford, and then four years later, you were heading the Reagan/Bush campaign that led all the way to the White House. Given this amazing background, Mr. Secretary, how have political campaigns changed over the last few decades?

Secretary Baker: Well, there's been some significant change but not as much, perhaps as people might think. Politics, to my way of thinking, or at least back in the days when I was leading those five presidential campaigns I led, was really a matter of crossing the T's and dotting the I's and being prepared. But politics has always been, and I think probably always will be, a contact sport. And having led all those campaigns, I've got the bruises to show for that. But in the early 1800s, if you look back, our politics was suffused with attacks and innuendo by one candidate against the other. The biggest difference, I guess, between now and then is the advent of the Internet and social media. They play a very big role today that it didn't play that size role in the campaigns that I led. And there have been other changes, particularly the way the media has changed. It's changed drastically. Rather than serving as unbiased reporters with the facts and of politics, media companies have become advocates for one side or the other. If you tune into Fox, you'd think you were listening to the house organ of

the Republican party. If you tune in to MSNBC or CNN, you would know you were listening to the house organ of the Democratic Party. The center, the responsible center in American politics, has, to some extent, in my view, disappeared. And we don't get the big swings that we used to get. Take, for instance, that 1976 election between Jimmy Carter and Gerry Ford. I was Chairman of the President Ford committee that year and Carter had a 33-point lead over us after the conventions. But by election day, he won by only two percentage points. And had Ford received 10,000 more votes in Ohio and Hawaii, he would've won the election. Swings like that, I think they may never happen again.

Sam: Well, Mr. Secretary, I'd like to talk about George Bush, the vice president. You have frequently made the point that my gampy was the finest vice president ever to serve in that high office. Why the generous assessment?

Secretary Baker: Well, because he knew the job. He'd been in Washington before. He knew how a vice president should operate. He knew, for instance, never to say something in a meeting because there are no secrets in Washington, and everything becomes public ultimately. So he never said something in a meeting that would've been embarrassing to his president or that would've juxtaposed him to the position of his president. If you look back at the history, you'll see that Reagan really didn't want to pick George as his vice president. It was an anybody but Bush campaign there for a while because we'd run a tough campaign against Reagan, and we were the last candidate standing, and we had referred to his economic program as voodoo economics. He really didn't like that, and don't think for one minute he didn't let me know that after I became his last Chief of Staff and Treasury Secretary later on. But he didn't want to pick your gampy. He wanted to pick somebody else, and they even romanced former President Gerry Ford, if you remember. But your grandfather knew how the job of vice president should be handled, and he handled it that way, and he was a superb vice president for Ronald Reagan. Take it from me because I was there for all of it, they became very, very close, and President Reagan had a very large appreciation and great thankfulness for the role his vice president played in those two terms.

Sam: Mr. Secretary, a lot of attention is paid to the foreign-policy accomplishments of my grandfather's administration. Given the major developments that transpired during those four years of historic change, to name a few, the peaceful end of the Cold War, the rise of Democratic Russia, the liberation of Eastern Europe, and German unification within NATO. Following that, there was also Desert Storm and the Madrid Peace Conference. What surprised you most during those four years of change?

Secretary Baker: Well, the pace of it surprised me to some extent, but so did the breadth. I mean, these were tremendous accomplishments in only four years. I mean, if you look at the presidency of your grandfather, I tell people he was the most successful one-term president America has ever had, and I have no doubt about that, particularly when you look at some of the foreign-policy accomplishments, many of which you just ticked off. So I don't think it was too surprising because your grandfather had quite a bit of experience in foreign policy before he became vice president and before he became president.

Sam: Mr. Secretary, just as my grandfather placed a good deal of emphasis on personal relationships between world leaders, you also forged close working ties with Gorbachev, Soviet Foreign Minister, and many others. Do personal relationships still matter today?

Secretary Baker: Yes, I think personal relationships in politics, in foreign policy, and domestic policy are very, very important. And the reason I say that is if you can form a good personal relationship with the person across the table from you, you have a far better chance of achieving a successful agreement. Not that you would ever sacrifice your principles or the interest of your country for a personal relationship, you don't do that, but if you find that you have somebody that you're dealing whose word is good, whom you can trust, it's a lot easier then to make things happen and to get to agreements, which is, after all, much of the work of foreign policy, at least the diplomatic part of it.

Sam: Were there any relationships that you had personally that stood out to you during that time?

Secretary Baker: Well, I had a wonderful relationship with Shevardnadze, as you mentioned. He'd been a Soviet apparatchik, and frankly, he was a little bit ahead of Gorbachev in embracing democracy and change perestroika and glasnost, and he was willing to do some things. For instance, when Iraq invaded Kuwait and Iraq was a Soviet client state, Shevardnadze was willing to stand shoulder to shoulder with me in an airport in Moscow and condemn that action even though they were condemning the action of a Soviet client state. And so I think part of the reason he did that was because he trusted me. And when I told him that this was not just an excuse by the United States to take military action, of course, ultimately, we had to, but it was not just an excuse. And he stood shoulder to shoulder with the American Secretary of State and condemned that action. He did that because of my personal relationship with him.

Sam: Mr. Secretary, you not only had the love and respect of my gampy but my gammy as well or Bar as you referred to her earlier. Can you talk about her unique role in American history?

Secretary Baker: I think she will go down in American history as the matriarch of an extraordinarily successful political family when you think about it. And by the way, it was a very close-run thing. I mean, there was no assurance whatsoever that when we started that first campaign back there in 1979, your grandfather was just an asterisk in the polls. And yet he persevered and ultimately was elected president of the United States. And then, his son George W. was elected president. So she was the wife of a president, and she was the mother of a president, and she was the mother of a governor when your uncle Jeb was elected governor of Florida. And, of course, George P. is down here in Texas now as the Land Commissioner. So she's the matriarch of an extraordinarily important political family. It all flowed from that first race. But I'll tell you, she was very competitive. Nobody hated to lose as much as she did. And so, it takes, I think, quite a woman to ramrod such an ambitious and successful family. Furthermore, I think you got to remember her role in promoting literacy in this country. Nobody is done more than she has. And both she and George both dedicated a large portion of their time, of course, to volunteerism. And that is, I think, been handed down to successor generations.

Sam: Well, Secretary Baker, later in my grandfather's life, he had a number of health problems requiring hospitalization. During his eulogy, my uncle George W. noted that you had maybe snuck a bottle of vodka into the Methodist Hospital at the request of my gampy so you could enjoy a martini together, which I know he loved. Now is your chance to set the record straight. Did you? And if so, how many times?

Secretary Baker: Well, it was not a big bottle. The answer is, I did, but it was the kind of vodka that you get on an airplane flight. These were little one-shot bottles. But I didn't do that over the objections of the doctors. Your grandfather had some wonderful doctors, and I would usually tell him I had this. Your grandfather wanted it, and I knew he did because he and I used to drink martinis together a lot. But the vodka I smuggled into Methodist Hospital really didn't have to be smuggled in. And we enjoyed it. Maybe it helped prolonged his life. At least I'd like to think it did.

Sam: Well, Secretary, I'd like to end with this and first thank you for sharing your stories. Nobody knows my grandfather quite as well as you. So it's such an honor to hear these stories. I want to take you back to St. Martin's church on December 6, 2018. A week before, you and your wife Susan had visited him during his final moments before he passed from this world into the next. Can you describe that week and what you want the American people to remember about your dear friend and our 41st president?

Secretary Baker: I want to say one thing to you, Sam, nobody has had a better friend than I've had in your grandfather, and nobody has had a better friend for as long. We were best friends for almost 60 years. That's a long, long time. On the day that he died, they lived here in Houston, not far from where Susan and I lived, and I had gone by to see him, and he was very chipper that morning. I think I got there at 8:30 or something like that. I walked into the room. He was in bed. His breathing had not become labored. Somebody said, "Mr. President, Secretary Baker is here." And he looked up at me as he had did so many times when we were doing all those campaigns together. He said, "Hey, Bake, where are we going today?" And I said, "Well, jefe" I called him jefe, which is Spanish for chief, I said, "Jefe, we're going to heaven." And he said, "Good. That's where I want to go." And I left, and he ate a very hearty breakfast. He ate at least five soft-boiled eggs. And I thought, "Well, now, he may be coming back a little bit." But later on in the day, they called me and said that I might want to come by, that he wasn't doing all that great. And I did, and we got there, and I think he passed away at 10:10 that night, but it was a very peaceful passing. And we got your uncle George W. on the line and the last words your grandfather said, the last words he spoke, were to George W. when he said, "I love you," and George, of course, said, "I love you too." But I think what people ought to remember about George H.W. Bush is what an accomplished president he was and what a lovely human being he was and what a compassionate man he was and what a wonderful friend he was. And how he was, without a doubt, no doubt about it, the most successful one-term president this country has ever had.

Sam: Well, Secretary Baker, thank you so much for sharing your stories and being such a great friend to my grandparents. Thanks for coming on "All the Best."

Secretary Baker: Thanks, Sam, and all the best to you.

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.