



**All the Best Podcast**  
**Episode 67: “Only in America: From Grocery Store Clerk to  
the White House”**

*Featuring Former Assistant and White House Political Director, Ron  
Kaufman*

Ron: March 29th, 1999. "I feel horrible and alone, unloved, even scared. Why might you ask? Well, Michael just rushed in and said, 'Our email must be closed down for four days.'

No time to notify family or friends. No time to even say goodbye to my wife of 54 years. Who will tell little Jeb who owes me a reply on his fishing trip? Who will tell our two governors who email me regularly—Quincy in New York or Ron Kaufman in Washington? Who? Who? Who? Who will email them that my modem is closed, that nothing can get in or can get out? The answer? No one.

'There's no time. Hurry and turn off your email,' Michael said.

He's thinking, 'Just because you are President of the United States, that doesn't mean this won't strike you. Shut the damn thing down.'

Our server has been down now for 6 long minutes, and I feel lonely and lost. Call me by phone. I'll let you know when I get back online." George H. W. Bush.

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."

Ron Kaufman is a highly experienced political strategist who has served as a senior advisor to U.S. presidents, governors, members of Congress, and a host of elected and appointed officials at every level of government. First, Mr. Kaufman served Pres. Ronald Reagan as national political director of the Republican National Committee, then became a key campaign figure in the 1988 presidential campaign for my grandfather, George H. W. Bush. When selected, my grandfather appointed Ron as the White House personnel director, assistant to the president, and the White House political director.

Continuing his distinguished public service career, Ron also has served as elected Republican National Committeeman for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, chair of the RNC budget committee and as a member of the rules committee, executive committee, and convention site selection committee. He is also active with the Republican Governors Association where he has served as the co-chair of the finance committee.

It's my pleasure to welcome on Ron Kaufman to all the best. Ron, how are you doing today?

Ron: I'm doing great, Sam.

Sam: It's great to see you.

Ron: Quite frankly, at my age, it's great to be seen.

Sam: Well, Ron, I want to start out with the history between you and my grandparents. You knew and worked with my grandparents for almost 40 years. How did your relationship start?

Ron: It goes back to a friend of mine who is a young state rep in Massachusetts, Andy Card, who later became my brother-in-law, who got me involved in politics as a volunteer, who in 1978 decided he wanted to run for governor of Massachusetts in '82. And between the two of us, we couldn't buy a peanut butter sandwich.

So we decided that we should help someone run for president, so we could use that as a platform to run for governor in '82. And back in the '80 campaign, Sam, there were 425 candidates running for president. And we listed all of them and decided, "This guy, George H. W. Bush, who was born in Massachusetts, had ties here, and had a great organizational sense of politics made sense for us to hook up with him."

So my friend called Ambassador Bush who came and met with him, and they let my friend be in charge of Massachusetts, which, in 1980, followed New Hampshire. Iowa, first as always, and then New Hampshire. But Massachusetts was 10 days later after New Hampshire. So very important to the Bush campaign to do well there. It was also the same media market as New Hampshire.

So, my friend and I wrote this long letter to Jim Baker, the campaign manager, on why they should take Massachusetts seriously, how, if we did well in Massachusetts, it would help us win New Hampshire, and we'd be on our way to be the first big state to do well for Ambassador Bush.

They loved the memo, agreed to a good-sized budget, and that Mike Powell would be the chairman. And Mike Powell said to Baker, "Okay, I want Kaufman to run the campaign here." The truth was I was running supermarkets for a living, you know, wrapping lettuce and cutting meat and things. And Jim Baker said, "Wait a minute. Listen. We agree with you this is important, but your pal knows nothing about politics. He can't do it."

So Ambassador Bush come in for a big announcement, and we had three out-of-state reps sign on at the same time—Paul Cellucci, who had become governor and ambassador, Andy Natsios, who went on to run USAID, and Leon Lombardi, who is now a judge. And he had this big announcement. "Here's my leadership team," said your grandfather. They left town, Andi called. The next day, he says, "Either you hire Kaufman or we quit."

So my relationship with the President and that team started over blackmail. And, to be honest with you, it was the greatest decision I ever made in my life. We had the best time, and your grandparents were so kind to me over the years. It's hard to put it in words, Sam. I owe them so much of who I am.

Sam: Well, I want to provide some context for our younger listeners, what was the political climate like in the 1970s and early 1980s?

Ron: Surprisingly very similar in many respects. We still were in the throes of street demonstrations, social unrest. Then, we had a disgraced president who was going to be impeached but left office on his own instead. All the same kind of problems, if you will, that we have today, but there's one major difference. Everything we talked about in the past should be put to the same prism. If Lincoln, when he was President, had social media, after Gettysburg, he'd have been lynched as president. And the same in the '70s and '80s. If we had internet and facebook and all that, Nixon would have been crucified. And my hero, 41, would never have been President because he was head of the CIA, which was a clandestine, awful thing to do. And he also was the chairman of the Republican National Committee during Watergate. Despite all that, he ran for the President of United States.

Sam: Well, I know my grandfather and Reagan were competitors, but they also became close partners. Ron, you were there on the sidelines watching that relationship develop. What did that look like during that time?

Ron: They weren't close as you know with the economics and all that. And they were competitors and strong competitors. And the truth be known most the books say this, going into the convention, Governor Reagan had not thought about George Walker Bush as vice president. And as the convention went forth and it became this talk about a co-presidency with Ford, Reagan himself said, "Wait a minute. I'm not going to co-president with anybody," and called your grandfather, and I happen to be in the suite when he got the call. And they became a team.

And the great thing about George Walker Bush, nobody in politics has more legitimate friends. Most politicians are lonely. They have a lot of acquaintances but not many friends. Your granddad and the President became good friends because the loyalty and support, and he never once ever doubted the fact that George Walker Bush was at his side. And they met almost every week as you know for lunch, just the two of them. No one knows to this day. A lot was said between the two of them, but they trusted each other and trust is a hard thing to come in politics unfortunately, very hard, especially in this day and age. But they bonded, they trusted each other and it made a great deal of difference. It made the whole thing so much better.

Sam: Well, Ron, we already discussed the 1980 campaign, but I'd like to shift our focus to the '88 campaign. What was the road to the 1988 nomination like?

Ron: Well, pretty rocky. You know, it's much more fun in '80 when everyone involved in the campaign were there for one reason; they love the Bushes. In '88, we were supposed to be the front runner from the beginning, and we had all kinds of new people who want to be part of the team. And blending the new people with the old people is always difficult. And as you remember, we came in third in Iowa, which was a big disappointment because we won it in 1980.

So, my job was running New Hampshire, and I remember like yesterday, sitting in Governor Sununu's office in the statehouse watching the returns in Iowa and sure we're going to come third in Iowa, and this was not good. And John sort of looked at me and smiled and said, "Ron, this is great because we're going to kick their butt in New Hampshire," and win the presidency for your grandad. And we had absolute faith in the voters of new Hampshire, and they delivered a smashing victory, and the rest was history. From then on, it was pretty smooth quite frankly.

Sam: Well, after my grandfather got to the White House in 1988, he always tried to keep partisan politics out of official White House business. but of course the presidency is always involved in politics in some way. How did he walk that fine line?

Ron: People say, "How did this guy from Massachusetts who went to Texas ever become President of United States?" One reason, aside from all things he's done in his life, he was the master of the small gesture. I was putting some things together, and I counted about 950 personal notes and letters from President Bush over the years.

And I was a very small cog in a very big wheel, and it is true if you went to America. You'd meet people, Republicans, Democrats, who love the man, who is good to them, and they were friends. And in this crazy city where people don't have friends, he had friends in both sides because he was genuine.

And your grandma had a lot to do with that, too. She was a spectacular woman. Ed Rollins once said that. I think you mentioned to me earlier that she was one of the greatest influencers of any First Lady in history. And she was, but she did it her way. She never once talked to your grandfather about throw-weights of missiles per se but there's more to the presidency than just the issues. It's who you are as a human being and how that's projected to the country. And she was a rock. People to this day love your grandmother to death.

To be honest, don't tell anybody this. It's just me we're talking about. If you were a staffer and you had to make a mistake with the President or the First

Lady, sorry, Mr. President, I'm not going to make with her. I met her in 1978, and till the day she died, I lived in fear of Barbara Bush. I remember the last time I was with her, I was down in College Station at the Bush School, and as you know, they had a suite where they entertained donors and friends and students, etc.

And there were four donors in the living room with your grandfather, and I'm there as the court jester talking politics. And she wheeled in. She listened for a while. She said, "George, are you still listening to Ron? He hasn't been right since Lincoln." And she gave that little Barbara Bush twinkle and smile. She was the best. People loved her.

Sam: That's so funny. Well, Ron, we touched on this earlier when we were talking about the political climate of the past versus the present. Civil justice issues are at the forefront of today's national discussion, and the Bush 41 Administration participated in similar discussions during its day. What do all sides need to do to address these problems?

Ron: Well, they're real issues, and unfortunately my party has gotten the wrong side of this issue politically. And the party's great at talking to old white guys and other Republicans but we're terrible at talking to Hispanics or Blacks or young people or women and we've got to change that.

Well, it's a problem for us. I'm not as concerned a lot because we're working real hard on it, and I feel very comfortable that we have to keep going on issues. We win on issues. We lose on other things, but we say, in issues, we win. Let's go back to that.

Sam: Well, Ron, I want to talk about the George and Barbara Bush Foundation. You've been a member of the board of advisors for a very long time, and I'm excited to announce that your daughter is now a member. Can you talk about your involvement with the board and now your daughters?

Ron: My daughter, Katie, she loved 41. She put up with me but she loved 41. I remember one day I'm with the President and he said, "Listen. I'm going to Kennebunkport." I said, "Sure, but I got to pick up my daughter." He said, "She can come with us." The motorcade went to the school. They pull her out of school. We got in the President's motorcade, and we told my daughter, on the way to the airport and say goodbye." We call the airport, we get on a plane, and she went on the plane, and the plane takes off. And she couldn't believe it.

But anyway longer in life, she graduated from Boston College a few years after your mom, and she got accepted for grad school to Kennedy School. I told that



to Pres. Bush. He said, "What?" He picked up the phone and called her. He said, "Katie, are you telling me after all this, you're going to go to the Kennedy School without even give the Bush School a chance?"

So they arranged to meet in College Station and of course you know where she went to school, the Bush School. She would say, "This is the best decision ever." Like, she loved every minute of it. It's because he's there. He walks the halls to this day. He was always about duty, honor, family, country. And whether you were the President of the United States or the chief of staff to the local mayor, he believed deeply that people should be involved in government, in making things better.

And his real legacy, in my humble opinion, are the thousands of kids that are going through that school all the time, who lived that legacy and bring with them the same duty, honor, country, family, spirit, that he believed in. And my daughter is doing great in life because of what she got in the school. She loved it. And there aren't many kids you meet that turned down Harvard to go to A&M to be honest unless you're a football player, but she'll tell you it was the greatest thing in her life. She loved it.

Sam: Well, Ron, you've known my grandparents for so long. There's not many people who have known them as long as you, so I have to ask, do you have a funny story or two you could tell about both of them?

Ron: People tell me all the time I should write a book, and I'll never write a book because the things that would make the book sell, I wouldn't put in print. As I said early on, I'm this poor guy who never went to college, who was running two markets for a living when I met your granddad. And somehow I ended up working in the White House, and I can remember it like yesterday the first day I drove into the White House the West Exec drive and the secret service agent said, "Good morning, Mr. Kaufman. Come right in." I said, "Holy smokes."

And the first day I was on Air Force One. I'm sitting in my seat and then Stewart comes up to me and said, "Mr. Kaufman, the President wants to see you." So I walk up, "Yes, sir." He said, "Well, I got a problem. Some political problem. I don't know what it was. He said, "What do you think?" I said, "Well, sir, I think we should do x, y, and z." He said, "Okay. Yeah, it's a good idea; I'll do that."

And I walk back to my seat and said, "Holy smokes, that was the President of the United States of America. He asked me what to do. I told him and, God help

the country, he's going to do it." And just the way he made you feel, it was just great.

And your grand mom, my hometown paper for *Quincy Ledger* sent a report to spend a day in the life of the whole "boy makes good" type thing, you know? So he followed me through a couple of days of work in the White House. I was sitting in my office the last day before he leaves, having brown liquid and talking about things. He said, "Your day's so long. You work so hard." I said, "Well, listen, to be honest with you, I love coming to work every day, and I hate to go home." And that made the piece of course. So in those days, you get clips. You know, the paperclips in the morning. So I'm going to the mess, the White House mess, and the First Lady comes in, and everybody stands up, and everyone gets nervous.

She said, "Well, Boy Genius, how are you doing today?"

I said, "I was doing well, Mrs. Bush."

She said, "Really? I love that quote. I bet your wife did, too. Finish your breakfast, get in your car, and go the hell home and don't come back for three days." Classic Barbara Bush, you know? She's just perfect. And the many mistakes I made, no one was more at my side with all due respect your grandfather than your grandma. I love her to death, and I miss them both, Sam, every day of my life.

Sam: Well, we all do, Ron. And, first, I want to say thank you so much for taking the time and sharing your stories. It's so great to hear such a great long-time friend of my grandparents share stories about them during their lives. I like to end with this. For someone who's known them as long as you, are there any lessons you've learned from them that you still carry through your life today?

Ron: Not just today, all my life. When I met your grandfather, I actually met him...I went to see him, and he's giving a speech. Harvard University back in '77. Afterwards, Q&A. And a bright, young lad, almost as good looking as you, asked him a question and said, "Well, sir, all the things you've done," you know, he had the perfect resume, Congress, CIA, ambassador to China, all the great things, "what gives you the most pleasure? One thing?" He said, "Oh, that's easy. My kids come home."

And that never left me. I loved that answer. I hope I raise my kids that way, and I got to be honest, I've got two great kids, Katie, who just adopted three kids, Sam, as you know, I think. My older daughter is a wildlife biologist and an



environmental scientist, Smokey the Bear [SP]. She's married to an ornithologist, a bird guy. They're professors at the University of Georgia.

So my life has been unbelievable. When I go to a classroom, no one could believe that I've actually done all these things in my life. I don't believe it, and I owe so much to them not just because of the experiences I had, but because the way I lived my life and I'll be eternally grateful. I'll even put up with you because of them.

Sam: Well, Ron, it's been great having you share your stories with us today and all the best. Thank you so much for coming on. Hope to see you around D.C. soon.

Ron: Thanks, Sam. Loved your family and thanks to all Bushes for being so kind to me and my family.

Sam: I'm Sam LeBlond, reminding me 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.