



All the Best Podcast
Episode 69: "The Personal Touch"
Featuring Senior Advisor to the George and Barbara Bush Foundation, Tom Collamore

Sam: November 27th, 1978. Dear Tom, thanks so much for your nice note. I also enjoyed meeting you in Hartford, and I'm sorry Ron and Lou didn't make it. Needless to say, if I become a candidate for 1980, I would welcome your interest and support. Thanks for your thoughtfulness, and please keep in touch. Sincerely, 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."

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George: I remember something my dad taught me. He said, "Write to 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."

Tom Collamore is the senior advisor to the George and Barbara Bush Foundation, representing the foundation in Washington D.C. to further my grandparents' legacy of service.

Tom began his government service as special assistant to the secretary of commerce, Malcolm Baldrige from 1981 to 1985. After that, Tom served in the white house as a senior staff member to my grandfather during his vice presidency where they traveled together to more than 30 countries and all 50 States.

From there, Tom served as liaison to the transition offices of the president-elect and the vice president-elect from 1988 to 1989. During my grandfather's presidential administration, Tom served as chief of staff and assistant secretary of commerce. He was also assistant secretary of commerce for the administration, serving as the secretary's principal advisor on management issues and as the department's chief financial officer.

Currently, Tom is the founder of Collamore Consulting Group, LLC, a strategic council and advisory firm serving foundations, corporate executives, and trade associations,

Tom, it's great to see you. Welcome to "All the Best".

Tom: Thank you, Sam. I'm thrilled to be here, and great to see you on the Zoom at least.

Sam: Tom, I'd like to start off with how you came to know my grandparents. I know you worked for them in 1985, but your relationship goes farther back than that. Doesn't it?

Tom: It does. Actually, I was a kid in college working for a friend who was running for governor in Connecticut in 1978, if you can believe it. And he looked at me one day and said, "Hey, there's this guy coming in, a big shot, who's gonna do a fundraiser for me in a couple of events. Why don't you go pick him up at the airport, get him settled in his hotel, and just drive him around for the next day or so and take care of him?" I said, "Well, great. Who's that?" He says, "His name is Bush."

So I go to the field in Hartford and pick up Ambassador Bush and David Q. Bates. Spent 24 hours with him, taking him around. And it was instant admiration society. We lost that governor's race, but I dropped him a note and got an answer-back, like half of America. Got my George Bush correspondence collection started.

And that began a relationship because a year later in 1979, an acquaintance of mine was asked by your grandfather to run his campaign in Connecticut, Malcolm Baldrige, who later became secretary of commerce under Ronald Reagan. And so Mr. Baldrige called me up and said, "Collamore, I'm gonna run George's campaign in Connecticut. And I asked Houston to send me the file in Connecticut. And your correspondence is the only damn thing in it. So why don't we have lunch and talk about that?" And so I got hired to work on the campaign in '79 and '80 and came to Washington with Baldrige in '81, and there we went.

Sam: And then, as they say, the rest is history.

So Tom, while most people will remember Gampy for his four years as president, his eight years as VP were certainly consequential. Many people say he helped advance the development of the new white house vice presidency. You were there. What were some of these advancements made during his time as VP?

Tom: Yeah, I think that's a really important observation, actually. You know, a lot of people, sort of, mark the beginning of the modern vice presidency would Carter and Mondale, right? But it was your grandfather who really, I think, got it rolling in a big way. He approached the vice presidency as he approached most things in life, right? Loyalty first. And he understood that he worked for Ronald Reagan now. Remember these are two pretty strong-willed political forces who had been in combat not long before, now they're together serving in the white house. And so, I think your grandfather knew he had to, kind of, prove himself and to show his chops. Not necessarily so much to president Reagan as to his staff and the rest of the Reagan team as well that he was gonna be loyal and supportive of their deal.

You know, he did that right out of the box. I mean, you've had other guests on this show who've talked about some of the stories. In particular, I love the story that Pete Teeley told you about the INF deal in Europe and the major role your grandfather played in that. But, you know, he did other things that showed his depth of experience that he brought to the job at that time. You know, he ran the drug interdiction task force, which was, kind of, a technical thing, working with the coast guard and law enforcement to stem the flow of drugs into the country

from down South. And he also ran something called the Regulatory Relief Task Force to try to make government a little less intrusive and more open for business, if you will. But I think the place where he enjoyed himself the most, and probably contributed the most to president Reagan's success was with his continuing to enhance his relationships around the world with leaders, not just with our allies, but also with our potential adversaries.

And he spent a lot of time on Air Force Two, logged a lot of miles, as he used to say, you die, I fly. Or someone else said that probably. Those were not just ceremonial occasions. He would carry important messages to presidents and prime ministers and carry important messages back and was the intermediary in a lot of very sensitive negotiations.

At the time, remember it was a different world back then, the cold war was in full force. The NATO Alliance was a critical element to America's leadership of the free world. Your grandfather was right in the middle of the whole thing.

Sam: Tom, you briefly mentioned president Reagan and my grandfather's relationship. They seem to have developed a rapport during their private weekly lunches at the white house during his administration. Did they always have such a great relationship or was that built over time?

Tom: I think it grew over time. I mean, I think they certainly respected each other, obviously. And for the president to tap your grandfather to be his running mate was no small thing. I mean, lots has been written about all the machinations in Detroit and, of course, we were all celebrating mightily, as you can imagine, when the big call came in. But I think your grandfather really worked hard to give the president confidence that he should trust him, which he obviously did. They had a great rapport before the weekly lunches that you mentioned. There was always a call out to friends and family and staff for the best joke of the week because the vice-president liked to break the ice every lunch with a good joke. And I think the president usually had one. There was a little competition for who had the best joke. It was the early days of the ranking committee, I think, on how the joke deal went.

I think the vice-president shared very sensitive and sometimes very tough advice. They talked about policy issues, but I think they also talked about some of the harder issues of running the government and personnel staff. There was some machinations like with every white house, over chiefs of staff or cabinet members who'd gotten themselves on the wrong side of the press. And I think the vice-president was very helpful to the president in providing counsel on working through those issues.

I'd like to talk about some of the roles you had working for my grandfather. You were deputy assistant to the vice president and staff secretary from 1985 to 1987, as well as senior traveling aid for the '88 election cycle where you traveled with my grandfather, visiting more than 30 countries and all 50 States.

Tom: The good news is I had no girlfriend or any other private life.

Sam: Well, connecting with people was always a strength of Gampy. What did you learn about 41 during this time together on the road?

Tom: People have characterized it as the master of the small gesture, right? But he did have this amazing way of connecting with people, not just the big shots and the CEOs, but the regular folks who he'd meet along the way. He never rushed by them. He had this thoughtfulness about the way that he presented himself. He had this thing about motorcades. One, he liked them to be short. Didn't like a lot of straphangers along. But secondly, he was really sensitive about inconveniencing others. And one thing you could always do if you were running behind schedule and he was lagging behind chatting with people, if you said, Sir, the secret service has already blocked the roads, he would sprint to the car. But he never wanted to lose that touch with people and their everyday lives.

And he enjoyed campaigning. I mean, he threw his whole self into it. The schedule was exhausting. I mean, we crisscrossed the country day in and day out and he'd still wanna be in the white house for that Thursday lunch with the president. He tried to be home every Sunday, not just for church, but I think to switch out the laundry, and that was good for the rest of us too. But he never got tired of it. He never complained. There was no whining allowed. And that started at the top. Just everywhere he went he was continuing to expand that friends' list.

Sometimes people make light of this saying, well, you know, everyone in the world was his friend. Well, it's true. I mean, it's unbelievable. You know, one of my jobs was to help manage the inbox. You know, the flow of correspondence and notes from people. This was long before email. He was tireless on answering every single letter. And not just from, you know, people, he had to answer. He wanted to make sure we were helping him answer everybody who took the time to reach out to him. And that personal touch, when you're in a job like that, is pretty hard to maintain. I would put his record up against anyone for doing so.

Sam: Tom, you were nominated by the president, my grandfather, and confirmed by the Senate to serve as the Chief of Staff and Assistant Secretary

of Commerce after the '88 election. What were some of the biggest challenges you faced during those four years?

Tom: Well, it was daunting. You know, I was a pretty young guy. I was just barely 30-years-old when I was confirmed. And the first job I had, this was for Bob Mosbacher, who was the secretary of commerce and a great friend of President Bush's. My first job there was actually as the assistant secretary for management and budget. I had to go up to the Hill and testify before the Senate and the House budget committees on the commerce department's budget, \$3 billion and thousands and thousands of employees. And you know, Commerce is this alphabet soup of various agencies doing everything from weather satellites to fish counts to technology stuff. So it was a quick education.

And a lot of the things that I learned from president Bush, having the honor of being near him for several years, I'd like to think I brought to that job because I was pretty young. I had a huge staff. You know, your grandfather always showed great respect for the career civil servants who are in our government. He certainly learned that starting in Congress. But I think particularly when he was in his diplomatic post and at the CIA. I tried to emulate that and just listen and soak up the information and be respectful.

You know, a lot of young political appointees do sometimes make the mistake of going in and thinking they've got it all figured out and the bureaucracy is their enemy, and that usually doesn't work out so well for them. But after a couple of years of that, I moved down the hall and became Bob's Chief of Staff. That was exciting for me because it was a return also because I'd been in the front office with Baldrige 10 years before. So I certainly knew my way around the building and had a lot of fun traveling and helping Secretary Mosbacher with his initiatives.

I'll tell you one thing. He was as loyal to your grandfather as anybody in the cabinet. And Dick Darman, who was the head of the budget office, put out this edict that every cabinet department was gonna cut their budget by, I think, at the time it was 4%. And, of course, nobody in Washington ever wants to cut their budget for anything. Right? The secretary came back from the cabinet meeting and said, "We're gonna be the first to do this. And call the staff together. We're gonna do this." So we bring in all the big shots, you know, all the political appointees, the undersecretaries, and the assistant secretaries running all these things. And they're all nodding. "Oh yes, we'll go back and we'll cut the budget." And he calls them all back a week later and nobody has done a thing. Calls them back another week later and no one has done a thing. And he said, "Okay, I got an idea. I'm just gonna do it myself then. You can either let Tom and his team have your input on this or they're gonna do it

themselves." So then the cuts came in and he was very proud of being the first one to deliver to the president his budget cuts. So.

Sam: Tom, how did your experience working for my grandfather during his VP and presidential years prepare you for your career after the White House at Altria and the Chamber of Commerce?

Tom: I think, you know, if you're looking around while you're in these special places, you can't help but gain some perspective on life and what's important and what's not important. And I think that when you have perspective like that and you move on in your career, it's a big help. Also, just remembering you're just one cog in the machinery and to not get too big for your britches.

I feel like everything I might've accomplished in my career after being in the government and serving your grandfather I owe to the fundamental way of living that I learned under his wing if you will, and your grandmother's, by the way. They're pretty basic rules of life, but they serve you well if you listen to them.

I don't know if this fits into your program, Sam, but a few years ago, your grandfather was asked to provide advice to young people. Do you remember that?

Sam: He's given a lot of advice over the years. I think so. Yes.

Tom: He's given advice, but he wrote it down, which was interesting. And they were just 10 quick points. If I may, I'll just share them.

Sam: Please.

Tom: He said the advice that I would give to young people might be like this. One, don't get down when your life takes a bad turn. Out of adversity comes challenge, and often success. Two, don't blame others for your setbacks. Three, when things go well, always give credit to others. Four, don't talk all the time. Listen to your friends and mentors and learn from them. Five, don't brag about yourself. Let others point out your virtues and your strong points. Six, give someone a hand. When a friend is hurting, show that friend you care. Seven, nobody likes an overbearing big shot. Eight, as you succeed, be kind to people. Thank those who help you along the way. Nine, don't be afraid to shed a tear when your heart is broken, because a friend is hurting. And 10, say your prayers. Pretty good rules to live by.

I think all of us who were honored to serve your grandfather when he was in high public office learned a lot of those rules from him because that's truly the

way he lived his life. I mean, it was not some PR deal. He was the genuine thing. I'll tell you as a staff person, the worst thing that you could do working for George H. W. Bush was feeling like you'd let him down there. No histrionics, no nothing. You know, if you'd come up short on something, you knew it and you just felt awful and you doubled down to not let that happen again. That's real leadership when the people working for you feel that way. That just doesn't happen. That happens because of how you're leading.

And your grandmother was his fiercest protector. You know, a lot of people have talked about how intimidating she was, and that she was, but her agenda was pretty darn simple. What's best for your Gampy? And are you delivering on that or are you sliding a little? And if she felt you were sliding a little, she didn't hesitate to give you a little push.

I remember one time, one of my jobs was to make sure the next day's briefing book was delivered to the residence in a timely manner so that he could read up on who he was gonna see the next day and study his speech cards and all of that. And inevitably, somebody on the staff, it was all game down on my shoulder, but somebody would be late with something and whatever. And sometimes that darn book wouldn't get out there until 9 or 10 at night.

And I remember getting on the plane one morning and Mrs. Bush came down the aisle and everybody's like, you know. She stops. Said, "Tommy. How are you doing today?" I said, "Very fine ma'am, how are you?" You know, that was a little late last night the book came in. You know, George stayed up late reading it all. And I think we could probably do better for him than that. Don't you?" "Yes, ma'am." Yeah.

Sam: Loud and clear.

Tom: Loud and clear. Loud and clear.

Sam: Well, Tom, even after the white house, it seems you continue to contribute to the Bush legacy in many ways, but one, by serving on the board of advisors for the George and Barbara Bush foundation. Why was it so important for you to stay involved?

Tom: You know, all of us who worked for President and Mrs. Bush certainly got passed along this idea of service, right? I think a lot of us found a lot of reward in trying to help the legacy organizations that popped up over time, whether it be the two literacy groups or the Bush School down at Texas A&M, the foundation itself points of light. All of these organizations do such great work, but it's fun to be able to give back. It's fun to see a bunch of people that

you've known all of your life because of this common bond we have of having known your grandparents and worked for them. It's great to see their legacy live on.

You know, at the Bush Foundation, in particular, as you know, you're very involved in the governance there, but it's an exciting time. The page has turned a bit. They're in heaven, and we still love them. But we now have a new younger CEO who didn't know them, didn't work for them, Max AngerHolzer, and he's bringing fresh energy and new ideas, and, kind of, reenergizing the work. It's fun to be a part of that. It's fun to see all the possibilities ahead of how we can continue to promote the lessons learned and the legacies that both President and Mrs. Bush have left us.

Sam: Yeah. And it's come full circle for you because you're now back full-time working for the George and Barbara Bush Foundation team. Tell us about that.

Tom: I really ought to figure out how to get a job, huh? I mean. No, it's great. I mean, in the time of COVID, doing what we can to present programming, we're all learning how to do the virtual thing, but also planning for that happy day when we can begin gathering again. And we're making sure we're doing a lot of the little things that will continue to give the next generation of kids a chance to learn about George and Barbara Bush. You know, I'm always, sort of, shocked, I guess it's a sign of age, when I talk to younger people and I realize, of course, that they weren't even born when President and Mrs. Bush were serving and in office.

So there's a lot to remind people about. We do it through little things like working with the mint on coins and the post office on stamps but on big things. As an example, upcoming, we've got a great program on the 30th anniversary of the Gulf War. Secretary James A. Baker is still with us. A wonderful gentleman. Of course, amazing and experienced. He's gonna be able to share with our listeners and viewers the experiences of that momentous time. It's really important that we continue to do things like that.

The other thing I'd say that's very exciting is the Bush School at Texas A&M, which I think is like the living legacy of George's service as it trains young students to go, actually, live a life of public service. They're opening a teaching site, and have opened the teaching site here in Washington. And they're just getting started. They have a small matriculation this spring, but they're really gonna be going full bore in the fall. They've got a retired three-star general from the Air Force running it, Jay Silveria. He's bringing great energy there. And so we're gonna have Bush School students in Washington full-time, which I think is gonna be great.

Sam: Well, Tom, I'll interject. The Bush School is, certainly, his living legacy, maybe besides his family, but the Bush School really is his legacy. And that's what he wanted his legacy to be.

Tom: Well, wait, you mentioned the family though. You know, Sam, every one of you guys, you know, definitely drank the Kool-Aid. It's fabulous to see you and all your cousins who are now continuing this legacy by just saddling up with one organization or another and giving back. I mean, it's terrific.

Sam: You know, it's our family business. And everyone thinks, Hey, it's politics. No, our family business is service. We just have a couple of high-profile people who use that platform. But like you said, you know, between my cousins and family, hopefully, we can make a difference. And that's, kind of, the goal.

Well, Tom, first off, thank you so much for coming on "All the Best," sharing your amazing experiences with my grandparents. I'd like to end with this. Not only did you work for my grandparents in many roles, but you became friends with them and our family over that time. Do you have a George or a Barbara Bush story you could share with us before you go?

Tom: Oh gosh, it's hard to choose. They did live this life centered around faith, family, and friends, as you know. And so it was a real privilege to be around that. Your grandfather, when I was working for him in the White House and was his traveling aid, running around in the run-up to the election, he'd sometimes need a foil. You know, he was a little bit of a softy when it came to disciplining people who weren't doing it his way. Right? Which was a sweet thing about him. But he also was pretty firm in what he wanted and what he expected and what he believed in.

I do remember one time we were on the plane and the speech had arrived from campaign headquarters, and it was filled with all this red meat. You know, he was gonna criticize Dukakis heavily and pivot to criticizing some of the Reagan policies as well. It was the same old stuff that he really didn't wanna do. And we had a speech ready to go.

And he said, "Who's on the plane from the campaign?" I said, "Oh, Lee's here, sir." "Bring him up and, you know, just get ready, Tom. You know, I think, you know what I'm gonna do?"

So I bring Lee up. Said, "Well, look Lee, I've got this speech here. I don't know. I mean, I'm not sure Collamore is gonna make it another week," you know. And he, kind of, threw the cards at me and he said, "You dare to give me this stuff again and we're just gonna have to do something different. And you know I'm

not gonna say this. I've told you this before. Now, fix it." And I go off with my tail between my legs. You know, they keep talking big political talk.

Lee comes back and he's, "Man, you know, where did that speech come from?" I said, "Well, from your staff, Lee. And, you know, I don't think we really can do this much more." He's, "Yeah, I know. As soon as we land I'm gonna call them and tell them to knock that crap out. We can't do that anymore."

We're about to land and the vice president calls me back up and says, "Do you think he got the hint?" I said, "Sir, I think the message is delivered. You know, all good. I don't think we're gonna be seeing that again." He didn't wanna hurt anyone's feelings, but he didn't wanna see that kind of a speech again either.

Sam: That's great.

Well, Tom, thank you so much for being on with us today again, and hopefully, I can see you very soon in DC.

Tom: The same with you, Sam. It's a real honor there be on here. This podcast is absolutely fantastic. So congratulations for what you're doing to get the word out about this great legacy of service of your grandparents.

Sam: Well, thank you, Tom. And it's only getting better with guests like you. So thanks for being on "All the Best" and see you soon.

Tom: Thank you, sir.

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.