



All the Best Podcast
Episode 71: “Front Row Seat”
*Featuring White House Photographer for President George W. Bush,
Eric Draper*

Eric: June 23rd, 2002. "Fifty-eight years ago, September 2nd, 1944 to be exact, I took off from CVL-30, the USS San Jacinto, to attack Titijima, an island south of Tokyo slightly north of Iwo Jima. Quite a lot has been written about my mission that day. The fact that my plane was shot down as I dove to attack a radio station on Titijima, that I parachuted and lived while my two crew members did not, that I was rescued by Finback, a U.S. submarine, pulled from my little yellow life raft well within sight of land. For some reason, I have always wanted to go back to Titijima, and now I have done just that. We flew from Portland to Anchorage to Tokyo to Iwo Jima. From Iwo, we went by Japanese Navy helicopter to Chichi. Along the way on Iwo, I stood atop famed Mount Suribachi with participation by Japanese naval officers, Ambassador Baker and I raised an American flag right next to the very spot where American Marines did the same thing. The photo of that event is considered one of the greatest war photos ever taken. It depicts our victory in the deadliest of battles. I was able to contain my emotions pretty well on this trip, but when that flag went up, I must confess that I choked back a tear. I was surprised that the Japanese commanders let us raise an American flag there, but they did and I was very grateful." 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."

Eric Draper served as the chief White House photographer for the entirety of my Uncle George W. Bush's administration. Draper was named special assistant to the president and is the first White House photographer to be named the commission officer to a U.S. president. During his tenure, Eric directed the photographic and archival conversion of the White House photo office from film to digital and took nearly one million photos documenting the presidency. Eric is also the author of the book "Front Row Seat: A Photographic Portrait of the Presidency of George W. Bush." Prior to joining the White House, Eric was West Regional Enterprise Photographer for the Associated Press. In eight years with the AP, he covered an array of domestic and international news and sports. Currently, Eric is a freelance corporate and editorial photographer based in Rio Rancho, New Mexico. Eric, thank you for joining us today on "All the Best."

Eric: Thanks for inviting me.

Sam: Well, Eric, I want to start off talking about the letter you just read because I think there's a story behind that. You knew the photographer that took that famous photo on Iwo Jima, didn't you?

Eric: Well, yeah, that photo was taken by Associated Press photographer, Joe Rosenthal, who was an icon obviously after that photo. He passed away in 2002 but before that happened, I was able to have lunch with him and sit down and talk with him. It was an amazing experience and such an amazing moment to capture and talk to him about it. I also work for the Associated Press as well so we had a lot to share.

Sam: Did he plan on getting that picture? Was it an accident, a happy accident as they say?

Eric: Not quite an accident. I mean, he was in the right place at the right time, and that's everything, you know, just being there ready to go. And he didn't miss it.

Sam: Wow, that's amazing. Well, Eric, you were the White House photographer for George W. for all eight years. I want to know how you got there. Can you tell us about the path you took to becoming the White House photographer and eventually the head of the White House photo office?

Eric: That's the most frequently asked question I get is, you know, how do you get a job like that, right? And every White House photographer has their own story. And in my case, like I said, I was an Associated Press photographer. During that job, which was great, I covered everything from civil unrest in other countries, international sporting events, Olympics. I covered politics as well.

And so in 2000, I was assigned to cover the Bush campaign, Gov. Bush in Texas running for president. So I was one of the many journalists on the campaign trail. At the end of it all, you might remember the election was not decided that night in Austin, Texas in 2000...

Sam: Oh, I remember.

Eric: I blame everything on the recount because, if it didn't happen that way, I wouldn't have even thought about it. I would have moved on. But during that time period where no one knew which way it was going to go, I was just curious. You know, every photojournalist out there is curious about things. And so I was asking, calling around all my colleagues, and no one knew who was picked. No one knew who was even in the running. And the more I thought about it, the more I thought, "You know what? I have a shot at this job I think."

By a stroke of luck, I found out I was invited to a Christmas party in Austin, Texas at the governor's mansion. It was perfect timing. Candidate Bush had just become President-Elect Bush, so I thought, "You know what? I'm going to go for it." So what I decided to do was take a page out of his political playbook and he would always say during the campaign, "I'm going to look you in the eye and ask you for the job. I want to be your president."

So I walked up to him at the end of the party, and I said, "Thank you for inviting my wife and I to the party. By the way, I want to be your personal

photographer," and I didn't blink. And he looked at me like he never thought about it before, and he looked away. And he was shaking my hand at the time, and my wife was in the background watching. It was like the longest handshake in the world.

And a week later, I'm sitting in front of Andy Card, interviewing for the job, and he pretty much offered me the job on the spot. Something I'll never forget during that interview was his first question to me was can I manage because I had an office to run. And of course, I said yes. But secondly, I never forget that he said working at the White House was like trying to drink water through a firehose at full throttle, and he was right.

Sam: Were you planning all along at the party to go up to him? I heard there might have been some urging from your wife. Did she give you a kick in the pants to go and get it over with or was that the plan all along?

Eric: It was the plan actually. I let the staff know what I was going to do, and I came prepared. I had a portfolio that I was delivering. I had a cover letter, so I didn't want to, like, surprise everyone except the president of course. But my wife was there basically coaching me the timing to make my move. Everyone was trying to shake hands with the president and meet him, so I was trying to wait for the right opening to walk up and ask him.

Sam: There have been so many iconic photos that White House photographers have taken that every American recognizes. Eric, can you talk about the importance of a White House photographer and your role in creating a visual archive of the administration? Because that's what you're doing, isn't it?

Eric: Exactly. You know, it's one of those things that becomes very important in history because our memory kind of fails us to be honest. It's something I didn't realize until I took this job the volume of events and the volume of images really amazed me. Not only is it good for visual record-keeping but it's also good for knowing emotionally what happened, the mood, body language, what say everything. That was the fun part for me was using my skills as a photojournalist to capture moments. Usually, ones that I enjoyed the most were the unscripted moments.

You know, the President schedule is like minute by minute it's written down, you know, and I had the president's private schedule and his official schedule, so I knew where he would be at every moment. I felt like a professional stalker.

Sam: When you became White House photographer, it was almost 20 years ago. Had there been innovations in photograph throughout your career as a White House photographer that have changed the way that you did your job?

Eric: When I worked for the Associated Press, they were on the cutting edge of digital photography. And so when I came into the White House, it was like going back in time. And I knew it was the future, and I knew what happened. And it happened during my time there, and so I directed the transition of the White House from film to digital, and it was a really tough job just because of the volume it involved. And, you know, it was, like, fixing an airplane in flight kind of thing where everything doesn't stop for you to do it. But luckily for me I had the digital experience prior to help direct that transition.

And it was an evolution that finally completed itself at the end of the first term and luckily when Pres. Bush won the second term, we're able to go 100% digital and everything was evolving from there.

Sam: Well, Eric, at the George and Barbara Bush Foundation, we too are taking on the huge task of converting everything to digital including all of my grandfather's letters, which I think you know are a lot.

Eric: Definitely a logistical nightmare to finally get it up and running, but someone had to do it, so I did it.

Sam: Eric, I'd like to talk about a specific moment that you captured, a big one that everyone knows about, 9/11. You were still new to your role when 9/11 happened. Can you talk about capturing the president during this time in history and how you felt during this time?

Eric: I was with the President that morning in the classroom in Florida. I'll never forget seeing the President's face change after Andy Card whispered in his ear and I knew something was wrong. I mean, we all knew the first tower had been hit and we were shocked by that, but we thought it was an accident. You know, just a horrible disaster until I walked into the hold room. You know, the President was reading to the children, he left the classroom, and he walked into the hold room. And there was a television standing there with a live picture of the burning tower.

So now he's just frozen, shocked at the picture, and I was waiting for the President to turn and look to kind of connect with him with what was going on in New York. But he never did stop. He walked over to the table, he picked up a

notepad, he started collecting his thoughts for a statement to the nation and to the world. And it really wasn't until minutes later. There's an image I made of Dan Bartlett pointing to that TV, and the President's on the phone sitting at a little desk, you know, made for 5th graders. We saw the video of the second tower getting hit, the fireball, that memory that's frozen in everyone's brain, and the President himself turned to see that for the very first time. So that was a moment.

Sam: Followed by months and months of, kind of, rebuilding or years or rebuilding and obviously his historic trip to Ground Zero.

Eric: I have photos from that. To kind of continue during that day being on Air Force One, it was a surreal experience because one of the things that we learned was the fact that Air Force One, we were out such a high altitude during that day just to be out of harm's way, and that didn't help with communications to the ground. To be that high really frustrated the President a lot. We were watching television to get what was going on, you know, with Washington, and New York, and the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania. We'll have to fly over a major city in order to see TV to get reports. So that made it even more surreal, and that made it more feel like a nightmare.

That day, like you said, September 14th, the day of national prayer started out at the National Cathedral. The President spoke at the service, and after he delivered his remarks, he returned to his chair. And there's a moment I made of the President and his father, and his father, Pres. 41, reached out to touch his hand after he came back to his seat. And it was a really tender moment. And I can see his mom looking at it as well.

Sam: That was a touching moment. It really was.

Eric: And later that day, we traveled to Ground Zero, and I'll never forget I was aboard Marine One with the President, and we can smell the smoke fill the cabin. And on the ground at Ground Zero, you can still feel the heat from the destruction. I'd covered many disasters, but I haven't seen anything like this where this three, four stories of rubble still smoldering but more importantly the emotion from the firefighters. They're tired. They're frustrated because no survivors were being found. And they were angry. You can feel this build-up, and they wanted the President to do something, and the President really delivered at that moment when... A total organic moment when someone handed the President a bullhorn and he spoke to the firefighters. And one of the firefighters screamed, "I can't hear you," in the background and the President

said the famous line, "I can hear you, the world hears you, and the people who knocked these buildings down will hear from all of us soon." And all of the firefighters erupted in cheer and started chanting "USA, USA." A lot of times I didn't know when things were historic, but that moment, the hair in my neck stood up because I knew that was a historic moment.

Sam: Yeah, even now the hair is standing up on my neck. That's a lasting image of him standing with a bullhorn next to a New York City firefighter. It'll forever be seared in hopefully everyone's minds and show really how resilient America really was but, wow, I'm so glad you were there to capture those moments.

Speaking of moments, you captured a lot of them. Eric, I heard you took over a million photos during your time as White House photographer. What better opportunity to turn that into a book, which you did, in 2013 when you published "Front Row Seat," which presents the behind-the-scenes view of the presidency of Uncle George. How did you choose which pictures made the book?

Eric: I took a million photos alone. My staff and everyone involved, we had over 4 million photos in the archive. It was daunting at first to think about doing a book and how many pictures to put in the book. But what really helped was after eight years of covering this amazing story, there are themes that really rose to the top. So, for example, the first chapter is called The Beginning, so a lot of photos of the early stages of the administration. And then the next chapter is called Life in the Bubble. All those moments that you don't see, all the behind-the-scenes moments, funny moments. There's a chapter called the Western White House. Photos from Crawford, Texas. 9/11 has its own chapter. There's a chapter called War President. You know, Afghanistan and Iraq, all of those images are there. There's a chapter called Family. Again, another great theme throughout the eight years. There's one section called To the World, all the travel in Air Force One. I traveled to 70 countries with Pres. Bush. It was an amazing experience to travel the world that way. The last chapter was called Sprint to the Finish, and that was a line that the President would say... People would ask him, "Well, what are you going to do?" and he would always say, "I'm going to sprint to the finish."

Sam: Please pick up the book "Front Row Seat" which you certainly had and 70 countries. I mean, what a way to travel. What an amazing experience you must have had. Eric, while you spent eight years documenting George W.'s presidency, you also spent plenty of time capturing the post-presidency of my

grandfather and grandmother. Can you talk about your experiences spending time with them and photographing the 41st President?

Eric: They always made me feel like family. I spent every Christmas, for example, during my job at the White House with the family. And I remember you being there as well.

Sam: Yeah, Camp David.

Eric: And I remember post-presidency, I covered Mrs. 41's 90th birthday celebration, and that was a blast. I have a picture of Mrs. Barbara Bush blowing the candles out. Everybody you can think of was there—every family member, every friend—and that was such a great celebration. Any time they were together, to me, it was almost like a live sitcom because they were so funny. They're so fun to watch and so fun to be around and they were so natural and just relaxed around their friends and family but you can also see their love together. I made a picture of them in front of the home at Walker's Point that I really remember I really liked. Also, a very touching close-up detail shot of them holding hands inside during an event. I really did enjoy them and miss them very much.

Sam: Eric, one of my favorite pictures you've taken was from January 20th, 2001, which I think was your first day on the job. The iconic picture captures George W. sitting behind the resolute desk for the first time sharing a laugh with a very proud father. Did you realize right out of the gate you would be capturing such historic moments?

Eric: Oh, yeah. I mean, this particular moment really just hit me over the head of just how amazing my job would be. When I first met them doing my job, it was a unique experience. And to me, it was always a magical moment, the two presidents together. Only the second son of a president to become president, so it was already historic. And they look so alike. You know, one of the first things you learn when you say Mr. President, when they're around, they both turn around, you know what I mean?

What I love about this photo is, you know, the several layers to it because you have the proud father with his son sitting at the Resolute desk. There's always the story behind the story. So you see that cord coming from the wall to the chair?

Sam: Yeah.

Eric: That particular chair was a massage chair that was there, and the President was turning it on at that moment, which is leading to the laughter with his father.

Sam: Eric, before I ask the last question, I'd like to say, first of all, thank you. Thank you for sharing the stories behind the pictures. It's always so powerful to hear what the person taking the picture was thinking at the time. This is probably going to be a tough question, kind of like picking your favorite child, but do you have a favorite moment or two you've captured throughout your career?

Eric: My career as an Associated Press photographer was amazing, and traveling to countries, Haiti, and I covered entertainment in Los Angeles. I was based in LA. I covered every Oscar event. I made a picture of Roberto Benigni standing on a chair celebrating his Oscar, and of course sporting events, which I enjoyed the most. I covered the Summer Olympics in Atlanta and in Australia. The Winter Olympics in Norway and Nagano, Japan. And I made a photo of Tara Lipinski, the youngest gold medalist in figure skating.

But I really think what I enjoyed the most during my entire career was spending time on the ranch with Pres. Bush in Crawford, Texas. I made a picture which kind of rose to the top to me. He's wearing his cowboy hat driving his Ford F250. Barney's on his lap. You can't see it, but Barney's on his lap and he's giving a tour. You would love to drive... You know, he had 1,600 acres to roam, and he's very proud of his ranch. And so this picture, you just kind of see a little twinkle in his eye.

And another reason why I feel like this photo stands out is the fact that this was taken in August of 2001, a month before 9/11. So every time I see this picture, I see a sense of innocence before the world changed.

Sam: Wow. Well, Eric, it's great to see you. Great to be with you. Thank you for showing us all these amazing pictures and talking us through what you were thinking during this time. It's really amazing. Hope to see you soon and thanks so much for coming on "All the Best."

Eric: Okay, thank you, Sam. It was fun going back in time and enjoying these memories.

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.