



All the Best Podcast

76. Live, Love, Serve

Featuring Granddaughter of George H. W. Bush, Barbara Bush

Barbara: March 9th, 2003. Subject: Nervous grandfather. Jenna, Barbara, and Lauren, it is Sunday morning. I am at my duty station in the office. I am worrying about three of my older granddaughters. Spring break causes the worry. I wonder, are all three off somewhere trying to get on the Wild College Women TV show? Are they having a good time? Are they sticking near their three campuses, so they can do what, well, what I used to do during spring break, circa 1946, '47, '48, namely stick near the library? I found it was almost free of noise and people during spring break. Maybe you three have discovered the same thing.

I am here all week in Houston, in case you need adult leadership. In spite of these worries, maybe because of these worries, I love all three of you guys. Who says the Gamster can't be with it? Devotedly, Gampy.

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.

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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 told 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 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."

My cousin, Barbara Bush, is the co-founder and board chair of Global Health Corps, an organization that mobilizes young leaders to solve the world's most pressing health issues. Barbara is also a fellow with Eric Schmidt's Schmidt Futures, a venture facility and foundation for public benefit, focused on technology and society, shared prosperity, and scientific benefit. And she also has worked with the Red Cross Children's Hospital in South Africa, and UNICEF in Botswana. In 2011, Barbara was named one of "Glamour" magazine's Women of the Year. In 2013, she was recognized as one of Newsweek's Women of Impact, and in 2015, she was named to Fast Company's "Most Creative People In Business" list. In October of 2017, Barbara released the number one New York Times bestseller "Sisters First," a memoir she co-authored with her sister, Jenna. Barbara, thank you so much for joining us on "All the Best." It's great to see you. How's it going?

Barbara: Hi, Sam. Thanks for having me. I'm doing great. How are you?

Sam: I'm doing very well. It's great to see you. I heard you've been nomadic recently in your travels. Barbara, I'd like to start off by asking how this pandemic has been for you and your husband, Craig. I heard you have had some unlikely quarantine buddies for the past couple months. What's that been like?

Barbara: Well, we did what a lot of younger people did during quarantine. We moved back in with my parents, my husband and I did. We have been with them in Texas. We were going to move to London, and we got rid of our apartment and we put everything in storage, and we were waiting out the lockdown in London, which lifted this week. So we've been waiting out since June of last year, and in the meantime, moved in with Mom and Dad, and we've got a real schedule. We have lunch with them every day, we have dinner with them every night, we watch a murder mystery before bed together, and it's been cute. I think

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it's been cute for me. I don't know how my husband feels moving in with his in-laws after only one year of marriage, but so far so good.

Sam: How about your mom and dad? Did they have any excitement when you said that London had lifted their quarantine? Would they kind of like, a little bit of excitement? Or were they sad to see you go?

Barbara: Well, when they offered for us to move in with them, I think that was when we all thought quarantine was going to last, like, a handful of weeks, and it would be this fun novelty. I don't think they realized seven months later we'd still be sleeping down the hall. So, I think they'll miss us.

Sam: Yeah. That's... you know. I haven't heard anything. I'm just, you know, I'm just thinking that maybe...

Barbara: Yeah, you tell me if you heard any gossip on the family text chain.

Sam: You know, the houseguests just won't leave. I don't know. But...

Barbara: Exactly.

Sam: Barbara, as you know, this podcast is all about the legacy of service of Gampy and Ganny. And some might argue you have been one of the leaders when it comes to serving others in our family. Co-founding Global Health Corps, among the many other ways that you serve. Did Gampy and Ganny's example help drive you towards serving others?

Barbara: That's such a sweet question. Probably. You know, Gampy and Ganny and my parents certainly never said, "Oh, this is something that you need to do." But I think, obviously, all of us had such great examples of Gampy and Ganny, and then my parents, who chose a life of service. I'm sure you remember these. Gampy used to write those beautiful letters at the end of the year, I mean, it makes me tear up thinking about them, where he would talk about the pursuit of happiness, and a life of happiness or a fulfilling life. And he always talked about how service was what brought that to him. I don't think it was ever intentional, but just being around Gampy and Ganny, and seeing how much purpose they had, and how much joy they got from serving others, certainly made it seem like the most appealing path for a career I could ever think of.

Sam: Barbara, it seems like you are constantly looking at ways to give back, from your contributions to public health, your new role working on social change issues, your support of the Black Lives Matter movement, Jenna, Wendy and yourself, with your amazing work at the Points of Light Foundation, and then even volunteering as a poll worker, I read. So, what is it that drives you to help other people? I mean, it seems like you're doing it any way you can.

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Barbara: Well, that is sweet. I've never thought about that. Okay, I love two things. I love being around people. Love it. And that's probably what's motivated me in my career, and then I really love solving problems. When I was younger, I never set out to work in global health. That was never my plan. But I was really lucky to have incredible exposure. My dad and mom were in the White House when I was in college, and they made it really clear that we could travel with them if we wanted to, obviously, as long as we were, you know, taking care of school and everything else that was of more importance.

And so, I got to travel around the country with my parents, I got to travel around the world. And I thought I had my life figured out. I thought I was going to be an architect. And what ended up happening is that when I was 21, I had a summer internship working in design, and I took two weeks off of my internship to travel with my parents, and they were traveling for the launch of PEPFAR, which is the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. It's this huge U.S. policy that few people know about. And this was in 2003. And what PEPFAR was going to do, and now does, is provide drugs, free drugs, for people living with AIDS.

And so, on this trip, I was traveling with them and we ended up going to Central and East Africa, and we landed, and there were hundreds of people waiting in the street for drugs that you could get in the United States, that any one of us could have walked to our pharmacy and gotten in the United States. And yet, if you were living on a different continent, you couldn't get those drugs making AIDS in the United States a chronic illness and making it a death sentence in another location. And I was very idealistic. I was 21 and I couldn't believe that that's the world that we live in, and how unjust that is, and how where you're born can dictate what your life is like. And so, I became obsessed with global health, and obsessed with thinking about these problems being solvable, and how can you be part of the solution?

Now, you know, flash forward, embarrassingly, 15 years later, I still work in global health, and I think what drives me is realizing that so many of the problems that we're used to are solvable, and how exciting and interesting it is to wake up every day and work with other people who want to solve them, and figure out ways that we can serve people better, and that the status quo that we believe is normal doesn't actually need to be normal. And so, let's try to build things better than they currently are.

Sam: Well, you said that your school was more important than these trips, but thank God you went on that trip, because it sounds like it shaped your life in many ways that maybe school couldn't have.

Barbara: Yeah. Absolutely. Exposure really matters, for sure.

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Sam: Barbara, I want to talk about Ganny, one of our favorite topics. You have the distinction of being named after our incredible grandmother, Barbara Bush. While I'm sure you view it as an honor, it must have had its difficulties growing up, and probably still does today. Do you have any funny memories or difficulties that arose from having such a recognizable name?

Barbara: Yes. So, I'm totally honored to be named Barbara Bush. It created for a very awkward childhood. When I was born, Gampy was Vice President. I mean, first of all, I asked my mom this recently. I was like, "Didn't you think that that name would draw a lot of attention?" And she was like, "Well, we didn't know Gampy was going to be president." Meanwhile, I was like, "Well he was vice president when I was born, and usually there's one next role that that person might pursue, so we sort of knew." So, in the '80s and early '90s, being named Barbara Bush, I would call and order pizza, and I would be hung up on every single time, because they thought that I was a little girl that was calling to prank call. I mean, this happens to me still. Now that Ganny's passed, people don't confuse me for her as often, but...

Sam: Well, in person, they don't confuse you, I hope.

Barbara: About five years ago, I show up at this conference to give a talk about Global Health Corps, and I get there, and I'm milling about, thinking, "Oh certainly, a conference organizer is gonna come get me." And I'm, like, awkwardly waiting and waiting and waiting, and finally, a woman comes up and she says, "Oh, you must be her intern." And I thought no, you know, I don't have an intern here. And they thought Ganny was going to give the talk. And meanwhile, they got me.

Sam: Oh, wow. Surprise.

Barbara: But, I think... Those were all hilarious. I think one challenge that it's brought, that Ganny had a hilarious sense of humor about, is that it could make it very confusing for family members, since there were two of us. And so, my sister and I wrote this book called "Sisters First," and we were nervous to let Ganny read it before it came out, just because we didn't know what Ganny's criticism would be. But she emailed me and she said, "I can't believe you didn't include the waxing story. People like humor." Meanwhile, I did include the waxing story. She hadn't gotten to that part. But the waxing story is that, we have a cousin, her name is Wendy. She once wrote me an email, and the subject line was "Waxing, laser hair removal, or electrolysis." And then, in the email, she says, "Yo what up. I'm thinking about..." she's talking about her bikini line. She's like, "I'm thinking about getting laser hair removal or electrolysis. What do you think? I'd love your thoughts. Love, Wendy." And she sends it to me, but what she didn't realize is that the email address auto-filled Ganny's email address.

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Sam: Oh, no.

Barbara: So she sent it to Ganny, and Ganny didn't miss a beat. Ganny read the email, she replied right away, she said, "Hi, Wendy, I can't wait to see you in Maine this summer. I have never done any of those. I recommend avoiding them, and I also recommend staying away from harsh products like Nair. Love, Aunt Bar." She fired that off. And then she was hilarious about it. She wanted to make sure that I included that.

Sam: That's so funny. Barbara, before we started recording, of course we talked about Maine, and I want to ask you about Maine again right now. Can you talk about our emphasis on family, and how Walker's Point in Kennebunkport, Maine served, as Gampy called it, our "anchor to windward?"

Barbara: Absolutely. First of all, I mean, I consider Maine my happy place, and I think the reason for that is because it always centered around family. All my memories from childhood are basically being in Maine, and I remember when we were little, our parents would just send us up there to stay with Ganny and Gampy, which now, thinking back, is hilarious, because obviously, it's not like they had small jobs at the time, and meanwhile they would have multiple grandkids just bunking up with them. But I think what was so fun about Maine was just how we were all together all the time, how we would have huge family meals and laugh hilariously together, and everything revolved around Gampy and Ganny. How we would spend, and we still do, all day, playing outside, and jumping in the freezing ocean together, and playing tennis, and now we play pickleball, and just laughing and being together and spending time in that way.

I remember one summer, it rained a lot, and we watched the movie Grease, like, 17 times. I'm sure you have it memorized...

Sam: Oh, yeah.

Barbara: ...I have it memorized by heart. People often say, "Oh, it must have been hard to share your grandparents." And I never felt like we shared them. They were so present in our life. We were with them all the time, in the summers or at holidays. You know, I know they were doing other work, but whenever we were with them, I'm sure each of us feel like we were each Ganny and, or, Gampy's favorite. I don't know if I ever fully felt like I was Ganny's favorite.

Sam: I definitely didn't.

Barbara: But I know each of us always felt like we were Gampy's favorite, just because he made you feel so special, because he was so present. And that is what being in Maine felt like, and why it's still so comforting to go there and

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relive all these hilarious memories. We might be bigger, but it's still just as fun to play outside with all of our cousins and everyone.

Sam: I can't wait to play outside this summer. But, you know, it's funny to look back at it. They were two pretty high-profile camp counselors, basically.

Barbara: Totally.

Sam: When, you know, I don't know how my parents and your parents got away with just dumping us on them like they didn't have anything better to do, but it's just like them to welcome us with open arms, and to your point, it never felt like they were too busy for us.

Barbara: Yeah.

Sam: And they're, like, two of the busiest people in the world, so it was an amazing gift that they had to really make everyone feel special.

Barbara: Absolutely.

Sam: Well, Barbara, you mentioned "Sisters First," and I want to talk more about it, but a little bit about your sister, too, because you and Jenna have collaborated over the years, writing together, most recently "Sisters First." Can you talk about the book, how you came up with the idea, and did all the wild stories make the cut?

Barbara: Well, so, Jenna and I wrote a book a few years ago called "Sisters First," and the tagline underneath it is, "Stories From Our Wild and Wonderful Life," the wild reference you're mentioning.

Sam: That's what I'm referencing.

Barbara: Actually, the wild reference initially was inspired by this beautiful Mary Oliver poem that we loved, that our other grandmother, Jenna, used to read to us, that ends, "Tell me how is it you plan to spend your one wild and precious life?" And we loved that. And so, we wanted to include that in our title, and we told our publisher that, and they said, "Well, you know, people are gonna think that you mean 'wild.'"

Sam: Well, I thought initially it was referring to Jenna.

Barbara: We know. We're trying to reclaim the word "wild," the wild Bush Twins. Both of us loved writing. I don't think either of us thought we would ever write a book together, and what ended up happening is, let's see, now, four years ago, we were together on election night, the election when Donald Trump won. I had gone over to her apartment in New York, we lived four blocks away from each other, to watch the results come in. We were watching and watching, it got

later and later, and her husband, Henry, was in China on a work trip. And so, I ended up spending the night with her that night.

The next morning, her daughter, Mila, you know, who was, like, four at the time, came running in, and was very confused why Auntie Barbara was lying where her dad usually does. We were going to have a meeting about a children's book that day, and we reflected on the fact that this was an election that was a big one for our country. Less personal for us, but we've spent so many election nights together, all of which have been important, some of which have been incredibly personal, because they've been Gampy's election night or my dad's election nights, and how, through all these major life moments, we've had each other. And, you know, we've had the other person lying in bed next to us to fall asleep with and wake up with, and how comforting that is, and how having a sister and a twin has really been the luckiest thing we could have ever asked for. It's made our lives so much bigger, and made us braver, and it's also been really fun to have a partner in what to us feels like a really normal life, but has been quite unusual, given the circumstances of our family members' jobs.

So we always had someone to go through that with, so we ended up writing this book, and it was really fun to write with my sister because we would go on these long walks in New York, on the West Side Highway. And we would talk about stories we would want to include, and then we would each remember details of the stories, so, by the end of the walk, we would have, like, this full picture of these memories that we hadn't revisited in years. We definitely talk about our wild, you know, I'm afraid we're not that wild anymore. It's sort of boring when you're in your late 30s, but we talk about our college days, we talk about...

Sam: Those were kind of well-documented.

Barbara: Those were well-documented. Yeah, there was the classic People magazine cover that said, "Oops, they did it again." Britney Spears was hot at the time. That would be about the second time we were in trouble for drinking, but more what it really is is a love letter to each other, and a love letter to Ganny and Gampy, and to our parents and all these wonderful people that we've just been so lucky to learn from and be with.

Sam: So it sounds like you found it easy to work with Jenna. Now, would you do another book with her, or is one enough?

Barbara: It was easy to work with her. We didn't know how it was gonna be. I mean, we'd never done anything together in that type of capacity. It was a lot of fun. I think we both also really respected each other's feedback, which was good. We have since, we wrote a children's book together, which was a lot easier than writing an adult book. That was also called "Sisters First," and

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actually, we have a new children's book that's gonna come out in the spring, so in a year from now.

Sam: All right.

Barbara: Also a sister theme, but a different deal. And so, it's been really fun, because now we have a new audience. We have Mila and Poppy, who are my two nieces, and my niece on my husband's side, Emma, who are the ages that these books are for. So we have very harsh critics to practice and draft them with.

Sam: So you gotta run it through them first, before it gets approved?

Barbara: We gotta run it through all three. We gotta do a number of different feedback rounds with them based on what they think. Then we gotta do the illustrations through them.

Sam: Jeez. And then, who knows what they're gonna ask as far as compensation?

Barbara: Exactly, rights.

Sam: Lord, have mercy. Barbara, there's not many people that can say their grandfather and dad both became President of the United States, like you and your sister are able to say. I asked Jenna the same question. What was the difference for you when each was in office?

Barbara: Good question. Okay, so I think age has a lot to do with it. When Gampy became president, we were seven, and I did not understand exactly what President of the United States meant. And I actually found my journal from Gampy's inauguration when I was seven. You know, it was a very profound journal, and...

Sam: Couple, like, a sun in the corner with, like, a horse.

Barbara: Yeah, exactly. A snowman that I drew. I thought that everybody's grandfather got an inauguration. I thought inaugurations, we did them in the United States because Americans just love grandfathers. I didn't get that only Gampy got an inauguration because he was President. So, we go to his inauguration, which I do remember how fun it was, and there was a parade, and, you know, there's, like, balloons and all these things that when you're six and seven years old are the greatest. And I go to it and I'm so excited, because I think I'm about to go to all these inaugurations for all my other friends' grandparents. And in my journal, I write about the experience of going to school and talking to my best friend, and asking her when her grandfather's inauguration was, and then being so deflated realizing that there was just one.

So I think, anyway, blah blah blah. The point is that I didn't understand the gravity, of course, of it, and I think a big part, as we were just saying, is because Ganny and Gampy were so present. We always felt so important, even when we were spending time with them even when he was president. All my memories of then, of course, are all of us when we're seven, and you would have been five, running around the White House and playing hide and go seek, and how at Christmas, there were trees everywhere, and it was so magical. And every memory I have from childhood is like, as if we were in this magical home, which, it was magical, where we were just playing all these games and spending time together, and basically having one big family slumber party. And I still have those memories from when we were older, when Dad was president, because all of us would spend Christmas in D.C. together, but I definitely understood the gravity a lot more.

At that time, Jenna and I, you think you're grown up, but you're not really that grown up when you're 18, but you think you are, and just being aware of his role and how serious it is, and also being aware that our parents were public figures and people were going to say things about them that we might completely disagree with, and trying to figure out how do you navigate loving someone so deeply, because they're your parents, almost to where you don't see them as this public figure, and then, how do you navigate when you hear things that you know not to be true about them, or that are different perception of them. And that, you know, is certainly something that's an interesting thing to try to navigate when you're trying to figure out, at any age, but also when you're trying to figure out your own identity.

Sam: Yeah, I feel like when Gampy and Danny were in the White House, we were kind of blissfully unaware of all the criticisms that come with that office, and, to your point, I didn't watch the news for eight years when your dad was president. You can't. It's brutal, and no matter what you do, you're going to be criticized, and that's part of taking on that huge role.

Barbara, I know we've only scratched the surface, as far as your service is concerned, but I know that there's people listening who are looking for advice. What advice would you give to those listening that are looking to make a difference in our world?

Barbara: Well, good question. No one necessarily needs to take my advice.

Sam: Unsolicited advice. We'll preface it.

Barbara: Everyone loves unsolicited advice. You know, I mean, this really goes back to Gampy's end of your letters, and end of summer letters, where he talked about what brought him purpose and joy in his life. And so much of it was about family, and so much of it was about service. Thinking about this past year, it's

been a brutal year. It's been a shocking year. I think back to exactly a year ago. I definitely didn't realize that we would be in quarantine for the next year, or I didn't realize how much pain people were going to go through and how much suffering was going to happen in the year ahead.

I do feel like right now, there's this huge desire to connect, and there's this huge desire to try to be part of the solution. And I feel so lucky that when I was young, I figured out one of the things I loved was global health, you know, how great to figure that out. But each of us have things completely different that we love, like, that will fire me up and that will sound so boring to somebody else. And so, I think it's important to notice what you get excited about. I think a problem that you're reading about or someone doing something inspiring that you're reading about really moves you think about how can you be part of that? How can you be part of that solution?

You know, I think we often think, oh, we have to go somewhere else to serve. Yeah. Like, right now, people in our own communities need help. I mean, it's been really interesting. Just for fun, some friends and I were delivering meals in New York. It was such a fun experience. Obviously, doing it as safely as we could, but we would come across these amazing characters who we would bring meals to, who we were the only people they were interacting with that day, and, you know, get to chat with them and learn their stories, and they were often elderly New Yorkers who had been here their whole life, and all of a sudden, you're telling jokes with them, and what to me is exciting may not be that interesting to somebody else, and you just figure out what to you is appealing.

And I also think the other thing is just start. Just do something, do it with a friend, do it by yourself, whatever it is, and you see where it takes you.

Sam: You know, I've always loved Gampy's quote on service: "There could be no definition of a successful life that does not include service to others." And then I think he went on to say something along the lines of, "Find something to do. Get off the bench. Don't sit there whining, sucking your thumb. Get in the game." That's so Gampy to have, one, the sports metaphor, but also to really hit home about why service is so important. As you get into service, I think it just takes a little bit to catch the bug, and once you have that experience, I think the ball starts rolling down the Hill.

Well, Barbara, thank you so much for sharing everything with us today. I have one more question. I don't want to get too weepy here at the end...

Barbara: Oh, no.

Sam: ...but we just reached the three-year anniversary of Ganny's passing, which is so sad. I can't believe it's been three years without those guys. What do you miss most about not having Gampy and Ganny here today?

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Barbara: Oh man. "Don't get weepy." I don't know if your listeners know, but we have a genetic gene for weepiness. How to talk about this without sobbing? I may just sob. Sometimes you just have to sob.

Sam: That would be good for views.

Barbara: Exactly. I mean, I miss everything about Ganny and Gampy. I really do. I can't believe that we got to have them in our life 30-plus years, how incredibly lucky, and that we got to really know them, and got to spend so much time with them. And I think one thing that Ganny really taught us at the end of her life was that she was so authentic. Ganny was so...you know, what you saw was what you got, she said what was on her mind, which made our lives hilarious, and sometimes scared us a little bit.

And even when she was passing away, you know, she did it so fearlessly. She chose to seek hospice, she chose to make sure that she was herself, that she wasn't supported by machines keeping her alive. Instead, she could tell everyone how much she loved them and choose when she was going to go, and do it in a way that maintained her own authenticity. And I miss that, and I remember going to Maine the summer after she died. Gampy and I were there by ourselves. I was lucky to go up for a few weeks before the rest of the family arrived, and we were talking about Ganny, and how, first of all, how quiet the house seemed without her.

And he joked, and he was like, "Are you trying to say she talked too much?" But she just was such a presence, and what I missed is that Ganny held us all to a really high standard. And that's because she saw the best in us, and, here come the tears... And I miss that. You know, I miss seeing her and wanting to be the best version of myself, because I know that that's what she would push us to be. So I have to remind myself to do that.

And then, with Gampy, I miss his gentleness. I miss... He taught us how important love is, and how important it is to lead with love. And I know that that can sound cheesy, but it's a choice. And obviously, the opposite of love is fear, and we've had, unfortunately, a lot of fear-based leaders recently, who, you know, make us scared of other people, and, or tried to demonize other people, and Gampy was just the opposite. I think that there's something so beautiful about the strength that Gampy held, but doing it in a gentle way. And I miss that example. And then, of course, I miss being the recipient of that.

Sam: We were pretty lucky, weren't we?

Barbara: Yes. As I'm sobbing away. So lucky.

Sam: Well, I'm lucky to have you with us on "All the Best" today...

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Barbara: Aww, thanks, Sam.

Sam: ...and thank you, Barbara, for sharing your stories. I can't wait to see you in Maine.

Barbara: I can't wait to see you, either.

Sam: We'll coordinate our dates off the air. Great to see you. Love you. Tell Craig hello.

Barbara: Love you, Sam. Thank you.

Sam: See you soon.

Barbara: Thanks for having me.

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 face of the Earth.