



All the Best Podcast

78. Serving Honorably

Featuring U.S. Senator from Ohio Rob Portman

Sen. Portman: "November 4th, 1986. The great question: 'Why do you want to be president?' And I've tried to write it down. Believe me, even though I know it's not easy, I know I've got the leadership ability. I know I've got the experience. I want to see an educated America. I want to see a literate America. I want to see a drug-free America. I want to see America with opportunity and jobs. I want to see the emphasis remain on the family values. I want to use my abilities to bring peace, to continue the discussions with the Soviet Union, to reduce the fear of kids of nuclear weapons, and also to be a beacon for freedom and democracy. Feel strong on the Sandinistas, for example.

But how do you say all these things and get it into a slogan or a formula, a catchall? I don't know, but this is what I feel comfortable with, the philosophy. I want to see us do better in terms of opportunity for Blacks, for Hispanics, but again, with the emphasis on the private side, private opportunity and education, rather than vast government spending programs. So, it's putting all these themes together, getting good people. We're going to have to get into the nitty gritty, like what we'll do about deficits, what we'll do about the competitiveness in international trade, but I've had enough experience to feel comfortable with the issues. Eight years. Six years ago, much less comfortable, much less experienced. But now, knowing the world leaders and seeing first-hand the president's decision-making process, and frankly, learning from him a lot about

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keeping my cool and turning the cheek and being pleasant and not getting bogged down in a lot of meaningless details, all of these are good lessons about how one should go about being president."

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 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."

Rob Portman is a United States Senator from the state of Ohio, a position he has held since he was first elected in 2010. Portman previously served as a U.S. Representative, the 14th United States Trade Representative, and the 35th Director of the Office of Management and Budget. In 1993, Portman won a special election to represent Ohio's Second Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives, and served six terms before President George W. Bush appointed him as U.S. Trade Representative in 2005.

Senator Portman currently serves as the ranking member on the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, as well as on the Senate Finance and Foreign Relations committees. He was born and raised in Cincinnati, where he still lives today, with his wife, Jane. Together, they have three children, Jed, Will, and Sally. We are so lucky to have Senator Rob Portman with us today on "All the Best." Senator, thanks so much for joining us.

Sen. Portman: You bet, Sam.

Sam: Senator, as you know, my grandparents epitomized service and serving others, and we like to highlight that in "All the Best." We are always fascinated

by our guests' path to service. Senator, was there something or someone that inspired you to serve?

Sen. Portman: Well, your grandfather was a mentor of mine, and I worked for him when I was in law school, as a volunteer, and then after law school, I was an advance person, meaning I went around the country, and he sent me to France and sent me to China to do advance work for him, and as a young lawyer, I was supportive of him in the 1980 election. He didn't win, but I loved serving him as vice president, and I got to know him a little bit. And what I saw was what made so many Americans proud of him and supportive of him, which was a guy of great honor and dignity and decency. And as that letter indicated I just read, he was earnest. You know, he was honest, he was speaking from the heart.

He inspired me to look at public service as an opportunity to help people, and I figured, you know, if a guy as decent and honorable as him could survive in the political world, that I might take a try myself. So I worked for him full-time for a while in the White House, when he was president. And I was first two and a half years as associate counsel to the president, and then as Director of the Office of Legislative Affairs, and then went home, to start my own career in the private sector, and shortly after that, ran for office myself. So, he really was my inspiration.

Sam: We represent the George and Barbara Bush Foundation, and many of our guests that we've had on have deep-rooted connections with my grandparents, and from what you've said, it sounds like you fit right in with that group. Can you talk about how you came to know George and Barbara Bush?

Sen. Portman: When I first started working for him, I was in law school, and I'm sure he had no idea who I was. I was the guy who showed up now and again to help out on an event. When we were in Paris together and I was doing the advance for him, one of my jobs was to do the events at the residence, the Ambassador's residence, which is right near the embassy, and one day, he said he was going to go for a jog around the track. And to this day, I have the picture in my office here in Washington of me jogging with him around that track, and that was probably the first time he realized who I was, and probably liked the fact that I could keep up with him on the jogging trail. Even though I was, you know, half a century younger, he was pushing it a little bit for me.

But anyway, he was a person that I just respected and looked up to, as associate counsel to the president, and you're supposed to give the president advice now and again, I normally gave it to my boss, who was Boyden Gray, who had taken a chance and hired me. But as the Director of the Office of Legislative Affairs, I did sit with him through many, many meetings with members of Congress, and sometimes others, and I would sit behind him. And I took notes and had the

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opportunity to hear him in private meetings take a lot of courageous stands, including the very controversial issue of raising taxes.

You remember that many believe that that's the reason he was not reelected, because Democrats were tough on him. And frankly, Republicans were tough on him too, but he did it because in his heart he believed that it was so important to get an agreement on deficit reduction. And Democrats insisted on some tax increases as part of that, in exchange for cutting spending. You know, that was the outlines of an agreement that could be reached. No other agreement would have been possible. And he wasn't looking out for his political interests. He was looking out for the interests of the country, and putting them first.

Most would turn to that example and say this is the naive political approach, that the political approach would have been to stick to your guns and allow the deficit to continue out of control. But he was concerned about the economy, he was concerned about the stock market, and concerned about interest rates. He wanted to be sure that the country was on a solid fiscal footing. So, even today, as I work on these issues, I think about the decisions he made, which were tough, and involved great political risk. And maybe people are right. Pat Buchanan used it as the main argument against him during a primary, that was very tough, in 1992. And then, of course, in the general election, it was used against him. And it was for all the right reasons that he took the positions. But the political reality probably is that it did hurt him politically, even though it was the best thing for the country.

Sam: That was a tough decision, and I know, as a family standing by it, we knew he was doing the right thing, but to your point, it did possibly end his political career, at least at that point. After my grandparents left Washington, it seems that you and Jane, Mrs. Portman, formed a strong personal relationship with my grandparents, spending time with them in Kennebunkport, Maine, at Walker's Point. Could you talk about George and Barbara Bush's friends?

Sen. Portman: Over the years, I became a member of Congress, and was able to get to know George and Barbara Bush in a different way. I got elected to Congress shortly after the '92 reelection. My first big fundraiser, of course, was with George H.W. Bush. Barbara Bush actually agreed to cut a radio ad for me, which to this day I believe probably was as important to my victory as anything, when she said, "I love coming to a favorite Cincinnati restaurant, Skyline Chili, with my friends Jane and Rob Portman."

Barbara Bush was tremendously popular, as you know, but so was, at that point, former President Bush. And I didn't run away from my association with him. In fact, I kind of ran as his guy. I was running in a tough Republican primary in a Republican district, and I'd never run for office before. And I had very low name ID, 6%, half of whom thought I was somebody else with a similar name.

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And President Bush, again, came in for me, and I associated myself with him, proudly. Another candidate associated himself with Ronald Reagan and was not complimentary of President Bush. Another candidate ran sort of as the Ross Perot, and, again, was not complimentary of George H.W. Bush. I was proud to stand with him. And at the end of the day, so we're a slight plurality of the citizens of the 2nd District of Ohio who voted, because we won narrowly in that primary, and then went on to win with over 70% in the general election, and never had less than that in seven elections to the House.

So, he was a much more popular guy, actually, in parts of the country, including southwest Ohio, than the media gave him credit for. I was just proud to get to stand by him then, and after that, we tried to make an annual pilgrimage to see them, which was not difficult, because going to Kennebunkport was just always a great joy, and often had lunches with them and had the opportunity to deepen the relationship. They were so great to my wife, Jane, and so great to my kids, Jed, Will, and Sally. They all got to meet them.

One of my last visits up there was just a couple months before he passed away, and it was with a mutual friend, Joe Hagin, who I had gone to high school with, who was the personal aide to President Bush for many years, and also very close to the Bush family. It was a beautiful final visit. Sully was there, the yellow Labrador, who was his dutiful sidekick in those years. He was just sweet, and I brought my Bush '88 hat, which, of course, I wore in our photographs, and he just lit up. And he was always gracious, as you know, but for me, it was always trying to get him to give me advice. Which he did reluctantly, because he was so modest. And he said, you know, "I just, I don't know all the issues and details anymore," but I would sort of push him and get him to give me at least a direction. It was always sound, and always based on, again, what's best for the country. And his passion for America and doing what's best for the great country that he had so proudly served from the age of 18, as the youngest naval aviator, was really what provided him his moral compass in life, and provides a great model to the rest of us.

I gave a talk yesterday to my interns, who are just leaving, the spring interns, and one of them asked me about how I modeled my life, who were my mentors? And, not remembering I had this podcast today, I talked about George H.W. Bush, and how he provided me with a model of public service early in my career that gave me, again, inspiration to know that good people can serve, and serve honorably. But also directionally, you know, how to make tough decisions. And so, I will always be grateful for that.

Sam: Senator, you've promoted my grandfather's legacy, and grandmother's legacy, in many ways. And one of his great legacies is having the CIA campus

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in McLean, Virginia named for him. You led the charge in introducing the legislation to have the site dedicated. Why was that so important to you?

Sen. Portman: Well, one of the models that George H.W. Bush gave me was that you can go in and out of public service jobs and make a difference in a relatively short period of time. I tried to do that at the U.S. Trade Representative's office. I've worked as USTR, which is a cabinet-level job, for his son, George W. Bush. I also worked as the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, OMB, another cabinet level job, in the Bush 43 administration.

The model there, again, goes to George H.W. Bush, that when he was a congressman, and then chairman of the Republican Party, and an ambassador to China, you know, he was trying different roles in public service, and accepting roles that were offered to him, in order to serve his country. And one of the roles he took was Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. And the CIA at that time had just undergone some significant reforms, and frankly, some very difficult hearings on Capitol Hill, called the Church Hearings, about some of the excesses, and frankly, some of the CIA operatives who had done things that were not consistent with the agency's proud tradition.

So the agency was suffering from a loss of morale. They were having difficulty attracting people and retaining people. And there arrives George H.W. Bush. And in his typical style, he embraced the agency and the people there, and focused on the good and the service that was being provided, and the sacrifices that were being made, and sort of called CIA to its better angels. And the response was overwhelming, from everybody that I've talked to who was at the CIA at the time or associated with it, that he really changed the agency's morale. And as an example, instead of taking the director's elevator up in the morning, he would take the employees' elevator, so that he could rub elbows with the employees who were at Langley, and he made a big point of bringing the groups together, whether it was families of those who had made the ultimate sacrifice, where you'd had a loss of a family member, and he just really worked it hard to not just improve the morale, but improve their standing on Capitol Hill.

He was there briefly, probably a year, but left an indelible impression. So when I got elected to Congress in 1993, I thought it was odd that the CIA headquarters was named after a geographic location and not somebody who could be inspirational to the agency. And I thought there's nobody more inspirational, at least in modern times, than George H.W. Bush. I began a quest to try to figure out how to name it after him. There were some ups and downs, frankly, and there were some people who thought it was inappropriate because he had been an elected official, and that politics shouldn't intervene with intelligence matters. I didn't disagree with that, but I also felt strongly that when he was CIA

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Director, he was totally apolitical. He was able to turn off the politics, and, again, focus on how to improve the standing of the agency and the morale of the agency, in a way that was overwhelmingly positively responded to by the stakeholders and the employees of the agency.

So I used them, frankly, to provide some of the lobbying, and overcame some of the objections eventually, and was able to succeed in passing the legislation to name Langley the Bush center, George H.W. Bush Center for Intelligence. And today, when I drive along the George Washington Parkway, and I see, you know, the Bush Center signs, you know, makes me proud to know that he's been remembered in that way, and that as people pass through those gates, you know, they think about him, and think about honorable public service, and the great responsibility that they are given to help protect all of us, and to do so in a proper, legal way. That's the legacy of George H.W. Bush. Nothing fancy, just good character and integrity and hard work, and those are the kinds of attributes that, you know, he focused on in his entire career.

Sam: Senator, as we come to a close here, I want to say thank you so much for spending time with us on "All the Best" sharing your stories about my grandparents. It's been a great conversation. I know you are slowly moving out of the public spotlight and transitioning to retirement, after an exemplary career in public service. I have to know, are there any causes that you will continue to advocate for in private life?

Sen. Portman: Yeah, well thanks, Sam. I'm leaving Congress after 12 years in the House and then several years in administrations, both in the Bush 41 and 43 administration, and what will be 12 years here in the Senate. All in all, about 30 years of public service. I never expected it to be that long. I don't think that George H.W. Bush did either. I plan to continue to be very active. I hope to get back into the private life a little bit, and we have a small family business in Ohio. I look forward to re-engaging in that more. By the way, a small business that has a room named after George W. Bush, but also Barbara Bush, because she stayed in one of our hotel rooms. It's the oldest continuously operating business in Ohio. It's an historic inn. The Bush family is prominently mentioned there because of their stopping by.

But I also want to continue to be very involved in public policy issues and some of the passions that I've had here, where I've tried to take a leadership role and make a difference are one, with regard to the issue of trafficking, particularly here in the United States, human trafficking, girls, women, sometimes boys. You know, this is something, unfortunately, that even in this century in this country, continues to happen. And we've made some progress. I co-chair the Caucus on Human Trafficking, and have passed four or five pieces of legislation that have been helpful, including stopping some of the exploitation online,

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selling girls, underage girls, online, unknowingly, and yet having an immunity to do so under our previous laws. That has been now changed under our legislation, and it's made a big difference. But I'd like to continue on that issue.

On the opioid issue, I've taken the lead on this issue of, as the journal entry I read, said from George H.W. Bush, to have a drug-free America. I started a coalition in my own hometown 25-plus years ago, and continues today, and I've always been involved with that when I've been in the private sector, and I intend to help there again, and continue to push our legislation, which has provided help to about 2000 coalitions around the country. The drug issue, sadly, is one that continues to increase in terms of the overdoses and overdose deaths during the pandemic. Things have gotten worse, not better, sadly, after a few years of real progress. So I look forward to continue to engage on that issue, and hopefully can do just as much on the outside, maybe more.

I have a passion for a number of policy issues that relate to more traditional fiscal or economic policies, trade, retirement policy, dealing with our fiscal deficit, and our long-term projections, which are, to me, unsustainable, so I hope to be involved in a lot of those issues and maybe, again, in some respects, that can be just as helpful if not more helpful on the outside, so I plan to be busy, and look forward to continuing that legacy that I came in contact with back in the late 1980s, which is through George H.W. Bush, learning about how public service can be honorable and how you can make a difference, but doing so in this case, probably outside of elected office, but continuing to focus on those policy issues, so, we'll see, Sam. Thanks for having me on. I appreciate it. Have to end by saying, "All the Best."

Sam: Well, thank you for your time, sir, and it was really a pleasure to have you on the show.

Sen. Portman: Thank you.

Sam: I'm Sam LeBlond, reminding you to listen, share, and subscribe to "All the Best" on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and everywhere great podcasts are found. Thank you for joining me as we celebrate All the Best.

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.