



**All the Best Podcast**

***79. Journey of a Lifetime***

***Featuring Secretary Tommy Thompson, former Secretary of Health and Human Services under George W. Bush***

Secretary Thompson: January 21st, 1989. The Honorable Jim Wright, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. Dear Jim, yesterday in my inaugural address, I suggested that together, we should begin the process of working to achieve a deficit reduction plan and that we should do so soon. I had previously stated that I would like to lead such an effort on behalf of the executive branch and that I would begin the process promptly upon taking office. In accord with that commitment and our discussion, I extend to you today an invitation to join me in a meeting at the White House on Tuesday, January 24th. At that meeting, I would hope we could discuss how best to proceed towards deficit reduction. I would also like to take the opportunity to follow up on suggestions made by you and your colleagues, on ways we can move towards effective bipartisan support for our foreign policy. In addition, I would like to confirm my request, would you indicate it could be honored for the opportunity to address a joint session at Congress on Thursday, February 9th. Again, let me say how much I look forward to our working together on these crucial issues. I am sure the American people expect their concerns of such national import to be tackled in a spirit of bipartisan cooperation. And I'm very hopeful that we may prove worthy of the confidence they have placed in

us. Sincerely, George Bush

Sam: Tommy G. Thompson was born in 1941 and raised in Elroy, Wisconsin. Enrolling in the University of Wisconsin, Madison, he graduated in 1963 with a double major in history and political science before earning a JD from the University of Wisconsin Law School in 1966. Thompson was elected to a seat in the Wisconsin State Assembly in 1966. And five years later, he successfully ran for governor of Wisconsin. He won his next three gubernatorial elections, winning an unprecedented four terms, making him the longest-serving governor in Wisconsin history. Before completing his fourth term, Thompson accepted the call from President George W. Bush to become the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. The major initiatives for HHS under his leadership were to strengthen U.S. preparedness for a bioterrorism attack, increase funding for the National Institutes of Health, expand health insurance coverage to lower-income Americans, and focus attention on large-scale national health problems, such as obesity and diabetes.

We're so lucky to have Secretary Tommy Thompson with us today. Sir, welcome to "All the Best."

Secretary Thompson: Sam, it's so good talking to you again. I think I met you once before with your mother Doro and it's always a pleasure. I know you're good friends with my associate Jason in Washington, D.C. He spoke so highly of you that I feel like I've known you for my whole life.

Sam: Well, sir, your path to service started at a very young age. Secretary Thompson: 23 years of age.

Sam: After completing law school in 1966, you enlisted in the National Guard for 6 years and then another 4 years in the Army Reserves, earning the final rank of captain. Sir, what did serving your country during Vietnam teach you about service?

Secretary Thompson: It was a very difficult time. As you know, the Vietnam War was not very popular but I thought it was absolutely important. If you're gonna live in this free country, you have to do something. I intended to run for public office and I felt that it was necessary to serve your country. And you just couldn't go on and be elected without at least being in the military in some

position. And so I went in the National Guard, was there for six years, and then had the opportunity to go onto Officer Candidate School and become a JAG officer in the Army Reserves. And I loved it because I felt, you know, a feeling of doing something for my country. I felt it's right to be patriotic. I felt it was necessary during this Vietnam War to be able to stand up and say, you know, the country is doing what it thinks is the right thing. We have to support our country through thick or thin. That was my position and I'm very happy I served. I'm very happy that I had a tremendous experience. I am a little sad I didn't get a chance to go to Vietnam but overall, it was a great experience and a touch of patriotism, a touch of dedication to duty and responsibility. Your grandfather and my very good friend, George H. W. Bush, joined at a very early age, and he fought and was a hero in the Second World War. I didn't get that opportunity but I wanted to serve.

Sam: Secretary Thompson, you became involved with the Wisconsin State Assembly immediately after law school, winning the Republican primary and then becoming Assistant Minority Leader and later, its Minority Leader in 1981. It sounds like public service was always the goal. Is that the case?

Secretary Thompson: It really was. You got to realize I come from a family... Both my mother and father were teachers. My grandfather was a teacher and he was also a rural mail carrier. He delivered the mail in the horse-and-buggy days. That's a little bit of time past. He was dedicated to his community and to his county. And my father sat on the county board and was the vice chairman and head of all the bridges and roads. Every Friday night when I was growing up, I had to work in the taps and grocery store, and the all-time political polls came into the store and talked politics, and I was fascinated by it. He came in to negotiate with my father on where the bridges and roads were gonna go and so on. It was a fine experience and I learned politics from a very early age.

And I wanted to do something for my community and my state and I decided to run for public office, run for the State Assembly at the age of 23. And I hadn't even finished law school. I had one more semester to go and I finished that up in the summertime while I was a candidate. And luckily, I was able to outwork my 16-year incumbent opponent and was able to win all three counties. The rest is history. I was the youngest man, at that time, youngest person to get elected to

the State Assembly at the age of 23. That's been a good life. I remember those days fondly.

Sam: Well, Secretary, this podcast is based on the life of service that my grandparents, George and Barbara Bush, lived. And many of our guests are inspired to serve from examples in their own life. For instance, our family, we were so lucky to have George and Barbara Bush to look up to. Did you have a similar influence or example in your life that pushed you to serve?

Secretary Thompson: Oh, there's no question, my parents and my grandparents, they were so public-minded. My father and mother were sort of the cornerstones of a little community. Our community was only 1500. I tell people you could call somebody, get a wrong number and still talk for a half-hour. That's how small my community was. But my father and mother loved their little city and they were involved in everything promoting the good of the city. They taught me early on that, "Tommy, you have two ears and one mouth. Use them in that proportion and you'll get along just fine. And do things for your community and don't expect to be paid. And remember that Elroy has been very good to you. It's been very good to us as a family. You have to give back." It was always that feeling of giving back. "And support your local people because they have a tough life and we all need to work together in our small community to make it successful." So I learned early on and my father courses on the county board that I learned politics. I'd been with him in the grocery store on Friday nights talking politics to all the farmers that came in to trade their produce for groceries. And so, we'd have some beer, and some baloney, and crackers, and talk politics. Those days come back to me very frequently when I'm thinking about what is the best thing to do, how's the best way to do it. And I learned from early on that it's got to be good for the community or it's not worth doing.

Sam: Well, sir, you went from serving the State Assembly to the Governor's Mansion as the 42nd Governor of Wisconsin for 4 terms. During your tenure, you changed Wisconsin's welfare system, leading the way for national adaptation. The nation also took note when you created the country's first parental school-choice program. Sir, when you look back at your 16 years of service as Governor of Wisconsin, what accomplishment brings you the most pride?

Secretary Thompson: There's no question that those two bring me a great deal of pride. I was very lucky. Even though both houses of the legislature were controlled by the opposition party, I still was able to work with them in a bipartisan basis. You know, this is something that I think I really tried to emulate George H. W. Bush. You know, he thought everybody was worth serving, and helping, and so on. He didn't look at their political partisan party. He looked at how you could be helpful. That's the way I felt. That's the way I governed.

I was the longest-serving governor in Wisconsin, which was a Democrat state. That in itself was a little difficult for people to understand but I always tried to reach out and do what was right. And the welfare reform bill I'd passed and I was interested in, Bill Clinton copied 70% of it for the national welfare program, didn't give me credit but says today, that the welfare reform bill that he passed was the best bill proposal that he passed in Congress. That was said, I also had the opportunity to try school choice. I think that probably is gonna go down as my biggest legacy because it's still going, it's still being used, and students need that kind of choice in order to better their education opportunities and to bring out their best abilities. I also purchased more land for conservation and state parks than anybody else did. Very happy about that. And I started really improving the economy in the state of Wisconsin, which was in the doldrums when I got elected and probably the reason I got elected because the economy was in such terrible shape, they thought that even a Republican could not screw up as bad as the Democrats had. So they elected me and I've had lots of successes and, of course, one of the things that helped me was my connection to the Bushes, all the Bushes from George H. W. Bush and Barbara, as well as George W. and his lovely wife.

Sam: I want to talk about George W. because in 2001, you were called on to serve as the Health and Human Services Secretary in his administration. It must have been hard to leave your role as governor but I have to imagine, even harder for you to leave the state of Wisconsin as your career in public service, up to that point, focused solely on your home state. Can you talk about the decision to leave the governorship and tackle the position of Health and Human Services Secretary during that time?

Secretary Thompson: Oh, sure. There was no question, you know, it was very difficult for me. You're absolutely correct. I didn't really want to leave Wisconsin. I love Wisconsin, and as you know, I'm back in Wisconsin. I love my state and do everything I can. People think I'm too pro-Wisconsin but I don't think so. President George W. asked me to come to Washington. He gave me a choice to either be Secretary of Transportation or Secretary of Health and Human Services. And he said to me, he said, "Tommy, I know you love transportation," because George H. W. Bush had given me the opportunity to serve on Amtrak. I love rails and I love building highways like my father did so transportation had a great deal of attraction to me. But he also said, "I know that's probably gonna be your first choice but I'd like to have you be the Secretary of Health and Human Services. You know welfare reform, you know the healthcare system, you did things with Medicaid in your home state that I'd like to try and have you emulate in Washington, so I'd really like you to take that but it's your choice." So he gave me the choice. I did think about it. My wife and my daughter had started a Wisconsin's women health foundation and they wanted me to be Secretary of Health. They thought I could be helpful to them as well as to the state and to the country. So I took that. It was a great opportunity. I loved it. I loved the opportunity and we had some huge problems with 9/11, making sure the healthcare system was taking care of public health. And also, you know, we had SARS, and we had monkeypox, and we had a lot of things that came into our country like we have the pandemic now, that I was responsible for.

Sam: And I know you also helped with PEPFAR as well.

Secretary Thompson: I did. In fact, I helped a lot because it was such a great thing. We went to Africa on a trade mission because I had asked George W. if he would join the program to fight malaria, and AIDS, and tuberculosis. He agreed and I became the precedent of that. And on one of my missions to Africa, I was with Tony Fauci and we discussed trying to do something in South Africa with the government. And we talked to your uncle and he agreed. Of course, Laura was very happy to be involved in it, too. So from that meeting in Africa where Tony Fauci and I was over on...our meetings with Africa, he came back and talked to the President. Out of that came PEPFAR, which is a great program.

Sam: Amazing. I think it's documented. Millions of lives have been saved because of it so we appreciate all that you did to help to put that through and it's still working.

Secretary Thompson: It's still working. It's still there.

Sam: Yeah, that's great. Well, you mentioned it earlier, Sir, not surprisingly, you've returned to the Badger State and now serve as the President of the University of Wisconsin System. Although I think, technically, you hold an interim title, it seems you have been very busy navigating the COVID-19 pandemic and the over 165,000 students under your watch. How has the University of Wisconsin tackled this pandemic and how close is the return to normal for your students?

Secretary Thompson: It was a tough thing. People asked me to come in and run the university. I turned them down a couple of times but the third time was the charm. Been here a year now and they haven't even started looking for my replacement. So, I guess, they're happy with the leadership. I had to make the decision as to whether or not we were gonna open up the university last fall, just about a year ago. I made the decision we're gonna open it up but we set up a program for testing, and subsequent to that, we had put a mask policy. And now, we're vaccinated and I had the university very much involved in it. And our testing program was considered one of the national best and the federal government came in and asked us to expand it into the communities and gave us money to do so. We were able to do it and we were able to get by extremely well and we graduated two semesters, 37,000 graduates. I got a huge operation, almost 170,000 students, 40,000 employees, a \$6 billion entity, and we were able to get through and graduate 37,000 students on time. Most of them are working here in the state of Wisconsin and doing well. So it was a very trying time when the university lost money but we were able to make things go and we're planning to open up in the fall with 75% of our courses taught in person, almost back to normal. We're gonna be playing football, and basketball, and sports. We're gonna have our students back learning from professors in the classroom and everybody is really excited about it. I'm very happy with what we've been able to accomplish.

Sam: Well, that's something to be proud of, sir, 37,000 graduates during a pandemic. That's an accomplishment.

Secretary Thompson: It is remarkable. And I asked so many of them, Sam, you know, "What kind of an education did you get?" They said, "You know, it would have been better if we could have been in class but we learned a lot. We had a good experience, as good as we could have." If we could have had a little bit more openness and flexibility but the truth of the matter, the students really showed a great deal of responsibility. I was very proud of our students who massed up, got tested, and when somebody came down with a positive state, we were able to quarantine them. We were able to continue on and graduate 37,000. It was a huge success and I'm very proud of it.

Sam: Well, sir, whenever we have personal friends of my grandparents on "All the Best," I feel obligated to ask about any personal stories you may have about your time together with them. We would love to hear any remembrances you may have with George and Barbara Bush.

Secretary Thompson: I have got so many stories, I could go on... I'll give you three if I could.

Sam: Sure.

Secretary Thompson: George was the vice president. He told me once. I don't know if he told it to all the governors but he says, "Tommy"... This was before either Jeb or George W. got elected governor. He says, "You're my favorite governor." I'm sure he said that to a lot of governors but he invited about eight of us out to Kennebunkport to spend an afternoon with him and Barbara to talk about his quest for the presidency. And, as you know, you mentioned the welfare reform, he wanted me to discuss welfare. We sat out on the brand and then we went in. We sat down and the Vice President had some people who were taking notes. Johnson was there, the governor of Oklahoma was there, Harry Bellmon, the governor from Rhode Island. There was eight of us, I think, six or eight of us. We went around the room talking about things and the Vice President wanted me to talk about welfare reform and how it might be able to be used as an issue. I spoke for about 15 minutes. I think he was very pleased.

The meeting lasted about two, two and a half hours. It was setting up issues and whether or not we would all support him for president. Of course, I jumped at the chance. I think I was in the top 5 governors at that time to propose that he run and I endorsed him. I might have been number one, I don't know but I was in the top 5. And then, he said, and you've done this, Sam, so you know exactly what I'm gonna be talking about. He said, "I want to go on a boat ride."

Sam: Oh, no.

Secretary Thompson: And he took some of us, and Barbara, your grandmother told all of us, "Don't go. This guy is wild when he gets behind that boat." You know this too, you had that plaza there full of clothes. He gave me a coat and a cap from the Chicago Cubs. He said, "I know it's not Milwaukee but here, wear this." And so I put that on. We went down. Then I got on the boat, the Secret Service guy, and the tag-along boat, and the guy was absolutely crazy. The way he drove that... He backed out at full speed with, you know, that big granite cliff, I didn't think we'd ever make it to the ocean. We got on the ocean and there's another speeding found. It was just top speed. I found out later he loves to scare people. I loved it. But a couple of the governors with me were hanging on for dear life. And then he came back in, I still see this. I thought we were going full speed and through that narrow canal there between those big rocks and he was going full speed. He puts it around and turned it off and it just stops right exactly where it was supposed to be.

Barbara met us and said, "What did I say?" I said, "You were absolutely right. He is wild when he gets in front of that boat." But I tell you it was a great afternoon. I loved it. He showed me the man that he really was.

Sam: He's been known to give out the white knuckle treatment to those who aren't aware.

Secretary Thompson: You know exactly what I'm talking about. Sam: Certainly.

Secretary Thompson: And then the second time was, he invited me out when he was President to the Alfalfa Club. We stayed overnight and he put us up in the Lincoln Bedroom. The only night I've ever stayed at the White House, we were

in the Lincoln Bedroom, and he wanted me to come out so we could spend the day together. We went down to one of his private clubs where he used to, like, go to have lunch. We went in there and everybody knew him as Mr. President, Mr. Vice President, George, whatever. He was friendly to everybody. And then as we were leaving, he said, "I want you to go with me, Tommy?" And I said, "Okay, fine." We went into the kitchen and all the wait staff were there, and the dishwasher, and the cook. He shook hands with every single one and everybody knew him. When I walked out, I said, "That was really impressive." He says, "Tommy, always remember, those are the people that are the most important. Go back and always say hello to them."

I never forgot that. When I was campaigning, I always managed to go back and say hello to the wait staff in the kitchen and to the mechanics in the garage. And it was George H. W. Bush that really impressed upon me what a tremendous person he was. Nobody was below him. Everybody was the same. And to spend his time as President going back there and shaking hands with everybody in the kitchen just showed me what a tremendous gentleman and what a fine human being your grandfather was.

And the third one was, I knew he was very sick. I went out to Kennebunkport, had the chance to spend the afternoon with him and Barbara, but he was having some difficulties. He could not speak. He could listen and we'd talk. And he gave me a big hug. I'll never forget that. It was just a wonderful, warm afternoon with Barbara, and she loved the man so much and was so concerned about his well-being. And she said after a while, "He's a little tired," which meant to me that he wanted my wife and I to leave. But I'll never forget that afternoon either. It was the last time I saw him alive. I think June 12th is his birthday.

Sam: Correct.

Secretary Thompson: I used to call him every year and I can remember one day, I hadn't called him till early evening. I call him and he says, "Well, Tommy, how come it took you so long? Did you forget my birthday?" And I said, "No. I just have been busy today, Mr. President, but I wanted to wish you happy birthday," and I did. So those are just a few stories of my love and respect for a giant of a man. Do you remember the boat trip?

Sam: Of course. He was an accelerator to the ground guy. I think we used to say he was full speed or sleeping. Those were his only two speeds in life.

Secretary Thompson: Oh my gosh. And on the boat, there was a third one, overdrive.

Sam: Yeah, exactly, exactly. I don't think he lost anybody over his career but he sure tried with some of those breakneck speeds that he would hit on his Fidelity boat.

Secretary Thompson: He wanted to scare you and he did most people.

Sam: It was one of his many happy places out on the ocean and his Fidelitys. Well, sir, I want to say thank you so much for your time and stories. It's always, as I've said before, such an honor to have a close personal friend of my grandparents and hear you tell stories about them but I want to end with this. I'm currently reading your book, "Tommy: My Journey of a Lifetime" and, you know, I have to say it's an inspiring story. And I know that there are many young people like myself saying to themselves, "How did he do it?" So for those listening who want to make a difference in their community, what advice do you have for getting started?

Secretary Thompson: I would tell everybody if you want to do it, do it. Do not let the naysayers talk you out of it. If you believe in yourself and please always do, because if you don't believe in yourself, nobody else will. You have to believe in yourself and you have to believe and have enough self-confidence that you can do it, even if all the odds are large against you and people tell you you can't do it, you shouldn't do it, you're too young, you're too old, you're too fat, whatever the case may be.

I can remember when I first decided to run at age 23. People told me, "You're too young. You can't do it." And I persevered and I won. Same thing when I ran for governor. They said, "You can't do it. You're from a small, rural area. You'll never get elected." I didn't believe them and I campaigned hard and won. The common sense, what I want to leave anybody with that wants to lead, wants to run, wants to do something that maybe they haven't done before and so on, if you believe it and you want to do it, do it. Don't let the naysayers tell you otherwise and don't believe them. Believe in yourself, have self-confidence, and

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go get the job done.

Sam: Now, that's great advice. Secretary Thompson, thank you for being a part of "All the Best."

Secretary Thompson: It's my pleasure, and Sam, it's good seeing you and talking to you again.

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.