



All the Best Podcast

80. Dr. Anthony Fauci

Featuring the Director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Dr. Anthony Fauci

Dr. Fauci: April 8, 1987. Went out to the National Institutes of Health for a very impressive AIDS briefing. Dr. Sam Broder, Dr. Tony Fauci, the head of the hospital, Dr. James Weingarten, and others, blood supply is being screened and is safe. They are encouraged by some of the vaccines. They can keep people alive quite a bit longer. It sounds like the early research on leukemia to me. 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.

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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." Dr. Anthony Fauci is a native of Brooklyn, New York, and received his medical degree from Cornell University Medical College in 1966. He then completed an internship and residency at the New York Hospital Cornell Medical Center. Dr. Fauci was appointed Director of National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at the National Institutes of Health in 1984. Dr. Fauci has advised seven presidents on domestic and global health issues and oversees an extensive research portfolio to prevent, diagnose, and treat established infectious diseases such as HIV and AIDS, respiratory infections, tuberculosis, and malaria as well as emerging diseases such as Ebola, Zika, and coronavirus. Dr. Fauci, welcome to the show.

Dr. Fauci: Thank you very much, Sam. It's good to be with you.

Sam: Dr. Fauci, this podcast is based on the legacy of service of my grandparents George and Barbara Bush whom you knew very well. We love hearing our guests' path to service and are excited to hear yours, which has led you to serve under seven presidents now as the nation's top infectious disease expert. Dr. Fauci, what inspired you to serve?

Dr. Fauci: Well, Sam, you know what I think it was? It really was something that was instilled in me very much from my early youth. My family had always been very much oriented to service. My father was the neighborhood pharmacist. Back in those days, pharmacies were different than they are right now. The pharmacist was sort of the sub-doctor for the neighborhood. You just come in and sit down in the store and talk to the pharmacist who would give you everything from psychotherapy to advice about your youngsters who are maybe going a little bit astray to your health. And I, as a child in my bicycle, was delivering prescriptions to different places. So it was never anything about money or acquiring wealth. It was more or less what are you doing for the community.

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Then, I happen to go to eight years of Jesuit training both in a Jesuit high school in Manhattan followed by a Jesuit college in Massachusetts, Holy Cross and Regis High School. And the theme of those places was always service to others. So I started off on the right foot with my parents. I got very interested in people and dealing with people, but I also liked science. So I figured the best way for me to serve and be a person of public service would be to be a physician-scientist and to do it in the context of the federal government where you're not actually out there charging patients, which is nothing wrong with doing that. I just felt it would be an important part of my life's goal to just do it as an integral part of my profession. So, again, it started as a child in Brooklyn and worked his way up to the NIH in Bethesda.

Sam: Dr. Fauci, I've heard you say that it was just by accident that you developed a close friendship with my grandfather. Can you talk to us about how that friendship began with then Vice President Bush during his quiet visits to NIH in the late 1980s?

Dr. Fauci: To me, it's really a wonderful story; wonderful in the sense of the fact that you had an extraordinarily wonderful grandfather and grandmother. During his vice presidency, then Vice President George H. W. Bush, when he was getting ready to decide that he was going to run for president, he really wanted to learn a lot more about what was really going on with HIV. So what he did is he had heard about me because I was at the time very visible out there, trying to drum up interest and activity to address this with very, very little resources.

With all due respect to President Reagan, one of the things that the activists sometimes and often criticize him about, it was his lack of overt bully pulpit interest in HIV/AIDS. That was not the case with your grandfather. He really wanted to learn about it. So we asked if he could come out to the NIH one day as vice president and meet with and chat with this fellow, Tony Fauci. So I had never met him before. I had met President Reagan but not the vice president.

So he came to the NIH and I spent a considerable amount of time with him showing him around the wards, introducing him to my patients. He took a really keen interest, in a way that anybody who knows George H. W. Bush, as you know better than I was such a warm, engaging person that he really wanted to interact with my patients, and we did. We had a really good time in the sense of getting

close in that couple of hour visit, which was a long visit, because when vice presidents and presidents visit, they visit for 10 or 15 minutes and then they're gone. I thought that would be the last I saw of him, but in typical fashion, a few days later, I got a note hand-written, his typical, hand-written notes saying, "I had a wonderful time with you. I would really like to get to know you better. You're a fine young man." I was a young man at the time.

And the next thing I knew he was inviting me to brunches and receptions at the vice president's mansion as if I were and did become a friend, a friend of the family, not just an NIH person but somebody that he would call me up and ask me about things that were not necessarily related to my job, medical things, advice about things. And then he promised me that, when he became president if he did become president, that he would come back to the NIH and he would really see if we could get the budget elevated to the point where we could really get a lot more science done. And when he was president, he did that. If you look at the curve of the budget for the NIH during his years, it was this, this, and then it started to go up in a fashion like that.

One other story—I don't want to be too long-winded about it—that was really important that showed, I believe, the depth of our friendship is that everyone wanted me to be the director of NIH, and I had told Secretary Lou Sullivan I didn't want to do it because I wanted to stay with my patients, with my research. But he kept on getting vibrations from the Oval Office from the president then, President George H. W. Bush, and John John Sununu was saying, "Come on. Let's get this over with. We've got to get an NIH director." So I said, "I don't really want to do it." So Lou Sullivan said, "I'm not going to tell the president that you're not going to do it. You're going to have to tell him yourself." And I said, "Oh, my God, I don't want to go into the Oval Office and have him ask me and then I'm going to say no. That would be terrible." So he said, "No, you got to come with me."

So I went down with Lou Sullivan, and I walked into the Oval Office. Your grandfather was behind the desk, sat down. He started off by telling me, you know, "I would really love you to become the director of NIH. You know, you've done so much," etc. And I said, "You know, Mr. President, I'm really very sorry, but I really do believe that I can serve you and the country better if I stay in my current

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position to lead the AIDS effort as now I'm the director of the institute and I really think I can really get things going to address this."

And he took like about 10 seconds, which felt like about 4 minutes, and looked at me and that's when I knew I had a real friend. He said these exact words, "You know, I've always had a great deal of respect for you before now, but I have even more respect for you now for doing what you want to do. So go your way. Let's stay friends. We'll keep communicating with each other. Thank you very much for what you've done. We'll always be friends."

So I walked out saying, "Well, maybe he's just such a gentleman. He's going to be a nice guy, and he's going to forget about me." The next thing I knew, about a week and a half later, he invites me to a dinner at the White House. So he really meant what he said. And then through the years, even when he stepped down as president and went back to Texas and to Maine, he would write me notes all the time, "Saw you in the newspaper today. You looked really great." And then on I think it was my 65th birthday, he wrote me a long letter for a surprise birthday party and it started off saying, "Tony, 65? No way you're 65." It was really wonderful. Again, I'm giving you more information than you asked for but...

Sam: Oh, I love it. He had such a gift to connect with people, so it's great to hear those stories.

Dr. Fauci: It was really just so typical of how he is and how he was.

Sam: And it sounds like you guys worked together a lot during his presidency because it wasn't just my grandfather but my grandmother who famously hugged the AIDS patient at grandma's house in Washington, D.C. at a time when people were afraid to. Dr. Fauci, what impact did George and Barbara Bush have on the fight against HIV and AIDS?

Dr. Fauci: I think it was a real transition and a turning around of making it something that was human feeling, empathy. To be quite honest with you, Sam, not everybody in the White House felt that way. I just have to be frank and honest on this, and there were people who were around there who were a bit more stern and rejecting and, you know, maybe a bit homophobic, I'm not sure, but for sure the warmth of your grandfather and grandmother clearly shown forth. And when people saw that, I think that had a lot to do with the diminution of stigma.

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Sam: And then years later, you worked alongside another President Bush, my Uncle George W. to create PEPFAR, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. My Uncle George believed and still believes that the United States has a moral obligation to help low-income countries who didn't have the same resources as we did. Dr. Fauci, can you talk about PEPFAR and why it was and still is such a successful public healthcare initiative?

Dr. Fauci: I feel—and there are many people throughout the world feel—that this is one of the most extraordinary examples of a profound legacy of a president of the United States. No doubt about that. And your words are absolutely correct because when your uncle, George W. Bush, sent me to Africa in 2002 when people were talking about what we can do for the people in Sub-Saharan Africa and other developing low and middle-income countries, he said to me exactly what you just said. He said, "You know, we have a moral obligation as a rich country to see to it that people don't suffer and die merely because of where they happen to be born and live." At the time, it was 2002 and from 1996 when the triple combination of anti-retrovirals was developed totally transforming the lives of persons with HIV where they went from almost a certain death sentence to leading with essentially almost a normal lifespan. It was just extraordinary. It was just profoundly transforming. He wanted to make sure that poorer nations did not suffer because of the lack of that.

So he sent me as part of a fact-finding mission together with Sec. Tommy Thompson to Africa and said, "I want you to go down there and figure out what we can do that is both accountable and transforming. I don't want to be just dumping money onto governments and have them just spent. I want to be able to make an impact on it." We started off with pediatric prevention of mother-to-child transmission. I came back with a plan to spend \$500 million to prevent mother-to-child transmission. He really liked the plan, but then I thought that was it. But just as I had presented it, I guess it was in the Roosevelt Room I think we were. I was getting ready to leave, and he grabbed me and Josh Bolton at the time. And he said, "You know what I want you to do? I want you to get something even bigger. This is great, but I want something that's really, really transforming." And I remember telling him, I said, "You know, Mr. President, this is going to cost a lot of money," and he said, "Let me worry about the money. You just worry about the plan."

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So I then spent the next several months working with his inner circle staff, Josh Bolten, Gary Edson, Jay Lefkowitz, Margaret Spellings, and all of them. We worked on it and on and on for months and months till we finally put together a program which ultimately turned out to be PEPFAR. And if you look at the history, because I went to Texas to celebrate with your aunt and uncle the 15th year anniversary, and if you look at today, that program has saved literally about 15 to 18 million lives. That is a legacy that I think in some respects is really unprecedented. And it serves as the model of what one can do when one applies empathetic presidential leadership to the world's problems. It's historic what he did, and I just feel so honored to have been a small part of being the instrument of getting us there. But he was the one that was the spirit behind it.

Sam: Well, it seems with every new administration comes at least one disease crisis of significance. Dr. Fauci, what have we learned from our past and what are we doing to prepare for the next possible crisis?

Dr. Fauci: It's lessons learned but unfortunately, Sam, often lessons are forgotten. We supposedly were the best-prepared country for a pandemic. We did some really good pandemic preparedness. Another part of your uncle's legacy, because following 9/11, and that's how I got to really know President George W. Bush, that he asked me together with some of his inner people, to put together a program that was a biodefense program that was to prepare us for deliberate bioterror. And I remember on a flight on Air Force 1 following 9/11 when I went up to Pittsburgh with your uncle because he was talking about some system that the University of Pittsburgh had set up to monitor the emergence of diseases in the country. And on the way back, he asked me what am I most concerned about regarding bioterror. And I said, "You know, Mr. President, I'm obviously concerned about deliberate bioterror, but I think nature is the worst bioterrorist, and we need to prepare for any kind of biological pathogen that might be used against us even if it occurs naturally. So why don't we just make it one big program to protect not only against bioterror but against emerging and reemerging infectious diseases?" And he liked that idea. And he said, "You know, yeah, we could spend the money as long as one is helping the other." So that's how the pandemic preparedness started as an offshoot of preparedness against deliberate bioterror. And I think his insight and his listening to what I was saying led for the next subsequent presidents to embrace it just the way President Obama embraced it right after that.

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Sam: Well, Doctor, I have to ask a couple questions about COVID-19. I was going for the record. I'm not sure the last time you've had five questions asked to you before someone mentioned COVID-19 at least in the last year. So, you know, my grandparents always used to lean in our family for support and as an anchor through happy and difficult times throughout their presidencies and their careers. I'm interested to know, how did you manage your own personal health during this pandemic?

Dr. Fauci: In a manner very similar to what your family did, my wife is just extraordinary. Started off as a nurse at the NIH and then got a Ph.D. in bioethics. And she's at the NIH. And she's an extraordinarily insightful person and knows me obviously very well and is like a rock or an anchor of support. When things really get tough, I always know that I can come home and talk to her about it and she helps me sort it out. Also, my children. I have three young adult daughters ranging from late 20s to early 30s who are always there and supporting recently by Zoom as opposed to in person but it is very much a family issue.

Sam: Dr. Fauci, it seems that most Americans are hopeful that they will be able to resume their pre-pandemic life at some point this year. It seems we are moving in the right direction. What still needs to be done?

Dr. Fauci: We are fortunate in this country that we have highly, highly effective vaccines. President Biden has made it a goal to get at least 70% of the adult population to get at least one of the two doses of a two-dose vaccine by July 4th. We still have a solid core group of 15% or 20% of people or more who just don't want to get vaccinated. And we've got to get those people to realize that to get vaccinated is not only to protect yourself and your family but also your community because even if you're young and healthy and you're not going to ultimately get statistically a high incidence of getting a serious infection, it might be asymptomatic. It might even be very low symptoms.

But the fact is if you allow yourself to get infected, you are part of the chain of transmission. So you are allowing the virus to use you as a vehicle to infect someone else. So it almost calls upon the community and societal responsibility of people to not allow the virus to use you as a vehicle of spread. So if we can somehow, through trusted messengers, be they community people and clergy and family doctors and maybe even sports figures or entertainment celebrities to get

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people to appreciate that, that's really the single most important stumbling block is the fact that we want to get as many people vaccinated as we possibly can, as quickly as we possibly can.

Sam: We're doing our small part here in Washington, D.C. and trying to convince everyone else to do the same. So hopefully the snowball will keep rolling down the hill, and we'll get there soon.

Dr. Fauci: Right.

Sam: Dr. Fauci, I'd like to bring it back to my grandfather for a second. The funeral week for him was in December of 2018. It was an amazing celebration of life. Dr. Fauci, I know you were in attendance. What do you remember from that historic week?

Dr. Fauci: Your family was so generous to me to give me a really very good seat as it were, close enough that I could really not necessarily rely on a screen, but I could see the people who get up. I just think it was one of the most extraordinary outpourings of love for this extraordinary gentleman. And you could tell it in everyone's speech and everyone's body language. Truly I think his funeral was exactly what it was supposed to be—a celebration of an incredible man. If you look at what America needs, a man of the highest, highest level of integrity, a war hero as a teenager, what do you think of that?

Sam: Big shoes to fill.

Dr. Fauci: No kidding. And then comes back and gets into business, and then gets into the political public service arena, has important jobs—the envoy to China, the director of the CIA, the vice president of the United States, and then president. I mean, it's an all-American story of an incredible outpouring of love for that man who even now today I just feel so strongly about.

Sam: Doctor, as we come to a close, I want to first say thank you so much for spending time with us today and sharing all the wonderful stories about George and Barbara Bush and keeping us updated on what's going on in our world today. I want to end with this because we have a lot of young people who listen to the podcast, what advice do you have for a young person who wants to get involved in public health and make an impact?

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Dr. Fauci: Well, if a person wants to and has a leaning towards wanting to get involved in public health, I can tell you that you will find that it is one of the most rewarding professions you could possibly get involved with. The idea that you're doing something as service to others, not necessarily people as individuals but people as individuals who then become a cohort, who then become a country, who then become a world. So global health, that's what global health means, the health of mankind, the occupants of this globe. I can't name a person who's deeply involved in public health who doesn't really love it. It's something that gives you a great deal of gratification and also does have impact. So if you're out there and you're a young person and you even have the slightest inkling of doing that, I thoroughly encourage you to do it because you'll enjoy it and you will be making an important contribution.

Sam: Doctor, thank you so much for being a part of the podcast. Good luck. Keep up the great work, and we'll be watching you.

Dr. Fauci: Thanks an awful lot, Sam. I appreciate that. Thank you 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 the face of the Earth.