



**All the Best Podcast**

***Episode 82. The "A-Team" of the East Wing***

***Featuring Peggy Swift White, who served as the Personal Aide to First Lady Barbara Bush from 1989 until 1993***

Peggy: January 16th, 2014. Dearest Peg, how great you and Brian are going to India. I'm so happy for you, and we'll breathe a little easier when you get home safely. Just a little. I'm glad the plate arrived. Sad to say the company that made the plates has gone out of business or stopped making them. Darn them. I never gave them to Doro or the wives of the boys. I'm so proud of you and Brian. You have made such a happy life. I'm sure you heard about Jean's rental in Maine. The pipes froze and the house is totally ruined. The owners are not going to redo, and Jean will have to find another place. So sad. All is well with our household. Both Neil and Jeb are going to cut down on traveling and will spend more time with family. They were killing themselves. Jeb Jr. had his second little girl, Vivian Alexandra Columba Bush. She is lovely. Georgia is having trouble adjusting. Big Jeb says she's doing everything to get attention away from Vivi. Funny. Love more than you want her to know, Barbara Pierce 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." Peggy Swift White has 30 years of public relations, corporate communications, and project management experience with Fortune 100 companies and the White House. She received a bachelor of arts degree in speech communication from Denison University in 1986. Peggy then went on to serve as a member of the George H. W. Bush administration. From 1989 to 1993, she was the personal aide to First Lady Barbara Bush.

Peggy planned and implemented Mrs. Bush's daily schedule and orchestrated extensive, domestic and international travel for the first lady, including over 34 foreign countries and 50 states. She facilitated all public and private appearances with national and international organizations on behalf of Mrs. Bush. Peggy also managed the transition of Pres. and Mrs. Bush's official and private residence from Washington, D.C. to Houston, Texas.

Currently, she is the president of the Woman's Athletic Club of Chicago. She serves on the board of advisors of Catholic charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago. She is the director emeritus with the Gold Coast Neighbors Association, a member of the Contemporary Club of Chicago, and past president of the Women's Board of Lincoln Park Zoo. We couldn't be happier to have Peggy White with us today. Peggy, welcome to "All the Best."

Peggy: Thanks, Sam. Good to be with you.

Sam: Well, that's great. I know you're enduring a little rainstorm in Charleston, so it's not too bad to be indoors right now, I guess.

Peggy: No, it's a great way to spend the afternoon.

Sam: Peggy, I'd like to start with this. It's always such a treat to speak with someone who knew my grandparents, especially my grandmother so well. For those wondering, what was it like to have Barbara Bush as your boss?

Peggy: Well, Sam, before I get into your question, I just want to say you are hitting out of the park with these podcasts. You've got such a lineup of guests. Totally impressive. Not really sure how I fit in, but here we go.

Sam: Well, the check's in the mail.

Peggy: So I served as the personal aide to the first lady from 1989 to 1993, which would have been the White House years and then the year after. I'm Number 5 out of 16. It's a very exclusive group of ladies. We still stay connected, which is really nice. I would say the one common thread that has kept us together all these years is our love and admiration for your grandmother. She was a great boss. She was very direct, and you always knew where she was coming from. She had a great way of letting you know if you were doing something right and was there for the praise, but she also was there to help guide us if we went astray.

You know, I remember when I interviewed for the job, and she said, "Well, if you've made it this far, then you must be qualified." And I thought, "Well, qualified at age 20 couple is being punctual, organized, and the ability to shlep a lot of luggage." So I was that in all spades, but the gals that came before me and after me are just a tremendous group of gals.

Sam: Peggy, as personal aide to my grandmother during her time as first lady, you occupied a front-row seat as she championed the cause of family literacy for the nation, eventually creating the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy. Why was literacy such an important cause to her?

Peggy: You know, that's a good question. By the time I came along, she was already well into the cause, but she really approached it as only Barbara Bush did. Very practical. She believed that, if every man, woman, and child could read and write, the country and the world would be in a better place. Really, sort of, the motto of the foundation was really to let people and let your children see you read. We spent a lot of time. We logged a lot of miles around the country and around the world speaking about literacy and adult literacy, and you could really see the impact that she had.

If I can, I'd love to share a story about one of these experiences. And we were traveling somewhere in the Midwest, and we're at an adult literacy program. And the participants were sitting around in a circle, and your grandmother was there. She's having a conversation with them. There was one woman who talked with her hand over her mouth. Obviously had some dental issues and her hair was a little unkempt, but she was so proud of her accomplishments in terms of being able to read and write.

And we left the event. We flew back to D.C. and the next day your grandmother asked me to find out who this person was and to contact her. And she sent her a check with a note and said, "You look and you feel so great about your accomplishments, and I hope you take this money, and get your teeth fixed, and cut your hair, and let us know how it goes." And sure enough several months

later, we get a note. We get a picture of the woman, and she's just beaming. And it really had such an impact on her life. You know, your grandmother just did things like that quietly and behind the scenes just because it was the right thing to do, but that story and that memory has always really stuck with me.

Sam: She was dedicated to family literacy, but it wasn't the only thing that kept her focus while she was first lady, was it? I know another cause that she was bringing a lot of passion and awareness to, and that's HIV and AIDS. Can you talk about her focus on HIV and AIDS awareness when, at the time, it wasn't the most popular thing to do?

Peggy: Well, you know, your grandmother was ahead of the curve on social issues in a number of ways, and you mentioned literacy certainly being one of them. And really AIDS and HIV when there was such a stigma attached with it. And I remember visiting a place called Grandma's House. You know, a picture's worth a thousand words, and holding a baby with AIDS was just a tremendous gift that she gave to a lot of people and to that community. You know, we would say now the photo went viral, but it was so monumental.

And she did it also overseas. We were over in London, I think, for the Economic Summit. And she and Princess Di went and visited a hospital and the AIDS board. And both of them, those fierce women, jumped in there, holding their hands, touching them, hugging them at a time when you didn't do it. You'd be ostracized, and they understood the importance of their positions and the importance of physical touch with these people. It was a special occasion.

Sam: Ganny famously gave the Wellesley College commencement address in 1990. At the time, there was a potent mix of feminist tension and Cold War politics surrounding her controversial appearance. It caused many people to protest her appearance in fact. Students believed honoring Barbara Bush as the commencement speaker was honoring someone who had gained recognition through the achievements of her husband. Well, we all know what happened next, one of my grandmother's finest moments and, in my opinion, one of the top speeches of the 20th century. She also brought a special guest with her that day, Mrs. Gorbachev. The speech has been well-documented, but I would love to hear about Ganny's unique relationship with Mrs. Gorbachev.

Peggy: You're right, Sam. I mean, this was really such a pivotal moment and it was... Although we did have protesters in Portland, Oregon, they were burning her, an effigy, which was really an interesting experience. But this felt so much more personal, I think, to all of us. She really put her head down and went through with it. You know, everybody's entitled to their opinion, and I think she, sort of, felt that way. I could talk to you for days about the experience with Mrs. Gorbachev, and I, sort of, feel like the fact that both of the people I'm going to talk about are no longer with us, it's safe territory.

But we were on the plane flying to Boston, and Mrs. Gorbachev and her team, we were all on the same plane. Mrs. Bush was trying to make some small talk, which is not easy with Mrs. Gorbachev. She said, "Oh, you know, I've been working on my speech, and, you know, I think this is going to be a great day for both of us. And I'm really looking forward to it. And how is your speech coming along?" And Mrs. Gorbachev with a straight face goes, "I don't know what you're talking about. What speech?" And with that, got up and, sort of, went to the back of the plane to go to the restroom. And she and I looked at each other and we're like, "Oh, my God. We're about to go live on CNN," which was not normal for coverage in terms of your grandmother's speeches, and her interpreter, sort of, looks at us and winks and, like, pats his coat pocket as if to say, "I got the speech. She knows she's got a speech."

It was a different time. We went. They both delivered their speeches. You know, I can't remember how the Gorbachevs were going to be in town. Some brilliant person suggested that she accompany your grandmother to Wellesley, and it really, sort of, defused the situation a little bit. And then they continued with the trip up to Camp David. You know, Mrs. Gorbachev was always very conscientious of her public image, and I think she always wanted to portray herself in a certain way back to her people. And she wore the highest heels all the time, and they looked so uncomfortable, but she, sort of, teetered on them. They were really high.

You know, Camp David is super casual, and she insisted on keeping her high heels on and your grandmother very kindly suggested that we take a tour in golf carts versus walking, because she's not going to make it. She can't walk that far. We come back and, you know, you could tell her feet were in pretty bad shape, and your grandmother arranged to have bowling shoes from the Camp David bowling alley delivered to their cabin. Mrs. Gorbachev never said a thing but the rest of the weekend walked around in bowling shoes. And I'm sure it's saved her because she had blisters. I mean, it looked pretty tough. But your grandmother was just, you know, thoughtful in that way, and she, sort of, was always looking out for the other person.

And another really fascinating part of that visit was when we were visiting with Mrs. Gorbachev, and the conversation was... You know, you struggled to have a conversation. The interpreters were there, and I was sitting with your grandmother. And Mrs. Gorbachev asked to look in my purse, and she was amazed that I had, like, three or four different kinds of lipstick like brands. They just didn't have access. You'd walk into a store, and there'd be lipstick. There wouldn't be Revlon, Chanel, L'Oréal, whatever, and she was very fascinated with my life as a 24, 25-year-old in terms of owning a car, living in an apartment with girlfriends. It just was a very different way of life. And you, sort of, felt like you saw a little bit behind the curtain, you know, when she was just

in a small group and she was clearly very comfortable with your grandmother. It took a few visits but she got behind the Iron Curtain.

Sam: Well, Peggy, I'd like to pivot to a lighter question. What about my grandmother's love of dogs? More specifically, Millie, the English Springer Spaniel, or the first dog, one of the more famous White House dogs. I think she wrote a book. She had puppies while in the White House and even is a part of my grandmother's first lady portrait. Millie seemed like a larger-than-life figure in the Bush 41 White House. Peggy, can you talk about Ganny's love of dogs and Millie as the first dog?

Peggy: I grew up with dogs. I loved Mille because she was a great dog. She was an asset that we would take to local visits to schools, and hospitals, and senior citizen homes. She just was a great buffer. I mean, everyone loved her. I will say there was one moment in particular where we were taping an interview with Larry King. It was in the studio, and Mrs. Bush was, you know, sitting with Larry and Millie was on the ground right at her feet. You know, in between each commercial, Larry would, like, sort of, lean over and say, "God, Mrs. Bush, your dog is so well-behaved," and your grandmother was really very proud.

And we get up to leave, and I just turned around to make sure, you know, we hadn't left anything behind. Millie had left her little calling card right on the carpet. Yours truly had to pick it up. Yes, she was a great dog, but there were definitely a few instances. And she loved, loved to hunt on the White House lawn and come back into the house with her little rodent treasures.

Sam: Well, Peggy, you stood alongside my grandmother during some great times as first lady but also some sad ones as well, specifically after they lost the re-election bid in 1992. You were tasked with helping manage the transition from the White House to private life back in Houston, Texas. Can you talk about that transition and how Barbara Bush handled what, at the time, was a heartbreaking defeat?

Peggy: You know, Sam, it's not going to be a surprise. Your grandmother was amazing. I mean, she just was so resolute. And, you know, the morning after, we woke up and the first thing she did was call Mrs. Clinton and invite her to the White House. She was really most concerned about your grandfather. That really was her sole focus in making sure that he was okay.

You know, we got back to Washington, and within the next couple days, we were back on a plane, back to Texas, and we were onto the next move. You know, after 29 residences...the last I counted. There could be more, but after so many moves over so many years, she was such a pro, and she's so organized and really I think was a closet designer at heart. You know, she just had such a sense of style and it was always the same. In some cases, she used the same fabric

throughout the entire room but it always worked and it always felt comfortable. It always was beautiful. She had a great sense of style.

Sam: Well, we have to talk about our friend, Jean Becker, who recently wrote a book called "Pearls of Wisdom," cataloging all the amazing advice my grandmother's given to many over the years. Peggy, whether you asked for it or not, I'm sure my grandmother has given you a couple pearls of wisdom over the years. I was hoping you could share one or more with us today.

Peggy: Huge shout out to our friend, Jean Becker. So talented. Not one but two books under her belt now. Let's hope there's a third. I have to admit, Sam, you know, when Jean reached out to people for some submissions to the book, I, sort of, flippantly just dashed off an email to her just thinking, "Well, check this box and move on." Well, mine made it in the book, and I would just like to say that my pearls were very practical just like Barbara Bush. The first one was, "When someone gives you a compliment, just say thank you." Like, they don't want to know that you borrowed the dress from your sister or that it's 10 years old. Just say thank you, acknowledge the nice remark, and move on, which is so her. Can't you just hear her say that?

Sam: Oh, yeah.

Peggy: And then the second one, which I learned from her, is to lay plastic dry cleaning bags in between your layers of clothing when you pack for trips, and it keeps the wrinkles away. So those were, sort of, my two little pearls, but I would say, from a personal aide standpoint, you know, she really had such an impact on all of our lives in very different ways. I mean, we were really young and impressionable. She had an opinion on who we dated, who we married, what we wore. She and your grandfather always set such a fine example in terms of being kind, being genuine, being charitable. She always had a saying, too, which is really something to live by. Every morning, when you wake up, you have a choice, and you have a choice to be happy and to love your life. And you can, sort of, press the reset button but every day you have a choice. So live your life to the fullest. And she certainly did.

Sam: Well, that's good advice. Well, Peggy, it's been a true pleasure hearing your amazing stories about my grandmother. But I'd like to end with a story about my grandfather as I'm sure you had many interactions with him during your time at the White House. What do you remember about George Bush?

Peggy: I feel like I know all the aides, I'm sure, felt like their time was the best time, but I feel like my term was really so remarkable in that I got to experience the White House and then a year or so after the transition. The White House was so different than the post-presidency. You know, it was serious business. God, I just tried to stay out of the way when we were with your grandfather and his

whole entourage and team. Your grandmother had a healthy competition. There's always competitions in the Bush family, but, you know, she referred to her lean staff and secret service detail as the A-team. You know, the east wing was the A-team and the west wing was, sort of, the B-team, which always got a laugh out of everybody.

But, you know, your grandfather was a remarkable man and seeing him with heads of state, you know, seeing him with elevator operators when we would walk through the kitchens of hotels to get to ballrooms to where he was speaking, he always had a warm smile and a kind word for everybody. He treated everybody the same. What a testament to a terrific person.

You know, the last time I saw him, other than at your grandmother's funeral, Brian and I were in Kennebunkport, which, you know, they were so generous and including people, and staff, and family, and friends up to the point... It was December before your grandmother died, and Jon Meacham, the historian and author, was there and he had spent the summer reading his book to your grandfather that he had written chapter by chapter, and then Jon would leave and other people would, sort of, fill in. But Jon asked to come back for the final chapter, and he did, and he was there. And we were in your grandparent's bedroom, which was the scene of so much activity throughout the years, and we were there when Jon was reading the last chapter. And it was just... I'll never forget it. It was really quite special.

Sam: Peggy, thank you so much for being a part of the show. It was great hearing your stories. All the best to you and yours.

Peggy: Sam, I had a great time visiting with you, too. Thank you so much 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.