



All the Best Podcast

Episode 83. Compromise and Action

83. Featuring Mark K. Updegrove, President & CEO of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Foundation

Mark: December 20th, 2016. Dear Mr. Simpson, I'm honored to write this letter on behalf of Mark Updegrove, for whom I have great respect. We first met Mark when he was at "Time" magazine. My great friend, Hugh Sidey, introduced us. And he told Barbara and me that Mark was a young man to watch. As usual, Hugh was right. Mark has done great work at the LBJ Library and his accomplishments are too numerous to list, although the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Bill stands out as an exceptional event. Through a number of cooperative projects and events between LBJ and the Bush Library, we have gotten to know him well and have become friends. I might add that we love his wife, Amy, too. The Medal of Honor Museum Foundation could not make a better choice in choosing a leader for your exciting new project. I recommend Mark without hesitation. My only regret is that he will leave Texas. Good luck in building your museum. It's a wonderful idea, and will be a great tribute to our country's heroes. Thank you for taking the initiative to make this happen. Happy Holidays to you and yours. All the best, 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.

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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 taught 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 investments 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."

Mark K. Updegrove is an American historian and author. He is the President and CEO of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Foundation in Austin, Texas, and Presidential Historian for ABC. From 2009 to 2017, he served as the Director of the LBJ Presidential Library. He has conducted exclusive interviews with seven U.S. presidents, and is the author of several books on the presidency, including, "The Last Republicans: Inside the Extraordinary Relationship Between George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush." And "Indomitable Will: LBJ in the Presidency." His next book, titled, "Incomparable Grace: JFK in the Presidency," will be published later this year. Mark, welcome to "All the Best."

Mark: Sam, thank you so much for having me. It's an honor to be with you.

Sam: Well, I have to ask, after hearing that letter, I think there's a story behind it. Could you share it with us?

Mark: You know, it's antithetical to a Bush 41 podcast, because it sounds a little self-aggrandizing. But it's a very wonderful story for me, personally. So, some years back, my wife and I had lunch with your grandparents. And we were just talking about things. And I mentioned the possibility that I might leave the LBJ Presidential Library as its Director. It was a federal job, and the pay was relatively modest. And my wife and I had just gotten married, and we had four kids to put through college. So we talked about this opportunity for me to be the CEO of the National Medal of Honor museum. And your grandfather looked at me, and he was a man of relatively few words at the time. He said, "Do you want it?" And I said, "Mr. President, I think I do, because it's a really wonderful opportunity. It's a

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worthy project. And it would allow us a little more financial comfort so that we could put our kids through college." And he just looked at me and he nodded. And that was all he said.

And three days later, I got a call from Darwin Simpson, the man to whom your grandfather wrote that letter, who was the chairman of the board of the National Medal of Honor Foundation. He said, "You just got a recommendation from the 41st President of the United States." And it speaks volumes about your grandfather. He didn't say a word about it. He just went back and found out who the chairman was, and wrote a letter of recommendation. It was one of the most gracious things anyone has ever done for me, and I'll never forget.

Sam: That's a classic George H.W. Bush move right there. Especially writing a letter, which he wrote many in his days. But Mark, I want to talk about your career, because you've dedicated a large portion of your professional life to studying, interviewing, and writing books about our nation's presidents. What is it about the highest office in our land that inspired you to pursue that subject matter?

Mark: It's interesting, in that letter, your grandfather referenced Hugh Sidey, who's a mutual friend of ours. Hugh Sidey was the president watcher for "Time" magazine throughout the presidencies of John F. Kennedy, through your uncle, George W. Bush. He knew them all, he interviewed them all. And I was always fascinated, as a kid, reading Hugh's column, and was honored, later in my life, to call him my friend. But he brought the presidency to life for me. And it was very clear through his writings, and through the study of American history, that there is no office in the history of the world that has meant more to the development of humankind than the American presidency. So if you're going to study history, American history in particular, you have to study the presidency. So I started off as an amateur and then became a professional historian. And it's been a fascinating ride.

Sam: And all that has led you to now, your role as President and CEO of the LBJ Foundation in Austin, Texas. You work every single day to promote the legacy of the 36th President. As someone who does the same for our 41st President, I'm always interested to hear what your biggest challenges are in advancing those messages.

Mark: We have similar challenges, to some degree. And maybe mine's a little more daunting than yours. You lost your grandfather, we all lost your grandfather a few years ago. And it's hard to bring to life the legacy of a president who's not top of mind. You know, it's been almost 60 years since LBJ was the president of our nation. So it's hard for young people, in particular, to understand the importance of that President, or what I consider to be the importance and consequence of the

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Johnson presidency. But it's made a little easier for me in so far as the things that LBJ was combating, the challenges that he had on his desk are the same challenges that we have today. Racial equity, immigration reform, voting rights, environmental preservation, these are all battles that LBJ was fighting in the 1960s. And they continue to be relevant today, just as the 1960s, in so many ways, is the most politically and culturally relevant period of the 20th century. We can relate to those times today, in many ways. So that makes it a little easier. But as you know, the challenges are still very much there.

Sam: Yeah. And you mentioned some of those legacies. And my grandfather never liked talking about his legacy when he was alive. I'm sure you have received this question many times in regards to our 36th President. Mark, in your view, what are the most important elements that make up LBJ's legacy, as we look back almost 40 years now, after his death?

Mark: Your grandfather used to call...he didn't say the word legacy, as you know, he'd say, "The L Word," he'd say.

Sam: Right.

Mark: And he'd say, "I'm going to leave it to you and others to figure out what that legacy was." LBJ was a little more heavy handed. But I think there are two central pillars to LBJ's legacy, Sam. One, importantly, is Vietnam. And that was, of course, the quagmire that LBJ found himself in. He inherited the Vietnam War from John F. Kennedy. He chose to escalate the war. We now know, in light of history, that that was the wrong decision. It was harder to see at the time. Vietnam very much shrouded LBJ's legacy for at least two generations. But as the passions around that very controversial war have receded, I think we see what I consider to be the bigger part of LBJ's legacy, which are his legislative accomplishments. I happen to be in the LBJ Library right now, and I'm looking at a shadow box which used to hang in my office. And it contains the pens that LBJ used to sign bills into law in one year, 1965, so one year alone.

And in that shadow box are the pens that signed the Immigration Act, which is the most sweeping immigration reform in the history of our country, created Medicare and Medicaid, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Head Start, and the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Clean Air Act, the Highway Beautification Act, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Higher Education Act, and the Voting Rights Act. And that is one single year of LBJ's presidency. And there aren't presidents who wouldn't give their eyeteeth for one or two of those laws alone. And if you sort through the laws of the Great Society, what stands out most are the

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contributions around civil rights. We simply did not meet our promise of all men are created equal, our most sacred creed, until the presidency of Lyndon Johnson, and the signing of the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, the Fair Housing Act, and other laws that ensured the protection of people of color. So I think the central pillars are twofold. There is Vietnam, which is a rightful and important part of LBJ's legacy, and there are the civil rights accomplishments that help us to achieve our promise as a nation.

Sam: Well, before we started recording, we talked about the pandemic and how you hadn't seen my Uncle George W. since before then. I know, like many businesses across the country, presidential libraries were certainly not spared from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Libraries were closed to the public, staffing was cut, and a lot of fundraising opportunities were put on hold or moved to virtual. Mark, how did the LBJ Library handle the changing climate? And are things getting back to normal in Austin, Texas yet?

Mark: Well, they were, Sam. That's a whole other story. I'll answer the first part of your question first, which is, I think we handled it in the same manner that you did. I watched what you did at Bush 41 and you did it very gracefully. You transitioned to virtual programming, and you tried your very best to keep in touch with your constituents and to continue to propagate the legacy of your grandmother and your grandfather. And you did an admirable job of it. We tried to do the same thing. And I think we learned a lot about keeping in touch through virtual means. So that was a valuable lesson. We are very eager to open up our doors wholeheartedly. And we've done so on a limited basis now. I expect that we will tamp down those efforts, as the Delta variant becomes increasingly prevalent. That's the right thing to do. We just made a very tough decision in the last couple of days about scrapping a huge event that we had with Bryan Cranston, who played LBJ some years back and has become a friend of the libraries. He was to come here and do a huge event that was to open up our new season of in-person programming. And I talked to Bryan last night, and we both felt that it was the right thing to do, not to convene a large audience when the Delta variant is so threatening. So we've put our in-person programming once again to the side, Sam, and we'll hope to pick it up as soon as it's responsible, and in your grandfather's words, prudent to do so.

Sam: Well, Mark, you're certainly a leading authority in all things LBJ. I know that only scratches the surface when it comes to your mastery of presidential history. During your career, you were able to interview both my grandfather and my grandmother, on separate occasions and together. What do you remember about your time together with George and Barbara Bush? And what kept you coming back for more?

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Mark: Well, you couldn't not come back for more. They were just utterly delightful people. And I admired them well before I had met them. I just respected so much about them, as people. I didn't always agree with the policies of your grandfather, but it didn't matter. I knew that they were coming from his heart. I knew that this was a decent person trying to do his very best in the office of the presidency. And that's all we can ask of anybody who holds that office. But as I got to know them, what I really appreciated was their senses of humor, and the fact that they really didn't take themselves all that seriously, as you know, as well as any. And I remember this one occasion of being up in Kennebunkport, which my wife and I love. And we had rented a small house there. And we invited your grandparents and a few other...your mother and a few others over to the house. And we had this glorious evening with a lovely sunset over Cape Porpoise.

I was to speak the next day at a fundraiser for the Kennebunkport Library. And as I was walking your grandmother to her Secret Service SUV, she said, "You know, George and I are coming tomorrow." And I said, "I know, Barbara." She instated I call her Barbara. I said, "I know, Barbara. I'm honored. And she said, "Well, what will you be talking about?" And I said, "Well, I'll talk on the presidency for about 40 minutes and then take 10 minutes of questions." And she looked at me and she said, "Make it half an hour. No questions." So I spoke for 29 minutes. Didn't want to take any chances, went down to your grandmother in the first row, and I said, "Did I do okay?" And she kissed me on the forehead and she said, "You did great."

Sam: That's a classic.

Mark: But she did not abide long-windedness, as you know. You know, again, they were utterly delightful.

Sam: Some of these interviews led to your book, "The Last Republicans: Inside the Extraordinary Relationship Between George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush," which shed light on one of the most consequential father-son duels in American history. Mark, what inspired you to write about the 41-43 relationship and why was it so important?

Mark: Well, it's not only one of the more consequential father-son relationships, Sam, in my view, it's maybe the most consequential father-son relationship. We've only had one other father-son duo hold the presidency. And that was John Adams and John Quincy Adams. And there was 24 years that separated their presidencies. And not only 24 years, but also a great distance. John Adams lived for about a year and a quarter of his son's presidency, but he was up in Quincy, Massachusetts, three days away by stagecoach. So it's not like he could talk to his son about the office he was holding and the decisions that he was making. But George H.W. Bush was

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very much alive and a spry 70-something when his son took office. And only eight years separated their presidencies. So he was in a real position to make a difference in his son's presidency. And as I explained to both of them as I was appealing to them, to do the project, to participate in interviews around the project, history is going to need to know this story. And it's going to be told whether it comes from you or not. So it's better that you tell that story. And I can promise you that I'll do the very best I can to convey what that story is, through your words.

And they were kind enough to talk to me about it. But at the end of the day, and what I worried about is I would be at cocktail parties during the George W. Bush administration, and I would hear people spin these wildly ridiculous theories on what your grandfather was doing behind the scenes to pull the strings of the George W. Bush presidency. And I thought that was ludicrous then, I think it's even more ludicrous now, knowing, as I do, your grandfather and uncle. But at the end of the day, as you know, because you were there, it's a love story. It was about a father supporting his son in the office that he knew so well. And he knew that that was the most important contribution he could make to his son. Supporting him, not trying to direct him, not trying to manipulate him or steer him in a certain direction, but simply to offer him love and support as he carried the burdens of this awesome job.

Sam: Mark, at the George and Barbara Bush Foundation, and I'm sure you feel the same at the LBJ Foundation, we feel, now more than ever, Americans need to be exposed to the legacy and Presidency of George H.W. Bush and Barbara Bush. The political climate has certainly changed since 41 was in office almost 30 years ago. Mark, what are some of the changes you see? And is it good for America?

Mark: You know, one of the changes I see is... There are several, Sam. One is the fierce division, partisanship, and polarization that we're seeing in America. We simply don't listen to each other. And we don't know each other anymore. We don't seek to know each other. I think that's problematic. And part of the problem is the fragmentation and proliferation of media. It's easy for us to get absorbed in our own echo chambers. And I think that creates greater alienation. The second thing is the state of our democracy. And the attack on the U.S. Capitol is the most manifest indication of that. The very antithetical idea of people storming into the citadel of democracy in order to take our country back. That's as antithetical as anything I can think of. And I think you're seeing the siege on voting rights, which I know would be a deep concern to Lyndon Johnson. I listed that flurry of laws that came from LBJ and an obliging Congress in 1965.

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But I'll tell you, if you looked at the large sweep of LBJ's legislative legacy, he was most proud of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, for many reasons. And that has been gutted and continues to be threatened today, as various state capitals enact greater voting reform in the form of suppression. So that's a thing that concerns me. The final thing is, and your grandfather spoke about this, he said in his inauguration speech in 1989, "America is never wholly herself unless she is engaged in high moral principle." And I don't see a lot of high moral principle in public life today. And I know that that would be of great concern to your grandfather.

Sam: Mark, I'd like to thank you for your time, stories, and expertise today. It's been a true pleasure to hear your perspective on our nation's presidents and the powerful role they play in our history. I'd like to end with this question. My grandfather was once asked about compromise, and how our current political climate has moved us away from those days, as many politicians and citizens are more entrenched than ever in their beliefs. Mark, when did this shift occur? And what can we do as a nation to get back to those days of compromise and action?

Mark: That's a really good question. I mentioned your grandfather's inauguration speech. And there's another quote that I love from that speech. He said, "To my friends, and yes, I do mean friends in the loyal opposition, and yes, I do mean loyal, I put out my hand." And he went on to declare the age of the offered hand. We don't see a lot of offered hands anymore. But to answer your question, Sam, I think it probably started with Newt Gingrich in the 1990s. I think we started to see a shift where the opposition was treated as the enemy. Newt Gingrich had been a thorn in the side, I think, of your grandfather, to a certain degree. I think he expressed mild concern at the attitude of Newt Gingrich and that demonizing the enemy, and both sides do it. But we've seen that become more and more prevalent in our national discourse. As to what we can do about it, I don't know the answer. I think it comes to what I was saying before, we really do need to try to listen to each other and try to understand each other, as different as we may think about things. We are inherently divided as a nation. That's what a democracy is. And we need to understand that and try to feel compassion for the person that we're speaking with, conjure up some understanding around them. It needs to begin with all of us. There might be something that needs to catalyze that, Sam, I don't know what it is. But I'm hopeful that we can come together as a people once again.

Sam: Hmm, well, you said listen, no problem for me to listen to you today, Mark. Thank you so much for being on "All the Best." It was great to see you and good luck at the library. Hopefully, Austin, Texas will crank back open and we can get some people in through there.

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Mark: Sam, the pleasure was mine. Thanks 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.