



All the Best Podcast

Episode 87. Making the World Better for Future Generations

87. Featuring Condoleezza Rice, Former Secretary of State and Former National Security Advisor

Secretary Rice: March 1st, 1991. "Dear Condi, you have graced us with your presence in so many ways over the past two years. These have been such exhilarating times, such challenging times, that all who played a part in them can carry for a lifetime a wonderful sense of personal fulfillment.

While the great struggle for the soul of the Soviet Union goes on, we made historic progress in settling the issues that for 40 years divided the world between East and West. Nothing is more stirring than the sight of East Europeans basking, while also toiling, in their new freedom. No one contributed more to these achievements than you. Your understanding of the Soviets, the wise advice you offered, and your tireless diplomatic and interagency efforts were indispensable. You can look back on these two years knowing that you had a hand in making the world better for future generations.

Having you a part of the White House family has been thoroughly enjoyable. Barbara and I will miss you, but expect to see you or at least hear from you often. Please promise that you will continue to share with me your thoughts on our policies. I would value them greatly.

All the best, and don't forget us.

Sincerely, George 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."

Condoleezza Rice was born in Birmingham, Alabama. She earned her bachelor's degree in political science, cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa, from the University of Denver, her master's, in the same subject, from the University of Notre Dame, and her PhD, likewise, in political science, from The Graduate School of International Studies at the University of Denver. From February 1989 through March 1991, Rice served on President George H.W. Bush's National Security Council staff. She served as director, then senior director of Soviet and Eastern European affairs, as well as Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. In 1986, while an International Affairs Fellow of the Council on Foreign Relations, Rice also served as Special Assistant to the Director of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. From January 2005 to January 2009, Rice served as the 66th Secretary of State of the United States, the second woman and first Black woman to hold the post.

Rice also served as President George W. Bush's Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, the first woman to hold that position. Condoleezza Rice is the Tad and Dianne Taube Director of the Hoover Institution, and the Thomas and Barbara Stephenson Senior Fellow on public policy. In addition, she is a

founding partner of Rice, Hadley, Gates & Manuel LLC., an international strategic consulting firm.

We are so lucky to have Secretary Rice with us today. I cannot wait to talk to you about all things George and Barbara Bush, but first I'd love to hear about your path to service. What inspired you to enter a life of public service?

Secretary Rice: To be completely honest, I was a failed piano major. I started life as a piano performance major. I studied piano from the age of three. After a stint at the Aspen Music Festival School, and meeting those 12-year-olds who could play everything I could play when I was 17, I thought, you know, maybe there's something out there rather than teaching 13-year-olds to murder Beethoven. And I wandered into a course in international politics in my junior year, taught by a man named Josef Korbel, Madeleine Albright's father, and he opened up the world to me of things diplomatic, international, Russian, Soviet, and I suddenly knew that I'd found something I was passionate about.

And so, I came to Stanford University on a one-year fellowship, ended up staying as a faculty member. A couple of years into that, I met this man named Brent Scowcroft, who had come to give a talk at Stanford. I asked him some question, and you know how it is. I'm sure, as a young person, it might have even been slightly sharp, because you want to show that you really know what you're talking about. And he came up afterwards, and he said, "You know, I've been following what you're doing." I was kind of getting to be known as one of the better young Soviet specialists in the country. And he started to take me to various meetings, the Aspen Strategy Group, where the foreign policy establishment gathers in Aspen in the summer.

And then, when President George H.W. Bush was elected, I'll just never forget the phone call. Brent called me, and he said, "You know, this fellow Gorbachev is doing some interesting things." This is now 1989, since December '88 and January 1989. And he said, "The president's gonna need somebody to help him sort it out. Would you come be the White House Soviet specialist?" And that was the start of my relationship with Bushes.

Sam: Well, as far back as I can remember, you've always been a close friend of our families. You've been a regular at Kennebunkport, Maine, and fit right into our kind of athletic and ultra-competitive family. So, you said you met through General Scowcroft. Can you talk about meeting George and Barbara Bush for the first time?

Secretary Rice: I was so excited to meet the Bushes. I of course knew President Bush's long history in foreign policy, all of the roles that he played, the fact that he was, by everybody's account, just a wonderful, gentle human being. And so, I was very excited to meet him. First time I met President Bush, I actually was the note taker for a meeting early on in the administration, when he invited Jack Matlock, who was then the ambassador to the Soviet Union, to come back for consultations, and I was the note taker. And it was my first time in the Oval Office, and so, I was sitting there and I was kind of looking around, thinking, "Oh, wow. Roosevelt was in this office. Kennedy was in this office. Oh my goodness, look at that portrait of Lincoln." And I remember thinking, "Oh my goodness, we're a third through the meeting and I haven't taken a single note." And at that point, I thought, "Okay, you'd better focus on your job and less on the surroundings." But he took me aside and said, "You know, I'm gonna need a lot of advice, and I'm just really glad you're here."

And then, in February, so, just a few weeks after we were there in Washington, he asked me to arrange a meeting with a group of Soviet specialists, bring them up to Kennebunkport. Now, it's February, in Kennebunkport, and I remember kind of dodging the ice and snow as we drove up there. Actually, the only heated room in the house was the bedroom of President and Mrs. Bush, and so, we actually had the meeting in their bedroom...

Sam: Oh, wow.

Secretary Rice: ...with these Soviet specialists sitting around talking about what was going on in the Soviet Union, and that was really my first exposure to this wonderful couple, to Mrs. Bush, who was just such a wonderful person, and so welcoming. We made popcorn in the kitchen. I mean, this would be familiar to you, is the way that they treated guests. They just made you feel right at home. Even if you were there to talk about the Soviet Union.

Sam: Well, I'm sure the Soviets didn't mind the cold weather.

Secretary Rice: I guess not. But we did. We thought it was a little chilly.

Sam: When he became president, many assumed that my grandfather would carry on a lot of Reagan's policies toward the Soviet Union. However, the administration chose to take a strategic pause, to kind of reevaluate that relationship. Secretary Rice, how do you think the administration benefited from this reassessment, and what could be learned from that thoughtful approach from 41?

Secretary Rice: So much was swirling around us, and I'd seen that Gorbachev was making a new pronouncement every day, and I think there was a sense that we needed to step back and really think about how real this transformation was in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe. There's a lot of pressure. "When are you going to meet with Gorbachev? When are you going to meet with Gorbachev?" And President Bush said, "You know, I don't want to meet with Gorbachev until I have something to say." He had actually met Gorbachev as Vice President, when Gorbachev had come to the UN in the fall before, so he'd actually met him. But he didn't want to rush into it, and so, we did do a series of papers for him. We brought in outside advisers to think about what was going on in the Soviet Union.

It also gave us time to get our team in place. Because, when you get there, it's really kind of the White House staff, but the State Department's really not very much at full strength, Defense Department, and so, it gave us a chance to do that. But I'll have to tell you, the Soviet Union just kept sprinting out ahead of whatever we could do. I remember writing a paper for President Bush that said, "We need to make sure that we have the following tests passed by Gorbachev, to make sure that he's serious." And before I could actually get the paper to him, through Bob Gates and Brent, they'd already done it. So, we pretty soon realized that we were going to have to start to catch up. And it was actually, really, events in Eastern Europe that let us know that we had to accelerate our own thinking about what was going on. That summer of '89, when President Bush went to Gdansk, and to Warsaw in Poland, met with Lech Walesa, could see that Eastern Europe was indeed moving on, and that Gorbachev was not interfering, I think that told us that the time for study was over. It was time to really move on.

Sam: And their unlikely friendship kind of blossomed from there.

Secretary Rice: It did. One reason that I think his relationship with Gorbachev blossomed was that one of the really wonderful characteristics of President Bush was he was always able to put himself in somebody else's shoes. We knew that history was moving our way. As a Soviet colleague of mine said, "The unification of Germany was a strategic defeat. There used to be two Germanys, and now there was only one," he said, "and it's your Germany, not ours." And so, we knew that history was moving on.

Now you have to keep your head about you, and you have to recognize that if you push too hard, if you're too vocal, if you're too triumphant, then you're going to back Gorbachev into a corner, and maybe make him do things that he never intended to do. And so, all along, the president was absolutely determined that we

weren't going to engage in triumphalist. It was going to be not "our side won, your side lost." And I really think that helped Gorbachev to do the right thing, all along the way, up to that final moment when he signed away to Boris Yeltsin the future of the Soviet Union.

Sam: I want to talk more about some of these foreign policy victories, and one of them you just mentioned, the unification of Germany in 1989. I want to talk about that day in the White House, because I know you were there, and my grandfather was obviously there. Can you talk about that day when the news broke in the White House? What was the overall feeling of the staff, and then, how did my grandfather react to the news?

Secretary Rice: Well, so much was going on that we were really busy in the Soviet and East European directory. And so, I got a call from Flo, who was Brent Scowcroft's secretary, and she said, "The general wants you to come over and brief the President on what's going on in Berlin." And we said, "Uh, what's going on in Berlin?" And she said, "Turn on CNN." And so we did, and here, the wall's coming down. We got our act together, sort of what were we going to say, and we were ready to go over and start presenting options to the President and so forth. But the one thing we really wanted him to do was to go to Berlin. And so, we went to the Oval and we said, "Mr. President, you have to go to Berlin. You have to go for Kennedy, for Truman, for Reagan. You have to go to Berlin. This is the moment when the Cold War is ending." And I'll never forget it, like it was yesterday, Sam. He said, "What would I do? Dance on the wall?"

He said, "This is a German moment, not an American moment." And that humility, and that willingness not to try to take credit, even though I think it is absolutely fair to say that without the United States, for 45 years, that moment would not have happened. He understood to stand back and give it to the German people. I was sat, as you know, at your grandpa's funeral, and Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany, was there. And I saw her in the aisle, and I walked up to her and I said, "Chancellor, you honor us with your presence here." And she said, "I had to be here. He made the unification of Germany possible." The Germans knew what he did. I sometimes think that they understood better than most Americans how pivotal his role had been in that moment, because the Soviet Union still had millions of men deployed in Germany. They didn't have good options, but they had options. And he just wanted to make sure that we dealt with it in the right way.

Sam: Truly was a remarkable moment. Well, Secretary Rice, you spent time in the administration, and also time around George and Barbara Bush for a very long time

after that. Working so closely with my grandfather, and spending time with him, I know that this happened to me, but I learned a lot about becoming a public servant. I think you did, too. I was wondering if you could share some of those things you may have learned from him over the years, maybe working in the administration, and then his post-presidency.

Secretary Rice: He absolutely taught me how to be a public servant. Because he understood that the important word in that was "service." And he understood it as an honor and as a privilege, not as something that was going to benefit you, but where you were coming in to give your very best every day in the defense of the country, in the defense of our values, and the furtherance of our goals, and in bettering the world for humankind. And he understood that that was a service. That was something that you needed to be honored to do.

And so, I learned things big and small. I learned the bigger lessons of humility and being gentle, and being both genuine with people and diplomatic with them. But I learned small things, too. I'll never forget, not too long after we got to office, he asked me to write a note to Helmut Kohl, then the Chancellor of Germany, congratulating him on that victory in the Bundestag. I had to go look up that victory in the Bundestag. And I realized that what he was doing was he was just establishing a relationship, so that when he had to ask for something hard, he'd already established the relationship. And I thought, through the rest of my life, not just in government, but in university administration, and when I worked with corporations, how you establish those relationships before you have to ask for something. And he was a master at doing that, in just small ways.

He was a master of sending the note to a staff member, that said, "Thank you for that excellent memo," on this or that, and I got my fair share of those. I read a letter for you at the beginning. That was the letter that ended my service, but I can't tell you how many smaller letters there were, and how many times the memo that I sent came back with a note at the top, from the President of the United States, that said, "Thank you so much for the insights in this." In ways that were both big and small, he taught me how to be a public servant. And he taught me how to put American values at the core of it, but also, just human values.

Sam: Well, Secretary, throughout your busy career, there's been one place that you've always come back to, Stanford University. You are the current director of the Hoover Institute. You already mentioned you did a fellowship there. And you didn't mention, but you were the Provost for six years as well. What is it about

Stanford University, besides the great weather, that's kept you coming back all these years?

Secretary Rice: Well, I have teased the Bush family from time to time about Yale and Stanford. It's really the remarkable people here. Being among these great students, and we do have wonderful students. We also have terrific faculty. I have great colleagues. But Stanford is a little bit different. Stanford is a young university. It's 125 years old, not 300 years old. It was founded on the farm of then Senator Stanford, kind of out here in the wilderness. And it also now sits in the middle of the Silicon Valley, which is the hub of innovation in the country. And because it's young, it's always been a striving university. It's always been pushing forward and running, not walking toward excellence. And, so I love that atmosphere, that sense of purpose at a place like this.

But there's one other thing. I love intercollegiate athletics, and your grandfather was also a great athlete for Yale. Your uncle once told me that he really wished he'd been Willie Mays, so athletics runs deep in the Bush family. And it runs deep with me, too. My mom was a musician. That's how I became a musician, but never picked up a ball or bat of any kind. My dad, on the other hand, was a three-sport letterman, in football, basketball, and tennis. And so, I absolutely love the intercollegiate athletics here at Stanford, and I'm the faculty fellow for the women's golf team, and you'll find me most Saturdays at a Stanford football game, or a basketball game if it's that season.

Sam: Oh, that's great. Well, the full life of service of my grandparents inspired this podcast. It inspired people all over the world, throughout their amazing lives, and they did it all by living by one credo: "To whom much is given, much is required." Secretary Rice, how have you emulated that in your life?

Secretary Rice: Before I answer that, let me say a word about your grandmother.

Sam: Please.

Secretary Rice: Because the day that I was going to leave the White House, she invited me for tea, in the residence. Nobody invites a lowly special assistant to have tea with the First lady. When you're the Soviet specialist during the end of the Cold War, you're around them a lot. And she was just wonderful, and she said, "I want you to know that once you're part of the Bush clan, you can never leave." And, in fact, it kind of turned out to be true. But she exemplified this in her love of reading and literacy, and her determination to make sure that those gifts would be there for everyone. Any good cause, Barbara Bush was going to be there for it. You

know, she has a kind of reputation of being, you know, tough and salty and all of that...

Sam: You're telling me.

Secretary Rice: Yeah, yeah. But I want to tell you one little story about her, too.

Sam: Please.

Secretary Rice: We had Raisa Gorbacheva, and Raisa had clashed with Mrs. Reagan, constantly. And, knowing Raisa Gorbacheva, it was not Mrs. Reagan, it was Raisa. And so, your grandmother and Mrs. Gorbacheva were going up to speak at Wellesley. They were supposed to leave at 8:00 o'clock in the morning, and we got word the night before, right, said that couldn't leave till 8:30. And then, she couldn't leave till 9:00. And then she couldn't leave till 9:30. And it was almost as if she was trying to provoke Mrs. Bush. Mrs. Bush just kept saying, "Oh, that's fine. That's fine." And finally, Raisa gave up and showed up, and they went to Wellesley. But it just says something, too, about your grandmother, and her ability to read people, and to do what it took.

What they both taught me is that that important biblical phrase, and I, too, am a deeply religious person, isn't just something that you say, you have to live it, that, at the end of your life, the achievements and the accomplishments will be remembered by history, but I think what will be remembered by those around you and those who loved you and those who care for you is the lives that you affected, the people that you helped, the people that you reached back to help, and to bring up, that aspect of service, deeply ingrained in the Bush family, and I think I know where it came from. It came from those two, George and Barbara Bush.

Sam: Came from the top. Secretary Rice, it has truly been a pleasure catching up with you today. I thought I'd end on something sports-related. As a former employee of your favorite NFL franchise, the Cleveland Browns, I know they had a tough test week one against the AFC champion Kansas City Chiefs, but I thought they really held their own.

Secretary Rice: They did.

Sam: Do you think they have what it takes to take the next step this year?

Secretary Rice: Well, they should have won...

Sam: I agree.

Secretary Rice: ...you know? You know, punters don't usually drop balls. But it's all right. They're the Browns. I love the Browns. I'm optimistic. I think we've got, for the first time, a really full roster and a great coach, and I'm very excited about it. But I'm also a Browns fan. You do know that the Browns fans are the only people who, when you're ahead by 28 points against Pittsburgh, you get nervous. And so, despite all of our assets this year, despite everybody picking us to do really well, I've just got my fingers crossed and my prayers going up. If nothing else, it shows I'm a person of great loyalty.

Sam: Very loyal. Sometimes you feel like Charlie Brown taking the football away as you're trying to kick it sometimes.

Secretary: Absolutely. That's right. But [inaudible 00:21:25] thank goodness we don't have to play Patrick Mahomes every week. Although, we might see him again in January.

Sam: I wouldn't bet against him. Well, Secretary Rice, thank you for being a part of "All the Best." Thank you for sharing your stories. It's great to see you. Hope to see you soon, and enjoy that sunny weather in California for us over here on the East Coast.

Secretary Rice: Thanks so much, and give my best to your whole family.

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.