



All the Best Podcast

Episode 88. Anchor to Windward

88. Featuring Susan Collins, U.S. Senator from Maine

Sam: March 8th, 2007. I am 83 years old. A few years ago, I would have thought of myself as old at 83, but I don't. What keeps me young is Kennebunkport, Maine, broader still, the Maine coast itself. It is more than the beauty and the heartbeat of our little town. It is more than the glories of a bright red sunrise out of Cape Porpoise or that same sun setting over Mount Agamemnon. This town, this sea, are the essence of my soul. I'm at peace here. I am blessed to live in the house my grandfather built 104 years ago on a neck of land he purchased long before that. My beloved Barbara and I go to sleep in our bedroom, literally a stone's throw from the sea. We can hear the pounding of the ocean waves when the ocean is angry and strong, and we can hear the gentle murmurs of that same sea when all is calm. I can feel all this in the fiber of my soul. I have had an exciting and full life with the help of many friends in Kennebunkport and across our land, I climbed the highest political mountain in the world. I knew good times and times of great disappointment. But when my body and soul cried out for calm and relief, my thoughts came right back here to Kennebunkport. And today I thank God for those who love our town and love this ocean, who lead us and preserve our sacred heritage. My sons and daughter all come home to this special place. So do our grandkids, cousins, brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews—they all come home to

Kennebunkport, Maine, for this is our anchor to windward. When the storms of life are threatening, it is here that all of us get comfort and strength. When we seek tranquility or say our prayers for peace, we come here. It is here we count our many blessings. From this grateful old man out on Walker's point as I sit in my chair out on our deck, watching grandkids playing on the same rocks where I played, and my mother before me. I say, Let us give thanks for our new leaders, to those who do have trust in our town, trust in our precious future. All the best.
George H.W. Bush

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. On behalf of our family and the George and Barbara Bush Foundation. This is “All the Best”.

Susan M. Collins, Maine's Senior United States Senator, was first elected to the Senate in 1996. She ranks 11th in Senate seniority and is the most senior Republican woman. Known for her Maine work ethic, Senator Collins has cast more than 7,900 consecutive votes and holds the longest perfect voting record in the history of the U.S. Senate. Senator Collins has earned a national reputation for working across party lines. For the past eight consecutive years, she has ranked as the most bipartisan member of the U.S. Senate by the Lugar Center at Georgetown University. A native of Caribou, Senator Collins graduated Phi Beta Kappa from St. Lawrence University and joined the staff of then-Congressman and later Senator William Cohen. She was appointed director of the Small Business Administration's Regional Office in Boston by President George H.W. Bush, and she was the founding executive director of the Center for Family Business at Husson University in Bangor. We're thrilled to have Senator Collins with us today. Senator, Welcome to all the best!

Sen. Collins: Thanks so much, Sam. It's a real honor to join you. I thought your grandparents were some of the most wonderful people in the world, and I miss both of them, as I'm sure you do, too.

Sam: That makes two of us. Well, we are always very excited to have a longtime friend of George and Barbara on the show, but before we explore that relationship,

I would be thrilled if you could take us through your own personal path to service. Senator, what inspired you to serve in the first place?

Sen. Collins: I was fortunate to grow up in a home where I was taught the value of public service. Both of my parents served as mayor of my hometown in Northern Maine, Caribou. Each of them was very involved in the community in the state. My father, grandfather, and great-grandfather all served in the Maine Legislature. My mother, I always said, became the chair of any board or organization that she either was appointed to or elected to, and that included serving as the first woman to chair the University of Maine System Board of Trustees. I remember sitting around the dining room table and my parents telling me that you had no right to complain if you stayed on the sidelines, that you had to get involved, and that you should make it a point to give back to your community.

Sam: Hmm. Well, another amazing woman who represented Maine in both the Congress and the Senate was Margaret Chase Smith, and she famously challenged Joe McCarthy in 1950 with the speech "Declaration of Conscience." I know you were able to meet Senator Smith, I believe it was in high school through the Senate youth program. Was Senator Smith the motivation for you to get involved in Maine state politics?

Sen. Collins: She certainly was. I met Senator Margaret Chase Smith when I was a senior at Caribou High School, and I was selected to come to Washington for what still exists, and it's called the Senate Youth Program, sponsored by the William Randolph Hearst Foundation. I had never been on an airplane. I had never been to Washington. I certainly had never met a United States senator. And for reasons I will never understand but always be grateful for, instead of just doing a quick picture with me, Senator Smith spent nearly two hours talking to this high school senior from Caribou, Maine. I believe that one reason Maine has Selected so many women senators is that Margaret Chase Smith paved the way for us. She was Senator the entire time that I was growing up, so it was not considered unusual to have a woman serving as the United States Senator in Maine. At that time, she was the only woman in the Senate. I remember when I met with her, we talked About issues and her famous Declaration of Conscience against the excesses of Senator Joseph McCarthy. She never talked about what it was like to be the only woman in the Senate. She followed up with a couple of letters, which I have to this day, but I remember leaving her office and being so proud that she was my senator and

thinking that women could do anything. And that was back in 1971 where we weren't quite sure—it was a real transition time for girls who were growing up during that era. So I feel fortunate to have had her as a role model. I certainly didn't know when I left her office that it would be in some ways the first step on a journey that would lead me to run for the seat that she once held, and I do have that honor to hold her seat in the United States Senate today.

Sam: Well, it sounds like she had some sort of intuition, at least even if you didn't know it seemed like she saw something in you.

Sen. Collins: Well, I'll never know why she was so generous with her time, but I'll always be grateful for that.

Sam: Senator, in 1992, you were appointed the New England regional director for the Small Business Administration by my grandfather. I'm not sure the history of your first meeting, but I have to think that might have been the first interaction you had with then-President Bush. Is that true?

Sen. Collins: Well, it certainly was a great honor to serve in his administration, and I'll have to say that other than being a United States senator, my favorite job was being the New England regional administrator for the Small Business Administration, and what I learned there had stayed with me to this day and helped me come up with the concept for the Paycheck Protection Program that helped so many small businesses and their employees survive this pandemic. But my first personal interactions with President and Mrs. Bush was in 1994 after I won an eight-way Republican primary for governor, and they invited me to their home at Walker's Point for lunch, and you can't imagine how thrilled I was. I had exchanged letters with the President thanking him for the SBA appointment, but as far as face-to-face and spending time with them, it was that lunch after winning the primary in 1994. I remember we ate outside of Walker's Point and Mrs. Bush had me wear one of her straw hats to protect me from getting burned on the patio, their beautiful patio overlooking the ocean.

Sam: Well, speaking of the ocean and the beautiful scenery that is Maine, the state of Maine specifically, Walker's Point in Kennebunkport has always been my grandfather's anchor to windward. George and Barbara Bush called Kennebunkport, Maine, their favorite place in the world. Senator Collins, what is

so special about the state of Maine, and why have so many shared in George and Barbara Bush's Love of Your great state?

Sen. Collins: I think it's two factors. It's the extraordinary people who live there. There's a real sense of community in our state—people look out for one another, they care deeply about one another. And also, the natural beauty of the state of Maine is unsurpassed. I've loved knowing how much the state and Kennebunkport meant to your grandparents. I think they were always very eager to get up there each year and always slept with some wistfulness. It was a longing. I've often thought that after Barbara Bush passed away, that President Bush was determined to spend one last summer in Maine, and I saw him that summer, and I'll always treasure that last meeting with him.

Sam: Hmm. They absolutely loved Maine, and we've obviously loved Maine as well as the family. I was there last weekend and the weather was beautiful. We love September in Maine, as everybody loves every month, but September is such a great month to be there. So, happy to steal away for one last weekend before the winter here in D.C. Well, senator, you mentioned my grandparents' support of your run for governor in 1994. I have to ask what was it like knowing George and Barbara Bush were in your corner, and did you ever receive any advice from them over the years? I'm sure my grandmother gave some advice. She usually likes to do it unsolicited.

Sen. Collins: I was just going to say that there was more advice from your grandmother than from your grandfather.

Sam: That sounds about right.

Sen. Collins: I will tell you that one of the most wonderful memories I have of my 1994 campaign was when Barbara Bush offered to go out on the campaign trail with me and we went to a senior center where they were doing some exercise class. And I think it was in Biddeford, as I recall, and it was so kind of her. That was really extraordinary, and over the years, they were always steadfast in their support and their friendship for me. For example, and this was rare, as you well know, they actually did a fundraiser for me at Walker's Point, and that was very unusual. In another campaign, there was one at the Colony Hotel, that both President and Mrs. Bush came to. I remembered that was shortly after I had gotten married and my

husband was not in town at that point, but he was coming the next day, and your grandmother said to me, "Oh, I don't believe that you finally got married," and I said, "No, I really did." And I showed her my wedding ring and she said, "Oh, you could have bought that," teasing me, of course. And she said, "Why don't you bring your husband by?" And, the very next day when he arrived in town, we went to Walker's Point in a driving rainstorm and she was helping to towel my husband off. I remember that she always had a gift of making people feel so at home, as did your grandfather. They were so gracious to me always, and you can imagine the first time in particular when I met them in '94 at their home, I was a little intimidated, and they both put me instantly at ease. They were just wonderful to me throughout our time together. I usually visited them once each summer and they were just so gracious, usually invited me for lunch, occasionally was for a reception that they were doing. It was just wonderful.

Sam: Well, I'm happy to see that George W. has picked up where they left off in supporting your most recent bid, at least for senator in 2020. So that's fantastic. And hopefully you know that our family supports you and all that you do.

Sen. Collins: Thank you. That means a great deal to me.

Sam: Well, Senator, my grandfather never liked the word "legacy." In fact, he hated the term. And when asked by people to define it himself, he would always say something along the lines of, "Let the historians figure it out after I'm gone." Well, he's gone, and I know you're not a historian, but as a close friend, I would love to hear your perspective on the legacy of George H.W. Bush.

Sen. Collins: To me, his legacy is one of a humble patriot. You know, the reason that he would never brag about what he had done, whether it was in World War II, where he was so heroic, or as President of the United States, is he had this modesty about him, this humility. He truly was an extraordinary person who was devoted to his country, and history is treating him more and more kindly with each passing year, and I think he was a wonderful president who set the finest example. He loved our country, he would do anything to serve the country, and he had an amazing career of service to America, and that reflected his deep... Patriotism, I really think is the right word to describe him. He always put his country first.

Sam: That's for sure. Senator, the state of Maine relies on you to represent all of their interests as a state senator. When you look at all the issues facing Maine today, is there one that keeps you up at night?

Sen. Collins: There is, perhaps because I grew up in rural Maine and the north in Aroostook County. I'm concerned about the opportunities being available in rural Maine. The southern, more prosperous part of the state has gained population, but the northern, western, and eastern parts of the state have lost population, for the most part, during the past 10 years, although we haven't seen this mini-surge during the pandemic, as people realize that they can work from home, that they can live anywhere, and why not live in beautiful communities in the more rural parts of our state? I do worry about that population loss and whether communities that once were thriving because they had paper mills, for example, that are now closed, or they had textile factories, they had other sources of good jobs, will keep losing young people to southern Maine and to out of state. So, creating jobs and opportunities for people so that they can live where they want to live in some of our most beautiful, smaller communities and rural Maine is really important to me, and I think it is a challenge for our state.

Sam: Senator, It has been an honor having you on All the Best today. We are overjoyed to have such a close friend of my grandparents on the show. I'd like to finish by asking you for advice. We have many young listeners who are eager to start their careers in public service, but sometimes don't know where to start. What advice do you have for someone just getting started in public service?

Sen. Collins: I would urge young people to not be put off by the cynicism and lack of civility that, unfortunately, is characterizing politics in this age. I would say to them, You are the ones who can change this. There are few areas, teaching is one, health care is one, but public service is a way that you can help improve your community, your state, and your country. And we need your energy, your commitment, your ideas in order to make our community, our state, and our country an even better place to live. I think one of the best ways to get started is through an internship. That's what I did when I was in college. I was an intern for then-Congressman, later Senator, Bill Cohen. That started me off. I had no idea that I would end up one day holding the seat that Senator Margaret Chase Smith and Senator Bill Cohen held in the Senate, and I've been very honored to serve the people of Maine, and I underline that word "serve." It is so important that people

get involved, and if you do, I can promise you that you can really make a difference. And it is so satisfying to look at something that has happened, whether you tapped an individual, a community, or written a law that has made our country a better place, or your community or state a better place. So, go for it. It can be difficult at times—I lost that 1994 race in the general election, but if I hadn't taken the risk and followed my dream of serving the people of Maine, I would never have had the opportunity to serve in the United States Senate. So I hope that young people who are listening to this podcast would realize what a difference each and every one of you can make.

Sam: Amen to that, Senator. Thank you for your service and thank you for sharing your stories about my grandparents. Thanks for being with us today.

Sen. Collins: Thank you so much, Sam. I truly love them.

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”.