



All the Best Podcast

Episode 92. Would You Look at That Tie?

92. Featuring the Honorable Sigmund Rogich, former Ambassador to Iceland

Sig: November 22, 1992. "Dear Sig, I'm sitting up here at Camp David looking to the future and counting my many blessings. I'm dressed in fall colors. I have on a brown sweater, a subtly checked shirting of muted greens, and rusty reds, and amber too. Bar said to me when I left Aspen Cottage just how, 'You look like Sig dressed you.' Then I thought he did, but not just in amber and mauve, he dressed me by making me a better person, not just looking into the lens and not just making me attach more real to others, but by watching and learning as he unfailingly supported me by showing how humor can help in tough times and by being just plain caring and being kind. So Sig, this is a thank you for all that you've done for me and it's a hope that our paths will cross in less troubled times, away from the lens, surrounded only by love. Many thanks, Sig. I'll never forget. George Bush."

Pres. Bush: 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."

Pres. Bush: I remember something my dad told me. He said, "Write to 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.

Pres. Bush: 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." Sig Rogich is a lifelong Nevada resident who is the president of the Rogich Communications Group, an international advisory firm that specializes in the areas of business development, crisis communication, strategic planning, issues management, media relations, campaigns, and government affairs. He is a former United States ambassador to his native country of Iceland and was a senior assistant to former President George H. W. Bush in the White House and served as a director of the Tuesday Team responsible for the 1984 election of President Ronald Reagan. Prior to that, Rogich founded R&R advertising and built it into the largest advertising agency in Nevada. Through his creative endeavors with R&R, he was involved in the reinvention of Las Vegas's image for more than 20 years.

Active in local and national politics, Rogich has worked on numerous local gubernatorial and congressional campaigns, as well as the presidential campaigns for President George H.W. Bush and President George W. Bush and presidential hopefuls, Senator John McCain and Governor Jeb Bush. Rogich's company RCG, has been offering counsel to clients in Nevada, throughout the United States, and globally in such places as Mexico, Russia, China, Ukraine, and Vietnam for the past 20 years. He currently represents the Chinese embassy in the United States. We are thrilled to have the very honorable Sig Rogich with us today. Sig, welcome to "All the Best."

Sig: Nice to be with you, Sam. Thank you for having me.

Sam: Well, Sig, I'd like to start by asking about your path to service. You were born in Iceland and moved with your family to Las Vegas, Nevada in 1954. Can you talk

about your early life growing up in Las Vegas? How did that time in your life prepare you for your successful business career that would soon follow?

Sig: Well, I'm not sure how to answer that exactly, Sam. I can tell you that when I came here to the Valley, my father was a construction worker and we kind of followed the circuit. I lived in Missoula, Montana and Sandpoint, Idaho and Cedar City, and Spokane, and then we ended up in Henderson, Nevada, wherever the construction work took him. And he worked for Magnesium Metals out there, it was a titanium plant as well. And we lived in a public housing facility and it was about I'm gonna say 450 square feet, my mother and my father, my sister, my brother, and me. And that was in Henderson. The whole valley then in Las Vegas was probably 45,000 people. And we didn't have much money but we lived well. And I look back on those days with a lot of fondness.

I guess I determined then I didn't want to live like that forever, and so I was very entrepreneurial as a young boy. And the evolution was we moved to Las Vegas I think in 1957, it was thereabouts. And I went to school here and then Las Vegas High School. I always had a job, even as a kid at 12 years old I had jobs. It wasn't collecting, you know, copper, scrap copper, and pop bottles. It was mowing lawns or painting fences or whatever it took to make a little money. So maybe that was the beginning of my desire to have my own company and work for myself.

Sam: Sig, you eventually started and built Rogich Communications and R&R Partners into large and successful businesses. What inspired you to get into the communications business? Was it always something that you were passionate about?

Sig: Not necessarily, but I was a journalism graduate. I had a reasonably good ability to write. In college, I ended up writing speeches for politicians. Paul Laxalt was a client of mine, and it helped me go through school, became editor of the university newspaper. And I took some strong stands, you know, that probably had a partisan bent to them, and the evolution was I ended up working with advertising agencies during the campaign cycle, and I ended up writing most of the commercials and doing all the editing, and got my fill of behind the camera work, and worked in a TV studio at night when I went to college too. So it kind of just grew and I decided I was doing most of the work for the advertising agency so I probably should do it for myself. And that's how I started the agency.

Sam: At what point did you become interested in politics, and when did George and Barbara Bush make their way into your life?

Sig: You know, Sam, in 1984, Paul Laxalt called me and asked me if I would be his representative on the Tuesday Team. He was the national party chairman, as you recall. The Tuesday Team was made up of three individuals. Two of them were in New York, and as fate would have it, I was based in D.C., and so I spent almost every day at the White House and I used the Roosevelt Room as a working room, believe it or not. And I ran into George Bush and we didn't become close until the campaign moved on its way, and in one cycle I was doing a half-hour show for Ronald Reagan and I determined I thought it would be smart to put George Bush into that piece as well.

So I went to Jim Bakker and suggested it. The Vice President loved it, and I wrote a five-minute piece for him to add onto what Ronald Reagan had to say and it ran nationwide. And that was kind of our beginning. Then after this successful campaign, I came home and I got a call from Lee Atwater and he asked me if I would fly to Washington and meet with George Bush, and they asked me if I would come on board and be the director of advertising for the campaign in 1988. And I did that and I loved it, and I spent a lot of time then with the president-to-be, you know, in the studio and at the residency over there at...what? Wisconsin Avenue, I think it is. Where is it? Where's the Vice President's residence?

Sam: Right off of Wisconsin Avenue. Yeah.

Sig: Yeah. I couldn't remember for certain. And so we spent a lot of time there and I just fell in love with him and her, of course. So we became good friends and it went beyond the political world and we talked an awful lot in those days and I just grew to love him.

Sam: Sig, you played an integral role during the 1988 presidential race when you served as director of advertising for the campaign. You were responsible for some memorable and effective ads like the revolving door, or "I Remember You" pieces. Sig, what do you remember from that campaign and how important was advertising during this specific race?

Sig: Actually, I think it was more important then than it is today because we didn't have social media to the degree we have now. Those commercials were some that set a theme for our campaign of differences between Michael Dukakis and us. I did

another one of him in a tank, as you recall, and I thought that was impactful. The irony of that is, at the end of it, I thought we were gonna win the campaign without that commercial. And I was in Seattle producing a closing spot, a real positive closing commercial, and I called Jim Bakker and I said, "You know, Jim, I don't think we should run that Dukakis in a tank commercial," and he said, "Well, we're sitting around the table here, Siggy," and he said, "We're gonna take a vote on that and there's six of us here and you're not at the table today, so you just lost six to one," so it ran.

And they ran it in the World Series, you know, and in prime time and it became a big hit and then everybody wanted it. And we had done some things along the way too to make the campaign a little different, you know. We got the music for "I'm Proud to Be an American" with Ronald Reagan. I got that music secured and we used it in the campaign with George Bush, and some of those commercials became iconic, I'm proud to say, and the rest is history.

Sam: Sig, as you know, Gampy was not image-conscious at all, and part of your job during his time as president was to handle just that. Was it tough getting George Bush camera-ready, and was he always a willing participant?

Sig: Not at first, you know. He thought it was a waste of time, actually. But one day I was up in the living quarters and I was looking for a suit for him to wear and ties for him to wear, and he had this cluster of ties. There must have been 200 ties and they all looked the same. They all had that stripe on them, you know, and I said, "Mr. President, don't you have anything else beside these ties?" And he said, "What's wrong with these ties?" And I said, "Well, they're just so boring, you know. They're all the same." And that's the kind of dialogue we had back and forth. But at first, he was a little difficult, but never really difficult, you know. He knew we were trying to do the best for him and he knew it wasn't easy and he was always trying to be more helpful than not. So, we just developed a trust and he listened to what I said, and at one point, he never questioned it.

Sam: And Sig, that leads me to this question. You've told a story in the past about a particular speech my grandfather gave while president in 1990 to the joint session of Congress. He spoke about the Persian Gulf situation and a new partnership with the Soviet Union, a truly historic speech, and one that has a humorous backstory involving a tie. Sig, I think you can take it from here.

Sig: I remember that, you know. We were in the limousine driving over to Congress. I was with the President going over the speech, the final draft, and he said, "Siggly." He always called me Siggly. He said, "Is everything okay?" And I said, "Mr. President, everything is great, except for the tie you're wearing." And he said, "What do you mean?" We're on our way now. We're in the limousine, and I said, "It's just the worst tie." I said, "I can't believe I let you get in with that tie on." He said, "Well, what am I gonna do?" And I said, "Well, here, take my tie."

So I took my tie off and he put it on and he looked sensational. He really looked good. And if you look at the pictures of him giving that speech, it's a youthful-looking tie as opposed to one of those boring things he used to wear. And I forgot about it, and then he sent me a picture of him with the tie and he said, "For Sig." He said, "In that great chamber, as we declared victory against Saddam Hussein, a lone voice could be heard saying in the back, 'Would you look at that tie?'" So that became typical. So that's the tie story. I liked it so much, I framed it with the picture and his comments and it's in my lobby in my office, and everybody comments on that tie and that story and that picture.

Sam: Well, towards the end of my grandfather's term, you were asked to be the ambassador to Iceland. This posting was short-lived as James Bakker and my grandfather convinced you to help run the re-election campaign in 1992. Sig, can you talk about your brief stint as ambassador, and was it a hard decision to leave your newly appointed post and return to D.C.?

Sig: Well, I can tell you I didn't want to do it but it never crossed my mind that it was a hard thing to do. The President asked me to help him and Jim Bakker asked me to help so I never questioned it really. I came to town in December and we had put together the first political-military talks ever with Iceland and the United States. And the base in Iceland was very strategic in the Atlantic Ocean because of all the nuclear submarine activity there. And so, I was proud of the fact that I put what they call Pol-Mil Talks together between the two countries for the first time in history.

And I was getting ready to leave and Jim Bakker called me at my hotel room and he said, "Siggy, I think we need to have you come back and run this advertising for this campaign." And I said, "Jim, you know, I just moved everything I have to Iceland, including my car, my clothes and I've just gone back." "Well," he said, "you know the President would like you to do it," and I said, "Oh, goodness." And

so, as he was talking to me, the President called from Air Force 1 and he didn't ask me, he just said, "Siggy, I want to just thank you for coming back." So the only condition I made was I answered to him and to Jim Bakker only.

And that was Sunday, and we met that night because they met everyone practically at the White House during that election cycle. And I went over at 6:00 and I went to the office the next morning where the campaign was and I changed, I don't know, 10 or 12 people in the staff that morning. And we revamped the advertising schedule and we were down, you know, 21 points. It was a very tough time, but we did some things that hadn't been done before and they gave me full latitude to do what I wanted to do, and we whittled it down to about three points on the Friday before the Tuesday election. And I'm still not convinced we wouldn't have won that if they had not indicted Cap Weinberger on that Friday night.

Sam: Sig, serving your community is something you have made into a habit, especially when it comes to your hometown of Las Vegas, Nevada. You have served as chairman of the board for the Public Education Foundation in Clark County for many years, and in 2000, Sig Rogich Middle School was named in your honor. Sig, why has education been such a focus of yours throughout your career of service?

Sig: That's a good question. I never thought of it as to why. I just thought of it as this is what you do, you know. And I love kids and I like learning and I like teaching, and so it was a natural thing to want to be part of. We changed a lot of things when they named the school after me. I made music and the arts integral. And I tell people when they talk about what we should eliminate. The first thing they say is, "Well, let's get rid of the music department. Let's get rid of the arts," you know, but I believe that they are the catalyst to learning in many ways. They teach kids how to focus. And so, at Sig Rogich Middle School, we put music in. And we have about 1,800 students. I think about 75% of them play instruments because music is math. In that regard, you know, they know quarter notes now and half notes and tempos, and I played guitars all my life. And so, I appreciate what that does.

Our school is the number one school in the state of its kind. We're a Blue Ribbon School invited to the White House during the Obama years. And we passed 100% of our kids in algebra and 92% in advanced algebra. And I think a lot of it has to do with music. So bringing that to the school is such a pleasure and I'm so proud of

that and we still continue to do it. I did do one other thing, politically speaking. I tricked him into naming it...our mascot is the Rough Riders, so I could thread Teddy Roosevelt throughout the school. And that's what we do too on all the walls, you know, near the desks. Wherever the students gather, there are huge great sayings of Teddy Roosevelt work. So I did get a little political.

Sam: Well, Sig, to most, Nevada is a destination spot visited only a couple of times a year, but to many like yourself, Nevada is home. And I would like to end our conversation hearing why you have dedicated so much of your time and resources into making Las Vegas the best it can be. Sig, what makes Las Vegas so special?

Sig: Well, you know, I've asked this question a lot, really. It's a good question, Sam. Las Vegas is kind of a melting pot. I always equate it to a place like Pittsburgh, let's say, less formally educated workers. Steelworkers, coal miners, earned good wages and sent their kids to college. That was their dream. In Las Vegas, we had the less formally educated that became culinary workers, the waiters, and the waitresses and the attendance, and beyond, and they did the same thing. They made very good money in those jobs, all things considered, and they used it to send their kids to college. So that's what kind of inspired me with this town. I tell the story a lot in that regard. And it's a community that grew out of nothing, you know. We're approaching 2.5 million people here now in this city, and I moved here when it had 45,000 people not buying any real estate along the way, which people question my sanity or my business acumen, but it's that kind of town. It's made up of...it's an homogenized community, you know, of affluents that grew with it and those who were not so wealthy that made it what it is today. So I'm kind of blessed.

Sam: Well, I know who I'm calling next time we go to Las Vegas. Sig, thank you for being a part of the show. Thank you for sharing all the wonderful stories about my grandfather. I know he couldn't have done it without you, so we really appreciate all the things you did for us and our family.

Sig: I'm not sure of that. I think he could have done it without me, but I'm proud to be part of it in a small way.

Sam: A big part of it. A big part of it. Thanks, Sig.

Sig: Thanks, Sam. Nice to be with you.

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.

Pres. Bush: 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.