



***Barbara Bush: Presidential Matriarch* featuring Myra Gutin**

Alan Lowe: Welcome to *American FLOTUS*, a podcast brought to you by partnership of the *American POTUS* podcast and the First Ladies Association for Research and Education or FLARE. I'm your host, Alan Lowe. Thanks so much for joining us. I'm very pleased to welcome our guest today, Myra Gutin, a Professor Emerita in the Department of Communication, Journalism and Media at Ryder University. Myra is a founding member of FLARE. Through extensive writing, teaching, and media appearances, she's made great contributions to our understanding of the First Ladies. She's the author of *The President's Partner: The First Lady in the 20th Century*, and the book we'll discuss today, *Barbara Bush, Presidential Matriarch*.

Myra, thanks for joining us on *American FLOTUS*.

Myra Gutin: You're welcome. Glad to be with you, Alan.

Alan: I told you before we started recording that I was very fortunate to meet Barbara Bush several times in my career. I thought very highly of her and really enjoyed this book. So, thank you for the book and thank you for being part of FLARE. It's a great organization.

Let's go back to Barbara Bush's childhood. She was very close to her father, but not necessarily to her mother. Could you perhaps outline those relationships for us, and how you think over time they helped shape Barbara's personality?

Myra: Barbara's relationship with her father was easy and loving. He was very supportive of her. But her relationship with her mother, Pauline, was a different story. Her mother could be difficult, we'll say, and challenging. It was obvious to Barbara that her mom liked her sister

more than she liked Barbara. Her mother, from a very early age, was critical of Barbara. She said that her daughter, Barbara, had been born at one hundred pounds, 100 pounds at birth. Later on, when they would sit at the dinner table, Mrs. Pierce would say, "Eat up, Martha. Not you, Barbara." And Barbara's friends thought that, even though she was witty and articulate, this experience with her mom made her develop a rather caustic tongue. She could be mean, on occasion, so that was not an easy relationship for her. Years later she wrote, "I certainly didn't appreciate the pressures my mother must have felt until I became a mother. She taught me a great deal. Probably her most important lesson was an inadvertent one. You can like what you do, or you can dislike it," and Barbara wrote, "I've chosen to like it." So, I think her father's loving and supportiveness and the challenging relationship with her mother both had effects on her personality. She would later also write, "My mother and I loved each other, but I was not her favorite."

Alan: Just a terrible situation for a young person. I wonder also, as you say, the caustic tongue perhaps being partially a result of that, but also the sense of humor. I know oftentimes humor is a way to protect yourself from those feelings.

Myra: Definitely. And, there were those members of the press who said that they found it interesting that Barbara could be funny and witty while sticking a knife in you, and you wouldn't even realize until later that she had been so caustic.

Alan: It's a very good skill in politics, I will say. So that was preparing her there.

Myra: It served her well. Yes, it did.

Alan: So, let's skip ahead a bit in time to Barbara and George. How did they meet?

Myra: It was during Christmas break, 1941. Barbara was a student at Ashley Hall, a private school in South Carolina and she attended a dance at the Round Hill Country Club in Greenwich, Connecticut. And, young George Herbert Walker Bush was there, and he saw her across the room and asked a friend for an introduction. And, as they say, the rest is history. Barbara was drawn to him. She couldn't believe that he was so attractive and charismatic. When I met her, she told me the story that I had heard her tell on other occasions, where she said, "I've told my children that George Bush was the first man I ever kissed." And she said, "When I say that, they just about wanna vomit." But it was the beginning of a very strong relationship. During that winter break, she saw him a few times. They both went back to school, really smitten with each other, and they corresponded almost daily after that.

Alan: How did she get along with the Bush clan?

Myra: They adored her, especially George's mother who used to say about her, "That girl could talk to anyone about anything." But they liked her a great deal. I don't think, from my research, that Barbara's mother, Mrs. Pierce, or George's father were as enamored with the relationship as Barbara's father and George's mom. And it's been suggested that both of them were a little snooty and felt that their children could have done a little bit better. But later on, Senator Bush, George's father, and Barbara's mother, they came to love their child's spouse.

Alan: They got engaged at a young age.

Myra: Very young. George was home from flight school after he had finished at Phillips Academy, and he deferred his admission to Yale to join what was going to be the Air Force. He was home from training, and they had gone up to his family's estate in Kennebunkport, Maine, and they became secretly engaged. Later on, they told their families about it, and even though they were young, their families, they were satisfied. There was no real opposition. And when they were married, Barbara was 19 and Bush was only 20. So, they were young, and it was wartime, and the families both felt that they were very much in love.

Alan: He goes off to the Pacific where he is a hero in the war.

Myra: That's right; that's right.

Alan: So earlier in their marriage -- talking about the Northeast -- they moved from the Northeast. They go to Texas. So how did Barbara handle that move to unfamiliar territory? As they say down there, it's a whole other country.

Myra: Barbara said that when she told her mother that she was going to Texas, she said, "I might as well have been telling her that I was going to Afghanistan." Texas in 1946, to be honest, was not what it is today. But Barbara had not quite expected this. She had thought that they would settle down in the Northeast, Bush would probably be involved in finance with his father. But it didn't work out that way. George Bush had been told that there were going to be opportunities in Texas, in the oil and gas industry so they went west. She was very accepting of it. They had some interesting experiences along the way. At one point they were sharing a bathroom with a prostitute and her daughter but became their friends. Of course, the Bushes being the Bushes, things worked well. Now that said, Pauline Pierce, Barbara's mom, still thought they -- she wasn't sure where they were. She used to send her suitcases filled with tissues and Ivory soap and some other commodities that she didn't think Barbara could get in Texas.

Alan: I grew up in Kentucky, Myra. I had to face that attitude. I have relatives in New York and the first summer one of my cousins visited she was shocked I was wearing shoes. I'm like, you've got the wrong impression, right? I'd heard the story before about the prostitute but I didn't know if that was true or not. So that is a true story...

Myra: I believe it is. I found it in a number of sources, so I'm going to say that it probably was.

Alan: They ended up having six children, overall. Can you just remind us of their names and birth order?

Myra: Sure. Well, first is probably the one that we know best, George Walker Bush, who would later be President of the United States. And of course, Barbara has the distinction of being the wife of a president and the mother of a president. Their second child was Pauline Robinson, or Robin, Bush who was born in 1949. Jeb Bush, John Ellis Bush is his name,

1953. Neil Mallon Bush in 1955. Marvin Pierce Bush in 1956. And finally, Dorothy Walker Bush, known as “Doro,” who was born in 1959.

Alan: And Robin passed away at a young age.

Myra: Yes. It was a terrible experience for them. One day Barbara walked out and Robin was, I think, two and a half, and she was lying on the grass. And Barbara said, “Why aren't you playing?” Robin apparently said something to her like, “I just want to lie here and watch the clouds go by.” Barbara thought that was a red flag that didn't sound at all like her daughter. So, she took her to the pediatrician. The pediatrician examined her and said to Barbara, “You and George should come back this evening so that I can talk to you about Robin.” They came back. And I remember President Bush saying, “This pediatrician said to us, your daughter is very sick.” And he said, “She looks fine.” And she said, “Well, she has leukemia.” It was 1950 or 51. And he said, “We didn't know what the hell she was talking about.” She explained it and he said, “Well, what do you think we should do?” The pediatrician said, “Well, I think you should take her home and let her live out the rest of her life which I think will be about six weeks.”

And of course, George and Barbara were not going to accept that, and they brought her to New York to Sloan Kettering, the hospital for the treatment of cancer. They had her treated with a number of experimental protocols but, unfortunately, she passed away in October of 1954.

Alan: A disease, now, that the treatment's gone so far since those days back then.

Myra: Absolutely. And one of the interesting things about that story too is that when Robin passed away, George said to both his parents, “Why didn't you tell me? Why were you not more honest with me about it?” That was quite a shock and difficult for them to deal with.

Alan: So, let's go from those sad days to the days of politics. Did Barbara encourage George to get into politics or was it already in his blood?

Myra: I asked her that when I interviewed her, and she said, “Well, I didn't really encourage him, but he always had the interest and then I would go along with the supposition that it was sort of in the DNA to begin with.” The idea of public service was very, very attractive to George Bush. So, in 1962 by this point, they were living in Houston. The Texas Republicans in the area asked him to run for Chairman of the Harris County Republican Party. And I had no idea when I did the research for my book just how large that particular county is. It's the largest county in the United States. I think it was 2024, we're talking about 5 million people in that county. And there were, I wanna say, around like 150 seats of government throughout the county and he and Barbara visited every one of them. That was her first exposure to politics. And he won that election though it was hard fought.

Alan: What an education. Was she engaged in campaigning and so forth thereafter?

Myra: Well, very engaged. Bush ran for the Senate, unfortunately during the year that Lyndon Johnson was elected in the biggest landslide that had been seen up to that point. So, it

was 1964 and Barbara, who had campaigned continuously for her husband, felt that they had lost Texas because she hadn't done enough. And it was certainly explained to her that, in that year, no Republican was likely to win in Texas because of LBJ. But she was always a very spirited campaigner. She didn't say a lot, at least early on, but still she was there as a presence.

Alan: Barbara recognized the bad actors and could call 'em out. How important was that during these political campaigns?

Myra: Oh, critical. She always had George Bush's back, and she was not shy about saying to him, "He's not serving you well. She's not a good person to have in that position." She really kept her eyes out for a positive and negative reaction from press or other politicians. George Bush used to say people called her "The Enforcer" but he called her "Miss Frank" because he said she could be very blunt when she had to be. And sometimes that bluntness got her into trouble.

You may recall the story, Alan, that Mrs. Bush had become very upset with Geraldine Ferraro, who was running against Bush when he was campaigning for Vice President under President Reagan. And, apparently Ferraro had made a crack about the fact that George Bush had been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, he had only known wealth and advantage and privilege. Barbara was on the campaign plane with reporters, and they asked her about it. She said, "Well, you know, Geraldine Ferraro should not be saying these things because she's had the same advantages and the same money because of her husband's success. And I can't say what that woman is, but it rhymes with rich." Well, the reporters went absolutely bananas. It was printed, and later on -- this happened right around Halloween. Mrs. Bush said later on, "Well, I didn't mean to say mean things about Geraldine, and I would never call her a witch," which I think is also that example of her saying things, and then sticking a knife in and then pulling it out again. She is very skilled.

Alan: Very, very skilled indeed. I've always been fascinated by the time that George and Barbara spent in China. Years ago I found out my friend, Jeff Engel, edited the China diary that George kept there. They were there from '74 to '75 in the US Liaison Office. So how did Barbara fare while she was in China, and what role did she play while there?

Myra: Well, she loved being in China and part of the reason, I believe, it was her first time really outside the country. But besides that, for the first time, she had George Bush all to herself. The children did not come; they were doing other things; they were in school. So, she had his undivided attention, and they really enjoyed China tremendously. They learned some Chinese; they traveled on bicycles whenever they could. They saw a lot of the country. They were goodwill ambassadors, and she found that she really enjoyed it a great deal. She loved meeting the people. She was very disappointed when they were essentially called back to the United States.

Alan: Let's go to her focus on some policy issues, both as second and as first lady, and one of those big ones was literacy. Why did she choose that focus and what were some of the results of that work?

Myra: Well, there's divided opinions on why she chose it. Some people, some historians, argue that it's because Neil Bush was dyslexic. He had trouble reading and it had been camouflaged, but she realized it I think around the time he was in second grade, and she worked with him relentlessly to help him. The other camp of historians on this particular point say, no, it wasn't really Neil, it was a decision that was completely political because she knew that Bush was going to run for the presidency, and she wanted to pick an issue that could be popular and non-controversial. There's this wonderful story that's been told many times. It was 1980 and Bush thought that he was going to be running for president. His staff was told that Mrs. Bush's issue was going to be literacy. And she was interested, no question that her interest was always very genuine. So, the story was that she and a campaign aide went to Milwaukee to a college there, the college had been told again that her issue was literacy. So she goes to the college, they arrived there, and the president of the college says to her, "Oh, Mrs. Bush, we're so happy you're here. We've assembled 40 experts in literacy, and we can't wait to hear what you have to say." And Barbara Bush has said in these stories, and she said to me in an interview, "I really knew very little at that point." So, thinking very quickly on her feet, she said to the president, "You know, I wanna put a question to this group. If you were the First Lady, what would you do about literacy?" And they started to go around making suggestions. And when they were about halfway through, she had to say, "Gee, I'm really sorry, time is up, I have to leave, but I'm going to take your suggestions with me."

So, that was some very good political sleight of hand. She survived that get-together, but she also gained a lot of information. Later she certainly hired people to work with her who helped educate her and she learned a great deal about literacy, and it then followed her right through to the end of her life.

Alan: As it did with Laura Bush, as a teacher and librarian, and they have that in common, and Laura continues that as one of her causes in the White House.

Myra: Definitely, definitely.

Alan: So, Barbara's image with the public, how effective was her work in trying to cultivate an image?

Myra: I think she was tremendously successful. She cultivated an image of a grandmotherly, benign, jolly woman. And I think that her celebrity and her popularity really helped her. She was called the Silver Fox for a while. That one didn't stick really that much, but she was very popular. We see this particularly during the presidential campaign in 1992, where at a certain point, President Bush is saying in his speech as well, "Barbara and I think," or, you know, "Barbara," fill in the blank. And that's not out of the ordinary for first ladies. They're frequently more popular than their husbands.

Alan: Yeah. What do you think about in terms of policy? The Bush administration had so many big issues internationally and domestically. How connected was she with those issues and giving advice or not to the president?

Myra: Again, I think we see a dichotomy. There's the public Barbara Bush and there's the private Barbara Bush. The public Barbara Bush is advocating on behalf of literacy. And,

again, she's got this very benign but popular grandmotherly image. Privately, even though I know that she always said she didn't give him advice, I think there was no question that she was *au courant*, that she was listening to everything and that she was giving her opinion. And reporters asked her about it and she said, "Well, if I'm giving him advice, I'm not going to tell you." And later Laura Bush says the same thing which is, "Well, of course, I talk to him." It sort of goes back to what Eleanor Roosevelt used to say. She'd say, "At dinner, you don't just look at each other." So, I think that she had a very good ear for the politics of whatever was going on and she was a good sounding board.

Alan: It's hard to imagine the stress the President and the First Lady went through during the Persian Gulf War. What role publicly did she play during that conflict?

Myra: She was, again, an advocate for what her husband was doing. She had great concern for our men and women in uniform. She wrote in her autobiography that one of the great moments of her life was going to visit the troops. It was Thanksgiving Day during the Persian Gulf War. Actually, it had settled down a little, but she went with Bush to visit servicemen and women, and they ate chow with them and had a Thanksgiving service. She thought that was a very special moment for her.

Alan: I am sure for the servicemen and women, too. So, we know George W. and Jeb were both in politics. Did George and Barbara encourage the kids to think about politics?

Myra: I think she was accepting. Barbara was never really an advocate for them getting into the race. And I know that when George W. Bush said that he was going to run for president she tried to discourage him. When she became First Lady, Mrs. Bush told her press secretary, Anna Perez; she said, "There are three areas where I will not tolerate criticism: my fella, my family, and my dogs." And I know that she hated hearing nasty things being said about her children in politics. She just found that hard. She felt that they were being lied about. She just found that very hard to take and yet she supported them. She certainly was on the road for George W. Bush. I don't recall that she did much campaigning for Jeb because, at that point, I think she was more just focused on literacy and staying home in Houston.

Alan: Knowing that she was sensitive to criticism of her children, George W. Bush's administration had to be quite traumatic for her with all the -- as we said when I was director there -- very consequential presidency with so many things going on.

Myra: She didn't like it. I remember there was a story in the *New York Times* when Bush was running for president, and she and President H.W. Bush were being interviewed. She must have made a couple of wise cracks because her husband said to her, "George isn't going to like this, you know. You've gotta cut this out. Just try to be a little more positive." So that's the way she felt.

Alan: How would you characterize her relationship with W. and with Laura?

Myra: I think that it took some getting used to, on Laura Bush's part, to become part of the family. And there was a skit that Laura was part of. I think it was at one of the press dinners where she took the microphone away from her husband and she said, "Yeah, you know, my family, they're wonderful." She said, "There's going to be a contest and if you win, first prize

is one week with the Bushes in Kennebunkport. Second prize, two weeks with the Bushes. Third prize, three weeks with the Bush family in Kennebunkport.” So, I think it took a little bit of getting used to. But that said, I think there was always great respect between the two women, and love as time went on.

Alan: Yeah. I saw a lot of kidding back and forth between the President and Barbara Bush. You could tell that was a very close and loving relationship. And you mentioned dogs earlier. No criticism of dogs. I know Millie was a big part of that. And a great way she reached the American people too, through Millie.

Myra: Yes. Millie's book was a terrific success. It was written for children with an eye to try and raise money for what would become the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, and it was supposed to be a dog's eye view of living in the White House. And it made the *New York Times* bestsellers list.

The most recent figures that I could find are that that book raised a million dollars for the literacy foundation. George Bush went so far as to make a crack about it in one of his speeches. He said, “You know, since Millie wrote that book, it's really hard to live with her. You can't give her Alpo. Instead, she wants to see the wine list.”

Alan: No doubt.

Myra: They used Millie very well. The day that I was able to interview Mrs. Bush, I was standing in the library waiting for her, and before she walked in a dog came up and was sniffing around. And I thought, “Wait a minute, I don't think that this is the Millie that I knew about,” but I think it was one of Millie's grandchildren. She still was very much a dog person.

Alan: I know President George W. Bush can't really say much because they had Barney and Miss Beazley very much part of their family when I was in Texas. I really recommend people check out *Barbara Bush: Presidential Matriarch*. A really great read, learned a lot about Barbara Bush and really enjoyed it.

What's next for you, Myra?

Myra: I've been working on a full-length biography of Betty Ford for a while and I'm hoping that will be finished this year. I think that even though she was only First Lady for two and a half years, those were consequential years. But what I don't think people appreciate as much is her involvement with the Betty Ford Center because she was not just the titular head. She was really involved in many, many decisions and I think she really did help to bring addiction out of the closet and put it on the national agenda in a way that it hadn't been previously.

Alan: A remarkable woman, a remarkable leader. I'm really glad you're doing that. You know the podcast wants you back when you're finished with that.

Myra: I would love to, Alan.

Alan: Wonderful. Well, thank you so much for a wonderful conversation today and thanks to all of you for listening. Please check out all of our *American FLOTUS* episodes at flare-net.org, americanpotus.org, or wherever you listen to podcasts.

Thanks. I'll see you next time on *American FLOTUS*.