

The Matriarch: Barbara Bush and the Making of an American Dynasty

Eric Motley: Susan, it's so nice to have you back here. And Aspen, it's great to be here. Susan Page is one of the most articulate voices and helping us to chronicle Washington. You've covered six white houses. Um, 10 presidential campaigns. Yeah. Even the most recent one. Yes. That's your next book, I hope. Um, and now she's given us this beautiful book and it's a beautiful portrait of an extraordinary woman. Next to him. This is Adam. Probably the only person who advise both the husband and a son as president.

Susan Page: Actually, Barbara Bush would correct you on that. She, yes, she did. Others, which is, uh, people say Abigail Adams was the only other woman to be both the wife and the mother of a president. But Abigail Adams died six years before her son moved into the White House. And we're to a point which Barbara Bush was eager to make that. Not that, not that Abigail Adams died, but that she lives to be clear the she live seminars and to advise her phone in the White House as she did, whether he wanted to hear from her or not.

Eric Motley: If you haven't read the book, I encourage you to go back to campus. As soon as this interview's over and get a copy. It is a beautiful book. You interviewed over 100 people as our inner introducer. A note noted. You had wonderful access. We'll talk about that later to the diaries, which is extremely rare and you get the opportunity to also have interviews with family members and I want to talk to you about that as well. I want to delve right into the book, but before I do, you paint such a compelling portrait of this very influential and powerful woman. I'm almost wondering if George Herbert Walker Bush could have been elected president of the United States. He not married Barbara Peers,

Susan Page: so that's such a great question. In fact, that is a question I ask almost every person I interviewed at the end of the interview. I'd say, so this, you can, this is an unanswerable question, but if he hadn't married Barbara Pierce, would George Hw Bush do all that he did, including becoming president? Two people said, absolutely he would become president anyway. That was Barbara Bush. You didn't hesitate for a minute. And George Hw Bush who hesitated for a minute thought about it and said, yes, I think I would have, but almost everyone else I talked to a thought that she was a crucial partner. It really the perfect complimentary partner to George Hw Bush. And the fact is when I ask, including George W. Bush, George W. Bush said he didn't think his father would have become president without, um, Barbara Pierce. And he'd said he didn't think he would have become president without Barbara Bush as his mother. Uh, and the grandchildren. When I asked him that, they seem perplexed by the question because I think they saw them as so inextricably linked that how could you extract one from the other? Yeah.

Eric Motley: You interestingly start in a surprising place. You started in 1953. You tell us the story of their first order. Robin who died of leukemia at age three. Tell us just a bit about that.

Susan Page: Yeah, so when I pitched the book, many of you, you're such a smart looking group. I'm sure all of you have written books of your on here. You know, at the Aspen Institute, the question is how many books have you written? This is the only book I've written. Uh, but when I wrote the proposal for the book, I said the first chapter would be about the 1988 campaign, the campaign that put George Bush in the White House. And I had a chapter about Robyn and her death quite a lot. That appeared chronologically in the book. And when I wrote the first draft, that's what I also did. And when I finished the first draft, I thought this is just wrong, because the 1988 campaign was a defining moment for George Bush. It was not the defining moment for Barbara Bush. It was the experience when she was 28 years old and a young mother in Midland, Texas, and got word that her little girl, her three year old daughter, had leukemia, a disease that she had never heard of before.

Susan Page: And then six months of brutal treatment at Sloan Kettering in New York. That was the defining experience of Barbara Bushes life. And in talking to her and in reading her diaries, Robin's life and her death was a thread that goes through her experiences and shapes your attitudes on any number of French shapes. Her priorities as a person. Um, as a first lady made her tougher, uh, she had a kind of survivors shell. One reason she could be so brusque I think was because she had survived the worst thing that could happen to her, so nothing else could hurt that much and also made her so much more empathetic to people. So much more understanding of people who had not lived the privilege life that she had lived up to that point. She would meet with parents at Sloan Kettering in the waiting room there, um, parents who were from, uh, Eh, uh, w didn't have low income, who didn't have power and position and social bloodlines, uh, that Barbara Pierce Bush had. But when they were in that waiting room, they were equal. They were in the same boat. There was nothing any of them can do to change, uh, and save their children. And that affected her forever.

Eric Motley: No. The Barbara Bush that we know is really a woman of steel, no steel in velvet, but more steel. And what you've done here is to capture a Barbara Bush that is a lot more vulnerable than the Barbara Bush that I ever knew or appreciate it. Yeah. In the 1970s, her husband goes off to the CIA. They have a wonderful interwoven relationship. They talk all the time, they share everything, and then all of a sudden she starts suffering from depression. Could you tell us a bit about that?

Susan Page: They come back from China. He goes to the CIA, can't talk to her about what he's doing. Um, because as she said, I could never keep a secret. Uh, her, she's got an empty nest. Her kids are away at school or had started their own lives. She was going through menopause. She thinks that might've been a factor. She was, she felt dissed by the women's movement. She thought young women of

the day did not respect the life choices she had made. And she not only became depressed, she became suicidal. She told me in the interviews that she would find herself driving down the road in Washington and have an impulse to steer her car into a tree or to steer her car into the path of an oncoming car and she would have to pull off to the side of the road and stop and wait for the impulse to pass before she could drive on.

Susan Page: Almost no one knew about this. Uh, her husband knew, uh, she didn't tell her doctor, her children didn't know. When I talked to her brother, her younger brother Scott with him, she's very close. I said, you know, she had this period of depression and he said, well, it wasn't that serious. No, she would even after all these years, um, it was at such odds with the image she projected of being so strong and stoic that he refused to believe how serious it was. She eventually came out of it. She said, after about six months, she started to feel better. She's not sure why. What factors went into her feeling better about herself and her life? She did tell me one thing that she did during this period. She went, she started to, ever since Robin's death, she had volunteered often on, at hospitals with adult patients, not with the kids. And she said she went and volunteered at what was then called the Washington home for incurables, which is an unfortunate name that's now been changed to the Washington, uh, hospice. Uh, and that, that made her feel better. So maybe a little bit of a lesson there that, uh, if you hit a rough patch, sometimes if you try to help somebody who's in a rougher patch, it can help you too.

Eric Motley: We learned too much about her through her diaries. Uh, I want you to tell us a bit about the diary entry in which he speaks about her moral struggle with abortion and how she tried to reconcile that as a woman, but as a Republican at that being married to a politician.

Susan Page: So if I can, can I tell the story about how I got access to the diaries? Yeah, because that will lead into so, uh, first time, right. So it in a move that was either brilliant or stupid. I signed a contract to write this biography without talking to Barbara Bush. So you want to vote on whether that was a smart thing to do. Um, and, but here was my reasoning. My reasoning was if she said no, maybe I would be too coward, Coward, Lita, move it, go ahead and do it. And if she said yes, maybe she would think she wouldn't have something to say. So you'd have some control over what I wrote. And I didn't want to write an authorized biography. I'm, although I was very grateful for the cooperation I got, I wanted to write a work of journalism. And uh, so I signed the contract and then I sent her a letter and she agreed to one interview and I went down to Houston for this interview.

Susan Page: And, uh, she said preemptively, do not even ask me about my diaries. You can't see them. And I understood that because I frankly would have thought there was no chance I was going to be able to see her diaries. Um, but I asked to see her diaries about Raisa Gorbachev because her relationship with Raisa Gorbachev really interested me. She said she would think about that. And at the

end of the fifth interview, so at the end of each interview, she would agree to another interview, the end of the fifth interview, which turned out to be the last time I saw her. Uh, we had a sixth interview scheduled, but she fell and broke her back and went to the hospital and it never really recovered. So in, in the final conversation, the final moments of our final conversation, I had stood up to leave and I said, uh, you know, you said you would think about whether I could see the Raisa Gorbachev diaries. And she said, I've thought about it. You can see it, you can see them, you can see them all, all are diaries. So I then said the stupidest response possible because I was so stunned. I said, are you sure?

Susan Page: Not really on second thought, not the words I had to hope to save, but she said yes. So journalists really not the right instinct. So that was how I was able to see your diaries. And in diaries have not been processed there at the Bush library. But no one can see them until 35 years after her death so no one can see themselves. 2053 so they would bring out boxes of unsorted, unorganized papers, stacks of papers cause she kept her diary in various forms over the years. She started it in 1948 and she made the final entry 12 days before she died on the day her doctor came in and said, told her she was going to die in the thing that you're talking about. So I've just treasure trove. So I'm going through the diary that she kept during the 1980 campaign. During the first time George Bush ran for president, and this was not actually a diary entries but tucked into this story was a four page letter she had written to herself and it was headlined is just handwritten out on unmarked station area. Thoughts about abortion. She knew that she was going to be asked about abortion during the campaign because it was an issue and she wanted to think about what she was going to say. And in this letter she tried to work through what she thought about abortion and on this as on so many things, she went

Susan Page: back to Robin and she wrote, I remember the moment that Robin was born and I felt her soul in her body. And I remember the instant that Robyn died and I felt her soul leave her body. And if your soul enters your body the moment you are born, abortion is not murder and it's not a presidential issue, it's an issue for mothers and fathers and doctors. Uh, and she said, therefore I support abortion rights. She didn't call it abortion rights, but she said she thought abortion should be legal. And she said she supported funding for abortion because why should it be available to rich women and not to poor women? And that is the view she held on abortion for the rest of her life. When Bush went on the, when her husband went on the ticket with Reagan, uh, later that year in 1980 he promised it followed the Republican platform, which was opposed abortion rights. And at that point she stopped answering the question. She stopped being willing to discuss abortion until he was out of the White House. And then in 1994 when she wrote her memoir, she wants again talked about how she supported abortion rights.

Eric Motley: Would you say that she was a very progressive woman? I mean, Barbara Bush White, silver hair, beautiful pearls. A fake fake fake pearls. Yes. A woman of one age living in another age in many ways. How was she on women's issues? So

when one of the interviews, see I think of Barbara Bush as a feminist because she was smart, she was outspoken, she was self confident in many ways. Uh, and so I tried to went interview to make her say she was a feminist and, and I failed and she wouldn't. I said, well, why does, this is what feminism is of, why aren't you a feminist? And she went around and around and she was being, and I finally said, okay, you're being very slippery on this. And she said, yes, I am with pride. She said, yes, I am. Because while she, she walked the walk of a feminist, she did not, uh, talk the talk of a feminist.

Susan Page: She wouldn't say she was a feminist and she was, uh, she had complicated and not entirely positive views about the women's movement because she thought it disrespected women like herself. Uh, we were talking fair and I were talking about the protest at the Wellesley commencement in 1990. Um, you know, in public she was very breezy about those protests. But in her diary she was very wounded and nervous, um, and hurt. Uh, so she had, she had not a symbol and the commencement speech, so she, she accepted, uh, uh, uh, uh, uh, an invitation to speak at Wellesley. Um, she was told she had been the first choice. She had not been the first stories of back down. Um, Alice Walker had, was the first choice. They announced, uh, she, she would be the commencement speaker and I'm a petition drive began with graduating seniors saying she was not inappropriate role model because her fame was all secondary to her marriage.

Susan Page: She was only notable because of the man she married. And, um, about a fourth of the graduating seniors sign the petition. Um, and it became this spark, this huge national debate about whether they were right or whether they were wrong. A lot of people came to Barbara Bushes defense. Barbara Mikulski called and said, uh, and pro said that the, the objected to the, to the protest, Richard Nixon's and advice on how to handle them, if you can imagine just anyway, but the speech, she gave a wonderful speech. It included, uh, words that like words that are quoted every commencement address since then, she said, at the end of your life, you'll never regret a deal. You didn't make, um, or, uh, uh, you know, uh, a professional thing you didn't do, but you will regret time you didn't spend with a friend or a parent or a child. Uh, and those are those, those were powerful words then. And, and they are now one last thing about Richard Nixon since he weighed in on the whole wealthy thing. So, um, she, I, she didn't like Richard Nixon. She said, I know,

Eric Motley: right? And you know this from the diaries. I know this because I said, did you like Richard Nixon said, no, I didn't like Richard Nixon.

Susan Page: And she said she met him a million times and he never could remember who she was. So she didn't like that. I know. Um, and then she asks, so I, after I asked her if she liked Richard Nixon and she said no. Um, she said to me was Pat Nixon a drinker? And I said, I mean, I said, well, I didn't know Pat Nixon, but yes, she had a reputation of having a drinking problem. And Barbara Bush said, well, if I was married to Richard Nixon,

Eric Motley: great too. I don't know if I want to ask her what she wrote in her diaries about president Trump. But did she write about President Trump in her diaries? Yes. Are you good? You sure you don't want to know? Yeah, I want to know. Yeah, yeah. No, no. They want to know. Yeah. Yeah. I'm just doing this. I mean this

Susan Page: for history. Okay. Well. Um, and it wasn't just when it became a presidential candidate in 1990 in her diaries, she wrote about how, uh, that Donald Trump was a symbol of all the greed of the 1980s she read the Gosh, who was reading gossip, gossip about his divorce from Ivana was some alacrity. She was pretty, and she was expressed a lot of interests with that in her diary. Here's something that was mentioned in Jon Meacham's wonderful biography of George H W, which was, it didn't get much attention because Trump was not at the point of the book was published a big political figure. Uh, but in 1988, Trump went to Lee Atwater, who was George Bush's top strategies and said he would be willing to be bushes running mate. I know. So anyway, fast forward to when Trump becomes a presidential candidate. She couldn't believe how well he was doing. She couldn't imagine why a woman would vote for Donald Trump.

Susan Page: She was of course, enormously offended by what he said to her son Jacob. Um, she didn't like that at all. Uh, she agreed. She was 90 years old, suffering from getting just have heart failure. She went to New Hampshire to campaign for Jeb, which was quite an effort. There's a picture in the book of her using her Walker through a New Hampshire snow storm campaigning for Jeb. That's how much he didn't want a Donald Trump to win, uh, to win that primary. And then she blamed Donald Trump for her heart attack she had, she had a heart crisis in June of 2016 and she told everybody who would listen, that Donald Trump gave her a heart attack because she was so wound up about him all the time. You may know some people like this. Maybe you are some people like this. Yeah. And Jeb Bush called her in the hospital to say, look, you've got to calm down.

Susan Page: You can't obsess about Donald Trump all the time you've shot. You've got to just trust in the country. And she said that she, she tried to do that, but she did do one last thing about Trump in the summer of 2017 she was in kidding bug port where they went every summer. And a friend gave her a Trump countdown clock, which may be somebody there that's a little digital clock, and it says how many days and hours and minutes and seconds are left in president Trump's term. They had these for Obama. They hadn't for Clinton, they're not new, but Trump can declare, which she loved. [inaudible]. This person gave it to her kind of as a joke. She put it on the little table in her bedroom in Kennebunkport that was next to the chair where she would often sit and needlepoint. She liked it so much that when they returned to Houston at the end of the summer, she took Trump countdown clock with her. She put it on her bedside table, so it would be the first thing she saw in the morning and the last thing she saw at night and it was there until the day she died. Wow. Wow.

Eric Motley: Susan. She was fierce when it came to protecting her too. Yeah, that's right. Yeah. I mean, she would go at people if they would offend her husband, a fan,

Jabba Fett, FN President Bush. Say, say a bit about the fiery side of Barbara Bush.

Susan Page:

Well, she was tough, you know, and she could be, she could be mean. Uh, and she terrified. You might have some stories about this. She terrified the staff over at her husband's just, they were, uh, uh, one, uh, speech writer told a speech writer for George W. Bush told me that he was up in Kennebunkport working on a big speech that the younger President Bush was going to give. And they were walking up that driveway at Kenyon bunk port. And here comes the Barbara Bush coming the other way. And he said that usually in that situation you would try to find some alternative path. But since it was with the president, this was not possible. And so Barbara Bush comes up and they chit chat for a moment, and George W. Bush says, and this is so and so who's going to be writing my big speech on this subject? And she said, Oh, good, then we'll know who to blame. And I said, you know, I'm sure she meant that as a joke does. And he said, no, they didn't

Eric Motley:

like, so yeah. So I worked for President George W. Bush at the White House or you're afraid of her? Yeah, and she was visiting the president and I had invited her, I was, you know, quite an earth in Scilla nerd and I had organized a book club in the White House and I invited her to come to review her memoir and she came in afterwards. So two of us were just walking down the corridor or in the West Wing and conversation at come to a low. And I just emotionally turned and said, your son, President Bush is one of the greatest presidents to ever live. And she turned to me and she said, well, I might beg to differ.

Eric Motley:

There's another president that I think outranks. Yeah. And she turned and she looked at me and I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to say. And then President Bush came around the corner and he said, Motley, what are you talking about? What are you talking to my mama about? And I said, nothing. Absolutely nothing. We have questions from the floor, but I have a couple of more questions I want to ask you. You spend a lot of time with her. I'm interested in what the last interview was like, and then you were given this special opportunity of the interviewing George Herbert Walker Bush, his last interview right before he died. So could you book in that for us?

Susan Page:

Uh, so what, what a privilege, um, and, um, and what a, what a gratitude I feel to the bushes because they were not, you know, they understood that I was going to write what I found. Right. You don't, they and the, and yet they gave me such access, not just, uh, George Hw Bush and Barbara Bush, but George W. Bush and Jeb Bush and Neil Bush and Scott Pierce and half dozen of their grandchildren. And, um, I think it is rare to have a family in public life would be willing to do that, to do that. And it's, uh, it's a, it was a gift to me. It made her story so much richer. It's a statement of trust and kind of our system that relies on, um, different institutions, including the press. I mean, I'm just, it just, um, uh, I just feel like I was so fortunate. Um, the, the interview with George Hw

Bush, who was the first campaign I ever covered, I was a young reporter for Newsday.

Susan Page: The first presidential candidate ever interviewed was George Herbert Walker Bush in January of 1980. Um, and he was certainly one of the most courteous people you could interview. And I didn't realize then how the others would, none of them would be as nice as he was that day. You know, I've, I've interviewed since then, I've interviewed, uh, 10 presidents, three of them after they left office. And, um, uh, so I've, I feel as special, uh, have a special feeling for George Hw Bush. When I interviewed him, he was in a wheelchair. Um, he had, uh, some difficulty speaking. Um, he, yeah, he could speak, but only a few words at a time. It wasn't that he couldn't understand or didn't have things to say. It was that the effect of that Parkinson's like disease that he had had affected his ability to do that. I said, uh, do you remember, do you remember that dance at the Greenwich Country Club where you first saw Barbara Pierce and ask a mutual friend to introduce you?

Susan Page: And he said yes. And I said, what? Uh, what made you want to meet her? And he said she was so beautiful. That nice. Uh, interviewing her was a remarkable, her health was, she was in worse health every time I saw her. Over this period of five months, she was struggling with congestive heart failure. Um, she, she was five foot eight when she was first lady at this point she was five foot three. She had lost that much height. Um, uh, but she was really sharp as a tack. And, um, when she told me a story about Nancy Reagan, who turns out to be her mortal enemy, it was as though it had happened the week before. She, and she told it with a lot of relish and spirit. And when I went back to look at her diary to see what her contemporary version of that story had been, it was exactly the same.

Susan Page: So that was a pretty fresh memory in her mind or whatever. Tell us a story. What was the story? So it was the story about the last time she talked to Nancy Reagan. Uh, so, so 1990 to 1993 inauguration day, Bill Clinton's inaugurated, the bushes are crushed. They think that George Bush has been denied a second term by a lesser man. Um, they are, is the worst political day of their lives. They're on the plane flying back to Houston, um, a plane that is no longer called air force one because he's no longer president. Uh, I mean, and really a low, a low moment for them. And Barr, Nancy Reagan with whom she had had all this secret friction for years, calls ABC and demands to talk to Barbara Walters on the air and complaints about the bushes, which is, yes, I know. Astonishing. And the, and they're in aware of this because unlike to now, today it'd be all over Twitter.

Susan Page: Right? But that wasn't the case in 1993 and they, they get back to Houston, they moved into a rented house because they're building a new house. The next day in the New York to the New York Times writes a story about this weird interview that Nancy Reagan had complaining about the bushes, but an, uh, a story that was written by the way, by a young reporter named Maureen Dowd. So, you

know, it was written with a certain flare. Um, and of course, Barbara Bushes incensed and the things that Nancy Reagan planes that weren't even true, she complained that they didn't have the Reagans back to the White House when they had had a ceremony honoring President Reagan 10 days before they left the White House. Anyway, so Barbara Bush is pretty mad about that. Nancy Reagan calls the next day and Barbara Bush won't get on the phone with her. And a day later, Nancy Reagan called calls back, uh, in the White House. Operator says, Mrs. Bush, aren't you going to talk to Mrs. Reagan?

Susan Page: And she said, okay, I'll talk to her. And so she gets on the phone and now this is one of a series of calls in which Nancy Reagan would do something that offended Barbara Bush and then call to explain it away. So they had a long history with this kind of phone call. So Nancy Reagan gets on the phone and says, I just wanted to explain about, and Barbara Bush had finally had enough and was out of the White House and said, I don't want your explaining anymore. I have reporters on my doorstep asking about what you said. Now this was of course a lie because there were no reporters there. No one really cared, right about what Nancy Reagan had said about Barbara Bush book x First Ladies. Um, but she knew that that would bother Nancy Reagan's. So she told her that, and I know, and then she said, uh, I don't want you explaining things to me anymore.

Susan Page: In fact, I never want to talk to you again. And then she said, the other phone is ringing. Now of course there was no other phone. The phone is ringing. And she hung up and they never spoke again. They never, they saw each other at the Nixon funeral, but they never had another conversation. So that is worth \$32 and 50 cents or whatever. I think that that story alone and what we know about that lesser man who became president, Bill Clinton in many ways became another son of the family. Right. And was beloved by President Bush. Yes. Barbara Bush. Right. Well, beloved by George Bush. I think Barbara Bush was a harder sell for Bill Clinton and Bill Clinton, who I also interviewed for the book and who was really incredibly perceptive about Barbara, uh, acknowledged that she was harder to win over. And she was finally one, for one thing, she said he cheats at golf. This was, this seemed to be some kind of original sin, uh, to cheat a golf. Um, she was finally won over by, uh, Bill Clinton because her husband liked him so much and you know, they started that whole thing. George W. Bush at Neil Bush started the whole thing about calling, uh, Bill Clinton, the brother by another mother. And I would just note that that scenario would cast Barbara Bush as the stepmother. So, so she, she grew too, um, like many things about Bill Clinton, but she was deaf. But beloved I think is probably maybe a step too strong.

Eric Motley: There's a wonderful story loving but always tough. President Bush is visiting Kennebunkport. He goes for a run, he comes back in and he puts his feet up on the coffee table and she yells at him, right and says, get your feet off of the coffee table. And President George Herbert Walker Bush turns and says, Barb, don't you know that you're talking to the president of the United States? And she goes, he knows where his feet,

Susan Page: they had such a great relationship and you know, uh, one reason is they were so much alike. You know, Georgia, George W. Bush looks like George has like his father, but he talks. Yeah. Like other mother. Yeah. Yeah.

Eric Motley: I think this is a great time to open the floor up for any questions. Yes. Thank you for this inspiring conversation. Uh, my questions may be simple or too complicated and analyzing and concluding her life. What would you like suggest a skirt, key values of life? What was the forest which was pushing her and given Harris trends, uh, to do what she was doing?

Susan Page: Yeah, she was definitely, um, uh, force. Uh, and you know, it was interesting in those final months of her life, uh, she knew she was close to dying the whole time we were, I was interviewing her. There was no question that, you know, she was, uh, approaching the end of her life and um, she regretted nothing and feared nothing except leaving him behind. She worried. The only thing she expressed concern about was dying before her husband because then he would be alone after the 73 years of marriage. And her devotion to him was one of the things that was fundamental to her. And it seems a very traditional, right? It doesn't seem like a modern marriage in that way. Although, and at the beginning of their marriage, they had the most traditional marriages. You know, he came home, they had graduated, he was graduating from Yale and trying to figure out what to do with his life. He came home and they had a little child, you know, George W was a baby. He came home one day and said that they were moving to Odessa, Texas. Not should we move toward us at Texas or what would you think about moving door? Does a Texas or is it okay with you if we moved to Odessa, Texas? It was, hey, great news. We're moving toward us at Texas. And she said, I've always wanted to live in Odessa, which no one has ever said.

Susan Page: And later in their life they had much more of an equal partnership. She was much more uh, and advisor of voice. He trusted on everything, on campaign strategy, on handling Mikhail Gorbachev, on, on our, on going to war in the first Persian Gulf War. Um, so they became a more modern marriage. But with this, I think, you know, he was a big motivator for her because she adored him. Yes, sir.

Audience Member: About 25 years ago, I had the opportunity of having lunch with Barbara Bush while she was first lady. And my conclusion afterwards was that the country was in good hands as long as she was first lady. But my question to you is about the Institute of Literacy. Could you share with us a little bit about why she started that and really why hasn't any other president, are anyone in politics taking that, that real challenge up?

Susan Page: No. You know, she, she said that she settled on literacy as her cause in 1980. At that point they were planning, they were getting going on that first campaign because she wanted number one, something that wasn't controversial. And uh, number two, she thought literacy was fundamental to addressing other

problems as she would say. If you don't, if you can't read, you can't have a job. Right. So many other things flow from, from being literate. And it was one of the things I thought was admirable about, even though she wanted to take a cost, it wouldn't create a political complications for her husband, was it her cause was not literacy for little children, for cute little children who are in this kindergarten or first grade, her cause was adult illiteracy and who are adult illiterates in this country. They're immigrants. Uh, there are people in jail, they're homeless people.

Susan Page: These are adults for whom one reason or another they have lost. They have the opportunity to learn to read, seems to pass him by. So it was not the kind of sympathetic cute side of literacy. She went everywhere. Um, and doing events for literacy, especially when she was second lady. Um, she, I mean she did a lot when she was first lady too, but a second lady should do all these community events that got almost no attention. Uh, but except in the community where she was and she went to homeless shelters and jails and poverty centers and elsewhere to, um, promote the cause of literacy. Uh, I don't, I don't know why no one's, and you know, one of the, one of the thing that she did was she maintained this as a cause for the rest of her life. So it wasn't like, um, as she would note, uh, Nancy Reagan dropped, just say no. As soon as she was out the White House, Barbara Bush would note. But she kept up with literacy forever. And it's a cause that are children have taken up now. There are now Barbara Bush Foundation for, for family literacy and Jeb has one in Florida and Neil has one in, uh, in Texas. Enduro has one in Washington. Um, why others haven't picked it up? I don't know. They have their own causes maybe or maybe they feel it's so identified with her that it would be fully their own. I do you have a theory on why?

Speaker 6: No, just talk about literacy and, and w

Audience Member: we kind of think it's because young kids can't vote. So there's no real incentive for politicians to take it up. But it's probably the most serious problem facing education right now is that so many kids, especially from poor communities or now we call them fragile communities, can't read and don't learn by

Speaker 6: third or fourth grade. Yeah, we've met Bianca.

Audience Member: What words of wisdom would Barbara Bush give the this generation and women who are going to participate in this upcoming election? Uh, well that's, uh, that's a good question. Uh, I wonder who she would have them vote for because in 2016, she didn't vote for Trump, but she didn't want to vote for Hillary Clinton either. So she wrote in Jeb Bush's name. Uh, you know, she really, she said, told me she really, um, had a lot of respect for the millennial generation, which included a lot of her grandchildren because they had a commitment often to community service. Um, and she, uh, she hated the title of my book. Um, she hated the word matriarch and she really hated the word dynasty, which you

thought kind of drip with entitlement. So I said to her, what would you call this book? And she said, the fat lady sings again.

Susan Page: But when, but talking about dynasty, I s I said to her, you know, I'm thinking of dynasty, not just as elective office, but as a broader definition of public service. And one of the things she was most proud of, uh, as she looked back on her life was the public service that our grandchildren had done in ways that were not elective office. No. One of her grandchildren is a land commissioner of Texas, a state wide elected job, George P. Bush, and another one, pierce Bush is thinking about running for his grandfather's old congressional seat in Houston. But many of our other have done interesting things in public service. Her, uh, her namesake, Barbara Bush, the younger, um, help stop, start the global health corps. Her another granddaughter, Lauren Bush, Lauren help start a feeding program for kids around the world. Um, her grandson walker enlisted in the marines and served in Afghanistan in service.

Susan Page: It was never publicly disclosed. And when I was trying to research her grandchildren and found this, it was something I'd never heard that walk that she'd had a grandson serving in Afghanistan. Uh, and Pierce Bush, um, left a corporate job in Texas to take over big brothers, big sisters of Greater Texas. And we need to find dynasty that way. She liked the word dynasty a little better. She wrote, um, one of the final things she did in her diary was draft a letter to her children, which she had never finished. And I found this inner diaries and I, and I actually, I copied it out and I sent it to her kids because I thought they'd like to see it cause she never finished it. She never sent it. And in it she said that that was what she was proudest of about the things that her grandchildren were doing. And in the conversation with me, she talked about how she thought this was such a great generation.

Audience Member: Yes. Thank you Susan. That was a really wonderful, um, story. Many stories. I really, I, I, you saw me smiling. Um, we talked before you went on stage. I have a personal question for you. Um, we talked about these handwritten letters that Mrs. Bush and I exchanged my senior year in college. Um, and I'm going to give all my stuff to Smith for their archive. But in hearing you talk about, um, your research for this book, I wonder what you would recommend I do with those letters. Okay. That's such an interesting question. So two good places they could go. Smith, that sounds like an appropriate place or the or the Bush 41 library. Uh, either one. Uh, you know, it was interesting, one of the questions that I had in starting this book was would anyone care about a one term first lady who had moved out of the White House a quarter century ago? Um, and when I saw the outpouring, uh, with their passing the across the country, that emotion and respect that people had for her, uh, I knew that the answer to that was going to be, was going to be yes. So it seems to be either of those would be great places to put them.

Susan Page: Hi. Thank you. Um, I work with an organization called child us advocacy. So we do a lot of work on legislation, any legislation that protects children. And one that we're obviously working on right now is the of child sexual

Susan Page: abuse in this country and quite frankly, all over the globe. And I work with a lot of survivors and it, it, it sort of struck me when you spoke about Barbara and sort of that string that always goes back to that survivor mother who had to bury her daughter. Um, and I see it a lot in survivors is this grit, this strength, um, that always is, you know, reaches back to that well of that, that tragedy or that pain. And I'm just wondering what it was that you saw that, um, the characteristics that, that she allowed to, um, you know, flourish because of that, you know, deep tragedy and pain and suffering. You know, one of the, she adopted literacy as their public cause, um, because it wasn't controversial. She had a private cause too. That was controversial at the time that she did a lot with it, I think went right back to Robin's death.

Susan Page: And that was aids, HIV, AIDS. Uh, you know, it's easy to forget an 18, 19, 1989 when she became first lady, um, how much stigma there was attached to people with HIV aids. And the Reagan administration had done almost nothing on aids as the crisis got worse and worse. And she, one of the things she did during her first hundred days as first lady was visit a place called Grandma's house in DC, which was a hospice for infants who had HIV aids. Um, and she didn't, she didn't give us, they were surprised they didn't, she, they, the White House called and asked if she could come visit. This was not some big initiative on the part of Grandma's house, which had had a terrible time getting started. Even they had to build, they had to buy a building because no one would rent them a building to be a hospice for infants with aids.

Susan Page: Uh, and so she went there and she didn't, she didn't give a big speech. She didn't, but our press release, she didn't scold anybody. She didn't talk about what people had or had not done in the past. She just went there and she brought reporters and photographers with her and she went into this, um, home and there was a baby Donovan, six months old in his crib fussing and she picked up Donovan and hugged him and the photographer, the AP photographer took a picture of it and it went around the globe and it had such impact. I don't know if you remember that, you're all really young, but, uh, if you remember this picture of her holding an aids baby next to her, hugging him, not wearing gloves, cheek to cheek stroking his back as though it was no big deal sending the message. You could pick up a baby who had aids, you could hug a child who had aids and you are not going to get aids.

Susan Page: And the re she did something else on that visit that I thought was interesting. She met, they had arranged for her to meet privately with a group of adults who had aids. And so she met with them privately. And Amanda in this meeting, uh, Lucas, Connie, um, said to her, everybody thinks the babies are blameless but we need a hug too. And she said, I'll give you a hug, Lou. And so he stood up and she gave him a hug. And here's what she did that shows how skilled she wasn't

understanding the power of the platform she had when they went back out to where the reporters and photographers were. She gave Lou to Scania hug again so that they would take pictures of it. And so that picture would go out to have her hug hugging and adult man who had aids, uh, sending the message that you could have a coworker as aids and you don't need to worry that it's going to give you aids.

Susan Page: And one reason I think the, the, the, the issues that people with aids were facing instruct so close to home for her. She told me that, um, when Robyn was being treated at Sloan Kettering, there was a time when she was welcome to come home for one last visit in Midland, Texas. Uh, last time she could see her two little brothers and neighbors and friends could see her and they come back to Midland and she said some of her best friends refused to visit because they thought they might catch leukemia. And so when she saw people with aids, she saw that through Robbins eyes. And you think about the impact that had over time, not just in attitudes toward people from this visit that she made to grandma's house, but from a speech that George Hw Bush then made on aids on historic speech, which was given with her encouragement and input to the White House speech writer involved. And even years later when George W. Bush pursued the pepfar initiative addressing aids in Africa, he told me, George W. Bush told me that that reflected in part the concern his mother had shown about trying to address the issue of AIDS. So if you think about it, Robin's death in the end helps save the lives of millions of people around the world because of her death and because of the impact it had on her mother. What a beautiful and powerful thought. This is our last question. We're out of Atari. Just wondering what she did. Think of Raisa Gorbachev.

Susan Page: Thank you for asking that because I was so interested in this and I did so much time researching it and no one ever asks me about it because they want to talk about Nancy Reagan. Yeah, good. Well, I appreciate it. So Raisa Gorbachev was impossible and impossible person. She was didactic and she'd lectured and she would insist that communism was a superior system in every way. And she had, Nancy Reagan really hated each other and they let every, the whole world know about it. So Barbara Bush saw this and thought this was really stupid. That is the word she used to me. Stupid. And it was stupid. Not because she didn't understand that Raisa was impossible, but because it was so unhelpful to have a feud with the wife of the Soviet premiere and a voice of the Soviet, the Soviet leader was listening to, you know, you really needed to cultivate her.

Susan Page: So she would be on your side. She wrote. So the the night, the day before, she was going to meet with Raisa Gorbachev for the first time as first lady, she wrote, her brother's got a letter that said, I'm seeing Raisa Gorbachev tomorrow. I'm going to love her no matter what she does, and that's what she did. She cultivated her. She befriended her raise a Gorbachev then showed a vulnerable side to her that she had not did not typically show, asking her questions about why was she so popular, why did, and just all about all kinds of things about this system. At one point they were at Camp David and Raisa

Gorbachev asked, they were, they had Barbara Bush had a young aide there, like 20 something aid and raise, just to ask if she could see her, what was inside her purse because Raisa Gorbachev had a daughter about the same age, so the aide who are interviewed said, okay, odd and so raise the Grover.

Susan Page: Jeff goes through her purse and says, why do you have all these lipsticks? Like she had three or four lipsticks and the aide said, well, you know this, she said in the Soviet Union you would go and you would only have one lipstick. And it was one of the few times years ago Jeff ever acknowledged there was anything superior about the American system. You know, one, just, I know we're out of time, but I know the one thing I was curious about was whether it made a difference that Barbara Bush cultivated Raisa Gorbachev and it didn't make all the difference. It's not like we wouldn't have had an end of the cold war without her, but was it helpful? And I found a, um, uh, a, a declassified papers from Helmut Kohl about a conversation that helmet cold than the west German chancellor and Gorbachev Mikhail Gorbachev had, in which they talked about how helpful it was. How about a calming influence. She was unlike other women, which I'm pretty sure it was a reference to Nancy Reagan.

Eric Motley: Susan, I have a beautiful relationship with many of the Bush grandkids and they always speak so lovingly and so kindly their grandmother, but always with regard for her discipline. And her concern for them always doing what is right. You capture her. So wondrously in this biography is beautiful. It captures her complexity, her strengths or weaknesses, and it's very informative. Thank you so much for sharing that.

Speaker 6: [inaudible].