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GEORGE H. W. BUSH INTERVIEW

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GEORGE BUSH SR.

41st U.S. President

Interviewed by Hugh Sidey

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

The American President

Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:

George H.W. Bush

41st U.S. President

GEORGE H.W. Bush

41st U.S. President

00:00:12:00

HUGH SIDEY

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Mr. President, I'm very delighted to do this. Take a, let's start look back at your family because I think we all stem from backgrounds like that and there have been great families in politics before. Some have called them dynasties, the Adamses, people like that. The Bushes seem to have somewhat of a hold on public life - may go on. What's your feeling about it? Is it going to be a Bush era?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well I don't think there's going to be an era. I think it's early to talk about dynasty. I, of course, learned a lot from my father who served in the Senate and I became Congressman, Vice President and President. Now we have a son who's the governor of the second biggest state in the nation, and another one who was almost governor of the fifth biggest state in the nation. These are three generations, but I don't, we're not, we don't talk in terms of dynasty. We don't think that way, as old Joe Kennedy might have thought. And. . . but if our sons do well and one of them is doing well, the other's doing well in life and probably will run again. I'm sure people will start writing "Dynasty". That's not what motivates these sons.

HUGH SIDEY

Where does that come from?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well it's more . . . and I got kind of teased about that when I was in the presidency - more a sense of service than it is some driving you know, project or issue.

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HUGH SIDEY

Did your father talk to you about it though?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

No, he just set an example. He'd ride out on the train from New York and go be the moderator of the town meeting of Greenwich when all his business colleagues were out there drinking a martini and having dinner. And Dad set an example. He was head of the USO back in World War II succeeding another philanthropically motivated man, Mr. John D. Rockefeller.

HUGH SIDEY

Did it go back in his family too, before that?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Yes, but not in public arena as much. Mr... Dad's father was head of a company and what I call one of a thousand points of light. But not public service, not elected service that I'm familiar with.

HUGH SIDEY

What ... Did you read any books or any particular people inspire you, besides your father?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well, Teddy Roosevelt inspired me because I love that spirit. He came out of a privileged background you might say. They always say life of privilege. I guess that meant his family could afford to pay the bills if he got sick and educate him, which is pretty darn good privilege. And he ventured forth to the West. He rode in the war and his ... Lincoln, every president respects and reads about. I can't remember the exact texts I read but I've read a fair amount about Abraham Lincoln.

00:03:01:00

HUGH SIDEY

You've talked about Ike also.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well, with great respect ... with great respect. I don't remember reading as much because we lived that one. I mean I was a tiny little, little, you know the lowest of the low in the Navy while he was our commander. I was in the Pacific and he was over in Europe. But I mean every sailor, whether under his command or not, had great respect for General Eisenhower.

HUGH SIDEY

You met him later though.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Oh I met him. Met him up at Gettysburg. He was a friend of my fathers. He was ... I was inspired by him. It was a steady principled leadership - decency. I think

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family meant a lot to him. And so I learned a lot from him. And what I learned - one of the things is you don't have to be out - glamorous, on the cutting edge all the time. It's steady, responsible, principled leadership.

HUGH SIDEY

What's the best advice your father gave you about politics looking back over it?

00:03:59:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

I'm not sure he gave me advice about politics. He gave me advice about life that I hope helped me in politics - tell the truth, be honest, work hard, try to see the other guy's point of view while sticking to your own principles. I mean these were truisms you might say that we had inculcated into us growing up - my three brothers and my sister.

HUGH SIDEY

But there came a time when you thought perhaps you would go into public life.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well that started about the time my dad left the Senate, which was in 1962. He served 10 years, decided he would not stay after whatever birthday it was - after he was seventy - and left the Senate of his own free will, not in defeat. And it was about that time that I started running for office. I ran in 1964, with a spectacular lack of success, for the US Senate. And maybe Dad's experience, though I was

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way out in west Texas while he was senator, had something to do - I'm sure it had something to do with my desire to be in elective politics.

HUGH SIDEY

Did his stories about the life back in Washington fascinate you?

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GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well, there was a fascination. I'd come here and visit him. Played golf once with Robert Taft and heard Dad talk about his games with Eisenhower as well as ... be up to the Senate dining room. I got a huge kick out of that - going with him and meeting his colleagues in the Senate when I was just starting out in the drilling contracting business in west Texas in the 50s. And then I headed the Eisenhower/Nixon campaign in 52 and 56, mainly raising a little money in west Texas. There were no Republicans out there in those days. Every office holder was a Democrat. So I was kind of an ivy league Republican down there. But we did - got our quota and that got me active in Texas politics a little bit.

HUGH SIDEY

Somebody suggested that even though you went much further than your father in terms of elective office, that you always said that you felt you didn't quite measure up. Is that true?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well, I don't know that I ... Well, I think in character I probably don't measure up. I guess ... I don't know how you measure progress in politics.

HUGH SIDEY

What was it - just that fatherly love?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well he's an overwhelming figure. He was an overwhelming respected figure that had the respect of everybody he worked with in business and the respect of those with whom he served. Wasn't an issue thing, it was a respect of his colleagues. They knew he would tell the truth and they knew he would say what was in his heart and they knew that he did not ... wasn't a vindictive man. And so, I think my dad enjoyed great respect and I did live in his shadow in that regard. I never was trying to catch up. I never was trying to "Well, oh my dad would have done it this way. I ought to try to do better." I mean there wasn't any such competitive motivation.

HUGH SIDEY

Your mother was still instructing you when you were in the White House.

00:07:06:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Yes she was. She was. She'd call up. One time, Hugh, she called me up and she said, "George I noticed that ... remember how President Reagan used to wait for Nancy as he got off the helicopter there on the White House lawn." I said "Mother

are you sending me a message?” “Well I think it’d be nice if you didn’t walk ahead like Jack Kennedy used to do.” She cited Kennedy. And then she called me one time - she caught me smiling during the State of the Union. Oh no she said I should smile more. “I saw you sitting next to Tip O’Neill and you should be smiling more. They can see you over the shoulder of the President.” I said “Mother, he was talking about nuclear weapons at that point.” You know, so she would check in, but with sound advice and with a lot of love.

HUGH SIDEY

It went way back didn’t it? That whole family of yours.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Oh gosh.

HUGH SIDEY

In addition to the instant and the specific influences, there was that whole network of uncles and ...

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Huge. On each side. Mother’s side, four driving, competitive, sports-minded uncles. One sister. And my dad’s side, two sisters and a brother. You know there was a lot of, lot of ... not competition, but life by example. And it was ... people say well George Bush was a man of privilege and by that they mean money. And I was a man of privilege. And yes I was blessed. If I got real sick the family could

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take care of me. But I was privileged in the question of values - a mother and father who were determined to help their kids be good people.

HUGH SIDEY

What other influence is there - church?

00:08:56:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Church has an influence on me. Faith. Sometimes it's rote, sometimes

HUGH SIDEY

You had to go didn't you? Sunday school?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Oh gosh yeah. Had to go even ... When I was way back in school where I went, chapel was mandatory. No kids today ... that would be an infringement on their rights. And sometimes I'd try to doze off in there. Sometimes I'd tell jokes or sometimes I'd needle some guy next to me. But I mean, it ... there was an accumulation of exposure to formal worship that I think helped me have certain standards.

HUGH SIDEY

Now you just started at Yale. Of course your Yale experience was after the Navy.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

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After the Navy, yeah. But the Yale experience was married man, living in an apartment and determined to get through the school with ... do well so I could get a better job and support my wife and then child.

00:09:50:00

HUGH SIDEY

Played a little baseball?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Played a lot of baseball. And loved sports. Played soccer one year and I loved all the competitive nature and the extracurricular activities of college. But the driving thing was "Hey, we're grown up now and you'd better get out and support your family."

HUGH SIDEY

Go back to the Navy. You were 19 weren't you.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

I was 18 ... on my 18th birthday I was sworn in as a Seaman Second Class. While I was still 18 I was a commissioned officer and a pilot.

HUGH SIDEY

Why'd you do that.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well, that was World War II. There weren't any protesters in those days. Everybody wanted to fight for his country. The country was together - good versus evil. And, there were you know, some conscientious objectors who had a real religious problem, maybe with this. But most everybody else couldn't wait to go to war, couldn't wait to fight for their country, couldn't wait to help defeat the Emperor and the Fuhrer.

HUGH SIDEY

00:10:54:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Count my blessings. Made me count my blessings. Why me? Why was my life spared and one of the crewmen whose parachute opened ... streamed and it didn't open ... why did he, why did the other man die? I mean I had a lot of self inspection on that incident. But on the bottom line for me floating around on the life raft knowing that the fleet was going to go south in about two hours - four hours and I'd be an hors d'oeuvres for a cannibalist on the Chi Chi Jima.

HUGH SIDEY

Or shark food.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

No no, from the guy in charge of the garrison was executed for cannibalism - eating the liver of captured pilots. I didn't know that at the time but I knew for damn sure I didn't want to be captured by these people. I was a skinny guy so he

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wouldn't have gotten much to eat but nevertheless. No, but it was a traumatic experience for a young guy - for anybody.

HUGH SIDEY

Then on to Texas.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Then on to Texas.

HUGH SIDEY

What was that? Independence?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

That was, yeah, setting ... I want to do it my way.

HUGH SIDEY

But that's a long ways away.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Long way. I never heard of Odessa, Texas when I was offered a job and I said I wanted to go. Barbara wanted to go and we had a wonderful life there. And we learned a lot about people and where they were educated or what their pedigree was, what are their values, do they work hard, are they kind, do they help other people. All that was in great broad colors when I, when I lived in Odessa, Texas

and drove hundreds of miles every day to take drilling bits or material ... soap, rope and dope they call it, out to the drilling rigs.

00:12:39:00

HUGH SIDEY

Then you had one of the tragedies of your life there, the loss of your little daughter.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well, we lost our daughter. And that, that was a tough experience because we didn't ... we, again though, why, dear God why does this child have to die? The epitome of innocence to us - beauty, everything else. And there's no explanation. But, you know, I was told that when a family loses a child that they often drift apart - the parents. It was the opposite in our case. And our family, never with any strains on it ever, but if Barbara and I were anything we were closer because of having shared this experience and I had more respect for her, watching her hold this baby in her arms until the day the baby died. Not baby - 4 year old kid. So all these things contribute to your life, maybe your character, to what you stand for, and that was a, that was a very, very ... I don't want to say transforming ... maturing - maturing happening. It hurt, badly.

HUGH SIDEY

You mentioned, just briefly, Barbara in this role. What else, in terms of public service and her influence in your life?

00:14:03:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well, enormous. And it grew. Barbara started off as a conventional wife, as did most of the wives of the veterans with whom we went to college. And then she, she started off by ... her first responsibility being to her children. Being sure they could read, being sure they did their homework, being sure they were well, not sick. And she was, she was a great example. And then she started getting into being one of a thousand points of light, doing her charity work and all. And then she became, as she, as we get older, convinced that this, the biggest problem in her view facing the country is the fact that so many people can't read. So she pledged herself to do something about family literacy. And today she's a shining example. I think I'm married to the most popular woman in the United States of America. And I have ... I said that to Michael Ovitz of Disney and he said "You are. I can prove it. We did a survey. And head and shoulders Barbara Bush is that..."

HUGH SIDEY

But by some of the standards of today, if you look at families, everything you did ... you made money down in Texas, you came from a family of some wealth, and then you went into public life which took you on the road, very much, to be monogamous in that period is rather unusual. A lot of families with this background of jumping around job to job all over and that, fell apart.

00:15:38:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

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They did and but, we, well, love of the children, parental guidance from early days. It wasn't that, there wasn't that much separation. I guess there's far more today with the amount of travel I'm doing, and maybe far more when I was running CIA and, in terms of exchanging confidences and all of that. But, no, there haven't been that many pressures on our marriage. We've been lucky. And we are privileged. I've never denied that. I never considered it a great liability as some people tried to make it in the political wars. But I was blessed by privilege. But blessed more by privilege that comes from having parents that teach you values.

HUGH SIDEY

When did that first thought that you might be president of the United States come? Can you remember it?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

That I might be president might have come right after I left the CIA. Jimmy Carter was elected. I went home to Texas and I started thinking in there, "Well why not... why don't I try this. I've had some considerable experience. I had some ideas. I'd like to think that I can help make things a little better, here and abroad. And I think, I think the serious thinking about began maybe in 1977. But everybody ... When I was a kid everyone wanted to be either a fireman or president. That was back ... or a policeman, maybe. That was back when you were growing up.

HUGH SIDEY

But when you say you ran back, way back there, that first time that you ran, was it in your mind that this was the start of a process?

00:17:14:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

No. I don't ... Well, I ... Hugh, I don't... My recall isn't too good. I don't think so. I don't think so.

HUGH SIDEY

What helped you most on the way to the White House, because you had half a dozen public lives?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Friends.

HUGH SIDEY

Friends? Network?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Running for president, because in terms of actually getting there, building a network, going into early caucuses or primaries ... friends, people that are willing to stick their neck out. They say "Hey, he's an honest guy. We don't agree with him on abortion or guns or foreign affairs or Russia or whatever it is, but we believe in this man." And that is the kind of network ... that was for ... there were

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a lot of pundits. There was a pundit here named Jack Germond in Washington. He said, "This man peaked the day he announced." He didn't understand that I had a network of friends that were determined ... that felt I would be a good president. And worked like hell. When others were sitting around giving speeches, they were building in the precincts of Iowa and New Hampshire.

00:18:18:00

HUGH SIDEY

What about being Vice President now? That was a long haul. Eight years.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well, had I not been Vice President I might well not have been President, because Reagan, at the last moment, put me on the ticket. It was his choice and that clearly gave me a leg up on the presidency even though the myth back then was nobody since Martin Van Buren has ever gone as a sitting vice, sitting vice president to the presidency.

HUGH SIDEY

Wasn't it frustrating though, eight years?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

To some degree, but not working with him. What a...the decency in the man and the...he was so good to me and so, in every single way. So if I had a minutiae of difference or a nuance of difference on an issue that was inconsequential compared to the confidence that Ronald Reagan put in me, the leeway he gave

me, the inclusion in every meeting that would help me understand better arms control or what these foreign leaders were like. And so the plusses of the vice presidency far outweigh any of the confines of the vice presidency.

HUGH SIDNEY

What were your thoughts when you heard he'd been shot?

00:19:31:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well, I thought "A friend of mine has been shot." I was...I didn't really, I don't think, think of the awesome burdens of the presidency descending on me. Maybe I did, flying back from Texas when I came back. I was determined to conduct myself with respect for the fact that he was still president. Symbolic, not landing on the White House lawn in a helicopter as some had urged. And I ...not sitting in his chair. I mean little tiny things but, you know, it became clear quite early on that he was not going to die of this. But when I first heard it I really... the instinct was a human instinct, a friend, a man that's given me a lot of trust and at that point in the early stages of a genuine friendship that was going on...he's hurt, he's been hurt. And then it, you know, then I guess at some point when you're alone in the private cabin on the very plane where Lyndon Johnson was sworn in after the shooting of Kennedy. You begin to think, you know, suppose something goes wrong. How would I handle the burdens of the presidency? I was never scared. I was never afraid I couldn't do it. But then, as I say, it had become clear early on that he would recover.

00:21:03:00

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HUGH SIDEY

Well, your whole, your whole action though was one of restraint, though.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Yes, was to be restrained, and to sit back and not presume to take the power or grasp for power. And there's something important in that, I think, because we sometimes take for granted the stability of our system, and the importance of the stability of our system around the world. And if I had inadvertently signaled something that, "Well now I'll take over. I'll hold the cabinet meeting at 8 o'clock tomorrow morning." There's a lot of countries that don't have our stability - that are kind of coup conscious. And though they wouldn't see this as, not a coup, they wouldn't have quite understood. "Well, maybe this isn't quite as stable as we think."

HUGH SIDEY

You, of course, have been around the Oval Office all through the time of Reagan and done everything, but once it was yours and you went in for the first time what did you feel?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Overawed. I have a picture in our sauna. We have a marvelous sauna that looks out over the ocean now and in that picture is my mother and me - the first official picture, I think, I had taken there. And I look at it now and I remember the feeling of awe. But you know Hugh, I think I went there as a tourist one time way back

somewhere in the sixties, or saw it on some tour walking by, and I felt this overwhelming sense of awe. I felt the same way the day I left the Oval Office, having been defeated, to go back as a private...having been president for four years, I felt that same sense of ... it wasn't just awe. It was excitement and respect for that office. And that's why when anybody was there I would not ever go in there and have meetings with neckties gone and plastic cups, because I, and maybe it's old fashioned, but I have great respect for the dignity of the office and for the office of the presidency itself. And I feel that way... when I walked a couple of mornings ago, 6 o'clock, I just took a morning walk to see where our dogs had run on the south lawn of the White House and to reminisce a little, quietly to myself, just two secret service guys - friends - walking with me, and it came back to me - that same sense of respect for that majestic office - say nothing of the house over here.

00:23:34:00

HUGH SIDEY

What'd you learn from Ronald Reagan?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Learned a lot about principle. Learned a lot about kindness to people although I think I was sensitive on that score before. Ronald Reagan would no more walk by the man driving the elevator in the White House without greeting him than fly to the moon. He couldn't go by a uniformed division Secret Service guy standing at attention - "Joe, how are you?" There was a kindness there that taught me a good lesson - don't get to be a big deal, don't bawl out the airline stewardess, don't

throw your weight around. Contain your anger. Smile a lot. Laugh. Be kind to people. Those values I learned from Ronald Reagan. He was a beautiful, beautiful man in that sense.

00:24:21:00

HUGH SIDEY

You mentioned before you went into the Oval Office that you were worried about becoming a prisoner in the White House because other presidents have talked about that. Did you avoid that?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well, I vowed - I don't know if this was publicly, I think it was - that I would never complain about the loneliest job in the world or the burdens of the presidency. And I didn't do that because I had a wonderful team of people in whom I had confidence. It was a team thing and I, I and of course Barbara, going over there sometimes at lunch, always at night and giving me strength there. But I, I never felt a prisoner because presidents are blessed with Camp David for one reason. If you want to get away, you have all the communications, you have every telephone to talk to every leader - every button to push, just like you're in beautiful 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue or in the West Wing. And it was all right there. So the way I'd relieve whatever might be tendencies to be a prisoner or tensions was to get up to Camp David and run in the woods and watch the dogs chase the rabbits and play wallyball with the Marines and bring people up there and get tournaments going on horseshoes, and let that adrenaline come to the surface and then work its way down by knocking tennis balls with Chris Evert or

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Pammy Shriver or doing, you know, all these things. We had more fun. We'd bring country singers there. So - with no press, no attention to it. It was just like the real world. Just like a private life.

HUGH SIDEY

Well I got the impression you liked the White House itself.

00:26:04:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

I loved it. I loved it. And I never felt a prisoner in there at all. But I'm just talking about changing the pace and the tensions. And of course we were blessed - son of privilege - with Kennebunkport. And I'd go up there. And I remember, Hugh, during Desert Storm the run up - Desert Shield - a lot of the press said "You ought to be back in Washington doing this." And I said "I'm not going to be a prisoner. I'm not going to go there. This is vacation time. Why do I want to send a signal of fear or a signal of - raise the level of expectancy of war by changing my schedule? What can I do different there? I can sit on Fidelity, a 28 foot, 20 year old boat and talk to President Assad of Syria from the cockpit there. So why do I need to knuckle under to somebody else's view of how to run my job?"

00:26:56:00

HUGH SIDEY

Let's change it just a little bit - the sense of majesty of the office.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Always there.

HUGH SIDEY

Always there - that was the instant you came in?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Always there. You felt it. And you wanted to keep it. You wanted the kids to have stars in their eyes when they went through the White House or looked at the West Wing, looked at the Oval Office. And I don't think I did ... I think I ... with the help of Barbara, I think we preserved that. I think we, I think we did a good job if I could say so. Don't want to have Mother looking down saying I'm bragging here. But I think we upheld the honor of the presidency because I did feel the majesty of the office.

HUGH SIDEY

Did you ever, some of those tense times, wander through the White House corridors and look at those other fellows that had had the job ...

00:27:46:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Yeah at times we did. Yeah, there are some pictures around. Pictures of Lincoln, particularly the picture of Lincoln and his commanders, made a real impression. It's up in my office, what was then the Treaty Room and became my private office. And it's actually painted into the official portrait I have in the White House for a reason. And the reason is that that picture helped me be strong during the,

during the decision to send kids into battle in Desert Storm. I think of the Lincoln picture, I've mentioned Teddy Roosevelt. I can't even remember where it was. I think it was in the Cabinet Room for a while. But it made an impression on me. The Roosevelt room - I'd see him there and see his Nobel Prize and all these symbols mean something to a president.

HUGH SIDEY

What is the most misunderstood thing about being president?

00:28:49:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well I think some, I think some people do think the president waves a wand and everything happens and I think there are proper limitations on presidential power.

HUGH SIDEY

Well you had a lot of tussles with Congress.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Yeah, then you can get very little done. If, maybe I could have been more persuasive with Congress - I expect I could have. But I ...

HUGH SIDEY

You were upset sometimes because things leaked out or because...

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

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Very much upset. I hated leaks. I didn't .. I felt that they ... what they did do was keep the decision, the decision process from being open. You would chill discussion. People didn't want to have something ... say something "Bless you Mr. President you're making a huge mistake. You're making an ass out of yourself." You know, this that and the other. Even Jim Baker who would talk to me like that, if he thought it was going to be leaked in a meeting he wouldn't talk that way.

HUGH SIDEY

So secrecy was a necessary quality.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well I think it was .. to reaching .. for the president to reach decisions to get the benefit of the advice from critics. And so if you, if you, if you chill it by knowing that there's a mole in the room who's going to rush out to endear himself or herself to a member of the press, the decision making is cramped and chilled and a president is denied the breadth of criticism or the breadth of alternative... alternatives that he should have.

HUGH SIDEY

Is that the hardest part of being president or what is?

00:30:18:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

The leaks?

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HUGH SIDEY

The hardest part.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

The hardest part is when you have to send someone's kid into battle. That's the hardest part by far.

HUGH SIDEY

You'd been in battle yourself.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Yeah, but when you have to commit someone else's - be bad enough if I was sending my own sons - but to send somebody else's pride and joy to fight for his country, it was...we did this in Panama.

HUGH SIDEY

Did this come home to you? How did this come home to you? Did you see letters?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

You see letters, yeah and of course with Desert Storm you'd see protesters beating their drums outside the White House and, you know, "Send your boy. Don't send mine." And you know that would be the ugly side of it but you'd have impassioned letters "Please give peace a chance." But we were doing it. We were

giving peace a chance. But when you have... a guy from your state of Iowa takes an 18 year old kid - his son goes off, off the farm, signs up for the Marines for what he thinks is 3 tranquil years of getting educational benefits and finds he's going to be on the front lines in Desert Storm, his parents worry about that. And I worried about it.

HUGH SIDEY

But there must have been, despite war and its awfulness, I recall when you went, I think it was Thanksgiving, when you went over there with the troops, and I recall the pictures of you with those men and you seemed almost transported by that.

00:31:44:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well, I wanted to show the flag, as it were, the flag of the commander-in-chief. I knew what they were thinking because I had been in battle. That combat experience of mine back in 1944 served me very well as commander-in-chief. And I knew what they were thinking. I mean that doesn't change. And they were gung ho, they were well trained and I still had questions in my mind, "Hey is the technology as good as the Air Force general McPeak is telling me? Is it going to work to this battle plan? Is Schwarzkopf right that we have to use military force. We can roll over the 4th largest army in the world with the speed that they predict?" And so there was all kinds of questions and doubt but I...

HUGH SIDEY

Describe the way you went at the Gulf War because that is such a big part of your presidency and was so successful in its way. I mean did you ... in your mind when you heard about Iraq and invading Kuwait did you set down principles to follow?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

I think there was only one principle and that principle was ... with no... that I stated on the lawn of the White House with no preparation, no cue cards, no, no briefing, just in my heart I said “This aggression will not stand.” And ...

HUGH SIDEY

You had no doubts about that?

00:33:12:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

I was confident. We would do whatever it took to see that it didn't. I thought that breach of international law was so clear. The evil against the good was so clear that we could not permit it to stand. Now, it caused...I saw something that Colin said, “My God, does he realize this means we may have to fight?” And Brent Scowcroft “Well how did the president happen to say that at that time? We never discussed that he was going to get that far out in front.” Marlin, “What is this?” And yet they were totally supportive, of course, as we then went from that August day to the fateful days in January and in February when the air war and the ground war took place. But I knew, Hugh, I knew that it was big enough and important enough that we could not let that aggression stand up. So that was the

only guiding principle. There was another one, I guess you might say, but I rank it as very important - but not as important as that one. And that is we can't let a brutal dictator torture and rape and pillage the way this man is now doing in Kuwait. There's...again, good versus evil. It's easier when a president can sort it out in those terms and not see the other side. I didn't see any other side to this. I didn't see anything that justified what he was doing. And so it was clear...it made it very easy for me. It didn't make it easy for a lot of the American people at the outset. Didn't make it easier for these congressmen that fought me almost unanimously on the other side of the aisle when I asked for the authority to do what the UN said we should do. But it was an easy call for me on principle - not on execution.

00:35:04:00

HUGH SIDEY

Well then there were months, literally, of what you would have to say the bureaucracy of war, in which you had to gather support in the Congress and NATO, in the UN, you had to get the military commanders in place and all of that.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Had to form the coalition.

HUGH SIDEY

How did you do that?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

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We used the UN for the best way...that since the founding of the UN we could do that because of our relationship with Gorbachev and our convincing Gorbachev that he should join us and not stand with his traditional ally, Iraq. Personal diplomacy helped.

HUGH SIDEY

You're talking the network again. You're talking your friends again - all over the world.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

That's right and they ... I ... one of them disappointed me - King Hussein of Jordan. And he was a friend. He flew down to see me, Hugh, in Houston, Texas when I was unemployed and out of work right after the CIA job in 1977, and I'd been to visit him as vice president in Aqaba and Amman as well. And he saw it differently from us. And so I was disappointed in that friend and I'm delighted that our personal friendship is back and renewed and strong, and I'm very proud of what he has done in reaching a peace agreement with Israel. But friendship even helped in that regard. Dealing with Gorbachev, dealing with the Chinese even. And dealing certainly with great friends like Thatcher and John Major, Brian Mulrooney, Helmut Kohl. Personal contacts helped.

HUGH SIDEY

At some point though along the way did it settle on you that you're making history? I mean, had that thing failed, had that thing failed, God knows what would have happened.

00:36:43:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

If that thing had failed, I would have been impeached. And one of the most respected Democratic senators told me that. He did not vote for the war to send our people. He'd been a war hero himself. And he said, "I can't go with you on this. I wish you Godspeed. If you commit our forces to battle, I will then support you. But if it fails, you're going to be impeached." And I knew that impeachment papers were filed by Henry B. Gonzalez, and prodded by Ramsey Clark. And so a fringe was out there from the beginning. But I knew we were dealing with something profound and serious. But again, it wasn't that tough a call, because I knew ... I took the advice of our military as to the way we would do this and I knew that principle was important. A bully is not with impunity going to take over and wipe out another country.

HUGH SIDEY

Did you have an inkling when you moved into the White House that the Cold War might end?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

I hoped it would end but I wasn't sure it would end that fast. I wasn't sure the wall would come down. I wasn't sure Germany would be unified. I wasn't sure that the

Soviet Union would have dramatically imploded as it did. And yet I, I felt that Perestroika and Glasnost were real. I believed in Gorbachev. I believed in his word. Some were very skeptical of that. But I think history will be very kind to Mikael Gorbachev.

HUGH SIDEY

But at what point did you see that the empire was ending?

00:38:24:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well, I think when the wall came down. I mean everybody says “What day did the Cold War end?” And you get all kinds of historians who give you different dates. So when that wall came down, I think that was pretty clear evidence that the Cold War was well on its way to being over. It wasn’t over then. You still had hiccups in the Baltics. You still had a lot of work to be done with the Soviets. But I ...it was wonderful. We were a catalyst. Kohl gives...well I shouldn’t say again, personally, but he gives me credit for the fact that the German... Germany was unified as fast as it was.

HUGH SIDEY

Well here again you’re friends that you had placed around there that came into...

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Yeah. It helps when you can talk to a person personally. It helps when I can tell Lech Walesa in Poland, “Look, Walesa, you want a peace treaty with Germany

before Germany is totally unified - before - Kohl wants to give you a treaty, but he wants it to come from - the treaty of a unified parliament in Germany - unified Bundestag. He's for real and take my word for it, Walesa, you're my friend. Kohl's word is good. And I can get you a letter saying what's going to happen." I mean there was some of this kind of even, detailed negotiation between me and people that I considered friends. And Walesa was one of them. And certainly Helmut Kohl was one. But they had a difference on the borders and on German intention.

00:39:58:00

HUGH SIDNEY

Mr. President, you've talked about things, we've talked about things you do do as president like when you get something like the Iraqi invasion and that, but it's been my observation that frequently important things are what you don't also. Now I remember particularly when the Soviet Union began to fly apart, there were a lot of people that wanted you to take \$50 billion and give it to Moscow, or, when the, or wanted you to go over when the Berlin Wall fell and make a big statement publicly like that, you didn't.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

We had several times when restraint - I use the word prudence a lot - when prudence seemed to be the course to take. One of them was when the Berlin Wall fell down. I was encouraged by some to go dance on the wall - George Mitchell, fine senator who fought me tooth and nail on almost every domestic program, said "You ought to be over there. We feel we're in a spirit of rejoicing here with these

young people. What are you doing sitting in the White House?” Had I done that, who knows what that kind of miscalculation might have encouraged the Soviet military to do. Stick my fingers in the eyes of these Soviet generals. They’re about to say “Wait a minute. We have a threshold for our pride and we’re not going to be humiliated any more.” And they might have said, “We’re not going to take any troops out of Hungary or Poland or certainly East Germany. And who knows what that would have ... what would have happened? And there were probably other times.

HUGH SIDEY

We'll remember the \$50 million...

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Tiananmen Square. I didn't want to cut off relations with China. We led the world in sanctions, Hugh, on Tiananmen Square. People forget that. At the same time I sent Brent Scowcroft over there, quiet diplomacy, to try to say this is an important relationship. What can we do together to get it back on track? When it came out that Scowcroft went why of course I was criticized for doing that with these tyrants, but I was right. We neglect China at our own peril. And I still feel that way.

00:41:56:00

HUGH SIDEY

You've had a little time to look back. What was your main stumble?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well, domestically...

HUGH SIDEY

Imagery or no new taxes, one of those two?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well I think the tax, you know, "Read my lips. No new taxes." I didn't want to shut the government down. We reached a compromise that I felt would encourage the economy. And...but, but the break was so big that the right wing got all over me and the Democrats got me on credibility, on my word of honor. And what was lost in the fact was that the economy recovered and was in robust recovery when I went out of the White House because the campaign of the Clinton people was the economy stupid and though we handed them an economy that's growing 3 times as fast as the economy we've got today, it was seen that I was out of touch and the economy was bad. So I think the handling of that was wrong. But not so much on the issue as on the credibility. I've varied...I've wondered whether it was totally bad economics. But I find it hard to say that as I look back now because we were ... 4th quarter GDP in 1992 was 5.8%. That is robust growth. So the tax hike didn't kill that growth. But it was credibility. And my biggest failure was not being able to get any of our programs through the Congress - our domestic program. We had a good program. So I'm seen now - I won't be when history's finally written - as a guy that was only interested in foreign affairs. But I don't...I

think we did some good things domestically and we were able to work with Congress on some of them.

HUGH SIDEY

Now, if you had it to do over again, would you banish that “Read my lips. No new taxes.”

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Yes, I wouldn't say that again.

HUGH SIDEY

Maybe taxes or hopefully...

00:43:45:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

No I wouldn't even say that. I'd just be silent - or say I'm going to cut your taxes. And try to get it done and then blame Congress when they didn't. I worked like hell for the capital gains tax reduction. It was killed single handedly by George Mitchell. He did a very good job in negating something that I knew would help the economy. But it was seen by the press as favoring big business and wealthy people. I think it would have worked then as it did in 19... when Kennedy cut the...cut it. And when it... Steiger put an amendment through in 78. But I failed. But I think if I were to do it over, I think the rhetoric was so clear and so profound and the TV bytes so succinct that it could be used against me and was ... very effectively. So, you know, would I repeat ...

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HUGH SIDEY

What about your imagery? What about this thing that Ronald Reagan did so well? Would you have worked on that more?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well I don't think I would have worked on it. I think you've got to be what you are and he was much better as a speaker - far more persuasive.

HUGH SIDEY

Well, he was a showman.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

He was wonderful.

HUGH SIDEY

Which was genuine.

00:44:47:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

It was genuine and it was the way he was. And, and he was better with humor, although I think I've got a good sense of humor. But he was better projecting the public persona. But to try to work on it, to try to change what you feel and after 60, then 68, 65 years, were in your life, I felt that was cosmetic. I didn't ... I resisted people trying to make me something I wasn't. "Wear this. Do your hair

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

with a bouffant do.” And you know, I mean, there’s too much of that. And yet I think had I done it all better, I mean, who knows? I might have been re-elected president of the United States of America. I feel comfortable with what I am though.

HUGH SIDEY

Well, without Ross Perot though, you would have won?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well, I think so. I think so. But life goes on.

HUGH SIDEY

How did you take that defeat?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

I didn’t ... I hurt for quite a while.

HUGH SIDEY

You didn’t show much.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Tried not to. Don’t you remember my father, “Be a good sport. Keep your head up.”

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HUGH SIDEY

That's a tough one though.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Yeah.

HUGH SIDEY

91% in the polls and then to slide, slide in...

00:46:01:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

And the ridicule that went with it. The adversarial nature of some of your colleagues in the press corps where the Washington press corps, now proven by statistical survey, was overwhelmingly opposed to me. They could identify much more clearly with Clinton. The values that I care about - duty, honor, country - they didn't mean a thing. And I, some of that may have been the way I presented it, but it hurt. It hurt a lot. But the minute we got back to Houston, Texas and were welcomed by our neighbors, went into that little house with 2 dogs and Barbara and me and nobody else, and began to say, "Hey, life's pretty good. Today is wonderful."

HUGH SIDEY

But you had a lot else that other presidents haven't had.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

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I was blessed.

HUGH SIDEY

You had family and you had...

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Blessed with family and I'm now blessed with - if I got a political urge of any kind today, I can just scratch myself and say, "Hey, let the governor of Texas handle this one. Or my son in Florida handle it."

HUGH SIDEY

One of the things that you emphasized throughout your presidency was loyalty. It really bothered you when you felt somebody had abandoned you or principle.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Yes it did.

HUGH SIDEY

Did you overdo that?

00:47:19:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

I found it very difficult to dump people. I remember when Clarence Thomas came down to the White House and he said, "I'm hurting you and I'm hurting my own family." And Danforth had called up and said, "I want you to talk to Clarence

Thomas. I don't know. He's finding this very difficult." And I put my arm around him. We walked around the South lawn and I said, "Clarence I'm going to stand with you. You're going to be a great justice. I hate it that I'm putting you through all this, but, just as I stood with John Tower, I'm going to stand with you." And some said, "Well, you stayed with some of these people - not those two necessarily - but some of them too long. Too loyal." The vice president was another example. He..."Well, if you'd only get rid of Dan Quayle, maybe you'd go somewhere." I don't happen to agree with that's the way it would have worked, remembering what happened when President Ford dropped Nelson Rockefeller. But I wouldn't do that. He was loyal to me and I owe him loyalty. And that's...if there's such a thing as too much loyalty, maybe so, but I think you begin to get into flawed character if you can't stand with people who have been loyal to you.

HUGH SIDEY

That's something you emphasized all through your time in office and have privately since then. And the necessity of character - that the presidency rests, in a remarkable degree, on that those...

00:48:52:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

I honestly believe it does. And I think people... people have to look to the president all around the world with a certain respect. And I don't think you get the respect ... Everybody's got flawed character, but if your character is too flawed... and I think you hurt your country. I think you hurt your...your...certainly hurt the

standing of the White House around the world - and even in the eyes of the people here. I may not be right about that. I felt strongly about President Clinton's view on the military - his leading demonstrations in London when his peers were dying in Vietnam . This troubled me. Mine is duty, honor, country. But I don't think it troubled the rest of the country. I don't think it troubled many of his age group peers in the press.

HUGH SIDEY

Why?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Because they agree with him. They thought the war was immoral in Vietnam and people...it was fine to run to Canada. And my sense of values, my traditional view of things was it doesn't - your country calls, you serve. And we can't have everybody determining the morality...

HUGH SIDEY

Hasn't that changed a little bit, though?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Oh, it's changed dramatically. But I haven't changed on it.

HUGH SIDEY

No, now it's come back to your way of thinking somewhat hasn't it?

00:50:12:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well I hope so but I'm not sure it has. I hope it has. I think Desert Storm lifted the morale of our country and healed in a wonderful way some of the wounds of Vietnam. I'm sure of it. Many of those men who served and were vilified upon their return to the states as being brutal killers of Asians felt lifted up because they somehow felt healed - the wounds healed by Desert Storm. Magnificent way the military performed without politics-politicians intervening on every decision. "Where are you going to move the 101st Airborne? How are you going to...how are you going to start the battle?"

HUGH SIDEY

What do you want historians to say about your presidency?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Did his best. Did it with honor.

HUGH SIDEY

What about life after the presidency? What's it been like...

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Life after the presidency. I recommend it for President Clinton. It's great and it is a wonderful thing ... You can go to a ball game and not get booed. They make you hole out putts this long when they used to say, "That's good sir. That's fine."

But, so there are some changes. But it's a wonderful thing. And I think some of the way ... reason that I'm very happy is I think there is a respect for the presidency. And a lot of people that I'm sure never voted for me come up and say, "We miss you."

00:51:39:00

HUGH SIDEY

Give a little thumbnail of a president's day.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Normal day, Barbara and I still wake up early now that I'm an ex-president, but in the White House we'd wake up about 5:15, 5:30. We had the dogs. There's a wonderful ... men that work in the White House for Democratic presidents, Republican presidents so one of them would be on duty early. You'd open the door quietly. Our two dogs would run out and they'd take them out to the South Lawn and when he returned they be full of life and I would have started reading one of six newspapers - scanning them, I can't read them all - and then we click on the television in our room which had 3 or 4 screens I think and just flick ... had the marvelous surfing on the dial. I'd get up, leave the ... the residence about 7 o'clock, walk once around the south grounds with the dogs and go into the Oval Office, and they'd run back over to Barbara. And then I'd start to work. First thing would be a CIA briefing that I never missed. I felt...I had great confidence in the intelligence I was given and I knew how it was produced and I ... they would brief me and I would ask questions. Always at my side would be General Scolcroft. Then Dan Quayle would come in around 8 having been briefed himself

on the intelligence and we would talk about national security objectives. Then I would be joined at all those meetings, except the very first one, by John Sununu or Sam Skinner, whoever was Chief of Staff, and we would then go over the agenda for the day. And then the schedule would start. And then we'd, you know, do whatever it called for ... getting the turkey or greeting the VFW.

HUGH SIDEY

A lot of ceremonial duties?

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Lot of ceremonial but a lot of ...

HUGH SIDEY

Cabinet meetings?

00:53:32:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Cabinet meetings. Very well prepared. A lot of briefing papers. Maybe meeting with an individual cabinet officer who wanted to see me. Often lunch right in a tiny office off the Oval Office. Maybe invite a friend in. A couple of Congressmen or whoever and then I'd work... about 6 o'clock, I'd had a full day, 6:30 maybe and you'd walk down the colonnade over to the house, take a drink once in a while, have a quiet dinner with Barbara. Or, the joy was bringing friends to the upstairs in the residence for dinner. People loved going there.

HUGH SIDEY

That's a great view over... out the Truman balcony.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Oh, it's marvelous. And then uh, maybe do a little homework in my office, but not every night. If alone I would. And that would be the day. That was kind of typical.

HUGH SIDEY

Just one last one, what comes to your mind when you... let me read these names.
Eisenhower.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Character and leadership.

HUGH SIDEY

John Kennedy.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Charisma.

HUGH SIDEY

Lyndon Johnson.

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GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Tough politics. Effective, tough, old school politics.

HUGH SIDEY

Nixon.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Flawed presidency. Very able leader. Good grasp of the world.

HUGH SIDEY

Ford.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Decency and honor.

HUGH SIDEY

Carter.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Well intentioned. Man of faith. Determined to help the little guy.

HUGH SIDEY

Reagan.

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GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Again, decency but certainly friendship. Principled leadership. Gigantic capacity for friendship and for warmth. Just felt good around Ronald Reagan.

HUGH SIDEY

Clinton.

00:55:36:00

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Effective politician. Very effective. Would say one position and then the next day convincingly take an opposite position and the American people appear to believe in it. They would have believed whatever... he's got a credibility, a way with people. I knew Clinton before I ran against him and we were friends. And we worked together on education things. And so I have no personal bitterness there, but I think, I think if I had to say... point out the best quality, it's the way to shift grounds and capture the political high ground... if it doesn't catch up with him.

HUGH SIDEY

Mr. President, thank you.

GEORGE H. W. BUSH

Ok!

END TC: 00:56:26:00

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