



In Pursuit

Alan Lowe: Welcome to *American FLOTUS*, a podcast produced by a partnership of the First Ladies Association for Research and Education and the *American POTUS* podcast. Today we're gonna talk about the exciting *In Pursuit* initiative with its CEO Colleen Shogan and the co-chair of the initiative, Anita McBride. Now, these amazing guests have very long and impressive resumé's, so I'll just admittedly skim the surface in these introductions.

Colleen served as the 11th archivist of the United States, the first woman to serve in that role, overseeing the National Archives and Records Administration. Prior to the Archives, she was Senior Vice President and Director of the David M. Rubenstein Center at the White House Historical Association.

Anita is Executive-in-Residence at American University's School of Public Affairs where she directs the First Ladies Initiative. Previously, she held positions in three presidential administrations, including service as First Lady Laura Bush's Chief of Staff. She is a founder and board member of FLARE and co-author of the recent book, *Remember the First Ladies: The Legacies of America's History-Making Women*. Colleen and Anita, thanks for joining us on *American FLOTUS*.

Anita McBride: Thanks for having us, Alan.

Colleen Shogan: Thank you.

Anita: It's good to be with you.

Alan: Well, you know, Anita, we saw each other last week at a great panel in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Thank you for being part of that. Talking about the first ladies, the public can't get enough of this and learning lessons from the past, especially from our great first ladies. Very, very important.

I'm excited about this *In Pursuit* initiative. I really appreciate you joining us on *FLOTUS*. What is the *In Pursuit* initiative and what challenges and opportunities inspired its creation?

Colleen: *In Pursuit* is a history-based civics initiative, and the goal of *In Pursuit* is to try to uncover the most relevant lessons from our past that can inform our present and our future. And the way that we're doing it in 2026 is as how you described it, is with a number of prominent historians, former public officials, journalists, other thought leaders writing short essays about our presidents and first ladies, and each essay has a one sentence lesson. What is one thing that we can learn? One aspect of this person's leadership that is noteworthy and relevant for our current situation and, of course, the next 250 years facing the United States.

Anita: Alan, I'd like to add to that, with what Colleen said, and we're so grateful for her to be the CEO of this organization. It's a big undertaking, but the timing for it, of course, is deliberate as we approach the 250th anniversary of the nation's founding, we have a chance to reflect on these leadership lessons and reflect on the values and the ideals that led to our founding.

So, it's an exciting project. And to go back to what you said earlier about the recent project that you held that I participated in, in Oak Ridge. First ladies are having their moment. I am so delighted that they are included in this *In Pursuit* project which is a great civic education exercise.

Alan: You know, I've learned how to say semi-quincentennial. We're very excited about 250 years. And, for many years, as you know, I worked at presidential libraries. I worked with Senator Howard Baker and we talked a lot about civic literacy. And we can't really expect people to be civically involved unless they're civically literate and understand these lessons of the past and put them into practice. So again, a great initiative. It's part of something called The More Perfect Alliance. What is that organization?

Colleen: It's a bipartisan alliance consisting of a number of civic organizations across the country, but most notably for *In Pursuit*, it is the alliance of the 43

presidential centers, presidential sites, presidential foundations that are all across the country. So, for *In Pursuit*, those organizations are our partners and we've been working with them since day one, once I first came onto the project to build it out, and then of course, now in 2026, they're helping us share the essays and all of the products of *In Pursuit*, all of the educational products so we get as wide a reach as possible.

Alan: That's a very powerful network across the country. Pretty impressive. Now, how do you define success in this initiative?

Anita: That's a good question, Miss CEO. {Group laughter}

Colleen: Well, I mean, when we first were doing strategic thinking about the project early on -- I came on board the project about a year ago, late March of 2025 -- and we quickly decided that we needed a little bit of time to come up with some strategic goals for the project. When we were thinking about that, one of the goals that I agreed to was that we would try to touch 10 million Americans with this project. And I thought that was a bit of a lofty goal, maybe even a rhetorical goal. But I can tell you that we are only a few weeks into *In Pursuit*, and it's really not a dream anymore. We have had 1.75 million touches and engagements onto these essays that have been released so far through Substack, through our website, through social media, so we are well on our way, I think, for that 10 million. And of course, we want the impact amongst younger people, amongst our K-12 students, amongst our teachers to be prominent as well, and so we've spent a lot of time figuring out who our educational partners will be so that we can maximize the outreach to teachers and students.

Anita: You know, in fact yesterday, Alan, on Sunday, March 8th, it was International Women's Day, and I was asked to speak at a high school here in town, Georgetown Preparatory School, whose founding is 1789, the same year that our first president was sworn in. Of course, it was originally at the grounds of Georgetown University. Now it's at its own campus. My own son went there. So, we are an alum family. But I was asked by the president of the school, Father Van Dyke, to come speak about first ladies connected to the importance of the founding of our history, connected to the importance of mothers educating their sons. It was a challenge for 10 minutes to get all that in there. Turns out Father Van Dyke is a consumer already of *In Pursuit* and told all the students and their mothers, "This is absolutely an important educational tool for all of them." So, I said, "Well, clearly, that's what the history department head needs to pay attention to." So, it's catching on there at diverse audiences, and I think the other point Colleen mentioned, our partners and distribution. C-SPAN is one of our partners for *In Pursuit* and they're helping to produce visual

montages or, vignettes, I think we're calling them, of the essays and that they will distribute through their channels and distribute through YouTube and through their educational programming for teachers. So, Colleen is right. It may sound lofty to reach 10 million, but I really feel we'll get there in one month if we're already over 1 million.

Alan: Very impressive results already. I've taught a lot of civics and history over the years and being able to teach those lessons about using a person like a first lady makes it more relatable, I think. You know, I remember years ago, I spoke to a group of first through fifth graders when I was Director of the Howard Baker Center. Probably the most nervous I've ever been because, you know, how do I relate to them? You can talk about here's how the government works, or here's a lesson from history. But I asked them, "Who was your favorite president and first lady?" And that got the conversation going.

We had a great time after that because they could relate to that person and then we could learn lessons from them. So anyway, I'm again impressed with what you're doing. How do you choose the participants? I know George W. Bush, I'm very proud of that, was the first writer of an essay for you. Who else have you chosen? How do you choose those participants?

Anita: Well, I'll let Colleen delve more into this because she's dealing with all of them directly, but I think all of us on the team really all tapped our networks of people, of experts that we know including the former presidents, including the Chief Justice of the United States that I personally asked to do, and he is writing the one on William Howard Taft. How perfect is that? The only president to serve as Chief Justice of the United States. But Colleen, you've been dealing directly with every single author, so you can share more with Alan on that.

Colleen: Well, I've gotten this question a lot, I think, because people think, how did you go about doing this? And it was a little bit like a jigsaw puzzle, in a way, because we had some ideas of people to participate, of course, but then you also have to match people up with someone that they could write about, that they're comfortable writing about, that they're excited writing about, that they may already have some knowledge about in some instances. And in other cases, maybe not knowledge about that person, in particular, but they have knowledge about that particular era of American history. So, a good example, David Blight, has written the essay on Franklin Pierce, and he wasn't an expert on Franklin Pierce, but he is an expert in that era of American history, the years leading up to the Civil War, so I knew that he would be a perfect match for that particular president to write about.

In another case, we have the scholar from AEI (American Enterprise Institute), Yuval Levin, writing about Julia Grant. And I don't think that Yuval was an expert in Julia Grant, I mean, you know, but he was really excited about it because he knew a lot about Ulysses S. Grant and he was interested in figuring out how did Julia Grant fit into what U.S. Grant was doing, particularly as President of the United States. And he found out a lot. You know, there were so many connections in which Julia Grant was supportive of Grant's larger project in Reconstruction, and how valuable she was in bringing people together at that time, post-Civil War, to try to heal the wounds of the Civil War in the United States. So, we have some people coming to the project in surprising ways. And then, of course, as Anita said, with the former presidents and first ladies, after we had recruited a few people to the project and we felt comfortable that we would be able to make a credible ask of the former presidents and former first ladies, we did ask them, and they were so eager to participate. It wasn't a hard sell because this was a project that they wanted to participate in, and when they looked at other people that were also writing essays, it was something that they knew that they wanted to be part of and to help in 2026, as once again, we think about our shared history together as citizens.

Anita: Exactly.

Alan: So, in 2026, our world is in some ways the same, but also very different from what it was at our founding. As you look back through history, how are these participants making sure the lessons they're drawing are actual relevant lessons for today, given that they're from 50, 100, 200 years past?

Colleen: That's the first thing we ask people whenever we ask them to write the essay, to be clear that this isn't a short biographical essay. It's also, quite frankly, not an essay in which you should be airing your own political or ideological interpretations of the current moment. Everybody has those opinions, and that's fine, but that's not the purpose of this project or these essays, and we gave some examples. You could have a lesson that was relevant to character and virtue and, of course, most character and virtue lessons are timeless. You could have a lesson concerning a crisis, leadership during a crisis. It could be also a lesson about democracy and many of our ideals of democracy, once again, transcend time across the 250 years. So, we gave people some ideas and some examples. I have had really good conversations, both email and also on the phone and online with people as they're working on their essays, "Hey, I'm thinking about doing this; is this something that would be in keeping with the mission and the vision of *In Pursuit*?" And I really appreciate people caring so much to check in as they're writing and thinking about their essays.

Alan: Do they have a rough time with the one sentence scenario?

Colleen: It's harder for some people than others.

Anita: Yes, Colleen and her editors have been good about helping to guide people, and I can attest personally, Colleen is also very strict on the number of words. She's given the direction of 1,250 words because we want this to be easy to read, and digestible, and transferable to different education levels, as well. I think we all know that it's sometimes harder to write in shorter number of words than it is to write a longer treatise. But the content is so rich. We've seen the ones that have been distributed, so far, through Thomas Jefferson, which was an excellent essay, by the way. I think everybody is gonna find they're gonna learn something new that they didn't know even about the very familiar figures in history, and certainly about the less well-known ones and that accounts for a good number of the first ladies we're writing about.

Colleen: I agree with Anita. I think a lot of people are gonna come to this project, which would make sense because they're interested in reading the essays about the presidents, but then they're gonna also get the first ladies essays delivered to them, and they're gonna end up learning more. I think there's more to learn about the first ladies than even the presidents because we have maybe a little bit of a wider knowledge base with presidents, but less so with first ladies. And I think some of those lessons and some of the stories of the first ladies are really gonna surprise people.

Alan: You mentioned Julia Grant. The next episode of *American FLOTUS* is about Julia Grant, so I'm looking forward to them learning more and more about her. Very impressive first lady. What other first ladies have been represented, or will be represented, that you know of right now?

Colleen: I think we have about close to 30 first ladies that are going to be counted.

Anita: Right.

Colleen: We started out with maybe a slightly smaller number, but then we expanded because there were more stories and more ideas, and more people that we wanted to participate in the project. So, I think we've got a really robust representation of first ladies in this project and certainly the first ladies, I would say, in the modern era, modern presidency going forward. They're all represented.

Anita: And I think in addition to that too, we're giving credit to, or at least shining a light on, those who served in the period of time of the late 19th century and early 20th century who were very involved in the social and labor movements of the time, and the contributions that they made. And particularly the first ladies who were active even when they didn't have rights yet, they weren't written into the Constitution. I think people will be surprised at how much that they did even with the limitations that were there. You know, I'll just say one last thing about Julia Grant that connects something both of you said about her, about Yuval Levin writing about her role in the reconstruction of the country. Well, one of the things that she did that was so interesting was when Julia Tyler had a beautiful portrait of herself painted that was sitting in an attic at the White House, and she really appealed to Mrs. Grant to put that portrait in the White House. And you know she was obviously a supporter of the Confederacy, Mrs. Tyler was, and the fact that Mrs. Grant invited her to the White House to meet with her was one of those soft power signs towards healing and reconstruction and reconciliation. The fact that she even invited her to the White House, that's an important anecdote in history.

Colleen: And some surprising stories. Caroline Harrison. All I can say is stay tuned for Caroline Harrison. You know, I don't wanna give away the fun stories that we have unearthed about Caroline Harrison, but probably not someone that most Americans have ever really thought about seriously. But I think they're going to find her entertaining and find it also very informative, and then also appreciative of the contributions that she made.

Anita: Right. Written by Nancy Smith, a FLARE member. Colleen has a number of FLARE members writing essays on the first ladies, so we're very proud of that.

Alan: So how can the public access this information? How's the content being provided?

Colleen: We have numerous ways in which you can access it. Of course, we have our website, inpursuit.org, and all of the essays will be posted there when we post an essay. It will be on Tuesday for a presidency essay, and if there is a first lady essay, which most weeks there will be, the first lady essay will post on Thursday. We also are on Substack. Substack is our major distribution partner for the project. And if you are on Substack, all you have to do is find us on *In Pursuit* on Substack. "Follow" us and that means you will get all of the essays delivered to your inbox every Tuesday and Thursday morning absolutely 100% percent free of charge. There are no subscription fees for *In Pursuit*. We also have, as Anita had referenced before, we have audio versions of all the essays.

And I can't tell you how many people that I'm talking to that are telling me they're listening to these essays as they're walking outside, as they're driving in the car, as they're exercising. So those are getting used. There are video essays that C-SPAN is also putting together, which is another amazing way in which you can access the essays. And then we are gonna have a podcast that's gonna start in early April, on April 7th, distributed by PRX, where we won't be reading the essays, but we will be discussing the essays with the authors that wrote them.

Alan: Oh, very good.

Anita: Colleen, do you wanna mention too the work that you've done with iCivics and Bill of Rights Institute?

Colleen: Yeah, it's a great point. They're two of our major K-12 partners and we are working with them to develop some short, catchy educational videos for select essays. And some of the videos will be for our younger crowd, our K-5 crowd, and some of the videos will be for our high school crowd. Also, Retro Report which does great documentary films, they are doing three documentary-style videos for *In Pursuit* that will be available for high school students.

Alan: Wow, you guys are doing this right. I love it. You're gonna reach so many people and reaching the students is so fundamentally important. You know, I've been thinking about a senator I used to work with, Senator Howard Baker, and this one sentence challenge you gave your participants. You know, he always said, "You must have a decent respect for differing points of view." That was his line, and he used that over and over. As you've thought about this, I was gonna say from a first lady but really from a leader of your choice, give us a one sentence of wisdom that you would have, one sentence that you would make for a leader from the past, of your choice, to leave us here today.

Anita: Well, okay, I'll start with one. I will do a first lady model. I loved the Joe Ellis's, who wrote the essay on Abigail Adams and, of course, I'm partial to her in the sense that she gave us inspiration for the writing of our book, *Remember the First Ladies*, of course, you know, taking from her counsel to her husband when he was writing the Constitution [Declaration of Independence]. But that lesson about being courageous, and being frank, to inspire change, and even before people may be willing to accept it, to really stand up and have courage, because the country is worth it.

Colleen: I would say one thing that I've learned from reading these essays and talking to a lot of the authors, even in this early phase of the project is: while success is terrific, we probably learn more from our failures than our successes.

Alan: Well, Anita, Colleen, I can't tell you how much I appreciate our conversation today. Thank you for what you're doing and thank you for joining us on *American FLOTUS*.

Colleen: Thank you.

Anita: Terrific. Thank you, Alan.

Alan: And thank all of you for listening. If you wanna listen to more *American FLOTUS* episodes, please do check 'em out. You can find them on flare-net.org, americanpotus.org, or on your favorite podcast platform. Thanks so very much, and I'll see you next time on *American FLOTUS*.