



American FLOTUS



Laura Bush: Texas Roots, Global Impact

featuring Jill Abraham Hummer

Alan Lowe: Welcome to *American FLOTUS*, a podcast produced by the partnership of the First Ladies Association for Research and Education, or FLARE, and the *American POTUS* podcast. I'm Alan Lowe, your host. Thanks so much for joining us. I'm very pleased to welcome our guest today, Jill Abraham Hummer. She's the author of *First Ladies and American Women: In Politics and at Home* and the book we'll discuss today, *Laura Bush: Texas Roots, Global Impact*. Jill, thanks for joining us on *American FLOTUS*.

Jill Hummer: Thank you for having me.

Alan: I told you before we got on the air and when we were corresponding, that for, I think, six years I was Director of the George W. Bush Library and Museum in Dallas, Texas. Got to know the President and Mrs. Bush very well, so I was very excited to read your book. I enjoyed it very much. I'll say this -- if Mrs. Bush is listening -- while I was there, I called her Mrs. Bush, always, and Mr. President. Today, I will call her Laura because that makes it much easier for us to have this conversation. I have no other problem calling, you know, Eleanor Roosevelt "Eleanor" or something like that, because I've never known her, but I knew Mrs. Bush so I wanted to make that statement at the very beginning.

Jill: That's great. That's great.

Alan: So, let's start with a young Laura Bush. What experiences from her youth and her education do you think most shaped her personality, her goals in life?

Jill: Sure. So, Laura Welch. She was born Laura Welch in Midland, Texas, and she was, actually, born in the 1940s. She grew up in mid-century America, a time of economic prosperity and she had a very comfortable upbringing. I think to understand Laura Bush, you do need to understand her mother and father. Her father was a home builder. He had his own home building business and which really shaped Laura's love; she had a lifelong love for homes, for home interiors, for home exteriors, as a personal hobby and something she also brought into her life as a political wife, as we'll talk about later. But she'll go on to use those interests in setting up the White House and the Governor's mansion and Camp David and the Crawford Ranch, and all of the places that they lived and entertained while they were in politics. Her father was really influential in that area so, I think, to understand Laura, you need to understand her father. Her mother, Jenna Welch, was a homemaker, primarily, but she was also a really great reader. Laura grew up as an only child and her mother spent a lot of time reading aloud to Laura, and this was really formative for her.

I think, as an adult, she understood that her mother was providing a great benefit to her by taking her to the library, reading books aloud to her, and just setting an example of being a voracious reader herself. And Laura really took after her mother in that respect. She had a kind of the typical upbringing in Midland, Texas, and she enjoyed a lot of the comforts and benefits of parents who were fairly well off. She was involved in lots of extracurricular activities, the Girl Scouts. She loved nature. Her mother was also a hobbyist naturalist, and Laura also gleaned that particular hobby from her mother. So, her childhood was very happy, and she has really wonderful memories of her growing up years in Midland.

The formative event, and kind of the effective end of her childhood was, of course, the car accident she was involved in just two days after she had turned 17. It was a fatal car crash. She was driving along on a back road outside of Midland. It was quite dark, and she ran a stop sign at an intersection, and a classmate of hers, a boy named Mike Douglas, happened to be driving a car that was coming in the opposite direction. She was hurled from the car. Mike Douglas was rushed to the hospital, so was Laura. He was pronounced dead on arrival and the cause of death was a broken neck. He was driving a Chevrolet Corvair, very dangerous car. And so, that was a really horrible tragedy to have to live through as a young girl, as a 17-year-old. In Midland, at the time, there weren't loads of grief counselors coming to the school, so she was really left to grieve that experience by herself. And many people think, and I would agree,

that that experience made her more circumspect, more watchful, maybe more discreet. I think, in particular, it helped her become more sensitive and attuned to the sufferings of others. She was very much drawn to, in her life and her life as a political wife, any situation in which children suffered. And she was always very good and empathetic in situations when she was meeting with people who suffered loss. But I think that that caused her to turn inward a good deal. It was a very formative experience for her.

Alan: So, remind us where she went to college. What did she study?

Jill: She went to Southern Methodist University, SMU, and she studied education. And so, she went there; she matriculated as a 17-year-old. She was quite young when she entered college, and she really loved her studies there. She really enjoyed her children's literature classes. She really enjoyed learning about the field of education. She was in a sorority, and she had a very active social life at SMU. So, that was another happy time for her. One, I think, important thing to know about Laura Bush and to kind of understand her, she always wanted to be married and settle down and that was, of course, the aspiration of many Southern women in the 1960s. And that was the typical path, to go to college, get married, even not go to college, get married, settle down and then not do much with whatever it was you had studied in college. But Laura remained single until she was 30 years old. So, she had a lot of time after she graduated from SMU to work in education. She tried a couple of different professions in different locations. She moved to Boston, Washington, DC, interviewed with her congressman, George Mahon, and was offended by his suggestion that she should be a secretary. She figured she had a professional degree and didn't want to be a secretary and tried working in finance in Houston for a couple months. That didn't work out. She stuck with teaching. And then when she was in her late twenties, she went to the University of Texas and pursued a degree in library science, which she also loved. She loved being around books; she loved being around literature. She met George W. Bush when she was 30, almost, and she got married the day after she turned 31. So, she had about a decade or so to work in her field; she had a long time to glean experience. She was a professional, the second first lady to have a graduate degree, which I think is something that many people don't know or understand about Laura Bush. That decade-long professional career was really important in how she portrayed herself in the work she decided to take on when she entered politics.

Alan: So, she met and married George W. Bush in 1977. She always makes the joke, and I think it's on a video there in the museum in Dallas, that even though she worked in the library, in some way she managed to meet George, which I

think is a great line. When she marries into this very large and influential Bush family, how did she fit in?

Jill: That's a great question. Laura, because she grew up as an only child, she had always wanted siblings and her parents always wanted more children. Her mother suffered a lot of miscarriages. She had a baby brother who died soon after he was born. So, she really longed for siblings and that was a sadness that hovered over her. While her childhood was happy, that was a very weighty thing, I think, for her to process and deal with when she was growing up, both her parents' losses and then the loneliness that she felt from being an only child. And so, when she married into the Bush family, she finally got a big, very rambunctious family who are quite different in personality and temperament to Laura, who was reserved. She's not one to jump into the middle of the fray and be the center of attention, necessarily. It's interesting because she finally had this big family and she was thrilled, but she largely moved on the periphery, especially in the years that followed her marriage. And I think a lot of that was just a matter of proximity. So, she really didn't get to know her mother-in-law, Barbara Bush, until much later.

It was 1987-1988 when George and Laura Bush relocate to Washington, DC, to work on her father-in-law's presidential campaign that they finally all got to live together. But from 1977 when they married up until 1987, they were living apart. Her father-in-law was vice-president, and her mother-in-law was second lady. They were traveling the world, doing all of their official things before that, gearing up before George Herbert Walker Bush made a bid for the 1980 Republican nomination, which he lost. But Reagan later, of course, appointed him his vice-presidential running mate. So, the elder Bushes were busy living their own lives and they would gather in Kennebunkport for holidays and things like that. But Laura and George, they kind of existed outside of the official circle until about a decade in. And, also, Laura talks about how she and her mother-in-law were very, very different personalities. Her mother-in-law was very funny, very acerbic, very outgoing, and Laura was more reserved, kind of quieter. And her mother remembers Laura as just observing a lot, taking it all in, and being just generally amused by their family because this was her first, kind of, big family. Anyway, that was the first 10 years of marriage. But eventually they got to form a relationship when they all lived in Washington at the same time, and it was a good one.

Alan: Absolutely. I know you mentioned the Washington move for the George H.W. Bush campaign. Right after they got married, after W. and Laura got married, he ran for Congress, and of course he runs for the Texas governor and for the presidency. How engaged was Laura in those campaigns?

Jill: Laura became a more active campaigner as the campaigns progressed. So, in George W. Bush's 1978 run for Congress he was running to represent a district in west Texas that encompassed Midland, where he was living. And then they got married and she relocated, and Laura's parents still lived [in Midland]. He was running to represent that district and because they had such a short courtship Laura was really happy to have some time to spend with her husband. She was there at his side for the whole campaign, which showed that she was a very willing and supportive political wife. She did not like to make speeches. She always talked about, one of her kind of laugh lines was, that she made George promise she'd never have to give a speech. And then, of course, that promise was broken their very first year. She was active in that campaign. She really, I think, liked the retail end of the campaign. She liked meeting the people. She liked going to people's homes. She liked shaking hands with all of the ranchers in the district. And she was very good at that, kind of the person-to-person. But again, being the person on the stage, no, that was not her thing at that point in time.

In his campaign for governor in 1994. So, of course, her father-in-law loses the presidency in 1992. This clears the way for George W. Bush to consider his own political future. Laura's role was minimized, I think, and I think part of this was strategic. I think that, in that campaign, there was the accusation that, oh, George W. only got to where he was because he was riding his father's coattails. And so I think it was strategic, in part, that the family, so Barbara Bush, George Herbert Walker Bush, Laura Bush. The campaign was really intent on making policy the important thing, so taking personality and family out of it. His reasoning was also that: hey, Ann Richards, who he was running against, she kind of won on her personality. She was very personable and had a very, very appealing personality. And he wanted to make his campaign about policy, so I think it was strategic in part. But, also, her father was very ill; she had younger children at the time, so she had some personal things going on. So, her campaign role: she made speeches. She mostly centered those speeches on Republican women's clubs which were the friendliest of friendly audiences, right? They had all campaigned for her father-in-law. Her job in those audiences was to tell a lot of personal anecdotes and help her audiences get to know her husband as a person and as a Texan, because he lost his congressional race, in part, because of his opponent played up his Eastern upbringing. So that was Laura's role in that campaign. And then in the final days when it looked like George W. was gonna win, she and Barbara Bush and baseball star Nolan Ryan went barnstorming around the state. She didn't talk too much about policy but, at the end, she started to do some education-related events and things like that.

Then, in the 2000 campaign, she was a very active campaigner. He was running as the education president. And so, Laura, given her background, and some of

the policy work she had done in Texas, she was a really important part of his strategy. She brought a lot of credibility to his No Child Left Behind education proposals, so it was important that she be involved, and she rose to the occasion. She did a lot of education-themed visits to schools, sometimes alone, sometimes with the president. Also, the message, kind of the central message of the campaign in 2000, was restoring dignity to a tarnished White House after the years of the Clinton scandals. And so, in this campaign, the personal side of the candidate was going to be important because he was running on character, and spouses can affirm character better than probably anybody else. She understood that and was a very willing campaigner.

And then by 2004, she was a sought-after campaigner. The campaign really used her a lot, especially in the Midwest because she resonated with audiences in the Midwest, so the swing states, Ohio, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, all those places. She really concentrated her efforts there. I read a study that found that she did 125 events between Labor Day and election day in 2004. And that is a lot of events, that's really a lot. But it just showed how useful and vital she was to the reelection effort, and I think she made a difference.

Alan: Yeah, I know. I always think about that evolution from someone who said she didn't wanna make a speech to someone who is a sought-after campaigner, speaking to the Republican National Convention, making the President's radio address. It's just really a remarkable evolution.

Jill: Right.

Alan: Now you mentioned Nolan Ryan. By the way, I have to tell the story: During the Bush Library dedication, we had five presidents there, and I wasn't nervous because I was numb, I believe. We were so busy getting the facility ready. But at lunch, Nolan Ryan was in line behind me to go into the courtyard lunch we had, and when I shook his hand, I was so nervous my voice cracked when I said hello to him. So, I had my priorities straight, I guess. We had talked about Laura's work in the campaign for George being Governor of Texas. What initiatives defined her role as First Lady of Texas?

Jill: This is another area where she really grew over the years. So, in my biography, one of my central themes was trying to just tease out how she evolved and developed as a wife and as a political figure, in her own right, as time went on. And her platform as Texas First Lady; I mean, same thing. She did not get in there on day one and say, okay, here's everything we're going to do. It kind of developed over time. She did have the idea early on, just based on some of her own interests. One thing about Laura Bush to know is that she

moves in high-culture circles, and so she's very interested in art and has a lot of artist friends.

She's very, of course, interested in literature and has a lot of writer friends. All of her life is, well, her Texas grown-up life, she's moving in these circles and has more access to them now that she's First Lady of Texas. And so, one of the first ideas she has is she wants to promote Texas art, artists, literature, and authors. So, the arts and culture. And she was very well suited to do that. One of the first things she does, she moves into her office. She has this brand-new suite of three offices in the Capitol Extension building, which is on the campus of the Texas State Capitol. It's just been renovated. It's very bland, but she has an office, her chief of staff, Andi Ball, has an office, and they have a conference room. So, one of the first things she wants to do is, she decides to host these rotating artist exhibits in her office. And so, she'll invite a Texas artist, a sculptor, painter, whatever, and they'll come, and they'll exhibit their work, and she'll invite the artist and invite people who worked in the capitol to come view their paintings. So, that's one way she did that. I think she got there and was a little appalled that the state capitol didn't have a really robust art collection. And so that was one of the things that she decided to do, using private money. She always wanted, you know, private money. It was the nineties, conservatives were not getting state money involved, but to use private money to acquire a collection of historic Texas art for the Capitol. And then, of course, she starts the Texas Book Festival, I think, as she was searching for ways that she could make her ideas about promoting literature and art materialize. I think one of the things, an author, a Texas author named Robert Skimin, comes to visit her in her office in the Texas State Capitol and says, "Hey, I was just at this Kentucky Book Fair and it was really great." And he told her all about it, how they used the state capitol to host author readings. And she said, that's really awesome. Well, maybe not those words, but you know, she said, let's do it. And so, I think she thought, hey, we're from Texas, we can do this bigger; we have a lot of great literary talent here. And it was a major initiative, but she put together a committee and they made it happen. So, the first one was in 1996, I believe. Yes, 1996. And so that festival continues to this day and it grew bigger, throughout her time. She eventually broadened it to non-Texas authors and that was a real boon. So that remains a popular event in Texas. So that's one thing. Also in 1996, her husband had announced a reading initiative. He was reading about the standardized test scores for Texas youth. It basically showed, I think the statistic was, there were 350,000 Texas school children who, at some point, had failed the reading portion of their [inaudible]. They were, like, functionally illiterate, basically. And he was just like, in our state this shouldn't be, every child should know how to read. And that kind of turned into the first iterations of compassionate conservatism in education policies. Because if students can't read, they're not going to be successful in life. You're setting them up for a life

of failure if they can't read during school. And so, Laura, her first kind of foray into policy was that she launched a First Lady's Reading Initiative that was designed to complement the Governor's reading initiative. It was very similar to what Barbara Bush had done. There was a tendency to conflate the two women. Laura's approach was a little bit different and was a little more professional. She had definite opinions about how students should be learning. She decided to focus on the years before children entered school. And so she actually advocated for some things that are pretty controversial in education circles, like teaching phonics in Head Start centers, which the Head Start community was not a big fan of, but she really thought that children should be getting phonetic education early. And she did not waver in her belief that that is something that should happen. Then as her husband was looking toward a presidential run, I think she recognized that she really needed to organize her platform in order to kind of help him. She approached Margaret Spellings, who worked in the governor's policy office, and would later become his domestic policy advisor, and then education secretary when he was president. But Spellings gave her some ideas about how to really organize her platforms. In the last six months to a year before the 2000 presidential campaign really got underway, she really made very organized communications, you know, to push for school readiness. She worked with a lot of state agencies in an initiative called Take Time for Kids. There was another one called Reach Out and Read. I won't get into all the policy details of them, but it was an example of her partnering. She was borrowing policy staff from the governor, working with the governor's policy staff, working with state agencies to get funding for programs. This is, like, really the first time she's getting her hands into policy, like for real policy work. And so that all starts in Texas. It was a gradual change, but by the end she was really quite involved.

Alan: We'll talk about some of those policies that she then took into the White House as First Lady of the United States. But first, as we set up at the museum at the Bush Library, we talked about No Child Left Behind and literacy efforts and so forth. But then you have the stark reminder of 9/11 with the pieces of steel from the World Trade Center and the names of those who died that day. Mrs. Bush was on the Hill with Senator Kennedy, if I remember correctly, discussing education reform when news of the attacks was brought to her. What did she see as her role in the immediate, and then I guess the long-term aftermath, as well, of 9/11?

Jill: She gets word that the first plane had struck one of the World Trade Center towers as she's getting into her limousine on the way to Capitol Hill. So, the bigger story here is that No Child Left Behind is kind of languishing. The president has been pushing for education reform since he came to office. It's gone nowhere. And so now it's the fall, everybody's back in Washington, and

Karl Rove and others in the White House organized this reading week at the White House. So, the President's in Florida speaking to elementary school students and Laura, Ted Kennedy had invited her to come and address the Senate to brief them on an early child development conference she had held back in July. And she had actually developed kind of a friendship and a pretty good working relationship with Ted Kennedy. So, she gets word that the second plane had hit the second tower when she's in her limo driving to the Capitol. By the time she gets there everybody knows that this is a terrorist attack. Kennedy's there to greet her. He gives her this painting of daffodils that he had done, and she goes into his office, and her chief of staff, Andi Ball, who I interviewed for this book, told me that it was good. Kennedy really understood calm, given all of the family tragedies he had lived through. So she was, obviously, desperately worried about her husband. She watches his brief address to the nation on the television. And then there's a great deal of discussion about what are we gonna do about this hearing? Obviously, it can't go forward, but we don't wanna say it's canceled. So, they decide to say that it's been postponed, like this is the emphasis: it's been postponed, not canceled. So, she and Kennedy and Judd Gregg, who's the senator from New Hampshire who's also working with the Bushes, is a friend of the Bushes, really, in working with them on No Child Left Behind; they're in the Russell Senate Office Building, adjacent to the Capitol. Meanwhile the Pentagon, like a few minutes before they get up there and say their thing, the plane flies into the Pentagon, unbeknownst to them at the time when they're speaking. She just extends her sympathy. She doesn't really say much. She credits reporter Lawrence McQuillan who asks her, "What do you want to say to the nation's children?" And she says that she "wanted to tell the nation's children that they are safe." And so, she says that the journalist, McQuillan, gave her the idea of what to do. I personally think that's kind of her instinct anyway. I don't know that she needed journalistic prompting to come up with that. That's just where she goes when tragedy strikes. It's where she's always gone and what she's always done. So, the next day she writes letters to schools to be disseminated to America's school children. I think those are on display at the museum, too, and so visitors who go there can see those. But she writes one to elementary school children and one to upper school children and she, basically, gives them coping strategies. She really, I think, after 9/11, really rises to the occasion.

The American people were looking to the President and First Lady for reassurance. She, I think, provided that. After the attacks, her husband gives her the job of planning the National Day of Prayer service at the Cathedral. She does that, her office does that. She travels to Shanksville, Pennsylvania, to memorialize the victims of Flight 93, which crashed into the field there, and she visits with the children, with the families. And so, she was the one who was given that particular job. And then she goes on Oprah Winfrey. The country

needed somebody to tell them that parents needed to turn off the television. They're watching this continuous loop of images of the towers falling and planes flying, and it was just these horrific images that children are consuming. What the country really needed was a calm voice of reason to say, "Turn off the television. Put your arms around your children. Read them a book. It's very comforting for them to hear your voice. Enjoy some family time together instead of sitting there watching, watching these horrible news shows." She was giving very practical advice of strategies that people could use to calm children, to create a peaceful home environment amid this great, great tragedy. So, the journalist had given her this moniker, Comforter in Chief, after the attacks, just given how active she was and what a comforting presence she had become to the American people.

Alan: Well, I'm always amazed at how time flies by and some of our listeners are young enough where they won't remember that horrible day, but if you did turn on the TV at any time thereafter, every channel was showing it. Now there was no escape if you turned on the TV. So, I think Mrs. Bush was right that to leave that off, and to comfort the children because TV was not going to do that at that point. It's a really remarkable, remarkable effort she did to bring that sense of calm and support to children around the nation. Let's get back to some of her policies and specifically on literacy. I know she brought the National Book Festival to life based on the Texas model. Was that always in the plans?

Jill: That was really, I think, the thing she viewed as her crowning achievement as Texas First Lady. And I think, once she got to Washington, she knew she wanted to implement it on a national scale. So that's one of the first things her staff started working on. Another person I interviewed for the book was her projects director, Anne Heiligenstein, who said that work began right away. They immediately looked for the infrastructure partner that they could partner with. And so, they partnered with the Library of Congress to make that happen, which is a really smart partnership because, one, it allowed, by housing it in a federal entity, it allowed continuity. So it was not just like a First Lady's office project and, you know, the First Lady's staff is small, they can't pull something like this off on their own. And so that was really smart for a lot of different reasons. So yeah, I think that was something that she got there and was like, okay, we're gonna do this and so she set the plans in motion right away.

Alan: And you mentioned her interest in buildings and art, and the renovations, the refurbishments she did in the White House. What did she do there? Where did she leave her imprint on the White House?

Jill: Everywhere, absolutely everywhere. This, I think, is something that is very, maybe unknown about Laura Bush, underappreciated about her. And something that I, actually, I had a lot of trouble with just from the archival record and even the public record, you can piece some of it together. I was able to talk to her longtime friend and decorator, Kenneth Blasingame, and he was super helpful in just providing the bigger picture understanding in everything that he and she both worked on. It's my understanding, I think this is right, that there really wasn't an area of the White House that went untouched. Again, given her interest and appreciation for homes and interiors, it was very important to her to have the spaces where she and her family lived and worked and entertained to be both useful and functional. So, that was super important to her. She also wanted the White House to appear presidential, for all the design elements to be drawn from American history and related somehow to presidential history in the White House. And she was very much like Jackie Kennedy, with lots of similarities between the two women, especially in terms of their White House renovation projects. So, her renovation efforts touched every part of the White House. I can tell you about a couple. I wanna talk about the Lincoln Bedroom, probably just because it was her biggest project. And I also wanna talk about the White House Family Theater because it no longer exists. It was bulldozed as part of the East Wing demolition. It's interesting that her renovations to it were the last. Nobody really changed it very much since she did a major renovation to that space during the second term. So, I'll just say a little bit about both themes.

Alan: Please, please.

Jill: And especially about the family theater. It's important to just, to preserve the understanding of what that looked like and what are some of the reasons why it looked the way it did before it got demolished. So, the Lincoln Bedroom was her main restoration project. I think she really wanted, before the 2004 election, you know, she didn't know if they were gonna come back for a second term; she really wanted to do something. She really wanted to do a big renovation room project and really leave her mark on a room. She thought the Lincoln Bedroom was a shrine to American history. She loved the Lincoln Bedroom. Her in-laws often stayed there when they came to visit. But she got there, the carpet was 50 years old, the decor was the same since the Truman renovations. So, this was, I think, a little bit appalling to Laura Bush because it was the Lincoln Bedroom. It shouldn't be so generic; it should have updated carpeting and wallpaper. So, Laura worked closely with the White House Curator and the Committee for the Preservation of the White House.

They used historical evidence, photographs they could find, textual descriptions, and incorporated objects from the 1850s and 1860s. They had a mantel made to

match the one that had been in the room when Lincoln had used it as his office and Cabinet room. The walls were painted yellow, but they found a wallpaper with a grid pattern that matched photographic evidence from when Lincoln used the room. So they put that up. The Rosewood bed, which was not in the room originally but it was purchased by Mary Todd Lincoln, remained. And Laura Bush topped it with a gilded cornice and then purple satin curtains, as Mrs. Lincoln had decorated it, and put Victorian-era cornices over the windows. So, it was a really big renovation project. Her mother-in-law wanted reading lights more strategically placed because it was hard to see. She told Laura that it was hard to read her books in bed with just the table lamp because the curtains got in the way, so Barbara encouraged Laura to install some better reading lights.

Then the family theater hadn't been touched, actually since the Reagan era, so Nancy Reagan's decorator, Ted Graber, was the last person to redecorate it. It was, kind of, the staff and people who worked there thought it was pretty, it was pretty dated, by the time the Bushes got there. It had this burnt orange carpet and had just kind of an eighties-seventies feel to it. Laura really liked the color red to use in her White House, not necessarily her personal, décor. But she favored red as a presidential color. She thought it was very presidential and tried to incorporate red wherever she could. And so, the Bushes actually used the White House Theater quite a lot. They used it for entertaining. After 9/11, she hosted a screening of the first Harry Potter movie whose release was delayed. And she would host children of staff members there to screen Nancy Drew and they screened a lot of movies. They used it politically, socially. So Laura, naturally, she was like, okay, well, we're using this a lot, let's make it look nice. So she and her decorator, Ken Blasingame, decided to use red as the theme, as I mentioned. They covered the walls in red fabric. It was accented with this rectangular gold trim that had a "key" pattern in the corners. [NOTE: A key pattern is a decorative motif composed of a continuous, interlocking line that turns at right angles. In décor, it is widely used as a border, trim, or framing element, symbolizing infinity, unity, and a blend of classical and modern.] And so, what Blasingame had done was, he looked at Jackie Kennedy's renovations of the Treaty Room and saw the same pattern and he really liked it, and so he decided to repeat it in the theater. And then he had an artist come spray paint the columns to look like mahogany and they installed red carpeting; the chairs were upholstered in red. So, it was a much nicer looking space, a much more presidential look. Like if you're gonna have a theater in the White House, it should look presidential and be a nice place. We assume that the White House is decorated and everything is updated and looks presidential. That's not always the case. And so, Laura especially recognized that with the theater. It was a complete and total renovation and looked very nice in the end.

But also, she worked on the Oval Office. She designed the carpet for the Oval Office. She did a big renovation to the Cabinet Room while she was there. She renovated the library. Of course, she's a librarian, so she took a special interest in the library, just freshened it, updated. Updated it and installed new artwork. She worked on the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room, modernized that space. The Vermeil Room, the Green Room, the Visitors Entrance and the East Wing, the residence of course, as many presidential couples do. But she was very interested in interiors, and it was just a constant renovation project during the Bush years.

Alan: Yeah. Amazing efforts there. We know during the Bush administration after 9/11 we're in conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. How did Mrs. Bush work to advance the rights of Afghan and Iraqi women?

Jill: Okay, so Afghanistan. Interesting that 2026, if you can believe it, will mark the 25th anniversary of Laura's historic presidential radio address on the rights of women and children in Afghanistan. So, basically, in 2001 after the invasion of Afghanistan the invasion phase is not complete. It's dragging on a little bit longer than people thought it would, and George W. is kind of upset he's not getting enough credit for the humanitarian gains that are going to be coming on the heels of an eventual U.S. victory there. Karen Hughes, who's doing communications, suggests that well, you know, maybe Mrs. Bush can give part of the radio address, and her husband chimes in that maybe she should give it all. And so she becomes the first, first lady to deliver a presidential radio address in its entirety. So it was really her most historic and important speech and I think it continues to resonate to this day because the cause of Afghan women was something that the world really didn't know about. Nobody was paying attention to Afghanistan in the nineties and the Taliban and the things they were doing over on the other side of the world. That was the furthest thing. And so, her speech. They had just finished hosting Vladimir Putin at the Crawford Ranch, and he leaves. She walks over to the Governor's house, which is situated on the Crawford Ranch property, to record this address on the plight of women in Afghanistan. And the speech really resonated. It had a broad, broad global resonance, and she really made the whole entire world aware of what was really going on with women, and girls in particular, in Afghanistan, the human rights abuses, their lack of access to education, especially. So that opened up a whole new dimension to what she was working on. I think she was surprised at how much it resonated and then her staff really took on women in Afghanistan as a cause. She was very involved in 2002. So once the invasion is complete and successful, and now we're rebuilding Afghanistan, she was active in the effort to try to get Afghan girls back into school. That wasn't an easy thing to do. You see her speaking at the United Nations and to the international community doing speeches, interviews, editorials, to shore up support for

humanitarian relief in Afghanistan. Behind the scenes she's working on a Women's Teacher Training Institute in Kabul which eventually opens its doors. One of the key mechanisms of compassionate conservatism, both at home and abroad, is encouraging these public-private partnerships, seeing what organizations are already operating on the ground and making sure they have the funds and doing good work and making sure they have the money to do what they're doing successfully already. And so she is encouraging these public-private partnerships on the ground in Afghanistan. She makes three historic trips there. She goes there, actually, before her husband even goes there. It's still a war zone, technically, so she travels there in March of '05, March of '06, and then in June of '08. Her last trip she meets with Habiba Sarabi, who is a female governor of Bamiyan province. She's the first and only female governor, so that was significant. She's visiting women's police training institutes where she's meeting with police officer trainees. So, it's those kinds of things, just encouraging, supporting the advances of women there and the U.S. government's initiatives that went along with rebuilding a nation from years of Taliban rule.

So you asked about Iraq. Iraq was a little bit different. So I went into this book, I was like, I really need to figure out what Laura is doing for Iraq, because it is the issue of the Bush administration, of course. It consumes much of the Bush presidency, half of the first four years in the entire second term. So, I'm poring through archival documents; I'm reading her speeches. She talks about Iraq frequently. She's asked about Iraq an awful lot by journalists and people who are just interested in the topic. But as a policy issue that she takes on, no, she does not take on the issue of Iraqi women. I mean she meets with Iraqi women if they're coming to Washington under visitors' programs, she meets with them at the White House. Oftentimes, these are accomplished women who are doing interesting things in their country. She often celebrates the voting rights of Iraqi women. Remember those images of the purple ink-stained fingers when Iraqis got to go to the polls after Saddam's regime was over? She supports voting rights for women often in her public comments. But I'm asking all of her East Wing staff that I interviewed; I'm puzzling over this: What is she doing for Iraq? And they all told me the same thing which was that the security situation there was just always so tenuous. They were always trying, but they could never get that settled. The insurgency just lasted and kept on getting worse and worse and worse. And so, they were always just trying to deal with that. And if you can't get that settled, there's no opportunity for the first lady to come in and say, this is what we're going to do. So, I'm pretty confident in stating that she really did not take up the cause of Iraqi women. Not that she never mentioned it, not that she never touched that in any way. But Iraqi women, I really can't say that that was part of her portfolio, like Afghan women. Afghanistan was a little bit more stable; she could visit there; she could do things there. That wasn't the case in

Iraq. But she was very important in Iraq in establishing the Basra Children's Specialty Hospital, which was a project that her staffers took on, along with Project Hope. They got Congress to fund a state-of-the-art pediatric cancer hospital, and eventually it opened, I think during the Obama years, but it was really an achievement because nothing like that existed in Iraq. Their healthcare infrastructure was not the best. And so that was one thing that she did work on for Iraq, but it was not an easy project to take on.

Alan: So, in different ways, affecting positive change. I know a recurring theme in your book is that of dignity. How do you think Laura Bush embodied the idea of dignity, and how did she do that while handling the various controversies of the Bush administration?

Jill: That's a good question. When I first started researching this book, the word *dignity* just kept on popping up over and over and over again. And I thought, okay, well, there's something to this; I wonder why this is so important. And it was, also, just interesting because whenever I would tell people that I was writing a biography of Laura Bush they'd either say, "Which one was she?" They'd often confuse her and then Barbara Bush. And then oftentimes people's reaction was, "Well, wasn't she a class act?" People remember her as somebody who behaved appropriately, she was very composed, she was very calming. They remember her as being a very appropriate first lady, what they would think of as a first lady, like, that was Laura Bush to them. And so that was very, very frequent anecdotal evidence: But, you know, wasn't she a class act? And survey after survey, actually, it showed that when people would give one word to describe Laura Bush "dignified," "has dignity" came up over and over again. It was a key personal characteristic that people associated with her. It was a double-edged sword in some ways, I think, because she was so composed and so kind of sedate. I think it caused people to minimize her influence because she just went about her job in a very understated way, in some way. She wasn't a showboat. She didn't fly off the handle. She wasn't making crazy statements to the press. She was dignified, and she thought that was her job, to be dignified. And I think this is very much a Bush family quality that was passed on to her by her in-laws. It was very important to her and to her husband to be sure that the presidency embodied or radiated the sense of dignity. So, the sense of dignity being stateliness, honor, decorum. It was also political. We talked about how it was their essential argument in 2000, restoring dignity to the tarnished White House. She believed that it was her job to dress in a dignified manner, to entertain in a dignified manner, to decorate in a dignified manner. So, dignity was just a key idea in her mind of about how she was to approach her job. And then dignity, in the human rights context, is really important to compassionate conservatism and to the freedom agenda. And so this belief that she and her husband shared, that every human being possessed intrinsic worth and that this

should be acknowledged and respected by individuals in government. So, dignity is coming up all the time. It's political, it's philosophical, it's, you know, personal, relating to the image she's trying to convey.

The controversies of the Bush administration. I'll first say that I, personally, don't think Laura Bush was a super controversial person. I was always kind of amazed she managed to sidestep a lot of the controversial things about the Bush administration, whether it was stem cell research or the war in Iraq. I mean, and there were lots of controversial things about the Bush administration, from how they responded to Katrina, to how they handled the war in Iraq to, of course, the economic crisis, social security reform. There was no shortage of controversy in the Bush administration. She really steered clear of issues that were not part of her platform. So, she was very good about staying in her lane. She's like, okay, I'm gonna talk about these things, but when it comes to social security reform or the economic meltdown, that's not part of my portfolio so I'm just not gonna go there. She didn't engage in every issue, and she didn't engage in some of the really controversial issues. However, she was often asked about Iraq. She always defended her husband. She never went off and criticized him or the administration. She always, whether it was what was going on on the Gulf Coast or how things were progressing in Iraq, she never criticized her husband. She never questioned his decisions. She had good political instincts. Oh, I will say, No Child Left Behind. As that became more controversial, she defended it. She was on the road in the 2004 campaign defending No Child Left Behind as Democrats on the Hill and John Kerry and others were attacking it. I think how she conducted herself, just in general after 9/11 and just her whole first lady persona, shielded her from a lot of criticism she otherwise could have gotten. So, I think it was kind of, she avoided some of the controversy, purposefully, and she just stayed in her lane, if that makes sense. Or were you thinking of, like, specific controversies, or...?

Alan: No, I was not. As director, I know we were very aware of those controversies, as you mentioned: Katrina, financial crisis, and so forth. And, President Bush wanted us to talk about those in the exhibit, which we do, especially in the Decision Points Theater. But I think you made some very good points about how Mrs. Bush handled those and stayed on her topics, which were very important topics, in and of themselves. So, I will say, in the interest of time, we're not gonna be able to really talk about her current work in the Bush Center, but I do encourage our listeners to go and check out the Bush Institute, what they're doing. Mrs. Bush and President Bush stay very active today in so many of these issues, from literacy to health to women's rights around the world. But I did want to make sure as we close out here, Jill, to ask you what's next for you? What are you working on right now?

Jill: Oh...we just finished *this* project, so that is a great question. You know, I do not have another project in the works. I know that's not a very satisfying answer, but I really did enjoy writing this biography. I wrote my first book, *First Ladies and American Women: In Politics and at Home*, and it was like a panoramic. It was great to write. It was a survey of modern first ladies, and I thought for my next book I'd really like to focus on one, to kind of get to know one. And I was really happy to have that opportunity to do that here. So maybe another biography. I don't really know. If anybody has any ideas, you're welcome to reach out. But I would love to write, maybe, a biography.

Alan: You did a great job with this book, and I really appreciate you joining us on *American FLOTUS*. Thank you so much.

Jill: Thank you, Alan. It was a pleasure.

Alan: I want to thank all of you for joining us, as well. Please make sure you check out all our terrific *American FLOTUS* episodes at flare-net.org, at americanpotus.org, or on your favorite podcast platform. Thanks so much for listening and I'll see you next time on *American FLOTUS*.