

What's Next for Laura Bush?

An Interview with former First Lady Laura Lane Welch Bush



Laura Lane Welch Bush

EDITORS' NOTE Laura Bush is the wife of the 43rd President of the United States, George W. Bush, and was the First Lady of the United States from January 20, 2001 to January 20, 2009. She earned a bachelor's degree in Early Education in 1968 from Southern Methodist University in Texas. She taught in public schools in Texas for a few years before earning her master's degree in library science from the University of Texas at Austin. In 1973, she became a librarian for the local public school system in Austin. As the state's first lady in Texas, she took up literacy and breast cancer awareness as her causes, raising nearly a million dollars for the state's public libraries. While campaigning for her husband, she delivered her first major speech at the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia in July 2000. After 9/11, she provided comfort for the country as it mourned the victims and worked to rebuild after the attacks. Laura Bush has been honored by The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity in recognition of her efforts on behalf of education and the American Library Association for her years of support to America's libraries and librarians. She also accepted The Nichols-Chancellor's Medal on behalf of disaster relief workers around the world in May 2006 from Vanderbilt University, as well as the 2008 Christian Freedom International Freedom Award.

You are known as a very private person. Was it difficult to write your memoir and did you enjoy the process?

I enjoyed the process, especially in the first year we were back home from the White House. It was a great time to reflect on those eight years we lived in the White House, but also to reflect on an earlier part of my life. And it gave me the chance to fill in the gaps on the stories in my life that reporters have never asked about and I've never shared with the general public. It was fun that George was writing his at the same time – we worked with two different researchers, but they would help each other.

Did the process go as you expected, and were you surprised at how it turned out?

I called it the dreaded book project at first because if I wasn't working on it, I felt guilty. But it did end up being easier than I thought. I told the stories into a microphone and had them transcribed, and then I edited and moved the stories around. I also had a lot of scrapbooks, schedules, and photographs from years back that I could use to jog my memory.

Was there anything going in that you felt was off limits?

The whole point of writing a memoir is to be as candid as possible. I talked about the car accident I was in as a 17-year-old. Everyone knew about it – it had come out in the press. But I had never talked about it in a way that people could understand what it was like for me and the impact it had on my life and what I learned from it.

In the book, you write about the car accident as being something that has stayed with you for life. How were you able to deal with it at such an early age and how critical was support from the community in handling it?

The community really supported me. My family and friends did too, and all of my friends were friends with Mike and the grief and the loss for them was just like it was for me. But the support of everyone was very important.

I think I dealt with it by not talking about it and not thinking about it, except in private, but it took a long time. I don't think you ever get over something like that. I got letters at the White House, and now since the book has come out, from young people who were involved in an accident or from their relatives or teachers who want me to write a letter of encouragement to them. I write those letters, and I say, time

passes and the tragedy of it and the wounds of it heal to some extent but it's not really something you get over.

In the book, you talk about 9/11 and the days after and use the quote that "the world as I knew it irrevocably changed." Not being in the White House, it's hard to imagine what it was like. Was it really a completely different feeling from that day on?

There was a completely different feeling for George, for me, and for our country. We all grieved in those days and months afterwards, just with the idea that we could have that kind of attack on our homeland, and there had really never been anything like it. Pearl Harbor was similar, but seemed more remote and was on military installations only, and this was on private citizens who were just going about their daily lives. In addition, both George and I, on that day and all the days afterwards, realized the gravity of what it means to be the President, what it means to be responsible for the safety of the country. We knew that already, but that was when we really knew it in an emotional way.

When you're President, people lose sight of the fact that you're still a human being with emotions. Was it sometimes hard to know how to be of help with the weight he had on his shoulders, and does the relationship change during those times?

We were already close but we became closer. Both of us know that is really important when you live in the White House, but also for anybody who is facing serious challenges and is responsible for trying to help face those challenges. We have always had the comfort of each other's presence, wanting to be together. On the afternoons and evenings when he would come back from the Oval Office, he just wanted to be with me and wanted my support. It wasn't that we wanted to go over every single issue again – we didn't need to do that. He had talked about those problems, challenges, and issues all day. This was a way for us to relax and be together.

There are issues you have strong opinions on, some with which you agree with your husband and some which you don't. During those eight years, was it important for you not to express your opinions as candidly?

Not necessarily. I just always knew I was not the elected official; that my role was to support the President as his wife and to represent the people of the United States, which I did

a lot. I visited 76 countries while George was President and had the honor and the privilege to represent the people of the U.S. In each one of those countries that I visited, I saw the benefits that those countries had accrued because of help from the United States. In Africa, for instance, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief allowed people to experience what some call the Lazarus Effect – they came back almost from death because they were able to start on antiretrovirals to treat their AIDS.

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So I didn't see my role so much as speaking out on issues that George and I disagreed on but, instead, supporting him in all the ways that I could.

You also took a lead role in advocating the rights for Afghan women. Did you realize the type of impact you would have?

I didn't. When I gave the Presidential radio address about the treatment of women and children in Afghanistan, which was about a month or so after September 11th, I was stunned by how many women, especially around the United States, thanked me for speaking for the women of Afghanistan. I think American women were shocked by the contrast between our lives in the United States and the lives of Afghan women. Many American women wanted to help. When I saw that, I understood that I did have a podium and that people did want to hear what I had to say, and that they wanted to help in any way they could.

Is the role of First Lady clearly defined or does it take on its own character based on the person?

Both. There are certain things the American people expect: they expect someone to be a good steward and hostess at the White House, and they know the First Lady is making a home for the President and for her children.

But we also benefit from all of the different women who have been married to our Presidents, because of the expertise they already had or what they were particularly interested in. Many times, because they can focus on just a few issues rather than the broad spectrum that the President has to focus on, we can see a lot of success from our First Ladies. Lady Bird Johnson's interest in native plants was the start of the environmental movement. She was a leader in that and her impact continues with the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

Did it frustrate you early on when the media would talk about you in a way that might not have been accurate?

I wrote in the book about reporters and a question that I got so often from them, which was, "Who are you going to be: Hilary Clinton or Barbara Bush?" That was a silly question, but in many ways, it was also demeaning to Hilary Clinton and Barbara Bush – they saw Barbara as a nice grandmotherly woman and Hilary as an activist, and denied what they really were, which is interesting and complex women who were interested in a lot of different things. So it was frustrating and it is something we need to think about. The press should play a role in portraying our First Ladies as the complex and interesting individuals they are as opposed to trying to define them by an either/or question.

Well before your time in the White House, literacy was a key focus for you. Are you concerned about the education system in the U.S. today, particularly in K through 12, and do you foresee continuing the dialogue to make sure we're adequately training the next generation of leaders?

Yes, George and I are going to continue working on education issues through the Bush Institute, where we have an education forum focused on how to develop the leadership skills and principles of superintendents.

I recently visited a school in Miami to announce the next round of grants for school libraries from the Laura Bush Foundation for America's Libraries, so 144 more schools will get their grants to increase the book collections in their libraries. It's something I will work on for the rest of my life. It has always been my life-long interest to read, and I know how important it is for children to get a really good education and to become literate adults.

You grew up at a time when reading and books were a larger part of a young person's life. With technology today, is that focus being lost and does there need to be more of a focus placed on the value of books?

Actually, the fact that people can download books now on electronic devices will increase reading for people everywhere.

Do I think people read the classics enough? No, probably not, and I wish they did because it's also an important way to transmit our values from one generation to the next. If we read the great works of previous generations, then we know a little bit more about ourselves and our country.

You touch on the Bush Institute and the focus on education. Are there are other priorities for the institute?

Yes. The four areas of focus for the Bush Institute are education, the economy and

opportunity, compassion, and global health. This fall, we'll be hosting a global health conference on ways to deliver a broad spectrum of health care to women at the time of the delivery of their babies which, in many developing countries, is the only time women might seek any kind of health care.

After eight years in the White House, it would seem like a good time to relax, but you're on a book tour, and working with the Bush Institute. Is it just not in your nature to slow down?

There is still a lot I want to do. George and I will relax some this summer, but I'm still interested in a lot of the things that I worked on when I was at the White House. George and I will continue working with the institute on the policy issues that are important to us for the rest of our lives.

Throughout those eight years, you were able to protect the privacy of your daughters, Jenna and Barbara, who are thriving today. How proud does that make you as a mother, and how critical is it, with all the things you have going on, to still carve out family time?

Family time is still very important to us. I loved having little babies, but I have loved having my relationship with my girls now that they're grown and I am very proud of them.

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Many things have been written, good and bad, about your husband and his Presidency. Through it all, you seem to maintain a composure and evenness about you. Is that hard to do and is it much different on the inside than what we see on the outside?

This really is my personality. I also know George, so as much as I don't like a lot of the things I've read or heard people say about him, I know that they're not right. He is being characterized in a way that is not him. I have that kind of confidence both in him and in myself. The difficult part of serving in politics is the big course of criticism that you get no matter what side of the aisle you're on. Right now, people on the other side of the aisle are surprised that it isn't just George who is going to be criticized. ●