

Barbara Bush

Wellesley College Commencement Speech

Delivered at Wellesley in Boston, Massachusetts

1 June, 1990

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INTRODUCTION

Barbara Bush was the First Lady during a troubled time in history, yet she remained the perfect picture of a strong woman and mother throughout her career. Although she had many fine moments of public address, the speech I focused on was her Wellesley commencement address. This was given at an all-women's college to the graduating class of 1990 while George Bush Sr. was holding office. As only the second woman in United States history to be wife and father of a President, Barbara Bush led a remarkable life that is worth remembering.

HER LIFE

Barbara Pierce Bush was born in New York City on June 8th in 1925 (Biography.com 2017). Her parents, Marvin and Pauline Pierce were wealthy enough to provide private education and maintain a household with servants even through the great depression (First Ladies 2017). Barbara attended the Ashley Hall boarding high school in 1940 (Caroli 2017). Her sophomore year when she was sixteen years old she met her future husband George Herbert Walker Bush at a Christmas dance (First Ladies 2017). She would later say that, "I married the first man I ever kissed. When I tell this to my children, they just about throw up." For the next few years she and George would maintain a long-distance relationship leading up to their marriage in 1945 (The Whitehouse 2017).

At the end of World War II George Bush finished his career in the Navy and he and Barbara moved to New Haven, Connecticut (Caroli 2017). They lived there while George attended Yale, and Barbara held her first and only paying job on campus at the university (First Ladies 2017). While living in New Haven, their first child George Walker Bush was born (Biography.com 2017). After George Sr. graduated from Yale in 1948, he moved their growing family to California and later to Texas establishing himself in the oil business (First Ladies

2017). Barbara would move over twenty-nine times during her marriage to George, often with her six children in tow (Caroli 2017).

While they were living in California, Barbara's mother died in a car crash, because she was pregnant at the time she was advised not to travel to the funeral (First Ladies 2017). Shortly afterwards, she gave birth to her second child, a daughter. Although her daughter's full name was Pauline Robinson Bush – in honor of her late mother – the family fondly dubbed her Robin. Robin was diagnosed with leukemia and passed away at two years old (Biography.com 2017). This traumatic experience contributed to the premature gray color of Barbara Bush's hair (Caroli 2017). It became part of her iconic look later in life and contributed to her 'grandmother' image in the media.

Barbara and George went on to have four more children, three boys and one daughter. Throughout George's career in oil he travelled leaving Barbara at home to raise their children and maintain a household (The Whitehouse 2017). Some of the issues she faced in raising children later influenced the causes she supported in her public political career. Her son Neil's struggle with dyslexia fueled her interest in literacy issues which later became her platform as first lady (First Ladies 2017). She would also remain a firm supporter of leukemia and cancer research for the rest of her career.

In 1959 Bush began moving into a career in politics, but Barbara did not become involved until 1966 when George ran for senator in Texas (Biography.com 2017). Although he lost it set him up for his election into Congress in 1966 which pulled his family into the political world (First Ladies 2017). Barbara spent these years acquiring the skills such as public speaking that would assist her and her husband throughout the rest of their time in politics (Caroli 2017). When George first ran for president in 1980, Barbara had already become well loved by the

public and was a popular speaker (Biography.com). She spoke with class, yet maintain a clever and witty attitude the stemmed from her practical life views.

The next eight years found Barbara performing duties as Second Lady, while her husband served as vice president through Ronald Reagan's two terms in office (Caroli 2017). Although she and Nancy Reagan were not close, Barbara made an effort to never overstep into the role of first lady (First Ladies 2017). During those eight years Barbara established her platform in child and adult literacy, becoming actively involved in several organizations (The Whitehouse 2017). She also spent these years honing her speaking style through a variety of public addresses.

With the knowledge of two presidential campaigns, the Bush's took on the Presidential election again after nomination for the presidency at the 1988 Republican Convention (Biography.com 2017). During the campaign, Barbara broke precedents of the past and addressed the convention, addressing her husband's qualities as a family man rather than his political ability (First Ladies 2017). Throughout the campaign, they would continue to use their extensive Bush clan to bring the presidency to the people making them a relatable presidential couple. Unlike many First Ladies before her, Barbara kept out of the political side of the campaign, emphasizing her interests in family life, church, and gardening (Caroli 2017). Throughout her term as First Lady she remained out of most political issues stating, "I don't fool around with his office, and he doesn't fool around with my household."

Barbara Bush was diagnosed with Graves' disease her first year in the White House and underwent radiation therapy as treatment (First Ladies 2017). Despite her medical condition, she remained active in public service founding the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy in her never-ending fight for national literacy (Biography.com 2017). As part of the campaign she authored *Millie's Book: As Dictated to Barbara Bush* (First Ladies 2017). She wrote from the

point of view of Millie, her springer spaniel. All proceeds from the book went to literacy programs and the book raised almost \$1 million (First Ladies 2017).

Although the Bush administration celebrated a successful term, an economic slump at the very end cost the Bush campaign re-election into office. So, in 1993, Barbara and George Bush moved back to Texas where Barbara would continue in her roles of public service (Caroli 2017). While Barbara and George were done with their time in the political spotlight, her eldest son George W. Bush would go on to serve two terms as president. Barbara also supported Republican candidate Mitt Romney in his 2012 presidential campaign (First Ladies 2017). More recently she supported her son Jeb's bid for presidency in the 2016 Republican presidential nomination (The Whitehouse 2017).

Barbara Bush and her husband currently live in Houston, Texas at a home that they built together (Biography.com 2017). They also spend time in their summer home in Kennebunkport, Maine (First Ladies 2017). At the age of ninety-two she remains active in her foundation for literacy, and keeps up to date on current political standings and issues in America.

THE SPEECH

This speech was given at Wellesley College on June 1st 1990 at the commencement of the graduating class (Eidenmuller 2001). When it was first announced that Barbara Bush would be the speaker, over 150 students came together in protest, saying that she was picked because her husband was president (Butterfield 1990). Reportedly, the students were outraged over her lack of education and career that the graduates of Wellesley College hoped to obtain (Butterfield 1990). Coming into the speech many of the students in the audience had a low opinion of her credibility for the occasion. There were a few other speakers that day, most notably the Soviet First Lady Mrs. Gorbachev (Radcliffe 1990).

THE AUDIENCE

Most of her audience would have been the graduating students of the class of 1990. Wellesley College is an all-female college, so she would have specifically written her speech with graduating female students in mind. As noted in the previous section, it is likely that a portion of the audience did not support the school's decision to choose her as speaker. The secondary audience would have been the families and friends of those students and anyone else who later watched the recorded speech.

SPEECH PURPOSE

The purpose of the speech is to impart some final wisdom and encouragement on graduating students before they head into the world. It is also a congratulation on their accomplishments as they look forward to their new goals. Barbara also had to persuade those in the audience that what she was saying was worthwhile, and important even if she did not have a college degree. By the end of the speech she had the whole audience laughing and enjoying themselves. Afterwards it was hailed by The Washington Post as a triumph for Barbara Bush (Radcliffe 1990).

SPEECH STYLE

Barbara Bush had a witty but straight forward style of speaking. At the beginning of her speech, she even addresses the fact that she was not their ideal choice for speaker, followed by a joking comment about her prematurely white hair. The most interesting part of her style is that she breaks from the tradition of commencement speech addresses, and focuses on family instead of future careers. She addresses the current political state of the nation saying, "Your success as a family, our success as a society, depends not on what happens in the White House, but on what happens inside your house (Bush 1990)."

She also uses analogies in her speech, and references stories, and even pop culture. At one point she quotes Ferris Bueller and later jokes that she should not tell her husband that the crowd clapped more for Ferris than they did for their president. There are jokes throughout the speech many of which are at the First Ladies own expense. Her ability to draw the audience in and leave them wanting more after ten short minutes is a testament to her style and finesse as a speaker.

She also brought in the emphasis that Wellesley has on individuality and what the college stands for, but she continues to ask the students to consider three things she also finds important. The three things are items that she has done in her own life, changes that she believes made her successful. She goes on to give some detail on each point and why that point is important in her life and potentially for the audiences.

DELIVERY

The occasion of the speech did not allow for much movement or require an extemporaneous style of speaking. Barbara read the speech and remained behind a podium, mostly to remain by the microphones. She has a subtle enthusiasm that helps her to connect with her audience without being overwhelming. Although she uses minimal gestures, she engages the audience through eye contact. Another component of her speaking is her use of facial expression, which varies greatly throughout the speech. Her volume and pace were appropriate for the occasion and she is masterful in her use of pauses.

PERSONAL VALUES

What I personally enjoyed about this speech were some of the very things that the students originally objected to. I loved that she addressed the importance of family in life. She specifically says, “At the end of your life, you will never regret not having passed one more test,

winning one more verdict, or not closing one more deal. You will regret time not spent with a husband, a child, a friend, or a parent (Bush 1990).” This is a reminder that we often need in our lives especially as we embark on new parts of our journey. It helps us as we set our goals to keep the important things in mind.

My personal favorite quote from her whole speech is one that the audience enjoyed as well. When she was finishing, she brought some of her life accomplishments in and spoke of being First Lady. Following that statement, she noted, “And who -- Who knows? Somewhere out in this audience may even be someone who will one day follow in my footsteps, and preside over the White House as the President's spouse -- and I wish him well (Bush 1990).” This is just one of her many witty comments that she uses throughout the speech. Having an example of a woman who can use humor in her speech is refreshing.

CONCLUSION

Barbara Bush gave a memorable address at the Wellesley College commencement. It can be hard to find examples of skilled female orators in history, and even in more recent years. Bush sets a high standard for female orators following her or going beyond. This speech is notable not only for the individual who gave it, but also for its content in a time where women were moving out of the homes and away from traditional family roles.

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