

RICHARD: This episode is about the power of compromise and why that can be crucial to making progress. It's a style of leadership and decision-making that runs counter to much of what we see in Washington today. We discuss the remarkable career of James Baker, a man who was never elected to any major post but was right at the center of American power for three decades.

This is Let's Find Common Ground from Common Ground Committee. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. James Baker had a remarkable career, Secretary of State, Secretary of Treasury, and White House Chief of Staff twice. He helped end the Cold War and reunify Germany. Baker assembled the International Coalition to Fight the Gulf War, negotiated a rewrite of the U.S. tax code, and ran five presidential campaigns.

RICHARD: In the words of a new book, he was "the man who ran Washington." That book's coauthors, Peter Baker, no relation to the man he writes about, and his wife, Susan Glasser.

ASHLEY: Susan is Staff Correspondent for The New Yorker, and she writes a weekly Letter from Washington for the magazine.

RICHARD: Peter is Chief White House Correspondent for The New York Times. Our first question goes to Susan. Why is it worth learning about Jim Baker now as a new administration is about to begin?

SUSAN: Because his story is the story of Washington at a very different moment, at a moment not only when Washington ran the world but also when it was forced to function in a different way. And the incentives in American politics have just changed so radically. For Peter and I, it was an exercise in almost time travel, to be able to immerse ourselves and to be able to conjure up a moment, certainly not a kumbaya moment, a very divisive moment in American domestic politics, but at the same time, one in which the two parties were forced and really even compelled to work together to get things done. And the incentives in American politics, the very definition of success, was actually getting stuff done.

ASHLEY: Yeah, and it helped that he was a real pragmatist, right? He was a master of compromise. He wanted to get stuff done.

PETER: Yeah. He didn't stand on ceremony. He didn't stand on ideology. He just wanted to check things off the list. He was a doer, an accomplisher in that sense. While he was a conservative, small-c, from Texas, he didn't stand for flag flying off the cliff, waiting to get everything when, in fact, you could get 80% of what you needed from a compromise. He was a dealmaker. He could put himself in the shoes of the person on

the other side of the table and say, "Okay, what does this person need to get to the point where he or she can say yes to what I need?"

SUSAN: Well, it was particularly interesting, I think, for us to be working on this book. We were really immersing ourselves in this story of someone who was an actual dealmaker at a moment when we've been listening, for the last few years, to all this rhetoric coming out of the White House about, "Oh, we have this dealmaker in the White House," who actually was never able or even interested, for the most part, in making any genuine deals.

So it really was a very interesting juxtaposition on, particularly, the question of what constitutes a bipartisan deal. How do you work with adversaries? Jim Baker was able to work not only with Democrats in Congress throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, which was a political fact of life in Washington, but with Soviets, our main adversary, he managed to forge perhaps the closest and more productive relationship that existed in the 70 years of the Soviet Union between the United States and the Soviet Union.

RICHARD: I'm really struck by Baker's pragmatism, his preparedness for each task, and just how effective he was. It's kind of remarkable, isn't it, compared with most other players in Washington, not only in his time but also since then.

PETER: Well, I think that's right. He was a very diligent student of the other side, and he understood that there were limits. But he understood where those lines were and how far he could push somebody up to that line without pushing them over it. There's no point in blowing up a deal. What would be the purpose of that from his point of view?

Imagine today a Jim Baker doing this COVID relief bill. We never would have seen eight months of dickering around while people suffered. In the end, both sides dropped the major thing that they were trying to get in there and came to the middle, which is the obvious solution you would've gotten to back in April or May.

ASHLEY: Susan, Baker was a realist about others and himself. You called him ruthlessly unsentimental. What's an example of that?

SUSAN: Well, he was very cold-eyed when it came to politics, in part because he wasn't animated by a broader ideological project, in part just because I think the nature of how he works and his mind, he's a believer that lying to yourself and believing it is a cardinal sin. Peter and I had the opportunity not only to have many hours of interviews with Secretary Baker but to have access to his papers both at Princeton and Rice. You look at some of these memos in there from his closest advisors, and they were pretty brutal when he was considering running for president in 1996, which he ultimately did not do. Margaret Tutwiler, who'd been with him forever, and others wrote this memo that just eviscerated him and correctly, I think, illuminated all of his weaknesses is at

almost the polar opposite of the kind of slavish displays of loyalty we've seen as the requirement for high office in the last few years.

This is a guy who understood that you can't succeed in politics—or in anything, frankly—unless you absolutely have a pretty ruthless understanding of where things are really at. I think that was one of the keys to his success. He was an A-plus who was not only willing to but, in fact, demanded to hire A-plus people and surround himself with similarly top-flight people. A awful lot of insecure people, an awful lot of less people just aren't willing to do that. They aren't willing to tell it like it is and to have others tell it like it is to them.

RICHARD: That sure sounds like a far cry from what's been happening recently where President Trump and leaders of both parties in Washington are so rigid in their approach and don't invite disagreement or compromise.

PETER: Well, that's exactly right. It's all very personal. Coming back to the COVID relief example, this is a president who didn't even bother to participate in the negotiations, and only after both houses of Congress and both parties actually voted for the bill, a bill negotiated by his own administration, did he suddenly interject himself and then made it a test of loyalty, suddenly putting his own party at risk by saying, "Either you go along with the bill you just approved or you go along with me and undo all the work you've just done." Again, Baker would never have done that.

He also just had respect for the process. He had respect for the people participating in the process. He respected Dan Rostenkowski, who was the Democratic power broker from Illinois that he negotiated the tax overhaul with. He respected Jimmy Carter, even though, of course, he had run campaigns against Jimmy Carter, and worked with Carter to help solve the Contra War that had been dominating Washington in the 1980s. So I think that is very different from today, where everything is a zero-sum game. Baker doesn't believe in zero-sum games. And in today's Washington, if you give anything up as part of a negotiation, it means you're a sellout. It means that you're insufficiently loyal to the person, in this case the President, or to the cause.

ASHLEY: In a way, Baker is the epitome of what Trump ran against, isn't he?

SUSAN: Well, I think Trump would think that in the sense that he represents not only a Republican Party establishment that he was very much defining himself in opposition to but also in the sense that he represents what we used to think of as the core views of the modern Republican Party, which is to say a kind of internationalism, a belief in alliances, a belief in America's global presence and leadership in the world. And those things, free trade, were core to what Baker believed that he had accomplished in his time in public life, not to mention his brand, when it came to the positions he held in Washington, especially White House Chief of Staff, was not just competent but a form of uber-competence in the management and administration and functioning of

government. So I can't think of a person who is more the polar opposite than what we've seen the last few years.

RICHARD: He voted for Trump. What does Baker think of Donald Trump?

PETER: Well, with Baker, everything is a compromise, and this way, his compromise was he decided he was not going to endorse Trump. He was not going to do anything publicly for him. He didn't like the guy. Our long conversations with him, he used words like "nuts," "crazy." Clearly, he thinks this is an embarrassing, carnival-barker approach to leadership, and yet, as you point out, he voted for him. That compromise was that, in the privacy of the voting booth, he would still cast his ballot for the Republican nominee despite his own misgivings.

There are a lot of public officeholders out there who don't like Donald Trump, who think he's actually dishonest or disingenuous or even dangerous in some fashion and yet have voted for him or at least stood quietly as he did things that they didn't necessarily agree to. I think that speaks to the tribal nature of our moment here in politics. People pick sides.

ASHLEY: Explain that a little bit more because I think many people will be surprised that such a strong critic of President Trump would still vote for him. Susan?

SUSAN: Well, look, first of all, the book is not a celebration of Jim Baker or the party that he helped to lead but a case study in power and how it's wielded. For him, especially someone who operated at the height of Washington for so long, he suffers a form of congenital insider-ism. He is a believer that access is everything in politics and that there's essentially no point in standing on the outside and "pissing in," which is what he would say. So I do think that that's part of his mindset, is the idea that criticism is more valuable when levied in the context of being on the team.

RICHARD: You both had many conversations with Jim Baker in recent years. What reason did he give for deciding to vote for Trump even as Baker criticized him, even denigrated him?

SUSAN: This is the struggle and the tension. What I would say is that we've had many readers and many interviewers ask us about this. In a way, it's been interesting and helpful to me to see our audience grapple with this question because, frankly, this is what Peter and I were grappling with for five years, right? You're asking Jim Baker over and over and over again, in effect, the same question.

Finally, I think we came to realize as biographers, if your subject gives you the same answer over and over and over again, you have to listen. He's telling you something. What's he telling you? He's telling you he chose a partisan identity in the end at the age of 90. Look, he's not accountable for Donald Trump. He's done his best to stay away from this. He's not helping them. They have asked him, many times, by the way,

to do things. He's not agreed to do it. But as an individual, it does say something about the value that he placed on his individual vote. Perhaps it tells you a little bit about the milieu and the world in which he's living in Texas and retirement, that the surround sound was such that he would say things like, "Well, I don't like what the Democrats might possibly do," or, "They've gone too far Left," or, "They're too extreme." By the way, he said that to me even on the eve of the 2016 election. "Well, I'm worried about what they might do in a Clinton presidency. At least I know what this guy is about."

It doesn't necessarily make sense, but I think it's interesting to understand because, frankly, 70 million people voted for Donald Trump, many of whom very likely shared Jim Baker's views about the erratic, unstable, and problematic nature of Trump while, nonetheless, casting their votes for him.

ASHLEY: Peter, we're in the middle of a really difficult transition to a new president. What are some of the skills that Jim Baker brought to Washington that would be useful to the incoming administration?

PETER: We talk about who in Washington these days has instincts like Baker. I think, actually, Joe Biden is probably one of them. He's closer to that generation than a lot of today's congresspeople and other politicians in Washington. I think Biden's inclination is to make deals. I think his inclination is like Baker, to try to reach across the aisle and try to find some way to bring people together. I don't know whether he's going to have the same success that Baker did because I think the incentive structure in Washington has changed so drastically that it may elude even the most skilled practitioner of common ground, that, in fact, the system resists it so strongly these days that it will be hard to overcome.

But I think there are a lot of things that Americans actually agree on across party lines: infrastructure, and we could talk about COVID. There's a lot of things where Biden could find some agreement with many Republicans if both parties want to do that. But we'll see. It's going to be an interesting test for both parties.

RICHARD: What is James Baker's view of how to exercise power?

SUSAN: The first thing about Baker and power is he understood that you have to exercise it. Otherwise, what's the point? I do think, in many ways, that is the biggest contrast with today, where we, in effect, have had permanent campaigning and politicization of everything, almost a constant media echo chamber approach to politics that is quite different than he view of what it was that he was doing in public life. That's a foundational difference from where we are right now.

ASHLEY: How did Baker exercise power?

SUSAN: He was a man of carrots and sticks and absolutely not afraid to exact revenge, to play hardball. He understood the bureaucratic politics of Washington. One

of my favorite stories in the book is a particularly tough arms negotiation in Moscow where he was brought in to be the closer after much dickering back and forth. And you always have politics on the inside, the hardliners in the Pentagon and in the Republican Party, the skeptics about the Cold War really ending. That was a major dynamic that's often underappreciated in the end of the Cold War and something that both Bush and Baker really had to deal with because they were seen, even at the time, as moderates within their party or perhaps being overly willing to accommodate to Gorbachev.

There was this one sticky issue about the Backfire bomber and how many of those were going to be agreed to. Baker goes in, basically refuses even the previous American bargaining position and essentially sticks it to the Soviets and refuses to give up until they agree to a much tougher deal than the one that had originally been on the table. And the Americans are mystified a little bit by why Baker has done this, "What's he doing?" He comes out, and he basically says, "I want you to go back and tell the Pentagon, the generals, this is what I did, and screw them." The real enemy in that negotiation was not the Soviet Union. It was the Pentagon.

So this is a guy who believed in being tough in all ways, and he was also extremely competitive. He was a believer that winning creates its own logic and its own momentum. It's just that he wasn't a scorched earth kind of winner. He understood that the other person needed to take away something, too.

RICHARD: Except on the tennis court, right?

SUSAN: There's only one winner in a tennis game, right?

ASHLEY: Susan Glasser and Peter Baker. Coming up, a special ingredient in James Baker's exercise of power, his close and deeply loyal friendship with the first President Bush. This is Let's Find Common Ground.

RICHARD: Our podcast is produced by Common Ground Committee. Find out more about what we do at our website, commongroundcommittee.org.

ASHLEY: And if you want to learn more about what we're discussing, join our Facebook group. It's an insider's look at our thinking and our future projects.

RICHARD: Join the conversation. Be an insider. Our Facebook group is distinct from Common Ground Committee's Facebook page. In the group, we discuss ideas and make suggestions. Now back to our interview with journalists Peter Baker and Susan Glasser.

ASHLEY: [Peter 00:17:52] Baker and the first President Bush were close friends for nearly 60 years. Bush's family was from New England. Baker was a proud Texan. How tight were they?

PETER: George Bush changed his life. George Bush was a newly-arrived Houstonian trying his hand in the oil field when he arrived in the late '50s. And he was directed to meet this young guy, Jim Baker, who was a lawyer at one of the big, prominent firms in town. They really forged a bond on the country club tennis courts in Houston and became, in fact, doubles champions two years in a row. They both, to the end of their lives, would sit there and tell you about those two doubles victories, and they're still on the wall of the Houston Country Club, listing George Bush, James Baker as the winners.

So that really became the basis of their friendship. The families got together. The boys in both sides, both families were relatively the same age. They played football on Thanksgiving, and they got together for cocktails at Christmas. It was a real friendship. It's totally different than any other American president and Secretary of State you could think of in history, where their partnership in high office was preceded by years of nonpolitical friendship that had nothing to do with politics.

SUSAN: Remember, Jim Baker, like George Bush, both sons have great privilege. Baker was born on the beginning of the Great Depression and yet he was completely insulated from it. He was a fourth-generation Texas who, in effect, his birthright was to be one of the leaders of Houston, a city that his great-grandfather had been friends with Sam Houston himself. His grandfather was probably one of the key institution builders of the city, and he grew up knowing his grandfather and seeing what a legend in his own time that grandfather was. His father was an extremely demanding, even micro-managing man of the very old school.

So he and George Bush had that patrician expectation and burden, and certainly Jim Baker never would've been Secretary of State if he hadn't met George Bush. There's a strong argument that George Bush might never have been president had he not met Jim Baker. So there was this interdependence over the decades between these two. It's really a remarkable story in its own right.

RICHARD: James Baker ran George Bush's successful 1988 campaign against the Democrat, Michael Dukakis, who, at the time, was governor of Massachusetts. There was a highly controversial ad run in that campaign—I remember it well—about Willie Horton, a Black prisoner who was let out on a weekend pass from jail and then raped a white woman. Many have said, in the years since, that that ad stoked racial fears about Black crime. Does Jim Baker have any regrets about that?

PETER: That's a good question because that campaign, of course, was a scorched earth campaign. It wasn't Baker's ad. It was actually technically put up by a supposedly independent Republican outfit. The Bush campaign itself had talked about Willie Horton but didn't use his name or face in their own ads. This separate organization did, but they didn't stop it, either. They didn't go out of their way to say, "Hey, we denounce or don't want to have anything to do with this." When we talked to Baker about that, that was really one moment where he kind of allowed for some idea of regret, that maybe that ad went too far or whatever. Then he quickly said, "But, in

general, I'm proud of that campaign. Were we tough in calling Dukakis's patriotism into question and all that? Yeah, but that's what you had to do to win.”

I think that speaks to the duality of Baker's role in public life that, in fact, in that very election, one month after the election, after they skewered Dukakis, Jim Baker was sat down in the apartment of Bob Strauss, the former Democrat Party Chairman, to have dinner with Jim Wright, the Democratic Speaker of the House, to talk about what they could do to solve the Central America problem that had so bedeviled the Reagan administration. So, for Baker, there was these two sides of politics, the one where you were cutthroat and the one where you sat down and made deals.

ASHLEY: What do you know about his views on race and discrimination?

SUSAN: That was actually a big question for us, not entirely answered, I must say. What I would say is that, number one, it clearly was not his animating issue, racial politics. He was not, by and large, associated one way or the other with either the stoking of racial grievance or the fundamental civil rights transformation that marked his lifetime.

It strikes me that his family at various time was seen as more progressive, at least when it came to Houston wealthy white people. In fact, his grandfather, who I mentioned before, Captain Baker, was a Progressive-era reformer. His wife certainly was. So it's a story of a white, privileged, entitled family in the South that neither led the change to end racism and discrimination in the South nor seemed to be part of the racist reaction to it in many ways.

RICHARD: You're both journalists. Susan, you're a commentator for The New Yorker and write about politics. Peter, you're a reporter at the White House for The New York Times. How important is it to try and be objective?

PETER: I think we have drifted away from the word objective because obviously human beings are not purely objective. We all bring our experiences and lifetimes to the table. I think probably the better phrase these days is fair and open-minded, independent, detached. Those are words I would try to use as a reporter, and it is different than being a columnist who can be more vocal about what you think about things, your analysis of things.

But as a reporter, it's my job to reflect various points of view, whether I agree with them or not but not just to sit there and do it mechanically. It is still our job, and I think we've relearned this lesson over the last four years, to help readers make sense of it by providing them the facts and context so that they can make their judgments correctly. Objectivity or trying to avoid bias is not the same thing as 50% one side, 50% the other, he said, she said.

You have to provide readers, I think, with enough information to draw their own judgements rather than just simply be stenographers. That's not our job, and it's a hard

balance trying to be fair to all sides and yet not... There's been a lot of misinformation or untruths coming out of this White House in the last four years. It's not our job to parrot that. It is our job to fact-check when things are put out there to the public that are not true. I think it's still important that readers can have a place to go where they can try to get information and analysis that's rooted not in opinion but in fact.

SUSAN: Yeah, and I would say that's how I see my role. There are many columnists who are newspaper columnists who are there, really, as opinion writers. But what I've been trying to do in writing a weekly Letter from Washington for The New Yorker is, certainly, I have views and I'm expressing them, but I would say that, for me, as well, I at least view what I'm doing as much more independent and trying to offer analysis and perspective perhaps based on covering Washington for the last few decades.

But I think it's really important, at this hyper-partisan and tribal moment, to present people with someone who's willing to call it in a straightforward and independent-minded way. I think both of us are animated by really wanting to get at the truth in whatever way that we can and to do so outside of the prison of partisanship and orthodoxies.

ASHLEY: Our podcast is called Let's Find Common Ground. What chance do you think Joe Biden has in helping America find common ground? What do you think his chances of success are?

PETER: Well, I would say at least that is his stated goal, which is a difference, right? What you've had the last four years is a president who didn't pretend to seek common ground, didn't try to seek common ground, in fact played on the divisions of America, and that was, in fact, his political persona. That's part of his success, on some level, rightly or wrongly, to play on our divisions: racial, economic, gender, sexual orientation, cultural. I think that was one of the most defining characteristics of his presidency.

That was different than I think we've seen in a long time. President Clinton talked about being a repairer of the breach. President Bush, 43, talked about being a uniter, not a divider. President Obama talked about a post-partisan era and bringing people together. Now, all three of them didn't live up to those grand aspirations, but they at least gave voice to it. They gave voice to the idea that, as President, it was their job to bring the country together, and that's not something you've heard in the last four years.

Biden is a return to that bipartisan tradition that we saw prior to this president, where at least you give voice to the notion that your job is to be a uniter in the country. So I think he'll try. Now, again, I think, as Susan said, the environment is so much different than it had been even just 4 and 8 and 12 years ago. It has gotten progressively more toxic, progressively more polarized over the years not just because of Donald Trump, although he certainly is both a manifestation and an encourager of that.

That's going to challenge Biden. He's not obviously coming at this in a moment where there's a welcoming of that. He's not going to have the kind of honeymoon other presidents have had from day one.

RICHARD: Both of you have reported from overseas, but in recent years, you've been in Washington, which is a city that's much more angry and anxious than it once was. How do you think things might change with President Biden, who will be so different in style from Donald Trump?

SUSAN: We've been experiencing something that I think has really... It's certainly never in our lifetimes occurred, which is essentially a cult of personality fused with the most powerful office in the world. That has meant that Trump, by design, has succeeded in occupying a really outsized portion of all of our mental bandwidth for politics. I think one of the key stories of his presidency is clearly that he was able to dominate and to roll over and to take over the Republican Party, at least the elected officials part of the Republican Party with much more success than we anticipated at the beginning of his presidency.

Look at how he would cycle through all of these officials in his own White House, as well. He would fire them. He would humiliate them. Yet, they were so terrified of being kicked out of his orbit permanently that they would abase themselves further, even after being humiliated by Trump, and continue to want to be seen in his orbit enough that they could profit off of that for the following two years. This is a remarkable dynamic in a country that at least prides itself or pretends to be something different, which is a rule-of-law based democracy. Yet, we saw that are we are not made, fundamentally, of different stuff than people in countries that have very different and much more tragic political histories.

The flip side is Biden is signaling, in every way possible, I think, not only that he himself represents a return to a different tradition of American politics, as Peter has pointed out, but many of his appointments are very much drawn from the ranks of expertise. They're drawn from the ranks of a professional, governing class in which knowledge, skills, expertise, science are the foundations.

RICHARD: Peter?

PETER: I agree with everything she just said, of course. Look, one of the things we're going to be testing in these next few years is what norms that were broken or changed in the last four years will be restored and which ones are now permanently gone. President-elect Biden talks about returning to normalcy, and he talks about the importance of norms. But will he or other presidents that follow decide that Trump's precedent allows them to do things that otherwise had been unthinkable?

Just as a small example, this isn't the biggest thing in the world, but President-elect Biden chose, as his Defense Secretary, a recently retired four-star general. That's something we hadn't done in more than a half-century until Trump came along and

busted that norm. Biden is basically saying, "Okay. I'm going to bust that norm, too." Again, this is not the biggest norm that got dispensed within the last four years, but it does suggest that there will be a picking and choosing.

It will be interesting to see what Democrats decide they want to get rid of, as well, in terms of norms using Trump as a justification or how much they would turn to the status quo ante. That's an important question because we had sort of a consensus, a bipartisan consensus between the end of Watergate and the beginning of the Trump era about where the rules were, where the lines were, and now they're all very fuzzy and blurred. We'll see how they get redrawn.

RICHARD: Thank you very much, Peter Baker and Susan Glasser.

SUSAN: Thank you so much for having us. Happy New Year.

PETER: Thank you.

ASHLEY: Our interview with New York Times Chief White House Correspondent, Peter Baker, and his wife, Susan Glasser, who's a staff correspondent with The New Yorker.

RICHARD: They're the coauthors of the book *The Man Who Ran Washington*. Again, Peter Baker is no relation to the man they wrote about.

ASHLEY: This book was years in the making. Both Peter and Susan had a lot of meetings with Jim Baker, and the book's been widely praised.

RICHARD: Thanks for listening to our podcast. We release new shows every two weeks. This is *Let's Find Common Ground*.