



# White House Usher: Stories from the Inside



Christopher B. Emery  
Foreword by former  
First Lady Barbara Bush

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Christopher B. Emery  
Washington, DC 20009

Email: [WhiteHouseUsher@gmail.com](mailto:WhiteHouseUsher@gmail.com)  
[www.WhiteHouseUsher.com](http://www.WhiteHouseUsher.com)

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# Foreword

By Barbara Bush

Just the other day someone asked me what it was like to live in the White House with so much staff around all the time. Did you ever have a minute to yourself? Did you feel smothered by attention? Was there no sense of privacy?

My answer was immediate and heartfelt: We loved the wonderful White House staff. They were like family who somehow knew when we needed them but then magically disappeared when they knew we wanted to be alone. (Come to think of it, my children and grandchildren are not always so good at the “appearing” and “disappearing” business.)

The point being, they made life just about perfect every single day. Even when the problems of the country and the world weighed heavily on George’s mind and shoulders, he knew he could come upstairs at the White House and feel at home.

At the center of the household activity is the White House Ushers Office, which oversees the 90-plus White House residential staff, including the plumbers and electricians, the chefs and the florists, the butlers and the housekeepers, and so many more. It is the ushers’ job to keep everyone and everything running well and running on time. That would include the president and first lady.

With his book *White House Usher: Stories from the Inside*, former usher Chris Emery gives his readers a peek inside what happens upstairs at the White House. Chris’s

anecdotes tell a rich story of how America's house really is the first families' home. I loved my trip down memory lane.

He even tells a few stories on himself—including the night I caught him racing around upstairs in FDR's wheelchair.

Like so many of the White House staff, Chris became like family and deserves credit for being my very first computer guru. Even after we left town, I would call Chris and ask him to solve my computer issues. (And there were many.)

Enjoy your peek inside.

*Barbara Bush*

## Richard M. Nixon



Richard M. Nixon circa 1987 (Official White House photo)

### **Tuesday, April 28, 1987 – *Nixon's Poignant Visit***

I greeted former President Richard M. Nixon as he arrived at the White House shortly before 5 p.m.—his first solo trip since he resigned and left in disgrace on August 9, 1974.

President Nixon came in a single government car. As he got out, he looked at me, smiled, and said hello. He was wearing a dark suit similar to those he wore in every image I'd ever seen of the man. We entered the White House Diplomatic Reception Room where he was greeted by Chief of Staff Howard Baker and National Security Advisor Frank Carlucci. As we walked into the ground floor hallway, Nixon paused and sighed as he looked around, reacquainting himself with the once-familiar surroundings.

We took the elevator to the private quarters where President Nixon met with President Reagan for 70 minutes. When the meeting had concluded and as President Nixon came off the elevator on the ground floor, Chief of Staff Howard Baker asked if he could take a photo of the former president in front of the portrait of his wife, former First Lady Pat Nixon. President Nixon looked in admiration at the portrait, then remarked that he'd never seen it and said how much he liked it. Known for being a camera buff, Baker had his camera at the ready and snapped a few photos. We then walked out to the South Portico where a car waited. No fanfare, no press entourage, and no throngs of staffers lining the driveway. Only a single car and an old man leaving the south grounds in obscurity.

I thought back to the last time President Nixon left through these doors on that historic, dismal day in 1974 and all those frozen-in-time images of the fallen president. As he stood on the steps of the helicopter facing the assembled staff on the south lawn, he waved—an infamous victory salute from a broken man.



## Vietnam Memorial



U.S. Navy Pilot George Bush in the cockpit of an Avenger (1942-1945) (George Bush Presidential Library and Museum)

### **Wednesday, November 11, 1992 – *A Memorable Memorial Event***

It was only one week and one day after President George H. W. Bush lost his reelection bid. I stood at the White House South Portico at 9:30 p.m. to greet President and Mrs. Bush as they came back from Union Station. They looked tired. We walked into the residence through the Diplomatic Reception Room to Cross Hall and got on the elevator for the ride up to their private quarters. The first lady said they had attended a party in which Senator Robert Dole and others paid tribute to President Bush, who quipped, “It was like a wake.”

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At 11 p.m., I was packing up and about to leave my office when the Secret Service agent nearby told me President Bush wanted to come down and walk the dogs. I took the elevator to the second floor and waited for the president, who came out a minute later with the two dogs, Millie and Ranger. As he approached the elevator, I asked if I could walk the dogs for him. He said no thanks; he wanted to get some air.

Accompanied by a Secret Service agent, we rode the elevator to the ground floor. As we walked out onto the South Grounds, President Bush said he'd like to see the Vietnam Memorial that night, but he didn't want to upstage President-elect Bill Clinton on this Veteran's Day.

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I stayed behind and watched as President Bush walked into the night, a Secret Service agent a few steps behind. They walked one lap around the south driveway then headed back toward the entrance. As they approached the South Portico where I stood, I heard President Bush tell the agent he wanted to visit the Vietnam Memorial around midnight without the press. The agent said something about bringing in extra agents. President Bush looked exasperated. "No, you don't have to do that. Look, what would you guys do if you had to take me to the hospital? You wouldn't wait to bring someone in. Check it out and call me. I'll wait to hear from you."

As the president and I walked back into the White House, we talked about visiting the Memorial. He said his heart felt for those who suffered from that war. At 11:40 p.m. President and Mrs. Bush both came downstairs. I met them on the ground floor and, as the elevator doors opened, Mrs. Bush looked surprised to see me. "What are you still doing here!?" she exclaimed.

I responded, "What are you doing awake!?" She laughed and said she was asleep until a minute ago. She asked if I knew the president planned to visit the Vietnam Memorial. I said, "Why, no.

I've been totally focusing on all the work in my office." She rolled her eyes.

Then the president, Mrs. Bush, and their two dogs walked around the South Driveway where the presidential limousine had pulled up. They kept walking past the South Portico where I stood and had just started another lap when Mrs. Bush turned and brought Millie over. She asked the doorman to take the dog inside, then turned to me and asked, "Would you like to come with us?" I immediately responded, "I would love to!" Waving me along as she walked, she added, "We'll walk down here (toward the Southeast Gate) and the limo will meet us." She looked up to President Bush and said, "Pops! Chris is coming with us." That's when he asked the doorman to take Ranger (the other dog) inside. The three of us leisurely walked on the South Drive.

"Mr. President," I said, "I hate to dwell on this, but I've got to tell you how sad I am you'll be leaving the White House. I know you're hearing that from everyone around here, but my feeling is a bit selfish. I know you will be happier somewhere else in a few months, but I would rather have you here." The president responded, "Well, that's so nice, and such a nice way to put it. Thank you, Chris, and we're going to miss you all a lot."

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Our motorcade exited the Southeast Gate and traveled south on East Exec Avenue, then made a right onto E Street. Mrs. Bush asked her husband about the press being present at the Memorial. President Bush said he didn't want any press people around; this had to be a low-key event. She said she thought he was required to tell them, but he clearly didn't want to discuss it, so I interjected, "All deals are off now."

After waiting for the red light, we made a left onto 17<sup>th</sup> Street. I was surprised we even stopped at the light, attributing the decision to not wanting to draw attention with lights and sirens. I was disappointed—NOT.

As we rode along, Mrs. Bush remarked, "I wonder what Marlin (Fitzwater, press secretary) will do after leaving the White

House?” The president said he was sure Marlin would be fine. Mrs. Bush added how much she liked him.

I was looking out the window as the limousine stopped at 17<sup>th</sup> and D streets. A delivery truck was next to us, and a man was loading something using a hand truck. I thought if he only looked over at us, he'd be amazed to see President and Mrs. Bush, but the man remained focused on his task. He probably figured we were just another limo in Washington, D.C.

The president said something about looking for houses in Houston. Mrs. Bush responded, “I saw Jack (Steel) on the tube today.” (Jack Steel, an older gentleman with a wonderfully warm character and delightful personality, was one of President Bush's closest friends and a key advisor.) I added that I'd heard him on the radio. President Bush couldn't believe it. “Jack, on TV?” Mrs. Bush responded, “Yep, on the tube today.”

As we continued to drive through light traffic, we talked about Mrs. Bush's laptop computer. I suggested she consider getting a fax board so she could receive faxes directly on her computer. She mentioned how Jeb (their son) was using Lexus software and how much his family enjoyed it. As the limo turned right onto Constitution, we discussed how internal faxes work. The president said to his wife, “Chris can set you up with a modem so our computers can talk.” He then said he told Don Rhodes (close confidant and long-time friend) to computerize all the accounting, but Don looked at him in bewilderment. “Could that be done easily, Chris?” he asked me. “And do they have packages that can print checks?” I said yes to both, and Mrs. Bush seemed very interested.

When I mentioned that names on the Vietnam Wall were being read that night, the president said he wanted to read some at midnight and so did Mrs. Bush. But she immediately changed her mind; it was more appropriate for her husband, the World War II veteran, to read the names.

The Secret Service agent told the Bushes more than 100 people would be at the Memorial that night. The president replied, “You said there would be only fifty when you checked it out.” Then

under his breath he muttered, “I hope they didn’t get word I was coming.”

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The limo turned left toward the Lincoln Memorial and did a U-turn, pulling up to the curb and stopping. Telling them it was my first time visiting the Memorial, they expressed surprise, saying how moving it can be.

After we hopped out, I let President and Mrs. Bush get a few steps in front of me so I wouldn’t crowd them. He looked cool in his leather aviator jacket with the presidential seal while Mrs. Bush stayed warm in her black mid-length winter coat. The only light that night came from the moon—no press lights, no security cordon, no entourage—just an older couple strolling along. How amazing!

As they headed down the path toward the Wall, a passerby recognized the first couple and said hello. Walking farther, I was three steps behind President and Mrs. Bush when I saw him slap a rough-looking veteran on the back and say, “How ya doing? Thanks for what you did.” Imagine the scene: this bearded vet wearing all denim was walking with his buddies in the opposite direction of a stranger who suddenly slapped him on the back. Looking annoyed, he didn’t know the friendly slap came from the president of the United States. But by the time he’d walked past me, his face had lit up. With a sense of awe, he said to his companions, “Hey! That was the president!”

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Meanwhile, President Bush was greeting surprised bystanders and saying, “Bar and I wanted to come out and pay our respects. It’s almost midnight on the tenth anniversary of the Wall.” As they approached the stage where people were reading names, several widows and family members of veterans came up and hugged them. One lady explained how she was about to read her husband’s name and would be honored if the president read it instead. Both President and Mrs. Bush got up on stage. He read 10 or 12 names, then gracefully backed away as those in the crowd of about 300 applauded.

That night, I learned to appreciate the job of the Secret Service agents as they thoroughly checked all the people waiting to greet the president without being intrusive or annoying. President and Mrs. Bush shook hundreds of hands and signed dozens of autographs. At one point, a Park Police officer held a flashlight for Mrs. Bush to see as she signed autographs while a Secret Service agent held a small flashlight for President Bush. So many of the vets told him how much they appreciated him and how sorry they felt about him losing the election. A few even insulted the president-elect. With dignity, President Bush repeated how we all need to rally around President-elect Clinton. I was so impressed at how President and Mrs. Bush were so patient and gracious, making each person they met feel special.

As we approached the end of the line of people, an older vet with a long beard and a tattered denim jacket that had military patches all over it wheeled up in his wheelchair. He was missing his legs. The vet asked President Bush to please sign the shoulder of his jacket. The president replied, "If you can move your beard just two inches, I can sign right here." Afterward, he called Mrs. Bush over to sign it, too. The vet said he'd treasure his jacket forever.

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We finally made it back to the limo. Mrs. Bush got in first, then I did. The president had stopped to talk to a few more greeters, with the last one telling him he'd played horseshoes at the White House in July. After he got seated, President Bush mentioned how moved he felt by meeting all those people. One vet had even given the president a hat, which he wore the rest of the way home.

As we headed east on Constitution Avenue, Mrs. Bush said to her husband, "Tell Chris what Bob (Dole) said about you earlier in the evening." The president was busy checking out his new hat, so she said, "Never mind, I'll tell him. Senator Dole had such touching words, saying that Bush was a great president. And Dole was crying."

Lost in thought, President Bush reflected out loud, saying he hoped Desert Storm helped vindicate the Vietnam experience, and

how bad he felt for those affected by the entire Vietnam episode. I saw a tear in his eye.