**Civics 101**

**Episode 86: Camp David**

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**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:00] Civics 101 is supported in part by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

**Intro:** [00:00:07] Who is the current Speaker of the House? I don't even know. Will they rule in the president's favor pr will they send it to the Supreme Court? You can't refer to a senator directly by their name. Congressional redistricting. Separation of Power. Executive Orders. The National Security Council. Civics -- civics -- civics -- 101!

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:19] I'm Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101, the podcast refresher course on the basics of our democracy. Today we're taking a look at Camp David the out-of-the-beltway retreat for presidents and their families and site of international diplomacy. Joining us is retired Rear Admiral Michael Giorgione, commanding officer of Camp David during the Clinton and Bush administrations and author of Inside Camp David. Mike, welcome to Civics 101

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:00:51] Thank you Virginia. Wonderful to be here.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:53] So what is Camp David?

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:00:55] Camp David is the presidential retreat. It's been around for 75 years, first started by President Roosevelt and fourteen presidents have and are using it to various levels of satisfaction for personal use or diplomacy. And there's been a rich history of that over the 75 years.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:12] Was it built to be a presidential retreat?

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:01:15] It was not. It was part of the Civilian Conservation Corps work in the late 30's and 40's and when they built some cabins and were putting men back to work, principally, to build our nation's parks, roadways, coming out of the Depression. And President Roosevelt told his staff I need a place to get away from D.C. I can't go out on my presidential yacht anymore due to the war years and being unsafe to be on the Potomac or in the Chesapeake Bay. So a staff found three locations that were then drivable distance from Washington D.C. and one of them was this place called High Catoctin Camp Number Three in the Catoctin National Park. And that's the place FDR chose to go to his retreat. And he first called it Shangri-La. And that name stuck for his administration as well as Truman's administration.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:59] When did it become Camp David and why?

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:02:02] President Eisenhower came in thought it was pretentious say he had his farm in Gettysburg, thought of closing the place as other presidents have thought over time but was kind of convinced by Mamie and his wife and others that maybe it had a good use diplomatically and maybe was a reasonable getaway. So he took it and but he said I don't like the name Shangri-La it's too mystical too surreal for me so he came to Camp David after his grandson David Eisenhower.

[00:02:30] So is it open all the time for presidents to just pop in?

[00:02:35] It is. It is our mission there to always be ready to receive the president or any other designated guest. Again only per his use. And we're always ready. Weather depending, you either fly up from the south lawn now or other parts of the country or you can drive in. But either way we received the president as guest for 75 years.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:54] How many staff?

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:02:56] At my time Virginia about 200. It's probably about the same, Navy sailors and Marine Corps guards. And that's the staff that protects, operates, maintains the installation.

[00:03:06] It is a Navy facility. It actually has an appropriated funding line. And it is a Navy command, that's why the Navy has it. And when the president visits he he brings his own guest and diplomacy and use of and we keep track of costs and needs of what he wants to use for the camp.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:25] You know, when I think of Camp David I think a number of things but you know camp. Sort of rustic, not grand mansion. What does it even look like at Camp David?

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:03:35] Imagine the very wooded hillside mountaintop actually with simple pathways, asphalt pathways, a couple of roads. One story cabins with thick oak plank siding and cedar shakes shingles. Very basic. All the amenities you would need but certainly no brass no marble no polish. A very rustic but very comfortable camping experience, I think, for our guests.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:01] How much does it cost to maintain a year?

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:04:05] At my time about 3 million was the budgeted line for the mission of Camp David and all the support services.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:11] So depending on how often the president used it the per visit price would vary?

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:04:16] That, the cost really is pretty standard, pretty steady I mean.

[00:04:20] The president coming in and out. There are costs that are associated by Marine One and the movement of the president and his staff that are captured by other parts of the White House Military Office, that's the office we report to

[00:04:33] But that 3 million was about the standard administrative operations maintenance fee cost, for the for the Navy per year.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:42] Has there been an argument to cut back on staff or services or close Camp David?

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:04:48] Several presidents as I mentioned President Eisenhower wasn't sure he was going to keep it. He did. President Carter felt the same way and thought it was too much. Realized the great value and I think made it more famous internationally with his 1978 Camp David peace accords. I think each president since has discovered a way to use it either for great personal use or diplomatic. There's really been very little debate about staff and sometimes we actually have to add staff based on the frequency of use by the president or the needs...

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:05:18] You just mentioned the Camp David Accords. This was during the presidency of Jimmy Carter. Can you give us a brief outline of what happened there at that time?

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:05:27] President Carter, very focused, like most of our presidents have been since his time too on forging some type of peace in the Middle East, and this time he was dealing with Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Menachem Begin of Israel and their history of course.

[00:05:43] And he wanted to get them together again to try to pound out this these accords and in debating and thinking about where to have it, his wife Rosalyn mentioned maybe, maybe you should bring him to Camp David. It's very quiet here. There's no press unless you want the press here. There's an aura to it that I think they might respect and feel comfortable in. And so he decided to do it that way and he brought him there not knowing how long the, The discussions would go. He thought maybe a week. Staff thought maybe five days or so and it went almost two weeks. And in the end very successful at that time and that they did sign the peace accords and they rushed back to the White House to do that. But it was a great moment in his presidency, I believe, and probably when he was most proud of... The Camp David peace accords of '78.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:06:30] Have any other major diplomatic events happened at Camp David?

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:06:35] Well, quite interestingly and I think part of why I decided to write the book, both, serving two presidents President Clinton, President Bush, was the 2000 Middle East Peace Summit which occurred on my watch. And very similar. Now this time between Yasser Arafat of the PLO and Ehud Barak, the prime minister of Israel. President Clinton getting together maybe six times now formally with these two world leaders to sign some type of peace treaty, some type of agreement. And he brought 'em to Camp David in July of 2000 and very similarly we didn't know how long it would go. No one did. And we thought it might be a few days and wound up going almost two weeks. Very similar to 1978, although no deal was signed in the end

[00:07:22] [break]

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:07:22] Well you were there living with your family. What was that like, I meanm did you have any memorable moments with the presidents or their guests at Camp David?

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:07:34] When you think about raising two young girls and you're the only family inside this fenced in place, you have no neighbors. Yes, there are Navy families living down the hill who were great friends and still are. But when you have no immediate neighbors and you're a young child there's a great snowfall, and dad doesn't let you go play sledding on the president's lawn, that's sometimes hard to explain. And when you have to go out the access gate every morning including winter and a golf cart to catch the school bus to go to public school and you miss it sometimes and your kids are crying, why do we have to live here? That's a hard explanation to offer isn't it?

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:09] Mmm, absolutely.

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:08:09] So these very surreal personal moments, I want people to appreciate what it's like for a family to live in the midst of this. And on the weekends you have guests who are the president and the president's family and the daughters and the sons and relatives and we're not socializing with them of course but we're around them, andwe meet them, and they get to know them and they feel somewhat of a very personal connection.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:32] So really memorable. One they'll need therapy for, the other, they won't.

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:08:37] That's right. It make great fodder for college essays. I will tell you that.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:40] I can imagine. Well, how about presidents when they get there. Do they get to unwind a little? Do you see them act differently, do you think, then when they do...?

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:08:48] I think so. The real metric for us, Virginia, is Friday, typically, a president comes up from the White House, from, from the South Lawn and departs Sunday. And our real measure is: was he and his family happy when they left Sunday? And all those little nit-noid things that bother you and I every day, you know they can bother our presidents too. So how was the weather today? Was the food just right? Was the pool water warm enough? Did bowling go well? Did you like the game of volleyball? Did, you know, was the right newspaper there? All those little things you... you're very mindful of because you want to be perfect, but you also want to be very natural. And that's part of the juxtaposition of serving a camp. Trying to be perfect but keeping it natural.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:31] We think of the White House, I think of as America's house. Don't necessarily think of Camp David that way because the public really doesn't get much of a chance to see inside of it.

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:09:41] True.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:41] Can people take tours of Camp David?

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:09:43] Only if you're an invited guest of the president.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:46] Did you ever have people over?

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:09:48] I did. And I was gonna mention, one of the benefits of living there-- and the crew, the sailors and marines, could have guests if the president was not there and we vet that the guest list and all, but one of the benefits was if the president wasn't there for say, Christmas, I could have my family or my wife's families come stay with us inside our cabin, our house, and recreate, you know, within reason. And that's a wonderful place to entertain someone.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:10:10] This is a presidential retreat but our current president Donald Trump owns his own resorts. Has he been using Camp David anyway?

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:10:19] By my count he's been there four times, including a recent trip in December. So he did not visit from his inauguration, did not visit for almost five months, going there for the first time for Father's Day. And I know, I know what the crew felt. They wanted to show off and be proud of serving the President and showing them what Camp David was about. And I think he was generally very pleased. I don't know that he'll find it to be his personal place of relaxation but I would hope he would find it to be a place to bring other world leaders to discuss important issues of the world. Interestingly he has brought most or part of his cabinet to Camp David twice now and I find that a good, good sign of use because it is a way to get away from the White House and certainly take some privacy and confidence into the place.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:11:04] What do you think Camp David means to Presidents, Mike?

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:11:07] Chapter 12, The True meaning of Camp David, I try to round up what many of the Presidents and First Ladies have said about camp. Some have said it's a place that if I didn't have it I'd go stir crazy, meaning I needed to get out of the White House. Some presidents, like the Reagans, almost principally only went there just the two of them. They needed their getaway and they used it for that purpose more than any other presidential couple. Some have chosen to use it for diplomacy, to bring other world leaders there. And like the distinction you made with the White House being formal and maybe America's house, I consider Camp David kind of being the family room. Remember watching President Bush invite the Blairs to Camp David early in his administration in February of 2001, and just watching from the sideline, George and Laura entertaining Tony and Cherie was very interesting. Because they brought 'em in, to me, a family room. And wanted to get to know them as a couple. And so presidents have discovered it in different ways at different times in administration, during their administrations. And I think the current president may find the same use, especially in a diplomatic sense.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:12:17] Well, fabulous. You're giving us a look inside the family room beyond the gate. Thank you so much Mike.

**Michael Giorgione:** [00:12:23] You're very welcome Virginia. Thank you for your time.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:12:30] Retired Rear Admiral Mike Giorgione, author of Inside Camp David: The Private World of the Presidential Retreat. That is it for Civics 101 today. There are a number of ways for you to submit your questions about how the government is designed to work. Send an e-mail to Civics 101 podcast dot org or visit our website civics101podcast.org. And while you're there, sign up for Extra Credit, a thoroughly entertaining and informative newsletter. This episode was produced by Justine Paradis with help from Taylor Quimby. Music from Broke for Free. I'm Virginia Prescott and Civics 101 is a production of NHPR.