**Civics 101**

**Episode 39: Post-Presidency**

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

**OPEN:** [00:00:04] Who is the current speaker of the house? I don't even know. Will they rule in the President's favor or will they send it to the Supreme Court? You can't refer to a senator directly by their name. Congressional redistricting. Separation of powers. 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 American democracy. Today's question comes from listener Rick. What roles have presidents historically played when they leave the White House? What does the post-presidency look like for most presidents. Well, to find out we're talking with Mark Updegrove. He's historian and author of Second Acts: Presidential Lives and Legacies After the White House.

[00:00:47] Mark welcome.

**Mark Updegrove:** [00:00:48] Thanks Virginia.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:49] Glad to have you with us. Is there a typical post-presidency?

**Mark Updegrove:** [00:00:54] No one's post presidency is as different as the individual who wages it. And just as there are different agendas that presidents take up once they assume the position of president there are very different agendas when they leave office and the scopes of their post presidencies vary. And I think in many ways the post presidency of a president is as revealing as anything in his lifetime; of his character; of the way he wants his legacy to be reflected. So it's --- it varies from individual to individual.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:28] Well let's go back to our country's first president George Washington who lived only two years after leaving office. What did he do with the time he had left?

**Mark Updegrove:** [00:01:37] Well he sets the standard for his predecessors. One thing he does is leave the office of the presidency. If there's anybody who could have made the presidency a monarchy it was George Washington. He set the standard for the presidency. And in only serving two terms and leaving office he set the standard for his successors as well. There was sort of this tacit understanding that you leave office after two terms and Washington emulated in so doing Cincinnatus the Roman general who warded off barbarians who had stormed Ancient Rome, and instead of leading the life of a hero and a political leader subsequent to that went back to his farm and laid down his sword and picked up his plow. And, figuratively, Washington did the same thing leaving the office going back to Mount Vernon and not getting in the way of his successor John Adams.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:37] So a pretty quiet post presidency.

**Mark Updegrove:** [00:02:40] A relatively quiet bucolic post presidency for George Washington.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:44] Today it's difficult to imagine running for president if you are not independently wealthy. How about back in the day? What did former commanders in chief do for money after leaving office?

**Mark Updegrove:** [00:02:57] Very often they struggled. And Harry Truman was extraordinarily different than presidents today. He left office in 1953 went back to his home relatively modest as it was in Independence Missouri actually it wasn't his home at all but rather that of his in-laws where he and Bess had lived before he became senator from Missouri in 1935 and led the life more or less that he had he had left before going to Washington to embark on his political career but struggled for money. There were no emoluments or there was no pension there was no there were no privileges for former presidents. At that time and if not for the sale of family farm land, Truman would likely have been broke. So there was an act put together, a law that allowed for a relatively modest pension for former presidents along with various privileges including office space and franking privileges and other emoluments.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:55] How much is that presidential pension?

**Mark Updegrove:** [00:03:57] It was a couple of hundred thousand dollars I believe it was comparable to the salaries of CEOs at that time. Now CEO salaries have increased disproportionately since then but it was it was enough so that a former president wouldn't be embarrassed in his post presidency at least financially have any former presidents become much wealthier after leaving the office. Well now they can for sure because they can go on the lecture circuit and command you know handsome six figure salaries for being behind a lectern for less than an hour. But also you have presidential memoirs which command a whopping seven even eight figure fees as well. So it's extremely lucrative to be a former president today.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:45] Have any presidents declined those kind of offers thinking that they may not be ethical.

**Mark Updegrove:** [00:04:51] Ethical not so much but not in keeping with the dignity of the office. Yes, I think that Richard Nixon for instance who was very keen on rehabilitating his image after being the first president to resign from office in 1974 refused honoraria when he went on the lecture circuit and actually judged folks like his successor Gerald Ford who did. There's a mixed view of how former presidents should behave. However it's become far more accepted for a former president to cash in on the presidency. Now relative to earlier years.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:05:29] How about Secret Service? Now presidents are protected by Secret Service for themselves and the rest of their family. Is it for the rest of their life?

**Mark Updegrove:** [00:05:37] That has changed now. And Secret Service was not provided for former presidents until after the assassination of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson who was president at that time had to talk Bess Truman into accepting the fact that there would be Secret Service agents outside of the gates of the Truman home in Independence Missouri. She didn't want the intrusion. She didn't want people trampling on her lawn. So things have changed security wise as well.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:06:08] Have other presidents refused protection after leaving office?

**Mark Updegrove:** [00:06:11] Richard Nixon did. Funnily enough he wanted to save taxpayer money. I think Nixon was very intent on changing his image and could say truthfully that he was saving significant taxpayer dollars by relinquishing his Secret Service detail. He did that 10 or so years after leaving the White House in the mid 1980s was Nixon eligible for a pension having resigned from the presidency. He was he got all of the benefits that any former president would have gotten. I don't know if that would have been different had he not been pardoned by by Gerald Ford. But in some ways the rehabilitation of Richard Nixon is a remarkable story because he was a guy who became the first president as I mentioned earlier to resign the office which he did in nineteen 74 Among the revelations that came up in the Watergate scandal. He went into a period of exile in his home at San Clemente and in Southern California and then four years afterward was very intent on pursuing the area that had most interested him as president. That was foreign policy and he sort of appointed himself a freelance secretary of state traveled the world re-establishes his relationships with leaders and he became a very valuable adviser to Ronald Reagan to George H.W. Bush and improbably to Bill Clinton who took great comfort in talking to Richard Nixon in his first year or so in office before Richard Nixon died in the spring of 1994.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:07:56] So Nixon was trying to redeem himself after his presidency. What are some of the other motivations of former presidents, what they want to do in the world as far as you can tell?

**Mark Updegrove:** [00:08:06] Well some of it is legacy rehabilitation or at least enhancement. I think many presidents continue to pursue the agendas that they took up in office. But I think some of it is the knowledge that they can use their post presidency to do good in the world. I think Jimmy Carter is a great example of that Jimmy Carter left office after being defeated at the hands of Ronald Reagan for re-election and he entered into what he described as an altogether unwanted life and he had no idea what he was going to do next. And then he decided there was this great revelation that he had late one night about a year after he left office and he decided to make his presidential library into a center where conflict resolution could be addressed something he had done very successfully at Camp David and brokering a peace agreement between the Egyptians and Israelis an agreement that stands today and then that that idea grew into well what if we pursued peace and human rights and democracy around the world and eventually that idea germinated into the Carter Center which is a very successful nonprofit organization that the Carters continue to steward today and they pursue philanthropic interests that again I think will enhance Carter's legacy in the eyes of history but also it's in keeping with Carter's Christian ethic to do good in the world and he has used his platform as a former presidency to do just that.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:40] You mentioned the Carter Center which is different than a presidential library. But when did libraries devoted to records and papers start for presidents?

**Mark Updegrove:** [00:09:48] It started in the Franklin Roosevelt administration and the idea was relatively modest remarkably before we established Presidential Library and by the way there are presidential libraries for every president from Herbert Hoover forward Herbert Hoover was living at the time of Franklin Roosevelt's administration. So it allowed for a presidential library for Herbert Hoover as well. But there was no repository for the records of presidents after they left office so those records sadly were scattered to the winds some some were put in attics of family members some were sold to souvenir hunters. I mean the equivalent of eBay at the time and these presidential libraries give us a place to put the presidential records where they were processed and available to historians like me to go in and examine for themselves what happened during the course of a particular administration a presidential library something a building dedicated to the memory of a presidency or the record of a presidency.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:10:54] I'm wondering about what gets revealed there. What kind of legacy a president tends to shape for themselves?

**Mark Updegrove:** [00:11:01] After leaving office for the public the foundations in place at these presidential libraries have varying degrees of influence. I was the director of the LBJ Presidential Library for eight years and we'll go back to be the president and CEO of the LBJ Foundation. But I can tell you that I was given great leeway as director to do whatever I wanted relating to the president's legacy. I was given a great deal of autonomy. Some foundations are are far more heavy handed in terms of how the legacy of their president is depicted.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:11:38] Well the office is considered the most powerful one in the world. Do presidents have a difficult time transitioning from that office to being a regular civilian?

**Mark Updegrove:** [00:11:51] Oh I think so. And I think it depends on the circumstances under which you leave office. It was I think extraordinarily difficult for Jimmy Carter and George H.W. Bush. I've spoken to both of them about their transitions after leaving the White House. But but they didn't get reelected to a second term. So as I mentioned Carter said he was this was an unwonted life. You didn't expect to be back as a private citizen just four years after taking office George H.W. Bush felt the same way he really believed that he would defeat Bill Clinton and Ross Perot and the election of 1992. George W. Bush told me that when his father left office there was not so much a depression but a deflation. His father really didn't know what he would do with the rest of his life and felt like he had left the office without finishing his agenda. But his post presidency changed dramatically when his sons Jeb and George W. entered of their own volition. The political ring first as governors of their dates and then of course with George W. Bush improbably assuming the office of president just eight years after his father had left.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:13:02] So I wonder if it's easier to be a partisan after you leave office, that you have to -- what do we say in politics, you run from the fringe, you govern from the center. How about after leaving politics? Do we expect our former presidents to tell a more nonpartisan line?

**Mark Updegrove:** [00:13:21] I think we do. You know obviously when they go to their parties conventions every four years as most do we expect them to toe the party line to a large extent and to support the standard bearer of the party. But I think to a large extent we expect our presidents to be above partisan politics after they leave office. They can serve us better by not getting into bitter partisan disputes.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:13:46] How about you who have studied them, looking back over the presidents whose lives after the presidency you looked at. Who do you think did it well?

**Mark Updegrove:** [00:13:54] There are a number of successful former presidents. I think John Quincy Adams who was the first really successful former president. He became the second one term president his father had been the first second president John Adams and John Quincy like his father went back to Quincy Massachusetts and expected a life in political exile. But he was elected to Congress by constituents in his in his part of Massachusetts and went back to Washington until he died in 1849 and became a a very important voice for the abolition movement in Congress. So he was the first really productive former president. There have been many since Theodore Roosevelt. In some ways changes the paradigm by leaving office then coming back and running for the presidency again as a Bullmoose candidate challenging his successor William Howard Taft. And the Democratic candidate Woodrow Wilson for the office in the modern post presidency I think it would be hard to beat Jimmy Carter. Jimmy Carter really changes the unofficial office if you will of former president by pursuing a very activist and very successful post presidency.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:15:07] Mark Updegrove, thank you so much for speaking with us.

**Mark Updegrove:** [00:15:10] Virginia thanks for having me.

**Mark Updegrove:** [00:15:11] Mark Updegrove. He's historian and author of Second Acts: Presidential Lives and Legacies After the White House. That's it for Civics 101 today. This episode was produced by Hannah McCarthy with help from Taylor Quimby. And if you're looking for some post-podcast, sign up for our Extra Credit newsletter. It is a fun and information-rich look at the topics that we cover and includes a quiz so you can test your civics knowledge. You can sign up at Civics 101 podcast dot org. I'm Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101 a production of New Hampshire Public Radio.