Episode Book

EPISODE #5508

Life After the Oval Office: Orange Juice and Security

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SYNOPSIS

What does life actually look like after the Oval Office? Starting from a listener's question about whether former presidents can ever do ordinary things again, we trace the real architecture of the post-presidency: the Former Presidents Act of 1958, the lifetime Secret Service guarantee that's only thirteen years old, and the 36 protectees behind a $3.2 billion agency. Then we look at three very different models — Carter's forty-three-year return to Plains inside a permanent perimeter, Bush's deliberate quiet and daily painting, and Obama's curated public life — and ask why almost no one ever gives the detail up.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Can a man who once commanded the most powerful military on earth ever walk into a supermarket and buy a carton of orange juice like nobody's watching?



Herman

That's the question.



Corn

That's Daniel's question, anyway. He wrote in this week with a whole thing about former presidents and whether any of them can ever get back to something that looks like a normal life. He starts from the global argument, the one that keeps coming up everywhere, about whether taxpayers should be footing the bill for round-the-clock security for people who've already left office. He points out that it's never one guy with an earpiece, it's teams of rotating agents, a full logistical operation.



Herman

Which is right.



Corn

And then he narrows it. He says he doesn't want us digging into the specifics of what personal protection actually looks like, partly because that stuff isn't disclosed and partly because he'd rather it stay that way. Fair enough. What he wants to know is whether former American presidents, that specific bounded cohort, can ever gradually do ordinary things again. Pop to the shop for orange juice. He mentions that photo of Netanyahu and his family on the beach with the detail around them, that stark contrast between a family relaxing and people standing there with rifles, and he says he can't tell whether Netanyahu was describing that with disappointment or with resignation.



Herman

Resignation.



Corn

Probably. And then the real question underneath it: these people spent years having everything done for them, and Daniel says they often badly want to do things themselves. They're tired of the aides. So does the career follow you for the rest of your life, or can you get back to something that resembles a normal existence?



Herman

There's a lot in there.



Corn

So let's start with what the law actually guarantees them, because that shapes everything else.



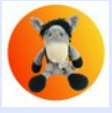
Herman

The baseline document is the Former Presidents Act of 1958. And the thing people don't realize is that before that, there was nothing. No pension, no staff, no office allowance. Truman went home to Independence, Missouri with essentially nothing. He was answering his own mail.



Corn

A former president of the United States answering his own mail.



Herman

By hand. And it got embarrassing enough that in 1912 Andrew Carnegie offered to endow a private pension, twenty-five thousand a year, and congressmen actually balked at it. They thought a private pension was improper. So it took until 1958 for the Former Presidents Act to pass, and when it took effect there were two living former presidents, Hoover and Truman. Eisenhower was the first one to leave office under the new system.



Corn

What does the package actually contain?



Herman

A pension equal to a Cabinet secretary's salary. That's Executive Level One, and as of January 2022 it was two hundred twenty-six thousand three hundred a year. Transition funding for seven months. A staff and office allowance, up to a hundred fifty thousand annualized for the first thirty months, then ninety-six thousand after that. Medical treatment in military hospitals. And Secret Service protection.



Corn

Which is the part that matters for Daniel's question.



Herman

Which is the part that matters. And the timeline there is messy. Congress authorized lifetime protection in 1965, for former presidents, their spouses, and their children under sixteen. Then in 1994 they cut it back to ten years after leaving office, for anyone inaugurated after January first, 1997. So Clinton still would have gotten lifetime, everybody after him would have gotten a decade.



Corn

And then they changed their minds again.



Herman

January tenth, 2013. Obama signs the Former Presidents Protection Act of 2012, and lifetime protection comes back, for George W. Bush, for Obama himself, and for every president after.



Corn

So the current arrangement is thirteen years old.



Herman

The lifetime guarantee is. Which is worth sitting with, because Daniel's framing treats this as an ancient institution and it isn't. The rules have moved three times in living memory.



Corn

And the money behind it.



Herman

The Secret Service has over eighty-three hundred employees and a budget north of three point two billion dollars. That covers the sitting president, the vice president, visiting heads of state, major events, financial crimes, and the former presidents. As of July 2024, the director at the time, Kimberly Cheatle, told Congress the agency had thirty-six total protectees.



Corn

Thirty-six. That's the whole protected population.



Herman

That's everyone. And the protective mission isn't a guy in a suit. It's protective advances, where they go assess a venue before the principal ever arrives. Protective intelligence, where they're investigating threats. Coordination with state and local law enforcement. Protection of the principal private residence. It's a layered operation that exists whether or not anything is happening.



Corn

So that's the architecture. Now what does it actually feel like to live inside it.



Herman

Carter is the case study everybody reaches for, and for once the reputation is earned. He goes back to Plains, Georgia. He goes back to the peanut farm.



Corn

Which was not a triumphant return.



Herman

Not remotely. He'd put the farm in a blind trust during the presidency, to avoid any conflict of interest, and when he got it back the trustees had mismanaged it. He was more than a million dollars in debt.



Corn

A former president, underwater on a peanut farm.



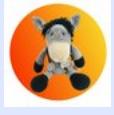
Herman

And he told the press corps he intended to emulate Truman's retirement, that he wasn't going to use the post-presidency to enrich himself. He taught at Emory. He wrote books, memoirs, poetry. He founded the Carter Center in 1982. Nobel Peace Prize in 2002. And he built Habitat for Humanity houses with his own hands into his nineties.



Corn

Actual hands. Framing, drywall, nails.



Herman

Actual hands. His post-presidency ran forty-three years and three hundred forty-four days, the longest in American history. He died December twenty-ninth, 2024, at a hundred years and eighty-nine days old. First American president to reach a hundred.



Corn

And here's the thing that connects it back. He had a permanent Secret Service detail the entire time. In Plains. In the same modest house.



Herman

The whole time.



Corn

So the normality is real but it's happening inside a perimeter. It's not the absence of protection, it's protection that's been made quiet enough that you can forget about it for an afternoon.



Herman

Which is the honest answer to Daniel's question, and we'll get to the supermarket. But Bush is the other model and he's more interesting to me because he's more deliberate about it.



Corn

Deliberate how.



Herman

He goes back to Crawford, then buys a house in Preston Hollow in Dallas, and he keeps his head down on purpose. He said it plainly to Jay Leno in 2013. "I don't think it's good for the country to have a former president criticize his successor." That's a principle, not a mood. He just doesn't do it.



Corn

And then he starts painting.



Herman

2012. And the reason is the part that matters. He took it up explicitly to combat post-presidential boredom. He'd read Churchill's essay, "Painting as a Pastime," and something in it clicked. He paints daily. He has a weekly instructor who comes to the house.



Corn

A former president taking art lessons.



Herman

And he's said it changed his life. "I love to paint. Painting has changed my life in an unbelievably positive way."



Corn

Here's what I keep circling on. He spent eight years where somebody else picked the schedule, somebody else wrote the remarks, somebody else decided what he ate and when he moved and who he saw. And then he picks up a brush and it's just him and a canvas and no staff in the room.



Herman

It's the one thing on his calendar that can't be delegated.



Corn

That's the whole thing. You can't delegate painting. Nobody can hold the brush for you. And Carter building a house is the same shape. The nail goes in because you hit it.



Herman

There's a clinical version of this. When you take away a person's ability to do things for themselves, even comfortably, you get a specific kind of decline. Retired surgeons who stop operating and never find a replacement for the handwork. It's not about the work. It's about being the one whose hands are on the thing.



Corn

So this isn't a hobby. It's rehabilitation.



Herman

It's a man rebuilding the muscle of doing something himself. And the contrast with Obama is instructive.



Corn

Obama's the youngest of the three.



Herman

Youngest living former president as of now, sixty-five. And his post-presidency is the most celebrity-shaped of any of them. He stayed politically active, he campaigned for candidates, he published "A Promised Land" in 2020, and the Obama Presidential Center was dedicated on June eighteenth of this year, with Biden, Bush, and Clinton all there.



Corn

Curated appearances. He's not trying to disappear.



Herman

He's not. And that's a legitimate choice. But it means the "return to normal life" model doesn't apply to him at all, because he never went looking for it.



Corn

Three men, three completely different answers to the same question. Carter went home. Bush went quiet. Obama stayed on the stage.



Herman

And all three of them had the same detail.



Corn

Which brings us to the orange juice.



Herman

It does.



Corn

Can a former president pop out for orange juice?



Herman

Not anonymously. And I want to be precise about why, because the answer isn't "no, they're prisoners." It's that the protection is permanent and visible, and visibility is the thing that kills anonymity. You cannot walk into a supermarket unnoticed when two or three people walk in ahead of you and two or three come in behind you and one of them is scanning the aisles.



Corn

So the errand becomes an operation.



Herman

Every time. Protective advance, site assessment, coordination with local police if it's a known stop. It's not that they're forbidden from going. It's that the trip has a tail on it, and the tail is the point.



Corn

And this is where the scale number matters. Thirty-six protectees, eighty-three hundred employees. That's the machine that makes one man's grocery run possible.



Herman

And there's a hard limit worth naming. The sitting president and vice president cannot refuse protection. It's statute. Former presidents can decline it. There's exactly one who did.



Corn

Nixon.



Herman

1985. He gave up his Secret Service protection, and his stated reason, per his assistant John Taylor, was that he wanted to save the government money. His wife Pat had dropped hers the year before. That's the only documented case of a president trading the detail for the savings.



Corn

And nobody's done it since.



Herman

Nobody. Which tells you something. Once you've had it, and once you understand what the threat picture actually looks like, giving it up is a decision almost nobody makes.



Corn

What about the other end of the scale. Former vice presidents.



Herman

Six months. That's it, unless the Secretary of Homeland Security extends it. Six months and you're on your own.



Corn

So the gap between president and vice president is six months versus the rest of your life.



Herman

It's not a gradient, it's a cliff. And it's a good illustration of how arbitrary some of this is. The protection isn't calibrated to actual risk. It's calibrated to the office you held.



Corn

Which brings us back to Daniel's beach photo.



Herman

It's the universal image, isn't it. The incongruity he's describing isn't American and it isn't Israeli. It's what happens anywhere a head of state tries to do something ordinary. You get a family on towels and a perimeter of men with rifles, and the two things don't belong in the same frame.



Corn

And the reason it reads as incongruous is that we know, instinctively, that a beach is supposed to be the one place where nobody's watching you.



Herman

Right. The beach is the last unguarded place in the culture. That's why the photo lands.



Corn

So does the career follow you forever.



Herman

The title does. The protection does. The public role does. You don't stop being a former president. But the degree of intrusion is negotiable, and that's the part Daniel's really asking about. Bush shows you can build a quiet life inside the constraints. Carter showed you can build a rooted one. What you can't do is build an anonymous one.



Herman

Normal within a perimeter. Normal with a tail. Normal where the supermarket run is possible but never private.



Corn

There's a version of this that's just about money. The pension, the office allowance, the transition funding. And there's a version that's about the thing you can't buy back, which is being the first person to walk into a room.



Herman

Say more about that.



Corn

When you're protected, you're never first. Somebody goes in ahead of you. Somebody clears the space. You arrive into a room that's already been prepared for your arrival. And after enough years of that, the idea of just walking into a diner and sitting down becomes almost theoretical.



Herman

Which is exactly what Bush was doing in May 2011, by the way. He's at a restaurant with Laura when Obama calls him to tell him bin Laden's been killed. That's the window. A former president, out to dinner, taking a phone call about the most significant military



Herman (continued)

operation in a decade.



Corn

And the detail is standing there the whole time.



Herman

The detail is standing there. It's the perfect illustration. The ordinary thing happened. It happened inside the envelope.



Corn

I want to push on the international comparison, because Daniel raised it and I think the US is the outlier here.



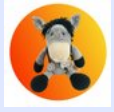
Herman

It is. Lifetime protection by statute is unusual. Most countries do it differently. Some provide it for a fixed term, some make it discretionary, some make the former leader apply for it and justify the need. And the taxpayer-cost argument Daniel mentions is a real recurring fight in a lot of parliaments.



Corn

And the reason the US is generous is partly that the threat picture is different. You've got a country with a long history of presidential assassinations and attempts, and a former president is a permanent symbolic target in a way that a former prime minister of a small country may not be.



Herman

There's also a practical asymmetry. A former American president travels constantly. Book tours, foundations, speaking engagements, foreign trips. The exposure surface is enormous, and it never really shrinks.



Corn

The bill is the price of the exposure.



Herman

The bill is the price of the exposure. And the debate about whether it's worth it is a debate about whether you think the exposure is voluntary or inherent. If it's voluntary, you could argue the taxpayer shouldn't fund the book tour. If it's inherent, you can't separate the man from the target.



Corn

Which is the same argument as the beach photo, just in a different register.



Herman

It is.



Corn

Here's the thing I keep coming back to. Daniel says former presidents are tired of everything being handled by aides. And I think that's the deepest part of the question, deeper than the security. Because the security is the visible constraint. The invisible one is that for years, possibly decades, you haven't done anything with your own hands.



Herman

You've been the decision, not the doing.



Corn

You've been the decision. And the aides aren't villains. They're the machinery that makes the office function. But you come out the other side and you've lost the habit of ordinary competence. You don't know how to book a flight. You don't know how to buy a coffee. Somebody else has been doing that for eight years.



Herman

Which is why the painting matters so much. It's not a hobby, it's a man relearning that his hands still work.



Corn

Carter's Habitat work is the same. He's not building houses because Habitat needs another volunteer. He's building houses because he needs to be a volunteer.



Herman

There's a line in the Carter story that I think about. He goes back to the farm and finds it a million dollars in debt. And he doesn't sell it. He works it. He fixes it.



Corn

Because it was his.



Hilbert

It was a hundred and forty thousand.



Corn

Sorry?



Hilbert

The debt. The number people repeat is a million, but the figure that actually came out of the trustees' accounting was closer to a hundred and forty thousand, and the rest of it was the interest and the notes against the land. I drove for a man who'd had the same thing happen with a hardware business. Not a president. A state senator. Same shape.



Herman

You drove for a protective detail.



Hilbert

Eighteen months. Contract firm, not the federal service. We handled logistics for visiting dignitaries and the occasional former official. I was in the follow car. The one with the bags and the backup comms and the man who runs the advance.



Corn

You know what a motorcade smells like from the inside.



Hilbert

Coffee and hot vinyl. Anyway, the thing your man Daniel is circling is close but he's got the detail wrong. It's not the guns that are the intrusion. It's that the protectee can never be first. Never first into the room, never the one who decides when to leave, never the one who pays the check. I drove a former governor who would ask us to stop at a gas station just so he could buy a candy bar. And we'd have to clear the store first. He'd stand there by the pumps while two of us went in and looked around, and then he'd walk in and buy a Snickers. Every time. He knew it was ridiculous. He did it anyway.



Herman

He wanted the transaction.



Hilbert

One night he told me the thing he missed most. Not being anonymous. Being early. He said he used to like arriving somewhere before anyone expected him, just to sit and watch the room fill up. And he hadn't done that in eleven years. Couldn't. Somebody always goes in ahead of him.



Corn

That's the whole episode in one sentence.



Hilbert

It's the whole thing. You can buy the candy bar. You just can't be the first one through the door. And I've got to go, I left the slow cooker on.



Herman

The slow cooker.



Hilbert

On low. Since six this morning.



Corn

The answer to Daniel is that the career never leaves. But the shape of the life inside it is a choice.



Herman

The choice is narrower than people think. You can be quiet like Bush. You can be rooted like Carter. You can be visible like Obama. What you can't be is unremarkable.



Corn

If you take one thing from this, take the distinction Hilbert just drew. The constraint isn't the protection. It's the loss of being first. Everything else follows from that.



Herman

It's the one thing money can't buy back. You can fund the pension, the office, the detail. You can't fund the feeling of walking into a room nobody's prepared for you.



Corn

Which raises the question we can't answer yet. Carter's post-presidency ran forty-three years. If that becomes normal rather than exceptional, and presidents keep leaving office younger, we're looking at half a century of protected life per person. The arithmetic on that is not obvious.



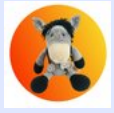
Herman

It isn't. And the Nixon precedent, giving up the detail to save money, looks less and less likely to be repeated the longer the threat environment stays where it is.



Corn

The debate Daniel's describing isn't going away. It's going to get louder.



Herman

It is. Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing, and for the slow cooker update.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you want to send us something, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you tomorrow.