



Policy on Purpose

Episode 11: Historian and author Michael Beschloss

(guitar music)

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ANGELA EVANS: Hello, my name is Angela Evans, and this is our podcast called "Policy on Purpose" — and today it is my extreme honor to have with me Michael Beschloss. And Michael Beschloss has a new book called "Presidents of War," but it's one of many books and many different insights you — he has on the presidency. So before I get to talk to Mr. Beschloss, I have two quotes—

MICHAEL BESCHLOSS: Am I allowed to be promoted to Michelangelo?

EVANS: (Laughs)

BESCHLOSS: I'm sorry to be so forward so early in this podcast, but—

EVANS: You just interrupt anytime.

BESCHLOSS: Alright, thank you.

EVANS: This — I want this to be a really robust conversation.

BESCHLOSS: Super.

EVANS: So I have two — I have two presidential quotes that I wanted to share with you. One is from John Adams and it's about the presidency. He says, "No man who ever held the office [of president] would congratulate another on attaining it." That was John Adams, and then Johnson, our namesake, Lyndon Johnson says, "The presidency has made every man who occupied it, no matter how small, bigger than he was and no matter how big, not big enough for its demands."

When you see these two perceptions of the presidency — and these are two men that held it and did a good job — it kind of shows the complexity of this. And some things that I wanted to go — really talk to you about, when you write your books, some of the books that you've written, instead of writing about an individual you're writing about relationships among individuals or you're writing about something

that goes — there's a thread that goes through different presidents. So I wanted to talk to you about why you chose that way of writing about presidents.

BESCHLOSS: And you're right, I've never written a biography of a president or anyone else and there is a reason for that, which is that if you write a biography of someone — and there are obviously a lot of people who do great biographies, this is just me, this is not about, you know, the way of looking at life — you're sort of, the book is dictated by the person's life. There are things that you have to cover, if there are things that you'd like to cover that are way outside the scope of the person's life, pretty much hard to get to them. So from my own point of view early on — and, you know, I've pretty much felt this way, it's more interesting to me to find like a theme that runs through history like the book I've just done, you know, the evolution of the power to make war from James Madison to the president. Or the presence of courage in the lives of a lot of presidents in a book I wrote called "Presidential Courage" —

EVANS: And "The Conquerors," too?

BESCHLOSS: Yeah, exactly. That way it's sort of, I'm the one who's determining the subject rather than covering all the bases of someone's life.

EVANS: But that gives you an insight that's different because you can go very deep into a life and then it — you know, you go into another life and if you're looking through a lens of a certain thing, it gives you some consistency of our history in terms of the men — at this point it's men — who lead the government and lead our society. So I'm wondering when you talk to other presidential historians, what do you think that you're adding to that knowledge base that they don't necessarily bring to the table?

BESCHLOSS: Well, I don't look at it so much in that way because I think that that almost suggests that people are competing or —

EVANS: Oh I don't mean that, I mean maybe it's more of a different aspect, you know, when you're talking about this, you know, you're contributing a different perspective than they might have.

BESCHLOSS: Well, in my own case, you know, it's just subjects that I'm interested in. For instance, I've always been eager to find out, how is it that at the beginning of the republic the founders felt really importantly that presidents should not be able to make wars on their own? And here we are in 2018 and they can do it almost single-handedly, almost overnight. So what happened? And the only way that you can find out what happened is to go through two centuries and trace how the war power evolved.

EVANS: You said — I was reading something, it took you 10 years to do this book?

BESCHLOSS: It did.

EVANS: Wow.

BESCHLOSS: And that is, it's a long book, but also it's — and I should have realized it, I did not at the beginning, I thought it would take maybe four years, it covers 200 years, it covers eight or nine presidents and it's almost like writing a full biography of each one of them. We're writing about — a full book about, for instance, the war of 1812 or World War I. And you can't do that, you can't really do it by just reading a few books and dropping in on a few manuscript collections, I really did each one of these,

the research for it, as if I were writing about that whole subject. And one reason is that's the way you're thorough, the other reason is that I love the research and I didn't want to give up that stage of it. But the other thing — you know getting at your earlier question, why I'd rather do this kind of book than a biography, one of the most exciting things to me in writing about a president is finding a cache, C-A-C-H-E, of new material that will show you things about this president that cause you to look at him in a different way.

And the best example of this, and you know exactly where I'm going, is the LBJ tapes. In the early 1990s, there have been books written about Lyndon Johnson that were based on his letters and his speeches and his press conferences and the reminiscences, usually pretty polite, of people who knew him, but you weren't getting really at the heart of LBJ. And before I knew that he had taped about 700 hours of his conversations, if someone had asked me "What source would you like to have, if it existed, that would show you who this really was?" I literally would have said, "Probably if he had had a tape recorder taping him in private with all the profanity and all the arm-twisting and the colorful stories." That would show you what he was really like because without something like that, all you're left with is what we had before the 1990s, which was, you know, an aide to LBJ saying, "You know, Johnson was so interesting and private and he told these great stories, but you had to be there to listen to it," or "He was so effective at twisting arms, but you had to be there to hear what he said."

And this would have all been lost to history and thanks to him, who made these tapes for mainly a different reason, there was this treasure trove that suddenly became available and you could write about LBJ in a totally new way — almost as a different person from the person who had been written about before. So I've been spoiled because that's about as good as it gets. And the chances that you're going to run across something like that for Dwight Eisenhower or William McKinley — William McKinley did not keep tapes of his private conversations obviously. So if you're going to write a biography, for me, it would have to be something like that and it's not likely to happen.

EVANS: Yeah, because you know, you really hear it in their voice, you hear it at the moment, it's not interpreted, it's firsthand —

BESCHLOSS: And also, in Johnson's case, more than these others because this is someone who made an enormous effort, as you know, to seem in public very different from what he was in private. In private, as it happens, you listen to him on these tapes, he's absolutely captivating, the stories are great, some of the language is a little bit raunchy, but in 2018 it's less raunchy than it was in those days. Sixteen-year-old kids listen to these tapes and he sounds hip and current (*Evans laughs*), but he was embarrassed about all this because he thought it made him sound like what he said a country backwoodsman. And so the result was you see him on TV, I was 11 or 12 in his — I guess 12 his last year as president, and I used to watch him on TV. Do you remember there was a cartoon character called Clutch Cargo?

EVANS: Oh my gosh, you are bringing back lots of memories — aging us! Yes. (*laughs*)

BESCHLOSS: Clutch Cargo was an early TV, it was a cartoon, basically a face that was drawn on paper and they'd cut a hole where the mouth should be and they had an actor moving his mouth so the only thing that would move was Clutch Cargo. So I watched LBJ give a speech on TV, looked to me like Clutch Cargo, you'd never believe that this guy was so animated and electric in private and so effective.

EVANS: And his speech was very slow and measured — whatever, whatever.

BESCHLOSS: Right, totally different from in private.

EVANS: So you think about what we've missed with all the other presidents by not having, sort of that little — that perspective of actually hearing them talk or hearing them debate.

BESCHLOSS: Yeah, some, or some like Coolidge, if you heard Coolidge's telephone calls it wouldn't tell you much because he wasn't very different in private from the way he was in public. You're writing about Eleanor Roosevelt? You want her letters. You know, she wrote these wonderful letters, poured her heart into them, thousands of letters, 25 pages long. So with each president or first lady, you want, probably, a different source. Thank God for Lady Bird Johnson who made this diary, as you know — taped just about every single day and it is really moving and really revealing. So I got to know her in her later years, it was a great privilege, but if you'd want a source on Lady Bird Johnson, probably her diaries would be just about as good as it gets because she was frank and she spoke beautifully and emotively.

EVANS: Quite a lady. I wanted to ask you this: When you think about the president as a person and then you think about the office of the presidency, in all of your studies and your work, what insights do you have for those that we consider the most successful presidents? And the most successful being either getting us out of a conflict at war or moving the country in a direction when we were in trouble. Do you see some similarities of how the man and the office aligned versus when you had a dis— you know, and you didn't have that alignment between the two?

BESCHLOSS: Sure. Largeness more than anything else — this sort of goes back to the quote that you had at the beginning, Angela. Most of our presidents, I would agree, have grown — not all, but most. And one example of that is — to use an LBJ example, at the beginning of 1968, it's something I wrote about in the book I've just published, "Presidents of War," and it had been written about a little bit, but I was able to get some evidence that completed the story. Which is that in January of '68, the Vietnam War had gone on in a big way for about four years, we were deadlocked, we were in danger of a defeat in a battle. And LBJ's commander in Vietnam, William Westmoreland, asked for permission to move tactical nuclear weapons to South Vietnam.

EVANS: Right, yes.

BESCHLOSS: And permission to maybe use them if it was necessary to reverse a defeat. And so it comes to Johnson, and Johnson—

EVANS: Through — through Mr. Rostow.

BESCHLOSS: Through Mr. Rostow and before the last couple of months we only know that it went to Mr. Rostow, Walt Rostow, his security adviser, because LBJ kept his fingerprints off. Tom Johnson, his very close adviser, told the story to me and then later [to] the New York Times, which wrote the story when my book came out. And LBJ — Tom Johnson was no relation in the room with him and he says that LBJ went ballistic. You know, nuclear weapons — you know he was eager to win in Vietnam but not at that price. He said, "You know, you bring in nuclear weapons, this could escalate quickly. This could be a war with Russia and China [that] I've spent four years trying to avoid and kill 100 million people." So the point I'm making is that anytime you hear someone say, "Presidents should just leave wars to the generals," Westmoreland was an OK commander — I mean, I don't want to get into a long discussion of how good he was, but he was fine. But the point is that from Westmoreland, what you're expecting

from Westmoreland is he's been told to win the war so he is giving you, the president, a way of doing it. Thank God that LBJ had the larger perspective and the largeness of vision and leadership to say, "You know, my only job in life is not just winning this war, it's keeping 100 million people from being killed and this is a crazy idea — shut it down."

EVANS: Yes, yeah. I remember when that came out, that story — it was a news story, sort of a new thing that added a whole different perspective on him as well.

BESCHLOSS: Right, and a very nice story about his leadership in Vietnam.

EVANS: Yes, yes. So one of the things that I was involved in when I was at the Congressional Research Service was looking at reorganizations of Congress over history. And they usually took place, Congress would create a joint committee on the organization of Congress and look at how they can regain power that had moved away from them toward the presidency and in most of those situations it was over war.

BESCHLOSS: Right.

EVANS: So it was World War I, World War II, the, you know, the Vietnam War, the Watergate — now here we are and in many people's perspective, more and more power has moved to the presidency for lots of different reasons.

BESCHLOSS: Right, especially in war.

EVANS: Yeah, so here we are and you know we have a war that's an — you know it's not a war using the War Powers Act because we haven't done that since World War II.

BESCHLOSS: And every president — I'm with an expert here so I want to make sure that you agree with this, but every president has acted as if he thought that the War Powers Act was unconstitutional anyway.

EVANS: Yes, yes, and here we are and we know we're involved and we've lost lives, etc. So I'm wondering in your mind, are you seeing the need for Congress to start thinking about another way of regaining some of these powers?

BESCHLOSS: Totally, totally.

EVANS: Because you know the Washington Post, yesterday, had the 44 senators writing about the rule of the Senate.

BESCHLOSS: A little belated and they're all retired, so *(Evans laughs)* it's nice, but you know, it's like what Everett Dirksen, the senator from Illinois once said about when JFK made a recommendation to Congress and Dirksen said, "Very nice; it'll have all the impact of a snowflake falling on the Potomac," *(Evans laughs)* and so will this, unfortunately.

EVANS: Yeah, yeah.

BESCHLOSS: What I'm talking about is basically presidents have snatched away the war powers that the founders reserved for Congress. As you know, the last time —

EVANS: And well they've been allowed to do that, too. I mean this isn't like —

BESCHLOSS: They have been allowed to do that because Congress let them.

EVANS: Yes.

BESCHLOSS: Last time Congress declared war was 1942. The Constitution says that if you want a war, Congress has to declare it — so if you're a purist, which I'm pretty close to getting to be, every major war we have fought since 1942, and we have fought a surprisingly large number of them, has been almost illegal because presidents have done not much more than go to Congress now for this new thing called a resolution to use force, which is weaselly and it allows members of Congress who vote for it to, you know, disown their vote later on. If you vote for a war declaration, that's one thing. If you vote for a resolution to use force — we've seen this in Iraq, we've seen this in Afghanistan — the war starts to get unpopular, it's not going well, you will see all sorts of weaselly members of Congress — and members, you all know who you are — saying, "I had no idea that the president was going to use this to go to war, I was only voting to use force." You're not helping yourself if you're a president doing this —

EVANS: Well, it's abdicating responsibility.

BESCHLOSS: Yeah, and also, if you're a president you should want Congress to get in on the takeoff so that they're there if it gets unpopular, but for some reason presidents think that this is a great idea.

EVANS: Plus the wars that we've been in are a little different than the World Wars.

BESCHLOSS: Correct.

EVANS: You know, so we're getting into them in a little different way and all of a sudden we're — it's like, you know, wading into water. Instead of being dropped into 100 feet of water you wade in, and I think that's been part of it —

BESCHLOSS: Right, and I'm not saying, by the way, that if there's, God forbid, a cyberattack or if a Russian missile starts flying over the North Pole, I'm not saying a president should convene Congress for three weeks, but if it's a war with a forethought and planning like Iraq or Afghanistan or a very successful war, [like the] Persian Gulf War, it's better if Congress declares it.

EVANS: Yes, well I think that's been, I think the war — the way that the relationship between the Congress and the president with regard to conflicts and war, is indicative of other kinds of relationships on other kinds of things. Like the budget, you know, we're not able to pass a budget in time for, you know, agencies to plan how they're going to use this. We can't pass reauthorizations —

BESCHLOSS: I mean, a great power like us to be operated in this way, it's terrible.

EVANS: That's what I'm thinking and I wanted to get your opinion: Are you starting to see, like, enough pressure in — from people, from the electorate or from members of Congress themselves, especially

now — it's kind of new yet. We have 100 new members in the House. This pressure to rethink and re-establish their authority? These would be the separation of powers —

BESCHLOSS: That's, that's, yeah, that's usually what happens as you know, the pendulum swings back and forth and —

EVANS: When?

BESCHLOSS: Well the voters will get really sick of this or, God forbid, it'll cause a catastrophe and people will say this cannot go on this way and they will stop electing people who do that sort of thing.

EVANS: You're such an optimist.

BESCHLOSS: Well, yes— *(Evans laughs)* but you really have to be!

EVANS: No, I know. Yes.

BESCHLOSS: We're, you know, two centuries into American history; there's some reason this country has gone so well for the most part.

EVANS: Yeah and we tell our students — this is, we tell our students this. We tell our students this is the best time to be in public policy.

BESCHLOSS: Yeah!

EVANS: Absolutely, the best.

BESCHLOSS: Couldn't be more needed.

EVANS: They're needed, you know, it's complicated, we're trying to train them to understand how to get into complicated situations aggressively and try to think about how to talk to everyone and be able to work with everybody. And they can see — what's great about it is they can see the consequences of not doing that.

BESCHLOSS: Right.

EVANS: Whereas before you could talk about it, but they were living it, they couldn't really see the benefit of it and that is something we're trying to do here at this school.

BESCHLOSS: Tremendous.

EVANS: And history plays a big part in this.

BESCHLOSS: I know that.

EVANS: So I wanted to talk to you a little bit about how you see your role in helping to inform the next generation of students who are going into the policy community.

BESCHLOSS: Well, I think the main thing is something that they already know and if they don't, they will be taught at the LBJ School, which is that history is a huge tool of what they do because — and that is also true for presidents, because anyone who is, let's say, working in the Department of Labor, or anyone who's president of the United States who says "Well I'm sorry, I'm just not interested in history" is completely crazy. Because it's one of the few things that give you some guidance on how to resolve an issue that, you know, is very — you know, both sides are fighting over it, you don't have enough information. I mean, Harry Truman once said that he couldn't understand how anyone could function as president who did not read history.

He said, "Not every reader will be a leader, but every leader has to be a reader." Because his whole point was he would say, "I had to make all these decisions," you know, firing MacArthur and atomic weapons in 1945, integrating the military — he probably made more tough decisions in a period of time than almost any other president, or at least as many as, you know, those who were particularly challenged. And he said, "At the time, I would think back to the history I read and there would never be an exact parallel to Abraham Lincoln or Andrew Jackson or some incident, but it was the only way — it was the only thing that would shed light on what was otherwise sort of mysterious to me."

And the way I put it — this is me talking, not Truman — I often say, "Fine, if you're not interested in history" — and this is not just people who are going into government or running for president, this is everyone who's an American — "And if you're not interested in history, your life experience will be limited to what happens to you and what your friends and acquaintances tell you about. If you tap into history in some way, whether its books or films or something else, you're tapping into the collective wisdom of billions of people who've walked the earth. You know, it's your choice, one or the other." And the other thing is that it's so American that the founders said, you know, the British subjects were not very interested in history and they didn't have access to it because the documents were closed by the kings and the queens. And so as a result, they were not able to study the past and benefit from it, and what the founders said was part of patriotism is that Americans have to just, all the time, be looking at our past. Where did our president succeed? Where did they fail? Where did our citizens succeed and fail? That's the only way that the society moves upward. So if you just throw all that away, you're throwing away what they wanted.

EVANS: Well I think this, we get into the — if we get into this, we're getting into the whole educational system and the role of history and civics and government —

BESCHLOSS: In which history is taught less and less, as you know.

EVANS: Yes, yes. There's something I'm thinking — like if I had, if I were in your position and something's happened. So we had, you know, there was some man-made disaster or, you know, it's a natural disaster and somebody comes and talks to you and says, "Give me your immediate reaction to it as an historian," how do you, being trained to consider and look back and take time between an event and when you're asked to comment on it, how do you just —

BESCHLOSS: Well, let me put it in a different way.

EVANS: OK.

BESCHLOSS: All the time people say, "What will historians say about Donald Trump?" or "What will historians say about Barack Obama?" and obnoxiously I reply, "Please come back in 30 or 40 years, because you can't do it in real time." Everyone has an opinion, but it's not a historical opinion, because to have a historical opinion you'd need evidence — you know, letters, documents, national security archives — that you're not going to have for decades. But more than that, you need hindsight. For instance, Lyndon Johnson looks far different, I think today, from the way he did when he left office almost 50 years ago.

EVANS: Well I'm thinking more about when people ask you to comment on things, and they'll put a mic in front of you or they'll sit you down and they'll say, "What do you think about what just happened?" And you're trying to say, "OK, I want to contribute to this conversation, but I have to draw from my experience, you know, my knowledge, my expertise, but I have to make this connection in a time that's not really my time frame.

BESCHLOSS: Sure, well, what I basically say is here are some past leaders or some past episodes that may have some similarities to what we're —

EVANS: You try to make that connection back.

BESCHLOSS: Yeah, absolutely. And I'm not saying that, you know, the current president is a direct, you know, reincarnation of someone who's served before, but sometimes you can use history to illuminate some things that are happening.

EVANS: Yeah, because I see that and I wonder how, if I were you or some of the historians, and you're on and people ask you these questions and you're thinking — how does that, how does your expertise and your, your [unintelligible] how does that fit into this day, which is 24/7, mics in your face, you have to have an opinion or else you're irrelevant? Which is another thing that we try to tell our students.

BESCHLOSS: Well, I guess when I give the answer about come back in 30 years, I'm making myself irrelevant all the time.

EVANS: *(laughs)* I don't think so, I don't think so. We need that foil, we really do.

BESCHLOSS: Yeah, OK, well, thanks.

EVANS: Is there anything you want to talk about on this podcast?

BESCHLOSS: Well, I think the main thing I would like to talk about is to thank you for what you're doing, and your teachers and your students because, especially at this time, there are a lot of people who are cynical about government and they're cynical about people who work for the government or are involved in public affairs in one way or another. And one of the biggest dreams of LBJ was that you'd find some way of drawing on history to make those who are in public service do it better than they did before. Of all the things that he wanted to do in his retirement, there was nothing that moved him more — and you know this that was, he felt more strongly about than the LBJ School. And all I can tell you is from everything I know about what he said about that, if he were to come back and see what you all have done, it would bring tears to his eyes, so thank you, and I'm sure he would say the same thing.

EVANS: Wow, thank you so much and I'm so glad you spent a little bit of time with us, and I encourage everyone who's reading —- who's listening to this podcast to really take a look at Mr. Beschloss' publications and his most recent publication, "Presidents of War" — I think you'll enjoy it. They're very accessible reads, they're about real people, but what I really like about the way that Mr. Beschloss approaches things is, again, through this sort of lens across a larger array of personalities and difference in similar situations, but how they react differently and how they are really molded by the time that they live. So thank you so much, I appreciate it.

BESCHLOSS: Thank you so much, loved it, Angela — thank you for asking me.

EVANS: Thank you, thank you, thank you.

(guitar music)

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