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Brookings Cafeteria Podcast:
What do ex-presidents do?

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DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, a podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews. President Barack Obama is about to join a very exclusive club, the ex-presidents. At the age of 55, he joins four other living ex-presidents: Carter, Bush, Clinton, and Bush. What happens next for Mr. Obama, and what role do ex-presidents play in our civic life?

To offer some thoughts on these and related questions, I'm delighted to be joined once again by Elaine Kamarck, senior fellow and founding director of the Center for Effective Public Management, and also a lecturer at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. Elaine is the author of numerous books, including *Primary Politics: Everything You Need to Know about How America Nominates Presidential Candidates,* and most recently, *Why Presidents Fail and How They Can Succeed Again*, about which she spoke on this program in September.

Stay tuned in this episode to meet Bradley Hardy in our Coffee Break segment. And after you listen to this episode, I invite you to download and listen to the latest episode of our Intersections podcast, on which scholars Tom Wright and Molly Reynolds talk about President Obama's legacy. Elaine, happy New Year to you, and welcome back to the Brookings Cafeteria.

KAMARCK: Thank you, Fred.

DEWS: I checked the records, and this is your fifth appearance as a guest on this show, which makes you the most interviewed guest of all! And also, you appeared on the very first episode of our Intersections Podcast, so thank you for supporting the Brookings Podcast Network.

KAMARCK: You're quite welcome; it's a pleasure.

DEWS: So in this episode that coincides with the end of the Obama presidency and the beginning of the Trump presidency, I thought we'd have a little fun and kind of look at the history of ex-presidents now that Barack Obama is about to become one. Do you know what Mr. Obama's planning to do after he's done being president? Besides go to Hawaii and just forget about it for about a month or two?

KAMARCK: Well, I mean, he has said he wants to take his wife on a very nice vacation, so I expect he'll do that. Unusually for an ex-president, he's going to hang around in Washington for a year, mostly so that his daughter can finish school here. And that in and of itself is going to be a little odd because, you know, he'll go out to restaurants or he'll have conversations with friends and unlike in other cities, in Washington there's one business and it's government and politics, so I suspect that he's going to find that he's inadvertently more in the mix than he would be, say, if he'd gone immediately home to Chicago.

DEWS: Right, so one of the things that people are starting to talk about already is that with the transition to a Trump presidency, that former President Obama might have a lot more at stake in terms of descending or talking about his legacy. How much effort do ex-presidents or can ex-presidents put into maintaining their legacy?

KAMARCK: Well, it depends. Kennedy was perhaps the best at this, okay, because Kennedy actually hired historians to work for him. So Schlesinger really put together the legacy of the Kennedy administration, and Kennedy invested a lot in historians; he was quite conscious of writing his own history, which turned out, of course, to be very short.

I know that Jimmy Carter had a young man working for him for some time who spent a lot of time on the legacy. I was called once or twice to write things or give interviews contradicting aspects of the Clinton legacy that Bill Clinton thought were being treated unfairly. So, they do spend time on their legacy, they do pay attention to their legacy, some more overtly than others.

DEWS: I know famously former First Lady Nancy Reagan, following her husband's death, spent a lot of time thinking about promoting his legacy, until her recent passing away.

KAMARCK: Well that's right, and of course a lot of this depends, but I'm glad you brought up Reagan, because a lot of this depends on the health of the ex-president. Reagan, you know, five years into his ex-presidency, was officially diagnosed with Alzheimer's but frankly it was probably coming on earlier. Bill Clinton and now Barack Obama and George W Bush will be very young ex-presidents, and so we can expect from Obama a much more active post-presidency.

DEWS: Speaking of President Bush – the younger, Bush 43 – his father was the 41st president, we don't hear too much about them in their post-presidency in the way that we've continued to see former Presidents Carter and Clinton in their public activities. And I know that George HW Bush is in his nineties now, but do you have any sense of why the two Bush ex-presidents have been, I guess, relatively quiet publicly compared to the other two?

KAMARCK: My opinion would be as follows: the first Bush president, 41, had his son running for office. He had, in fact, two sons who were governors of major states; he had two potential presidential candidates on his hand, both Jeb and George W., and I

think that for the first Bush there were other considerations other than his own legacy, and frankly what better legacy could you have than electing one or both, I think, of your sons to be president? So for the first Bush, that was the case.

For the second Bush, I think that he went out on a cloud, that he went out having pursued a failed war based on an incorrect premise that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and he went out on the biggest economic disaster since the Great Depression, so frankly he wasn't inclined probably to say much about his ex-presidency. I'm sure he'll get a revival but he was a persona non grata.

I mean really, the Republican candidates for president – nobody was campaigning, even in 2016, no one was campaigning with George W. Bush. And he had a side to him that we've now seen that was quite different than some ex-presidents; he's turned himself into a painter, and some people think a very good painter. So he's had art shows, as opposed to doing the sort of intense involvement in the world that say Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton have done.

DEWS: I think the fascinating aspect of our democracy, that these people serve the highest office in the land, one of the most powerful in the world, and then they buy a house, say in my mother's neighborhood in north Dallas and they live there. And people that I have known have reported seeing former First Lady Bush visiting the grocery store at the Preston Royal Shopping Center in Dallas, just kind of almost like regular people, although with the big Secret Service contingent

KAMARCK: With the Secret Service contingent, yeah.

DEWS: Thinking about maybe Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton. Can you just commentate on some of the works that they've done post-presidency?

KAMARCK: Well, I think history has already established the fact that Jimmy Carter really invented the post-presidency in the modern era. He set up a foundation and a center in Atlanta and has been deeply involved in international affairs on two levels: one is the humanitarian level and the other is in the monitoring of elections, which the Carter Center really was one of the pioneers in doing. And I think Jimmy Carter's real activity and impact in the world stands as a model for those ex-presidents who are interested in continuing their work.

Clearly that was a model for Bill Clinton, so clearly the Clinton Foundation was very much built on the model of the Carter Foundation and the Carter Center.

DEWS: Mr. Carter has also, in my calculation, been the longest serving ex-president, at 36 years.

KAMARCK: That's right. And he's also ironically been probably the most successful ex-president. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002, and other than Al Gore, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in, I think, 2007, that’s a pretty big deal for somebody who had been in office. And so I think it's testament to the fact that he really brought some significant innovation to the post-presidency.

DEWS: So do you think there's any norm developing around what ex-presidents are expected to do? Because there seems to be different tracks, I mean, some are more private, some are more public.

KAMARCK: The norm has always been that they should not criticize their successor, and we'll see if Barack Obama can manage to go through for eight years holding to that norm. I mean, he said that he would like to, but on the other hand there are some really big things at stake that President-Elect Trump has said he'd like to

undo. So here will be the challenge for ex-President Obama, which is when it comes to deporting children – the Dreamers, so-called; when it comes to unraveling the Iran deal; when it comes to unraveling the Paris Accords; and of course when it comes back to rolling back Obamacare; the question is going to be, can Barack Obama sit quietly by or how will he play in the court of public opinion?

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DEWS: I'll take you back to my discussion with Elaine in a minute, but first meet Bradley Hardy. He talks about why he became a scholar, what he thinks is the most pressing public policy issue, and offers a very interesting book recommendation.

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HARDY: My name is Bradley Hardy, I'm a labor economist and I'm the Okun-Model Fellow in Economic Studies for 2016 and 2017. So, you know, the Fellowship is all about trying to promote scholarship for junior faculty across the U.S. and junior scholars more generally, so it's for folks who are typically within their first six years out of grad school, and I'm right at that point. So, I am a labor economist at American University, full-time here in DC, in the School of Public Affairs.

I grew up in Durham, North Carolina. I was born in Arkansas, and sort of intersected the southeast and mid-Atlantic ever since. I was inspired to become a scholar because I was sort of observing, early on in childhood, differences in neighborhoods in Durham, North Carolina, and I always found myself having questions for my parents about, you know, why some people seem to have more than others, why certain schools seem to look different than other schools, so on and so forth. And I grew

up in a very conversational household with two academics for parents, so I think that maybe it was in my blood, and I ultimately ended up becoming an economist.

It's hard to pick one issue but if I had to pick one, I'd say an understanding of how the country's social welfare system operates. So for example, we see all sorts of stereotypes about people getting one over on government and, in fact, in many instances, it's just not true. The social welfare state is very much geared towards work, and it's hard, if not impossible, to sort of remain quote unquote, "on the dole," in the U.S. today without working or actively seeking work.

And then I guess related to that, maybe a second point would be just helping citizens to understand all the things that go on behind the scenes, or maybe not so much behind the scenes, where government is actually making their life better. And so we spend lots of time vilifying government, but everything from the schools that you appreciate – the roads, different disability payments – these things matter quite a bit, and oftentimes I think policymakers haven't done as good a job at explaining the positive role of government.

A couple things I'm working on: I'm working on minimum wages here in the District of Columbia. So recently the city passed a law to raise the minimum wage to $15 by 2020, and so I am, along with coauthors, trying to forecast what some of those economic impacts will be and I'm also looking at the city's refundable earned income tax credit. And this is another one of these programs that's somewhat opaque to many people, but it's a large refundable tax credit for the working poor exist. It exists on the national level, but then the District of Columbia has probably the most generous city-

level tax credit in the nation, so they top off 40% of what a tax filer receives from the federal government.

I'd say there's two books, and I've gone to revisit one. The first would be *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* by Harry Caudill. This is a book that's very much about Appalachia, and it was written in the 1960s and it sort of profiles, you know, issues related to poverty and economic development and just kind of traces out the history of Americans migrating into this region of the country and so kind of talks about the challenges that folks face in that part of the country.

And I would also recommend *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, and so that's a much more contemporary look where Coates describes the trials and tribulations of being black in America, and he creates this narrative or this voice where you know he's talking to his son through the book. And so really, what I like about both of these books is that there's some intersection in terms of the economic struggles and other struggles that different groups are facing. In the Caudill piece, this is really focused on whites in Appalachia. In the Coates piece, it's more so thinking about the experience of blacks in America. Different time periods, but I think given everything that's going on this country, probably two nice books to read.

DEWS: And now back to my conversation with Elaine Kamarck. So thinking in terms of the long sweep of American ex-presidents, I mean, from George Washington to the present – I think George Washington had less than three years after his presidency, but others, I mean, it varies. Was there ever a sense of “what do we do with this person now that he's done being president?”

KAMARCK: Well, that was clearly the case with Eisenhower, right? It’s like, what

do you do with him? And he taught. I think these days, there's a fairly familiar pattern – they write a book, ok, they usually get a very big advance for the book. Sometimes the books are good, sometimes they're, you know, endless meanderings. Bill Clinton's first post-presidency book was widely panned for being just sort of his random thoughts and calendars placed into a book. But they always write a book, and they always make a fair amount of money from that.

I think ex-presidents also these days do speeches, and for all the, you know, fuss they made over Hillary's speeches, speeches are actually, for these guys, a pretty good way to make some money, because they're public, you know. Particularly in the first couple years, they get a fair chunk of change for them, and they're not tied to a corporation or, you know, an ongoing business concern.

What they haven't tended to do is get involved in the business world and get involved in the private sector. They've tended to do purely kind of charitable things, and I think that that probably will remain the same – although Barack Obama's very young so, you know, he might be tempted to sit on the board of directors or something like that – but ex-presidents have tended not to do that.

DEWS: Speaking of ex-presidents writing books, I'm now put in mind of Ulysses Grant's famous example of writing his memoirs and finishing them like two days before he died. And they are maybe the most widely-republished political memoirs ever done in the United States. So speaking of Grant, speaking of our historical presidents, what are some of the most interesting post-presidential activities that you can think of?

KAMARCK: Well to go way back, of course, I would probably say Herbert

Hoover, ok, because Hoover was of course, you know, the guy who was in office when the Great Depression hit. It's a matter of historical argument how much was his fault etc., but as you can imagine he was widely disliked and disparaged, and took down the Republican Party for a couple decades. But in his ex-presidency, he was called on a lot for formation of, really, the modern federal government. So the Hoover Commission and his work during the Roosevelt administration and past there was pretty important work, and I think that he had a very successful ex-presidency.

And I think that probably the next one that really comes to mind is, of course, Jimmy Carter's, where his impact on the world through the Carter Center actually was fairly substantial in free elections and humanitarian efforts. In fact, sometimes his actions through the Carter Center got current presidents kind of mad at him. So, I think those two have been substantial, and I would answer that the Clinton Foundation – I mean the Clinton Foundation did lots of work in health through the Clinton Global Health Initiative – was actually quite a big deal in many developing countries.

One of the things that I think that Clinton campaign failed to do during the election is they kind of let everybody think the Clinton Foundation was the same as the Trump Foundation, when in fact the Clinton Foundation was an enormous operation with lots of people in different countries – in other words it wasn't a slush fund for the Clinton family. They were actually paying a lot of people salaries to live in places like Hanoi and live in Africa and do actual work, so I think they had a fairly big impact on the world.

DEWS: Well I would love to keep talking about presidential history because I love

it. So, but let's think about the present and the future, because that's one thing that Brookings scholars like yourself excel in. Let's think about the new presidency, the 45th president, Donald Trump. First of all, let's talk about this “100 first days” concept; why is that a thing that we talk about?

KAMARCK: You know, I kind of wish we'd stop talking about it, you know, because I think it puts an enormous amount of pressure on new presidents and they often bumble in those first hundred days. But the reason we talk about it does go back to presidential history and it goes back to Roosevelt, because when Roosevelt took over in March of 1933, I mean, the country was in an awful depression and freefall. And Roosevelt managed in those hundred days to stabilize the economy through the bank holiday and a variety of other measures, so we talk about it because in everyone's minds there's that first hundred days of the Roosevelt administration.

The only equivalent we've had since then, frankly, was the first hundred days of the Obama administration, where we had a similar economic meltdown and there was a priority on stabilizing the economy and keeping things from getting worse, and I think Obama will get a lot of credit for keeping us from going from a recession to a depression. But frankly, this notion of the hundred days is kind of silly. There's nothing really magic about it. People need to take their time and get things right instead of rushing through. But generally, the reason it persists is the notion that there's a honeymoon for every new president, that even their opponents sometimes come to like them or give them the benefit of the doubt in the first hundred days, and if they’re going to get anything hard and important done they've pretty much got a defined window in which to do it.

DEWS: I mentioned in the introduction that you're the author of the book *Why Presidents Fail and How They Can Succeed Again*; now that we're thinking about the very beginning of the Trump administration, what are some things that President Trump can do to succeed?

KAMARCK: Well the first thing he has to do – and this I talked about a lot in the book, and it was a problem that affected both Democrats and Republicans – is he has to understand the government he runs, because the government he runs is both the source of his greatest advantage and his biggest disadvantages. When the government you run crashes and burns, you get blamed. You're the president, the people in the country think that you're in charge of the government, even though it's a massive operation and you know a lot of presidents are so put off by it that they don't spend any time learning it.

The second thing is, so sometimes this government is failing, sometimes this government is going to give the president a big black eye, and we saw that with the Veterans Administration scandals under Obama. He looked really bad when they failed and he didn't even seem to know that that was going on. The flip side of that is that sometimes this government knows things that a president really needs to know, and if you ignore them or you allow your options and your vision to be concentrated by somebody, you're going to miss important points of view, important facts, that are important in your decision making. And of course here, the biggest example was probably the warnings that consistently came out of the State Department about Iraq and about all the downsides and all the problems that were going to be in Iraq, including severe doubts about whether or not there were weapons of mass destruction.

So the point of the book *Why Presidents Fail* is that in any entity as big as the US federal government, something is going really right and something is going really wrong at the same time, and when a president doesn't take the time to understand this he becomes the victim of things that, frankly, sometimes he didn't even know were happening.

DEWS: Well, Elaine, let's end it there. I know that I'm going to ask you to come back on the program again in the future. Thanks for taking your time today to share your insights and expertise.

KAMARCK: Thank you, Fred, thanks for having me.

DEWS: You can learn more about Elaine Kamarck and the Center for Effective Public Management on our website at brookings.edu.

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DEWS: And that does it for this edition of the Brookings Cafeteria, brought to you by the Brookings Podcast Network. Follow us on Twitter @policypodcasts. My thanks to audio engineer and producer Gaston Reboredo, with assistance from Mark Hoelscher. Vanessa Sauter is the producer, Bill Finan does the book interviews, and our intern is Kelly Russo. Design and web support comes from Jessica Pavone, Eric Abalahin, and Rebecca Viser; and thanks to David Nassar and Richard Fawal for their support. You can subscribe to the Brookings Cafeteria on iTunes and listen to it in all the usual places. Visit us online at brookings.edu. Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.

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