

GEORGE W. BUSH INSTITUTE

QUARTER TWO 2025

# BUSH INSTITUTE BRIEFING



The Bush Institute is focused on ensuring opportunity for all,  
strengthening democracy, and advancing free societies.

DAVID J. KRAMER  
*Executive Director, George W. Bush Institute*



*David J. Kramer, Executive Director of the George W. Bush Institute, with Dr. Robert M. Gates, former Secretary of Defense, at the Forum on Leadership 2025. (Photo by Grant Miller for the George W. Bush Presidential Center)*

## A NOTE FROM DAVID J. KRAMER

The entire Bush Center staff is thrilled to welcome aboard Shilo Brooks, our new President and CEO, who started this week. We're excited for him to begin engaging on our work and with all of you.

As [President Bush](#) has said, Shilo is "a brilliant thinker" with expertise in civil discourse, civic literacy, and American political thought. A West Texas native, Shilo came to us from Princeton University, where he led the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions and taught a highly popular course on Statesmanship and the American Presidency.

Even as we look to the future with his arrival, we want to highlight some of the Bush Institute's many recent achievements.

Our signature Forum on Leadership on *The American Promise* in April included American success stories and conversations on higher education, democracy, and restoring trust in the media. *The Dallas Morning News* published former CEO Ken Hersh's [op-ed](#) on why fear-based regimes don't last.

Former Defense Secretary Dr. Robert M. Gates received the George W. Bush Medal for Distinguished Leadership, and Tom Luce, Founder and Chairman Emeritus of Texas 2036, was given the 2025 George W. Bush Institute Trailblazer Citation. The George W. Bush Institute Citation went to BridgeUSA for bridge-building work with young people.

As part of our own bridge-building work, the Presidential Leadership Scholars program, a collaboration with the presidential centers of Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush, and Lyndon B. Johnson, is celebrating a decade of impact and now has almost 600 alumni.

On the policy front, a first-of-its-kind [report](#) from Bush Institute Senior Fellow Dr. Victor Cha co-produced with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in June used the voices of 100 North Koreans to show

what life was truly like there during the pandemic. It attracted national and international attention, including from [The New York Times](#) and [CNN](#).

In April, the Bush Institute-SMU Economic Growth Initiative tackled two hot topics, housing and immigration. Director Cullum Clark published the latest Blueprint for Opportunity report, [Lessons From America's Fastest-Growing Cities](#), while Director Laura Collins wrote a widely cited piece on the need to [overhaul immigration processes](#).

[Mrs. Bush's Summer Reading List for Kids](#) in May recommended books for toddlers through middle schoolers, including ones that celebrate America, adventures, and friendship.

*The Catalyst: A Journal of Ideas from the Bush Institute* made [The Case for Conservatism](#) – why humility, respect for tradition, and honoring human dignity still matter.

[The Strategist](#) podcast hosted Jessica Yellin, founder of News Not Noise, and Damon Wilson, President and CEO of the National Endowment for Democracy, among others.

Ken Hersh's outstanding leadership for the past nine years helped the Bush Institute advance President and Mrs. Bush's core values of freedom, opportunity, accountability, and compassion, which are more important now than ever before. We will always be grateful. Of course, none of it would be possible without your generous support, and we extend our deepest thanks.

Sincerely,



David J. Kramer  
Executive Director, George W. Bush Institute

## POLICY IN FOCUS

### STRENGTHENING OUR DEMOCRACY

The Forum on Leadership included several engaging conversations, including [inspiring immigrant stories](#), the [role of education](#) in preparing students for life beyond the classroom, and the foundational nature of [freedom of the press](#) to our nation.

Nicole Bibbins Sedaca, the Kelly and David Pfeil Fellow at the Bush Institute, wrote articles this quarter on how [cutting](#) State Department funding would hurt American interests, how Americans must [unify](#) against democratic threats even amid policy disagreements, and how ["either-or"-ism](#) is incompatible with a strong democracy.

William McKenzie, Senior Editorial Advisor at the Bush Institute, and Global Policy Director Chris Walsh wrote

a piece for their *Pluralism Challenge* series on what we can learn [from rural schools](#). McKenzie also launched a new series to explore entrepreneurial publishing around the country with a piece on [Sycamore Media in eastern Iowa](#).

Our Stand-To Veteran Leadership Program [announced its new class](#), and alumni continue to make a difference around the country. The Presidential Leadership Scholars Class of 2025 graduated in June, bringing the total number of alumni to nearly 600.

## ADVANCING FREE SOCIETIES

Exiled Belarusian democracy leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya [visited](#) in May and met with President Bush to discuss her fight for freedom and democracy in Belarus – a country suffering under the brutal dictatorship of Aleksandr Lukashenka.

Bush Institute Executive Director David J. Kramer and Global Policy Senior Program Manager Albert Torres published “[This is no time for business as usual in Russia](#)” in *Just Security*. Kramer and National Endowment for Democracy CEO Damon Wilson wrote a piece for *The Dallas Morning News* on why [the world is a safer place for Americans when the United States leads](#). Additionally, Kramer and Igor Khrestin, the Bradford M. Freeman Managing Director of Global Policy, published a piece on [Ukraine](#) for *The News*.

Kramer and Monica Kladakis, the Bush Institute’s Senior Advisor of Strategic Partnerships and Outreach, highlighted the [achievements](#) of the Millennium Challenge Corporation, an innovative foreign assistance institution created by President Bush with strong congressional support, on its 20th anniversary.

The Bush Institute [submitted](#) a statement for the record to the Senate Appropriations Committee in June on the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) as the committee weighed proposals for rescissions. This followed a [statement for the record](#) on PEPFAR to the House Appropriations Committee in April. Hannah Johnson, Senior Program Manager for Global Policy, [published](#) a piece on how America can utilize the tools it has to fulfill PEPFAR’s mission.

On Afghanistan, Global Policy Director Natalie Gonnella-Platts wrote a [piece](#) for *The Diplomat* in April. Kramer also provided [remarks](#) at the U.S.-Afghan Women’s Council annual meeting in June on behalf of Mrs. Bush, while Gonnella-Platts participated in an [invitation-only symposium](#) at Stanford University in April on the codification of gender Apartheid and

other mechanisms to hold the Taliban accountable for human rights abuses.

Global Policy Associate Celia Siade-Cox published a piece in May on why [Syria](#) needs more women in government to build a more prosperous future.

The Lindsay Lloyd Freedom in North Korea Scholarship [awarded](#) a total of \$55,200 to nine students in June. The scholarship is designed to help escapees from North Korea and their children pursue higher education and build productive, prosperous lives.

*The Struggle for Freedom* series on human rights advocates around the world profiled [Ukrainian pastor Mykhailo Brytsyn](#), a Baptist minister who has maintained his faith in the face of Russian repression, in April.

## ENSURING OPPORTUNITY FOR EVERYONE

*Engage at the Bush Center*, presented by NexPoint, [featured](#) the seventh annual Laura Bush Book Club event in May with one of Mrs. Bush’s favorite novelists, bestselling author Amor Towles. Robin Berkley, the Ann Kimball Johnson Director of Education, [spoke to](#) NBC DFW on the process of finalizing Mrs. Bush’s 2025 summer reading list for kids. This interview was subsequently featured in the [Axios Dallas newsletter](#).

Berkley and Senior Fellow Nina Rees co-authored a [report](#) on school choice touching on charters, magnets, education savings accounts, and more. Berkley also did a [Two-Minute Take on Texas Senate Bill 2](#), a new education savings account program launching in 2026, and discussed it with the *Dallas Morning News* Editorial Board.

Berkley presented in April and May to the PIE Network (Policy Innovators in Education) about the current landscape for assessment and accountability policies. In April, Anne Wicks, the Don Evans Family Managing Director of Opportunity and Democracy, moderated a panel at the ASU+GSV Summit on “[Literacy at Light Speed: Scaling Personalized Reading Success.](#)”

For Immigrant Heritage Month, Caroline Bergonia, Manager of Accounting and Finance at the Bush Center, [shared](#) how her grandfather’s legacy paved the way for future generations.

Laura Collins, Director of the Bush Institute-SMU Economic Growth Initiative, was interviewed about immigrant rights on PBS’ [The Balancing Act with](#)

[John Katko](#). She also joined a panel on deportation and immigration stories at the [Council on Foreign Relations 2025 Local Journalists Workshop](#) in New York and played a role in the immigration panel at the Workforce Forward Immigration Policy and America's Economic Future Summit in Austin, Texas.

Cullum Clark, Director of the Bush-Institute, SMU Economic Growth initiative, released new [state](#) and [city](#) policy recommendations on combatting America's worsening housing crisis. He also published extensively on housing issues, including in [The Dallas Morning News](#), on how metros can mimic the Sun Belt region's housing successes.

In June, [Check-In](#), a resource powered by the Bush Institute's Veteran Wellness Alliance that connects veterans, service members, and their families to high-quality mental and brain health care, officially marked its 1,500th connection. Check-In continues to make an impact on the lives of our service members by streamlining access to care and community.

The Veterans and Military Families team published personal reflections of those who have served – and continue to serve even after hanging up the uniform. They include Deputy Director D'Juan Wilcher's [tribute to the fallen](#) on Memorial Day and Director Jason Galui's discussion of how serving in Iraq taught him how to combat the ["fictional fear"](#) he sees dividing our country.

Retired Navy [Rear Admiral Michael Giorgione](#) discussed his journey from military to civilian leadership on *The Strategerist*, while Blayne Smith, interim Deputy Director for Health and Well-Being, discussed [perseverance, endurance, and the Special Forces](#) on the podcast.

Wilcher participated in an employment roundtable convened by the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs.

Kala Gulovsen, Technical Support Manager at [Combined Arms](#) and the lead technology representative for Check-In, wrote a piece on how [technology can provide a mental health lifeline for the military community](#).



GEORGE W. BUSH  
INSTITUTE

*Located on the SMU campus in Dallas, Texas, the George W. Bush Presidential Center is a nonpartisan institution advancing the timeless values of freedom, opportunity, accountability, and compassion. The Bush Center comprises the George W. Bush Presidential Museum and the George W. Bush Institute, a solution-oriented policy organization focused on ensuring opportunity for all, strengthening democracy, and advancing free societies through policy solutions and public engagement. The Bush Center also houses the George W. Bush Presidential Library, operated by the National Archives and Records Administration, which provides access to official documents and artifacts from the George W. Bush Administration.*

*Learn more about the Bush Center at*

BUSHCENTER.ORG