



{Wisdom Watch interview, National Public Radio, April 11, 2013}

***Without Reservations***  
***How a Family Root Beer Stand Grew Into a Global  
Hotel Company***

by J. W. Marriott, Jr. and Kathi Ann Brown

## Book Summary

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Chronicles the history of leading hospitality company Marriott International while revealing J.W. Marriott, Jr.'s thoughts on his health, the impact of 9/11 on the industry, and the 2011 appointment of a CEO from outside of the family.

### Hotel Magnate Bill Marriott On Life's Lessons

April 11, 2013

• • • MICHEL MARTIN, HOST:

This is TELL ME MORE from NPR News. I'm Michel Martin. Now it's time for our Wisdom Watch conversation. That's the part of the program where we learn from people who've made an impact with their work.

And, if you've traveled just about anywhere from Dubuque to Dubai and you've needed a clean and comfortable place to sleep and a friendly greeting, then you have probably, at some point, sought out a Marriott.

Over the course of six decades, J.W. Marriott, Jr., known as Bill to family and friends, became a household name by turning what had been a successful family restaurant chain into a multi-billion dollar hotel industry giant. And then, last year, he shocked some when he turned the company's leadership over to a successor who is not a Marriott. Along the way, he and his companies have weathered many economic ups and downs, civil unrest, the culture wars. He's not only survived, but thrived and now he's telling many of the lessons he learned along the way in his latest book. It's called "Without Reservations: How a Family Root Beer Stand Grew Into

a Global Hotel Company" and he was kind enough to join us in our Washington, D.C. studios.

Mr. Marriott, thank you so much for joining us.

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J.W. MARRIOTT, JR.: Thank you, Michel, for having me.

MARTIN: It's a pleasure to see you.

JR.: Good to see you.

MARTIN: This is not your first book. As I mentioned, you actually wrote about the company ethos in 1997. Was there something you wanted to say in this book that you didn't get to say in the first?

JR.: Well, there's another 16 years and I think I'm a little more wise 16 years later than I was back then and I remembered some stories that had gotten us through some difficult times in the '90s and I wanted to talk about some of the recent experiences.

MARTIN: You were not shy about talking about the times that you feel that - just to be blunt about it - that you or the company messed up and I was curious about that.

JR.: Well, I think you have to be truthful and everybody in life makes mistakes and everybody in life, in the business world particularly, has mistakes. The important thing is to learn from your mistakes and move ahead and not dwell on them and let them get you all upset and worried and it causes you to stop. And we could have easily done that.

You know, we had a terrible crisis in 1990 when the real estate market was destroyed and then, in 2001, 9/11, we had the World Trade Center situation. We lost a hotel up there and it was right in the middle of the World Trade Center complex and the hotel went down and all our guests got out. Two of our associates were killed and so we went through that difficult time and everybody was afraid to travel. And we've had some bombings in some of our hotels overseas and we've put that behind us now and we've got

great security. We had security then. In fact, one of the hotels was not severely damaged because the security stopped a van short of the main driveway.

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MARTIN: I was fascinated by these stories, in part because - well, for people who don't remember the story, in the '20s, your parents started with one root beer stand, which eventually turned into the Hot Shoppe. Then you got your first job there when you were a kid. All through school, you were working there. Then, when you got out of the Navy, your dad had bought a hotel and you said, you know what? Let me run it.

JR.: Well, he'd built a hotel right at the 14th Street bridge in Washington between what's now Reagan National Airport and the Pentagon. And a hotel was a no-brainer, but it didn't do very well. It started out kind of slow and we really didn't understand the business and I went to my dad one day. He was looking for something for me to do because I'd just gotten out of the Navy and he was afraid to entrust me with one of his Hot Shoppe restaurants because he didn't think I was smart enough to do that. So I said, you know, nobody's running this hotel. Why don't you let me have a crack at it? And he said, you don't know anything about the hotel business. I said, well, neither does anybody else around here. And so he said, well, I agree with that, so you go ahead and see what you can do with it.

And that was the beginning and we took it over and we made some changes and we put in some banquet and meeting space and, you know, we had our usual ups and downs. We booked a group for 400 people and put them in a room that only held 300 and it was a great beginning. We got the next location right up the river at Key Bridge in Washington and we liked the bridges. My dad loved the bridges because he says, they're going to always change the highways, but they're never going to change the bridges. So if you've got a restaurant or a hotel next to a bridge, it's always going to be busy.

MARTIN: I do want to ask, though. Your company is now a global - I wasn't kidding when I said that you can find a Marriott in - I don't know if you have one in Dubuque. Oh, I'm sure you do.

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JR.: We do.

MARTIN: But you started the company - your parents started the company. It was 30 years before the civil rights movement and you've managed to grow this company. It is regularly on the list of the top places to work across Fortune, but a number of other places. And I was curious how you've managed to do that without stumbling into a lot of these culture war questions that seem to have tripped up a number of your fellow CEOs. I mean, I'm thinking more recently about like the chair of Chick-fil-A, who got a lot of - well, both negative and positive attention, depending on your point of view, when he took a very strong public stance around same-sex marriage. He's opposed to it. You've never been criticized for kind of stepping wrong on these questions. I'm interested in how you navigate these questions.

JR.: Well, we've always been in favor of equality and we believe that everybody should have a chance to learn, to grow, to be promoted, to provide for their families - if even if they don't have families. You know, we've never been segregated by race and never been segregated by sexual preference. We were one of the very first to come out with partner benefits. We should be giving opportunities to everybody, regardless of their sex, and their gender and their sexual preferences. And so...

MARTIN: Is that hard for you?

JR.: No.

MARTIN: Has that been a hard place for you?

JR.: No it hasn't been because some of our, the most leading and talented people in our company are in this community. And so we

recognize that if we're going to have a successful company, we've got to have talent and we draw talent from all over the place.

MARTIN: You're also though, a very proud life-long member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. And Mitt Romney...

JR.: Oh, very good.

MARTIN: He's a very good friend of yours.

JR.: And he's on our board of directors.

MARTIN: He's on your board. Was...

JR.: For the third time.

MARTIN: For the third time after...

(LAUGHTER)

MARTIN: ...he returned to the board after he ran for president. You gave him a very large contribution. He took positions that were completely opposite from yours, and I was just curious how, if you ever had conversations with him about that.

JR.: No I never did. I'm a very faithful member of our church, but we also believe we have to run a big public company, and we've got shareholders and investors and owners of our hotels, and we have to separate church and state. And just because the company takes certain positions doesn't mean that I personally have to follow those decisions. I still believe in being married to a wonderful woman and - who I have been married to for 57 years and, you know, my kids are all married and in our temples, and so we've been very successful in our marriage.

MARTIN: Have you ever felt a challenge between your personal conviction and the demands of your business? I know you personally don't drink alcohol.

JR.: I don't.

MARTIN: But the hotels do serve alcohol.

JR.: Right.

MARTIN: Have you ever felt personally challenged between the demands of faith and the demands of your business?

JR.: Well, sometimes. But, you know, I think what we've done is follow the advice of our church leaders who say to us, you can be in the world but not of the world. In other words, you can believe in what you believe in, but your company has its own set of values and beliefs which may be a little different from yours.

MARTIN: If you're just joining us, I'm speaking with J.W. Marriott, Jr. He is now the executive chair of Marriott International. We're talking about his latest book, it's a memoir, called "Without Reservations: How a Family Root Beer Stand Turned into a Global Hotel Company."

One of the things that you talk about in the book, over and over again, is kind of a personal ethos of yours and part of the corporate culture, is the importance of listening to people - and not just kind of surface listening, but really getting to know them. That must be very hard to do.

JR.: I think it's probably the most important thing a successful executive can do is to listen and learn. I just read John Meacham's book on Jefferson, and it was interesting that Jefferson's key management style was to listen to people and make them feel more important than he was. He respected their ideas and he talked about the things that they were interested in and he learned from them, and at the same time, they learned to respect and love him because they knew he was sincerely interested in them, and that's because he was a superb listener.

MARTIN: You tell of, actually, a funny story in the book about a time that President Eisenhower was visiting your...

JR.: Family farm.

MARTIN: Your family farm. And you were on leave from the Navy, right?

JR.: Right.

MARTIN: And it was really cold and you were going to go what - quail hunting...

JR.: We were going to go out quail hunting. That's right.

MARTIN: And then what happened? You want to pick it up from there? Tell us?

JR.: Well, sure. It really cold. It was Christmas time. I was home on leave. I was an ensign in the Navy - which is the lowest rank you can possibly be in the officer corps. And I was on my way to report to duty on an aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean, and Ike and Mimi came down to our farm with my parents to do a little quail hunting. And it was really cold outside and we were standing there, trying to decide, should we go outside and freeze and try and kill some quail or should we stay inside by the fire? And I was standing off the corner, hiding, and the President looked at me and he said, what do you want to do, Bill? What do you think we should do? And I've never forgotten that. I said no wonder he could deal with Montgomery and Patton and all those people he dealt with in the Second World War, because he made them feel important. He showed respect for them. He showed interest in what their beliefs were. And he asked those very important - that very important question: what do you think?

MARTIN: And what did you do? What did you say?

JR.: I said it's too cold. Let's stay in by the fire.



(LAUGHTER)

JR.: He said, I agree.

(LAUGHTER)

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MARTIN: But how do you continue to be really present for people? And you also talk about the importance of talking to and hearing from people at every level in the organization. Something you said your father believed in, listening to the people who work hourly, people who work in the kitchen, people who work in housekeeping.

JR.: That's right.

MARTIN: How is that really even possible with the company of your size?

JR.: Well, it's very hard, the size of our company, but you lead by example. And my senior leaders that I work with, I always give them a chance to express themselves. And I ask those important words: what do you think? What do you think we should do? I remember a meeting I had to discuss a very important expansion program we were considering. And all around the table everybody was in favor of it, and finally one fellow raised his hand. He said I'm not in favor of it. I said why aren't you? He gave a very compelling argument and I said then let's not do it. And that sent a signal to everybody around the table that their opinion matters. And when they go out in the field and talk to their people, maybe someday they'll listen to their people and remember what I said that day: you're important to me, I want to know what you think.

MARTIN: You have any thoughts then, about why your preferred candidate, Mitt Romney, seemed to have stumbled so badly during this last election? Any thoughts?

JR.: Well, I think a couple of things happened. One, he didn't have a real good ground game. I think President Obama had a terrific

ground game. You know, you've heard the story of the barbershops and how many barbershops, like 25,000 barbershops were enlisted to get the people out to vote in the Hispanic community and the African-American community - to vote for Obama. And the Republicans didn't think that there enough, they didn't have a real good ground game. The other thing was he really didn't spend as much time working with the Hispanics as he should have. He should've gotten more Hispanic votes than he got, and that might've put him over the top because he lost Florida, he lost one of the Hispanic communities down there that always voted Republican. And as you look at the ground game and his concern for the minorities, that could have been a lot stronger.

MARTIN: You think it was tactics, not policy?

JR.: I think it was tactics. I think he was focused on raising enough money to compete against Obama - which McCain was not able to do against Obama in the first election. And I think you like to be around people that have the same traits as you have, and he selected a vice presidential candidate who was just like him. And he maybe should have picked Rubio. I don't know. Maybe he should have picked somebody else. But I don't think his co-running mate was really that strong a help to him.

MARTIN: Before we let you go, I do want to ask about diversity because you talk a lot about - it's an issue that's featured on your website a lot, the company regularly shows up on the lists of best diverse places to work. You don't talk a lot about race in your book, but you do talk a lot about diversity. And I wanted to ask do you have advice to people who seem to be struggling with this issue?

JR.: Get over it.

(LAUGHTER)

JR.: Some of the best and strongest people we have are from the minority community. We have a general manager of our downtown

Atlanta hotel, 1,500 rooms, African-American female, started as a telephone operator and now she's running the biggest hotel in the state. And she's doing a superb job. She's just smart as a whip and she gets along well with everybody, and they look up to her and they respect her. And we have hundreds and hundreds, and sometimes thousands of people just like her who are in a very, very hard, strong role. Almost 50 percent of our general managers are female.

MARTIN: Who are you hoping will read this book, by the way?

JR.: Someone who really wants to learn some points about management. I've tried in the book to explain why we've been successful and how we've been successful. And it all comes back to listening and learning. I talk about getting out of the office, finding out what's going on in the business, finding out what your people think about what's going on in the business, what's the morale like. I can walk through a hotel in an half an hour and can't tell whether or not a general manager knows his people, or her people, whether they're getting along well with them or not, whether the people are motivated, excited, whether the hotel's clean, whether they think they're taking good care of the customer. Those kinds of things you can pick up very fast, because the general managers sets the tone and you can find out how the general manager really feels about his job and his or her people.

MARTIN: Do you have any advice for our national leaders in Washington? I mean it's no secret that many people in the country, at large, are not pleased. They don't feel like our leaders are getting a whole lot done and not listening very well to each other. Do you have any advice for them?

JR.: Yeah. They've got to listen and learn. They've got to learn what the other side - why they feel the way they feel and then they've got to address that and try and come to some kind of a compromise. I mean that's what life is all about, politics is all about compromise. And there's no point at this time - doesn't seem

to be a desire to compromise. I was encouraged, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the unions getting together on the guest worker program this past week or two. That's the kind of thing we need to get done in the city.

MARTIN: So many other things we could talk about, but your time is limited, and including your hotel in Haiti, that is coming on line, one of the most important properties being built on the island in the wake of the earthquake.

JR.: Right.

MARTIN: Yeah. So maybe when the hotel opens you'll come and tell us more. You'll come back and tell us more about that.

JR.: I'd love to. I will.

MARTIN: OK.

JR.: I'd love to.

MARTIN: J.W. Marriott Jr. is the executive chairman of Marriott International. His latest book is titled, "Without Reservations: How a Family Root Beer Stand Grew into a Global Hotel Company." He was kind enough to stop by our studios in Washington, D.C.

Mr. Marriott, thank you so much for speaking with us.

JR.: Thanks, Michel. It was a lot of fun.

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To listen to the 15-minute interview, go to the NPR archive at <https://www.npr.org/books/titles/176916257/without-reservations-how-a-family-root-beer-stand-grew-into-a-global-hotel-compa>

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