

Preface

Her husband, Will, said it best in saying good-bye.

“One picture: Julia is leaving for work in the morning. Hanging about her is a pocketbook that is never completely closed, a Kenyan bag crammed full of e-mails and papers, and a briefcase. In her hand, she often has a coffee cake, or some sweet thing to share with her office. Thus burdened, she somehow manages to get the front door open, turns around to give me a kiss and saying, ‘I’m off to save the world!’ is gone.

“‘I’m off to save the world.’ She says it with a smile, and her tone is light-hearted. But Julia means it, too. She is happy. It’s her life’s work.”

Julia and Will had been married for 33 years. During that time, Julia Vadala Taft became one of the country’s top humanitarian relief experts, a friend and ally of the world’s most impoverished people. Starting in 1975, when she directed the Indochina refugee task force, Julia essentially invented the way the United States government responds to natural and man-made disasters around the world, demanding basic rights for those whose lives are turned upside down by civil war, famine, religious persecution, earthquakes, floods and insect infestations.

Julia, whose career spanned the administrations of six presidents, died of colon cancer on March 15, 2008. She left a legacy of strategic vision and decisive leadership that will be celebrated for generations to come. “Julia was an image of American openness and generosity,” said former Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, a friend and colleague for more than three decades. “Her professional life was committed to people

trying to get by on a dollar a day, those who are hungry, without clean water, without medicine, without homes.”

Said retired General Wesley K. Clark, former supreme commander of NATO, and a friend and colleague for three decades: “Julia was a make-it-happen kind of a person. She knew how to get things done.”

A creative, compassionate woman, who married into a well-known Republican family—she wed William H. Taft IV, a great-grandson of President William H. Taft and a prominent member of the Nixon, Ford, Reagan, Bush I and Bush II administrations—Julia dedicated herself to restoring dignity and honor to those far less fortunate than she.

Julia’s life was a portrait of inspiration and idealism in a world torn apart by ethnic hatred, terrorism, religious extremism, genocide and natural disaster. She knew how to tailor her mission to the troubles around her, when to call on the skills of the military to solve a problem and when to tap nongovernment experts. In a city filled with oversized egos bent on turf building, Julia was a builder of coalitions, determined to go for the right solution, not the easy one.

“She used her wit, passion, determination, knowledge and contacts to promote a humanitarian agenda—and succeeded,” said Refugees International President Ken Bacon. “Julia was fearless about the bureaucracy. She knew how to make the power of the United States government work for her, and she didn’t do it in a ruthless way that made enemies. People liked being ordered around by Julia Taft.”

Julia would tap her fat Rolodex of top officials whom she knew personally and professionally—Powell, Clark, Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush, George Shultz,

Caspar Weinberger, Elliot Richardson, Donald Rumsfeld, Richard Cheney, James Woolsey, Strobe Talbott, Richard Holbrooke, on and on—and tell them what strings to pull to get whatever she needed for the current mission: visas, military planes, armored convoys, search-and-rescue dogs, relief supplies, maps, intelligence briefings, tents.

Julia used her passion, energy and pragmatism and a revolving team of experts to find creative answers to complex humanitarian aid questions. And once she came up with a plan of action, she would use equal doses of chutzpah and charm to rally American and foreign VIPs to the cause. “Julia called herself an ‘operations person’ who was interested in the mechanics of protecting refugees and delivering life-saving aid,” said Bacon, who died of cancer 17 months after Julia. “It was her ability to bring order to chaos—plus her willingness to get on a plane, helicopter, jeep or riverboat to go almost anywhere—that enabled her to make a difference. Whether in the White House or a governmental meeting or a refugee camp, Julia knew how to get people moving.”

Like many women in high-octane marriages, Julia juggled her responsibilities with those of her husband, Will Taft, who held one important administration appointment after another: principal assistant to Caspar “Cap” Weinberger, who was director of the Office of Management and Budget under President Nixon; general counsel to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, under President Ford; deputy secretary of defense, under President Reagan; acting secretary of defense after George H.W. Bush became president; the United States permanent representative to NATO during the Gulf War; and legal adviser to Secretary of State Colin L. Powell under George W. Bush. Most of the positions Taft held were presidential appointments that required the consent of the Senate.

Julia and Will spent much of their married life in Washington, where they raised three children: Maria, born in 1976, William in 1978 and the youngest, Julia, named for her mother and known to all as Julie, born in 1980. One of the rules of the Taft household: no complaints. Maria once arrived home from boarding school and went into Julie's bathroom to take a shower. "There's no hot water," she yelled to her sister.

"I know," Julie replied. "There hasn't been any for months." When Maria asked why Julie hadn't told her parents, the teenager shrugged. "I didn't want to complain," she said.

Julia and Will made sure that each of their children did humanitarian work abroad, though the experiences didn't always turn out as planned. Maria was infected with malaria in Belize while building a bus shelter for a village with no road. William went to Kyrgyzstan to set up a computer center in a village with no electricity. Julie traveled with her mother to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. "Mom was on crutches with a sprained ankle, rain was pouring down, our clothes were covered with mud... and we couldn't have been happier," Julie said. Two years later, at 17, Julie asked her mother if she could spend the summer living and working in a refugee camp in Africa. "To some mothers, it may have been their worst nightmare," Julie said. "But to my Mom, it was a dream come true."

There was no one like Julia Taft. No one.

A tall, handsome, charismatic woman with perfect posture, deeply set dark eyes and thick, curly black hair that turned gradually to silver, Julia was a size 16—and proud of it. She had a regal presence with a personality that filled whatever

room she was in. Her laugh, which started with her shoulders, was contagious. Her glare could make a general quake. When visiting a strict Muslim country where women are forbidden to make eye contact with men, she would look Taliban officials straight in the eye. And she loved being mistaken for Maude, played by Bea Arthur, in the long-running television sitcom of the same name.

Julia could converse in the acronym-littered *patois* of an inveterate Washington policy wonk, but she was quick to pick up the latest *National Enquirer* at her local supermarket. She had a weakness for caramel-filled chocolates, ordered popcorn with double butter at the movies and kept a box of Nabisco double-stuffed marshmallow cookies in her desk drawer. Although she was a spiritual woman, raised Episcopalian, Julia did not attend church regularly. Yet throughout her life, she believed in the power of prayer.

While she could be formal and formidable in public, she was witty and wacky with friends. After dinner at the family farm in Northern Virginia, she delighted in banging out “Blue Moon” on the piano. And at the end of a long evening, just as guests were ready to leave, she and Will would call everyone into the library for a round of Blockhead, a game that requires balancing colorful wooden shapes on top of each other to make a sculpture. It is, in effect, a genteel test of sobriety and would be played until everyone was ready for the drive home.

But when disaster struck somewhere in the world—whether in Vietnam, Armenia, Sarajevo or Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Ethiopia, Liberia or Sudan, Julia would drop everything to focus on her new, most vital effort. Better than anyone else, she knew how

to make the often-intractable gears of bureaucracy shift into action, frequently before the president of the United States—whoever that was at the time—had decided to act.

Julia also knew how to speak truth to power. In December 1988, after she briefed President-elect George H.W. Bush on the American response to the Armenian earthquake, which she had directed, Bush told her he planned to send his son, Jeb, and grandson, George P. Bush, to the Soviet republic on Christmas Eve to hand out gifts to earthquake victims. Julia told Bush pointedly that Armenian officials had their hands full and had neither time nor resources to devote to foreign VIPs.

“And, by the way,” she said, “the Armenians do not celebrate Christmas on December 25 but January 6.” Bush sent his family on December 24 anyway.

“Julia was never a prisoner of ideology,” said Ken Bacon. “She was an idealist who was always willing to make practical compromises. She would tolerate fools—and try to turn them around.” She was not always successful, but she was never deterred.

As was common in the 1970s and '80s, most of the top officials Julia dealt with were men who dominated the American and international foreign policy establishment and were often patronizing and dismissive of female colleagues. “Being a woman in these situations was unique,” said Renee Bafalis, who served as Julia’s press secretary for many years and often traveled overseas with her. “A lot of these world leaders were not used to dealing with a powerful woman. But Julia had the ability to take the most hardened leader and soften him up to the point where he was kissing her on the cheek when she left.”

Yet however powerful she may have appeared in meetings, at the end of a long day, Julia liked to relax at home with a bubble bath. When whatever she was reading fell into the water, she knew it was time to go to bed.

I met Julia Taft for the first time in 1971. She was a White House Fellow, a prestigious, one-year position for ambitious young men and women who want experience working at the highest levels of the federal government, and I was a young reporter with The Associated Press. I interviewed Julia, the only woman in the group, and wrote an AP story about the Fellows briefing President Nixon on their two-week trip to Latin America.

Julia and I met again professionally in Moscow in 1988, shortly after the Armenian earthquake. By then, she was a high-ranking State Department official, directing the American relief effort in the Soviet republic, and I was a foreign correspondent for *TIME* covering the story from Moscow. I attended a news conference Julia held in the Soviet capital before she returned to Washington. It would be almost 20 years before we would meet again, this time through our children.

My son, Christof Putzel, began dating the Tafts' younger daughter, Julie Taft, a charming, outgoing fellow Maret School graduate who, like Christof, shared a love for Africa. Julie had worked on a refugee project in Sierra Leone. Christof made his first documentary, called "Left Behind," about AIDS orphans in Kenya. As mothers, Julia and I enjoyed watching our children's romance flourish, and in the process, found we had many interests and friends in common.

Julia and Will's son, William, was already engaged. He had fallen in love with Begüm Bengü, a beautiful and talented Turkish-born architecture student, whom he had

met at Yale when both were undergraduates. Begüm held a master's degree from Harvard. William was a law clerk for U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Samuel A. Alito Jr., then a nominee to the Supreme Court.

In August 2005, Julia and Will traveled to Istanbul at the invitation of William's future in-laws, Hasan and Beyhan Bengü. William had proposed to Begüm the previous February, and preparations were underway for a wedding to be held in Washington, D.C., in November. The purpose of this trip was to celebrate the engagement with Begüm's extended family and for Will and Julia to get to know Begüm's parents.

Julia was fully aware that Turkish culture had well-established rituals for formalizing engagements, and that as mother of the groom, she had an important role to play. It soon became clear that she was more familiar with many of these traditions than Begüm's parents, and perhaps more enthusiastic about acting them out than any of her future in-laws. She had obviously been looking forward to this for a long time.

It was not Julia's first time in Turkey. In the 1980s, she traveled with Will on a Defense Department trip to Troy and Ephesus. When describing the highlights of the journey, she recalled the shock of seeing an American tourist visiting Ephesus climb onto the amphitheater stage and begin to sing, "I'm a little lamby, yes I am'y." Julia would later pay homage to this gross breach of decorum by reenacting it at various amphitheatres in Greece and Sicily during later family trips.

Preparations for the pre-wedding trip to Istanbul began in Washington. Julia's research indicated that as the groom's parents, she and Will would be expected to give gifts of silver and chocolate to the parents of the bride. Flowers would be part of the

package, but they could be procured in Istanbul. By chance, Begüm's anticipated monogram—B.B.T. for Begüm Bengü Taft—matched that of Julia's mother-in-law: Barbara Bradfield Taft. A silver dish with Barbara's monogram was transported from Washington to Istanbul, together with a box of chocolates bearing pictures of the national monuments.

Once in Istanbul, Julia supplemented the Washington-themed chocolates with some fine selections purchased from the chocolatier in the lobby of the Swissôtel. (She always had great taste in chocolate, developed over the years through study and consumption of the Whitman's Sampler she always received as a Christmas present and honed during her years in Belgium.) Next came the flowers, an enormous arrangement exceeded in its beauty only by the logistical challenge it presented in transporting it from the hotel in Ortaköy across the Bosphorus to the house of Begüm's parents, perched on the hillside above Anadoluhisarı.

Fortunately, help was on hand. Julia's godson, Jack Brown, was conducting research in Istanbul that month. He was given the task of transporting the flowers—by Istanbul taxicab—to the dinner party hosted by Hasan and Beyhan during the first night of the trip.

That night, during dinner under the stars at the Bengüs' home, Julia asked about the itinerary for the next day. There would be a cruise up the Bosphorus, but before that, Julia wanted to make sure there would be a trip to the Grand Bazaar on Sultanahmet, near the famous Blue Mosque and Aya Sofia. She had to purchase a few more things to help “seal the deal” between the families.

The next evening, both families climbed aboard the *Lüfer II* (“The Bluefish II”) for a cruise up the Bosphorus. The weather was perfect. The boat crossed under the Sultan Mehmet II Bridge and made its way up to a small bay, a few turns below the entrance to the Black Sea, and anchored for dinner. At that point, Julia produced a small pouch of henna that she had purchased at the bazaar. Henna is traditionally applied to the hand of the betrothed woman to mark her engagement. The package did not come with instructions for preparing the ointment, but Beyhan’s sister, Handan, with the help of one of the stewardesses on board, was quickly able to turn the powder into a clay-red indelible paste.

Following tradition, the mother-in-law is expected to bribe the bride-to-be to accept her son’s proposal. No chocolates here—this was strictly a cash deal. Begüm held out her hand, fist closed, as Julia presented increasing, but nominal, amounts of money to induce her to accept. (Sometimes, cash is insufficient, and pieces of jewelry are needed to close the deal. Here that proved unnecessary. Although no receipt was kept, it is believed that William was “had” for 10 Turkish lira, about six U.S. dollars at the current exchange rate.) Finally, Begüm opened her hand, and Julia applied a spot of henna to her palm. Her mission to Istanbul was complete.

Will and Julia returned home relieved and happy that the trip had gone well and filled with excitement and anticipation about the upcoming nuptials. But the stars were not all aligned. That September, Julia learned she was battling a progressive form of colon cancer. She was 62 years old and had never had a colonoscopy. “I will fight this like the Taliban,” she e-mailed me shortly after receiving the news.

And fight she did, beginning with the timing of her first chemo session, which she scheduled the week after William and Begüm's wedding on Saturday, November 5. On November 7, a hospital secretary called Julia to say her chemo treatments would start the following day, instead of Wednesday, as Julia had planned.

"How long do they last?" Julia asked.

"Six hours," the secretary replied.

"Six hours?" Julia said. "That's not convenient. I have a board meeting that morning with the Dalai Lama."

The secretary was unmoved. "That is the *doctor's* schedule," she replied. "He only does these chemo sessions on Tuesdays."

Julia was insistent. "I am also attending a lunch with the Dalai Lama and hosting a dinner for him," she said. "I can skip the lunch, but that's it."

The secretary reported Julia's unhappiness to the doctor and called her back: The doctor would start the treatments on Wednesday.

After learning that they would last for weeks, Julia decided that she would spend her "down" time writing a book about the highlights of her career. I offered to help and, over the next year, conducted a dozen taped interviews with her, each about an hour long. Julia concentrated on the intensity and excitement of directing some of the most complex humanitarian relief missions of the last three decades: her role as head of the task force that managed the resettlement of refugees from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in 1975 at the end of the Vietnam War; Operation Lifeline Sudan in 1988; her direction of the

American relief effort during the Armenian earthquake, also in 1988; the Siege of Sarajevo, which started in April 1992 and lasted until February 1996; the crisis in Kosovo in 1998-99; and her trip to Afghanistan in 2001, when she worked for the United Nations.

Julia also talked about her fascinating and enduring friendship with the Dalai Lama, whom she met in 1999 when she was the State Department's coordinator for Tibetan issues and made an unprecedented trip to Dharamsala, high in the hills of northern India, where the Tibetan spiritual leader had established a government in exile.

She shared tapes of televised interviews she had done with ABC's Ted Koppel, PBS's Jim Lehrer, NBC's Jane Pauley and other well-known television personalities. She also provided the names of many government officials with whom she worked and traveled over the years. To my delight, when surfing the Internet one day, I found a lengthy oral history Julia had recorded in 1996 for the Library of Congress (LOC) as part of its American Memory Historical Collection. She had never mentioned it.

Woven together, the interviews, oral history and dozens of newspaper stories about her over the years offer a mosaic of a determined, hard-charging and idealistic woman who not only ran some of the most dramatic relief efforts of her generation but also influenced the debate at home and abroad as the international spotlight moved from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos to the collapse of the Soviet Union to ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. Julia's story reflects the history of three decades of unrest and social upheaval in the 20th century, at home and abroad.

Throughout countless rounds of chemotherapy, Julia kept a full schedule, traveled extensively, spent a year commuting between one coast and the other, agreed to an

interim appointment as chief executive of a large humanitarian organization and planned Julie and Christof's wedding. She coordinated every detail of the event, as if planning a state dinner. When I chose a lipstick red dress for the occasion, she insisted that I return it. The mother of the groom would follow the old adage to wear gray and keep her mouth shut!

On Saturday, June 2, 2007, at the Tafts' 14-acre farm in Lorton, Virginia, Julia took her son's arm and walked down what the family calls "The Staircase to Nowhere," a cascade of long cement steps that lead from the house to a field below, where 200 guests were putting to good use the delicate pink hand fans Julia had had placed on each chair. The temperature had soared into the high 90s, and the sun was searing. But when Julia appeared—elegant in ice blue silk and smiling broadly—everyone broke into cheers, tears and applause. It's not every wedding that the mother of the bride gets a standing ovation!

Or that she shares in an elegant toast from the father of the bride. Julia beamed and her eyes glistened when Will Taft held high his champagne glass and addressed the two Julias in his life. "When we named Julie after her mother, we did so in the hope that she would be endowed with some of her mother's fine qualities, amongst them: loyalty, sincerity, a winning smile and an abiding concern for people who are less fortunate."

During our all-too-brief four years of friendship, Julia and I shared many confidences—about our lives, careers, families and, eventually, after the wedding, our dream of sharing grandchildren! It was a subject we never brought up with Julie and Christof, but we loved to discuss the possibility when we were alone. On our regular

outings—for lunch, movies or just a manicure—we often stopped to gaze into baby store windows and debated which frilly dress or sailor suit we would buy first. In her heart, Julia may have realized that the odds were against her, but she never said so aloud, and she refused to give up hope. Even in her final months, Julia dreamed of one last adventure, maybe a safari in Africa with Will and the kids or another mission for the Dalai Lama.

That was the essence of Julia Taft. She was an eternal optimist. She had run countless disaster relief programs, and she would run this one.

Julia took enormous satisfaction in having her children launched—Maria with a master’s in business administration from Stanford, concentrating on complex deals; William as an attorney with a fine law firm in New York, specializing in litigation; and Julie, with degrees in international relations and nursing, who was following in her mother’s footsteps and would soon be working with refugees in some of the darkest corners of the globe. If only she could have lived to see her first grandchild, Ella Noor Taft, born to Begüm and William on December 4, 2008.

As Julia’s cancer spread and her doctors tried new experimental drugs to slow it down, she railed against the expense of the treatments—some pills cost \$88 each and were so big that she had to crush them with her garlic press—but she took them, if not always without complaint.

In June 2007, in the midst of yet another chemo session, Julia sat down at her dining room table and penned an op-ed piece for *The Washington Post*, criticizing the George W. Bush administration for its slow, reluctant resettlement of Iraqi refugees,

many of whom faced death threats in their country because they had worked for U.S. forces. “What has happened to our leadership on this issue?” she wrote. “No matter your view of the war, welcoming the persecuted and standing by our friends is the right thing to do.”

In mid-summer, I accompanied Julia to Georgetown University Hospital for an appointment with Dr. John L. Marshall, the clinical director of oncology overseeing her chemo treatments. Dr. Marshall told Julia that he would be on vacation for two weeks in August and would see her again on August 28.

“I’m sorry, but I am moving to California on August 25,” Julia said.

The doctor looked up from his papers, startled: “Say that again, please.”

“I am moving to California on August 25. I was planning to go on August 20, but I can wait a few more days.”

“Moving, like moving and taking your bed?” the doctor asked.

“Yes, moving,” Julia replied. “Will has an appointment in California. Will is my husband.” Will Taft had been offered a visiting professorship at Stanford Law School, and Julia had insisted that he accept it.

Undoubtedly, Dr. Marshall had a lot of cancer patients who wanted to pack up and leave at some point, but I doubt that anyone ever actually did so in the middle of such a critical treatment. But he didn’t blink. “And where in California might this appointment be?” he asked with a hint of a smile.

“Stanford,” Julia said matter-of-factly. “We will be in Palo Alto.”

Dr. Marshall told Julia that he would arrange for her to see one of his colleagues at the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) School of Medicine. “I’ll set it up,” he said. And he did.

That fall, I visited Julia in Palo Alto and met her at UCSF, where she was having another treatment. The move had been difficult, but she was in good spirits. “Hey, Sweetie, do me a favor,” she said as I arrived. “Run across the street to that little deli on the corner. I want the double pastrami sandwich on white, and the biggest piece of cake with icing that they have.” She polished them all off!

This was the beginning of a wonderful family Thanksgiving with Julie and Christof at their new apartment in San Francisco. Julia, as usual, organized everyone. At one point we went on an excursion to a tourist trap called the Mystery Spot in the woodsy hills near Santa Cruz, where buildings with tilted floors and slanted ceilings create the sense that the body is defying gravity. Julia had visited the place as a young girl and laughed uproariously as we all stumbled through it.

Julia still wanted to write her own book. She outlined a memoir that would combine the high points of her professional life with her pride in being a wife and mother. She had two titles: “A Decoupage of Disaster Response,” and “A Kaleidoscope of Crisis Response.” She purchased a red leather-bound volume with lined, blank pages and had begun to write in her careful, schoolgirl cursive: “While I neither aspire nor expect to be singled out as a super-mom/super-woman, the path my life has charted has been unusual, no, extraordinary.

“I have been blessed with strong family ties, close friendships and professional experiences spanning a spectrum of academic, governmental, non-profit and international arenas. As I currently face the drama of fighting cancer, it has become a personal goal that I capture the highlights of my life to pass on to my husband and children and to my friends who have been such an important part of my life.”

That’s all there was. Julia wouldn’t admit it, but even if she had had more time and more energy, I doubt that she would ever have had the patience to sit in one place long enough to produce a book. (When I told her so, she stuck out her tongue at me.) Everyone who knew and loved her understood that she would never have been content writing about the circus. She wanted to be the ringmaster. She didn’t want to pontificate about refugee problems. She wanted to go to the camps and reassure the people there that help was on the way.

So this will be, in its way, *our* book, and I will take my cues from Julia, as I always did. It is not intended to be a full biography or a grand history of the programs Julia administered. My objective has been much smaller in scope: to write down the stories Julia delighted in telling family and friends around the dinner table and put them into a short, historical context. Any material in quote marks comes from my interviews with Julia, her Library of Congress oral history, my many interviews with those who knew her and news articles about her work. The newly digitized archives of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have been treasure troves.

There are obvious drawbacks in writing about a friend, especially a member of one’s extended family. It’s impossible to be totally impartial, and impossible not to give a

damn what friends and family think. And the politics can be tricky. But there are pluses as well, the key one being access to loved ones, friends and colleagues who are eager to talk about someone they cherished and admired so deeply. They have given generously of their time, and I accept responsibility for any errors in the text.

Julia was no milquetoast, and she probably had her share of critics. I didn't dig too deeply. A number of her friends encouraged me to write a complete biography, warts and all, insisting that Julia deserved the best. I couldn't agree more. But there are times when it's important to put impartiality aside and concentrate on the essence of a life well lived.

So for this story, picture Julia sitting on the deck of the family's house in Washington, or stretched out on the chaise longue in her office nibbling chocolate, or perched on the screened porch at Indian Springs Farm, iced tea in hand, explaining how the U.S. government became involved in each humanitarian crisis, how she handled the inevitable bureaucratic snafus that developed, how she persuaded skeptical officials in foreign governments to cooperate and how she survived in some of the life-threatening situations she faced.

There are funny scenes, as well as poignant ones. Most of my interviews with Julia were interrupted two or three times by the ringing of her cell phone, which was never nearby. "Oh, where is that damned thing?" she would say each time. Then she would return to the tape recorder and pick up in mid-sentence, exactly where she left off. "This will be my legacy," Julia said in our last official interview. "Well, my kids are my legacy, but I need to leave this for my friends in the field."