JON MEACHAM INTERVIEW 01
THE SOUL OF AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Jon Meacham
Presidential Biographer and Historian
March 25, 2019
Interviewed by Katie Davison
Total Running Time: 1 hour, 34 minutes

START BITC: 01:00:00:00

CREW:

Jon Meacham, take one.

Strom Thurmond and States' Rights

01:00:10:00

JON MEACHAM:

So Strom Thurmond breaks away from the Democratic Party in Philadelphia in 1948 on the States' Rights platform, which was code for segregation. He then campaigns throughout the fall of 1948 on a segregationist platform, basically couched in cold war language, arguing that civil rights, the extension of Jefferson's promise that we're all created equal to previously excluded groups amounts to socialism. It amounts to an encroachment on the true American way, which in Thurmond's view was a segregated way. It was the way of the pre-Civil War era; it was the way of Plessey vs. Ferguson, when

separate but equal was constitutional. It was an attempt to take the country back to where it was before the verdict of the Civil War. And so Governor Thurmond shows up in Charlottesville, Virginia, and gives a speech to a raucous crowd arguing that civil rights is communism. That white supremacy is in fact the natural order of things.

01:01:26:13

Strom Thurmond was a master of using fear to divide and he was playing on the fears of white folks who, in many cases, all they had was that they felt superior to people of color because of the color of their skin. Economically, culturally, they were not getting ahead in the America of the post-war era. And so, Thurmond did all he could to say we know there is one group to blame for everything that's wrong and there's one group to which you will always be superior and we must defend that. And that was people of color. So 1948's a fantastic presidential race. You have four candidates. You have Truman and Dewey as the centrist more or less. You have Henry Wallace as a left-winger, progressive, and you have Thurmond as the right-wing segregationist candidate. So it's really a referendum on almost every sphere of American life. Imagine Henry Wallace is basically Bernie Sanders in this analogy. Thurmond comes up way short obviously. But he wasn't really there to win the presidency, he was there to advance an argument. And the argument was that the Civil War might be lost but white supremacy was not, and by embodying that, by being the true to that point what the Democratic

Party was, the Southern Democratic party was. He was trying to stake out a national platform on what was essentially a regional vision.

Abraham Lincoln and the "Better angels of our nature"

01:03:10:16

JON MEACHAM

Our better angels is a line—the better angels of our nature, more precisely, is a sentiment of Abraham Lincoln's from his first inaugural address. He had begun to write his first inaugural in the upper room of his brother in law's store on Adams Street in Springfield. And he'd called for Andrew Jackson's nullification proclamation and a speech of Henry Clay's, the Declaration of Independence. And he'd come to the end of it and there wasn't a particularly poetic conclusion and so he passed it around to his incoming cabinet and William Seward suggested a phrase, a more elegant ending. Lincoln went in and edited Seward's edit and basically came to the line which echoes even now, that at some point we would be together again when the better angels of our nature were summoned. Lincoln was a prose poet. So much of the way we think about the country is shaped by his language. Better angels of our nature, government for the people, by the people, of the people, forever free from the emancipation proclamation, with malice towards none, with charity

for all. And it's a reminder that language in the presidency matters. That their words if in fact they meet the moment in a noble way can live forever.

Why Meacham studies presidents

01:04:39:08

JON MEACHAM:

Well the presidency is intrinsically interesting. You never have to explain why you're talking about it, because it's ultimate stakes, it's ultimate power. There's a reason Shakespeare wrote about Kings. You know, there's an unfolding drama that is intrinsic because the character of those figures and their actions matter enormously for good and for ill. And so there's a—there's an intrinsic drama and it's the most human of undertakings because you know, I think we tend to think of history as they're sort of these distant figures and they're statues and it's all in an oil painting, but these are human beings. And they have good days and they have bad days. And they're good fathers and they're bad fathers. And they're good husbands and they're bad husbands. Heraclitus said that character is destiny and destiny can also be

translated as fate. And for better or for worse, the American fate has been shaped in many ways by the character of the people at the top.

01:05:57:13

Not entirely by their—their character. Change in America happens when people in power heed or don't heed to whatever mysterious algorithm there is, the voices, hopes, fears, desires, of the people who are powerless. And when those two things intersect, that's how history is made.

The idea that the past was better than the present

01:06:22:18

JON MEACHAM:

Well, nostalgia's a powerful force. We would—there's a natural tendency to think that our own problems are so overwhelming, so complex, boy I bet you know, if only we could be like grandpa or grandma because they didn't have it so bad. You know, things—people came together then. That's my favorite. People came together in the past. Really? Did they come together at Fort Sumter? Did they come together when the isolationists were leading the charge against fighting Adolph Hitler? Did they come together when the Chicago Democratic National Convention descends into violence in 1968? Did they come together when a significant part of the country wanted Ronald

Reagan to be impeached? I mean, I—so there's the sense that the past was easier, our own time is very difficult and the future will be what we can make of it. I understand it. It's the motive force behind things like making America great again that presupposes that the country was once great and now is not and that it falls to this generation to try to lift it back up or this particular group of people.

01:07:39:19

America is great. It's a marvelous, complex, confounding, frustrating yet wonderful country. But it's always been in the process of becoming. The founders understood this. Our goal was not perfection. Our goal was, in the words of the preamble of the Constitution, a more perfect union. And they totally understood that in fact the life of the country would be like the life of a person. That we would be driven by appetite and ambition. We would get things wrong far more often than we got them right. We have proven them correct in that forever. As Churchill once said, "You can always count on the Americans to do the right thing once they've exhausted every other possibility." And we've proven him right. So perfection's not the goal, it's just trying to get it more right. And I think that to pretend that the past somehow is simpler does two things we should avoid. One is it forecloses the possibility of learning much from it because if it was easier, what do they have to teach us if they were walking around in powdered wigs and frock coats and everything was fine, which would have surprised them. The others were not doing justice to the people who sacrificed to get us where we are. We're not

doing justice to John Lewis or Rosa Parks or Frederick Douglass or Harriet Tubman or Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Susan B. Anthony, all the—pick you person who stood in the arena and said the country is not being all it can be if we exclude this group or that group. And those are the people who have truly made us a country worth defending.

The complexity of politics and the Republic

01:09:36:15

JON MEACHAM:

I don't know any people who are all good or all bad, so therefore the country can't be all good or all bad. The Republican model, the government we've underta—the attempt—the system of government that we're attempting to make work here is the most human form of government. Now you would think if I woke you up in the middle of the night and said, what's the most human form of government? You would say, oh, well a monarchy because that's a human being being the government. Actually no, it's all of us. And this is an idea that begins with Plato, it runs through Aristotle, it comes with the Christian West through Augustine and Aquinas. It goes to Machiavelli and it gets to Philadelphia in 1770s and 1780s, really through the Renaissance. And the idea is that a Republic is the sum of its parts. It's why the Founders talked about virtue. They didn't want everybody to behave well though that was, they wanted that. The point was that there had to be a disposition of heart

and mind that would enable them to live together to make what Jefferson called the mutual concessions of opinion necessary to create solutions to given problems for a given period of time.

01:11:00:09

And that's what politics is. It's not about the next 300 years. It's about how do we solve this particular question given the limitations, given what George E liot, the great Victorian novelist called, the dim lights entangled circumstance of the world. Given those dim lights entangled circumstance, how do we get through this? Therefore you manufacture consensus, you seek consensus to create a solution for that period of time. It's always subject to amendment; it's always subject to adjustment. And I think in that way it totally mirrors what human nature is like. I—you know, I—I'm in more need of amendment and adjustment than almost anybody, and so I don't see why the country as the manifestation, the political manifestation of 340 million people should be any different.

01:12:03:06

The public arena is not particularly conducive to dealing with complexity. Evermore so if you want to think about social media, you think about cable news, you think about political figures who now benefit from dividing and not unifying. That in fact they get more purchase, they get more mileage out of losing fights in being able to blame the other side than they do winning

fights. I understand that. My argument is it's not a hell of a lot different today than it has been in the past. And you look back and you look—just look at World War II. The greatest generation, the greatest war. We came together. Tom Hanks once said when asked about why do you make so many movies about World War II? He said, "It was good versus evil and grandpa won." Great cinematic insight but let's remember, we didn't get into World War II until Hitler declared war on us, which was five days after Pearl Harbor, which was after Japan attacked us. So we were not nobly racing toward the burning building to save human rights and democracy and the rule of law in the old world—quite the opposite.

01:13:28:09

It was when they came after us. That kind of complicates it was good versus evil but grandpa won. But that's the way it happened, and I think the more we engage with that conversation, the more we understand that it wasn't so clear cut even then, I would hope that would give us some sense of proportion and perspective in dealing with the problems in our own time. Not in a policy way. But you know what, we barely got it right in the greatest cataclysm in human history. Which is what the second World War was. It begins in one world and by the end of it we have the power to destroy human life. That's a hell of a six, seven-year period. So if you recognize that, that the isolationists were very strong, that America first was powerful, then it gives you I would think some hope that you can—we can find a way to manufacture a

consensus to solve the problems of our own time because they barely did it then.

Charlottesville riots

01:14:33:21

JON MEACHAM:

When the Charlottesville riots happened, when the demonstration happened, the neo Nazi rally and then the death of Heather Heyer who was trying to stand up for what the country is truly about, I knew—I knew but didn't know that there would be some moment in the history of Charlottesville, Virginia, that would have prefigured this because there's always a moment that prefigures what unfolds and the story of race and fear and anxiety and violence is inextricably intertwined with the story of the country. It's not that the soul of the country has been captured by a particular group at a particular time. The soul of the country is in fact this essence in which—which is not all good or all bad but you have your better angels fighting against your worst impulses. You have Dr. King and you have the Ku Klux Klan and our history is shaped by the extent to which those better angels or those worst instincts went out in a given period of time. It was true in the 1760s, it was true in the 1860s, it was true in the 1960s and it's true today.

01:16:00:02

The Sunday of the weekend of the Charlottesville violence, Nancy Gibbs, the Editor of Time Magazine at the time called and said, do you have anything to say historically about the history of hate in American politics. And so I dived back in, started with reconstruction and moved forward. And what you find when you look back is, we shouldn't feel quite as lonely as we tend to feel in the present. We shouldn't feel quite as unique or special. I think that the efficacy of looking back is not to create a narcotic. Oh, well it's happened before so therefore it's all gonna work out. But it does give us a sense of realizing that there are perennial forces in the country that ebb and flow. Right now they're flowing. So how do we get them to ebb a little bit more. We're never gonna get rid of them on this side of paradise but I think that history gives us the ability, should give us the ability to see proportionately what is the scope and nature of our crisis. How have people in previous generations addressed those crises and are there lessons to apply.

The American Soul

01:17:21:15

JON MEACHAM:

So, there are two ways to make this argument, right? You can argue that there's an American idea that's under assault from one side or the other. In this case, from the right in our own time, that the idea of fair play, that the

generosity of spirit is something that has defined us and that we need to recover that. My view is that the creed is pretty self-evident, so to speak. That was Benjamin Franklin's edit of Thomas Jefferson. So when you can steal from Benjamin Franklin, who's editing Thomas Jefferson, it's always a good thing. We know what the idea is. What we don't always understand is to what extent can we apply that idea, realize that idea. And that struck me as an idea more of the soul than of the mind. Because I—again, I think we sort of get that the country is stronger and better when we apply Jefferson's, "We hold these truths self-evident that all men were created equal…" when we apply that more generously, we grow stronger. That's the lesson of history.

01:18:32:04

That's a matter it seems to me of this—these competing forces. We know the right thing to do most of the time. In our lives, we know the right thing to do. But for a whole host of reasons, we don't always do them. So what is—what is that zone like? What do we call that? Well, we call that the soul. And in Hebrew and in Greek, the world soul means breath or life. When God breathes life into man in Genesis, that word can be translated as soul. When Jesus said, greater love have no man than this than to lay down his life for his friends, life can be translated as soul. So it's vital, it's essential. And it's in my view, maybe they're saying it sort of like this but I don't think it's all good or all bad. I think that we're all in a fallen world struggling ideally to do what's right and falling short far more often than we're succeeding and that the life of the country has the same collective soul. And my own view is that if we get

it right 51% of the time, it's a hell of a good day. And we don't always. We lose a lot. And that's why the framers I think deserve—not being reflexively worshipful of a bunch of dead white guys, but those dead white guys understood that we were frail and fallen and given to sin and shortcoming and they created a document that actually enabled us to take account of those appetites and ambitions and keep the thing going.

01:20:23:06

There's a reason it's so hard to get anything done in this country, it's because they were fearful that we would be so busy doing bad things that they wanted to make everything difficult. And I think if anything, experience has proven them right. The constitution is fundamentally a religious document. That's gonna make heads explode across NPR land but it is. It's based on an understanding of human nature that we are imperfect and we are selfish and ambition must be made to counteract ambition, as it says in the Federalist. And Hamilton and Madison who later ended up wanting to beat each other up totally were as one on this point. Madison said, "If men were angels, then no government would be necessary." But because they weren't, we needed a government.

01:21:14:05

My argument about the soul of the country is I'm sure informed by the fact that I'm a hapless Episcopalian, which is redundant. But it's also based on a historical sense that we are all driven more by appetite, ambition, than we are by our better instincts most of the time. And that has a religious

component certainly. It's also though a matter of historical observation. The whole history of the world proves this and I think that it's an insight—the American experiment is based on an insight that is not fundamentally religious but it is certainly an insight that was informed by a religious understanding

American ideal vs. American soul

01:22:01:02

JON MEACHAM:

The American idea is that everyone is born equal, all men are created equal, that everyone has the right to rise or fall on their own merits, that we guarantee equality of opportunity if not of outcome. Everyone has what Lincoln called a fair chance for their industry intelligence and enterprise to rise in the world. That's the idea. That's the ideal. I think that it's more productive to look at the soul of the country, which is how we actually act or do not act on making that idea reality. The country is entirely shaped by a battle between the ideal and the real. To what extent do we make real our professed devotion to an idea of equality and liberty under law.

The pursuit of happiness

01:23:05:04

JON MEACHAM:

One of the most interesting phrases of the founding is the pursuit of happiness. John Locke and others had talked about life, liberty, and property. Jefferson changes that to pursuit of happiness. His idea of happiness was, yeah it was about everybody being cheerful but more fundamentally it was about how do you create a civic sphere in which there is sociability, there is neighborliness, there's a sense of mutual regard. Because without mutual regard, making those mutual concessions of opinion was going to be very difficult. And so the pursuit of happiness was not simply an individual endeavor, it was also about the good of the whole. It was a—there was a civic minded aspect to that. I would argue that the pursuit of happiness has always been more theoretical than real. Because the man who wrote those words didn't have much interest in the hundreds of people he enslaved to pursuing their happiness. He wrote those words on a lap desk that had been made by an enslaved man. So Abigail Adams in the same season had written to John Adams, remember the ladies, hoping for some equality of treatment and he didn't.

01:24:30:08

So we've always been in the act of failing as much as we have succeeded in terms of enabling everybody to pursue happiness. I think you could argue that by the 20th century, there was a kind of prevailing cultural narcissism that has become more dispositive, but I'm hesitant to be too hard on modernity when the men who framed that as a goal were so self-evidently limited in their application of it.

Americans at their best and at their worst

01:25:18:05

JON MEACHAM:

At our best, Americans believe in fighting for fair play. They believe in more generously interpreting and applying what became the most important sentence written in the English language, "That we are all created equal and are endowed by our creator certain inalienable rights." I think the entire nation rises or falls on how generously we've applied that Jeffersonian sentence—how widely have we opened our arms. If we have widened the definition of the mainstream, if we've widened the understanding of—in the applicability of equality, then it's an era worth emulating and commemorating. If we've constricted access, if we try to take away certain rights, it's an era worth learning from but avoiding. And so I don't think—if you ask anybody what era would you like to go back to in American life to go live, I think the test should be if you would like to go back to say, the 1920s, you probably when you think about it don't want to. Because we were—the second Ku Klux Klan was on the rise. You know, there was limiting immigration. There was fallout from the First World War. You—you don't want to do that because that was an attempt to—that was an era that was marked by a limitation of the mainstream, not an expansion of it. I think

we're at our best when we expand access to the mainstream. I think we're at our worst when we try to constrict it.

Perennial forces

01:27:10:16

JON MEACHAM:

There are certain forces that ebb and flow in American life. There's racism, nativism, isolationism, extremism, a lot of ism's. They rise and they fall based on a sense of individual security. If you're secure in your own life, then you're probably less likely to want to keep people out or you'll have less reason to need someone to blame for an economic problem, a sense of lost opportunity, whatever it is. When you have economic anxiety, you have anxiety about the future. There's a natural human tendency to want to look outward to find someone to blame, find some explanation as opposed to looking inward and realizing that you have to do something to adapt in these changing circumstances yourself.

01:28:10:16

So it seems to me that the forces that are shaping our own moment—isolationism, nativism, racism, are the result of an economic and cultural anxiety on the part of a lot of folks who look a lot like me, who believe the country is slipping away from them. The country's not going to look like them going forward. And that's disorienting, it's scary. It's then the job of the

leader, if you want to go for our better angels to say, don't point fingers, we're going to get through this together. Or you get a leader who helps you point. This is basically as if we have elected Huey Long, Charles Coughlin or Joe McCarthy or George Wallace president. A figure that who is more interested in dividing than uniting. A figure who's more interested in raising a clenched fist than extending a hand. A figure who's more interested in tightening his grip than in opening his arms.

01:29:22:21

And there is a significant part of the country for a whole host of reasons that respond to that message. I think a lot of the forces that are dividing us today are perennial American forces. We've seen them before, we'll see them again. Here's where things are different. Basically from 1932 or so 'til about 2017, we had a political era in this country that was defined by a figurative conversation between Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal and Ronald Reagan and the Reagan Revolution, which was more about the market than the government, the New Deal was more about the government than the market. Every president from FDR through President Obama governed on a field that had been demarcated by those positions, the relative market and the government and the relative projection of force upon commonly agreed upon foes and rivals. Where things are different now is that that conversation has stopped and the task of the next few years in American politics I think is gonna be do we restore that conversation or has a new conversation begun? And that we just don't know the answer to yet.

Politicians are more often mirrors of who we are than molders

01:30:43:21

JON MEACHAM:

Politicians are far more often mirrors of who we are than they are molders. And I think when people say they're unhappy with American politics, when they say oh I wish the system were different, they can actually make it different. And if enough of us wanted it to be different, it would be. Michael Bloomberg, the former Mayor of New York, I once asked him, "What have you learned in politics?" He said, "I've learned three things. Politicians want to be re-elected. The second thing they want most is to be re-elected. And the third thing is to be re-elected really big. That's their incentive. That's their unit of commerce, is the preservation of power and the perpetuation in office and they will do that insofar as they possibly can and if that requires reflecting their voters, then that's what they'll do. And right now they are reflecting those voters. You have people who are not particularly interested in getting 55 or 60% of something. They want to get 100% of it. Insofar as they think this way. I mean this is a very sophisticated conversation. Most people actually check into politics very occasionally. And what therefore the task of political leadership it seems to me is to tell a story that is assessable even if you're only checking in every once in a while.

Relationship between presidents and the people

01:32:29:02

JON MEACHAM:

There's a myth that the founders didn't anticipate that the presidency would become so powerful. They fully understood it. A great political scientist in the 19th century once said that what we managed to do in America was re-establish the most ancient form of government, the elective kingship. And there's simply in the nature of things this emotional and political connection to the person at the pinnacle of power. We—there was a Scottish traveler who came through in the age of Jackson who wrote that in America, people seem more interested in the apostle than the creed. That the power of the leader, the character of the leader seemed almost more interesting than the details of the policy and I think there's a lot to that. Our eras—FDR once said this, that great presidents are those who came along at periods where there were stories and issues that required definition in the life of the nation. And so Washington creates the office. Jefferson coming from an anti-federal government view uses the federal government to double the size of the country and launch exploration, therefore in a way legitimizing government for people who had been skeptical of it. Andrew Jackson really becomes the first American president from his sphere of life. The first six presidents were either Virginia planters or Adams from Massachusetts. Jackson was born on the periphery of white society, he rises to the top, he shows that there is a—there is a role for popular leadership.

01:34:14:01

Lincoln saves the union. Franklin Roosevelt saves capitalism and then wins World War II. President Eisenhower leads us through nuclear struggle. President Kennedy does the same thing. And so on. Presidents tend to be remembered less for giving the people what they expected of them but for surprising us. So FDR ran on a balanced budget in 1932 but he realized as he put it that we needed what he called a spirit of bold, persistent, experimentation. Try a method and if it fails, admit it frankly and try something else but above all, try something. President Truman was from a border state. Truman had relatives who wouldn't come to the White House because there was a Lincoln bedroom in it. He was coming from—he had a lot of confederates in his family and yet he becomes the first president to address the NAACP and integrates the military, sets really a lot of the civil rights legislation in motion.

01:35:27:20

Eisenhower comes in as the conqueror of Hitler, seen as a great warrior chief and yet not a single soldier dies on his watch in eight years. Lyndon Johnson, from a segregated state who has not been a champion of civil rights in the senate becomes president and finishes the work of Lincoln. Nixon goes to China. Ronald Reagan comes in saying that he's a great cold warrior, and that the Soviet Union reserves unto itself the right to lie and to cheat and it seeks world domination, and yet he ends the cold war. The presidents who reach beyond their base of support are the ones that we remember fondly. And so

what does that tell us? It tells us that it's a big complicated country; that people who think they want one thing often don't know what they want or don't want until the history and reality and politics presents them with a choice. And so I think that the presidency remains the central actor in our political life. But the president can only do as much as the populist makes possible. And Lyndon Johnson could not have done civil rights if Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks and others had not done what they did. Woodrow Wilson could not have pa—could not have signed woman's suffrage if the suffragists had not done what they were do … and lord knows Abraham Lincoln could not have done what he did with the emancipation proclamation without the work of those who were fighting for abolition. So there is this mysterious interplay where presidents tend to make things possible only after possibility has been presented to them. The art of American citizenship is that our hearts and minds matter and if the government is in fact a reflection of who we are, then who we are matters. And it's not gonna be a quick thing. It's not a tweet, it's not an email, it's not a quick action. But there is a mysterious tide in how public opinion works and presidents who shape that opinion and react to it are the ones who end up I think living in history in a positive light.

Presidents' temperament and character

01:38:14:20

JON MEACHAM:

Well, there's a marvelous scene right after he's become president in 1933. FDR goes to call on Oliver Wendell Holmes and Holmes talks to him and then he leaves. And he says—he compares him to—Holmes had known TR and Holmes said of FDR, "Third rate intellect, but a first-class temperament." And temperament matters. Becau—think of the scope and scale of these jobs. I mean it's just incredible. Presidents don't have to be perfect to be effective. In fact it sometimes helps that they're not. There's actually a selfish instinct, there's a selfish aspect to doing the right thing. If you want to be seen as a great president, it requires often taking a short term hit in order to do that and so one of the things I always think about is, I wish they would all think about the portrait test. What do they want us to think about when we look at their portrait? It actually is very effective because very few of them can imagine a world where we would not be staring adoringly at their portrait, so it actually is kind of an effective device.

01:39:32:15

The character of the person at the top matters enormously because in the end, as President Kennedy once said, you really do stand alone. He once said, no one has a more clamorous counsel than the President of the United States. But in October 1962 when he had to decide about whether we were gonna have Armageddon or not, it was really his call and it was his temperament, his decision which created a zone in which we could get to the right place. I don't wanna overstate it. They aren't kings. There is this connection to us and

just to what extent do they follow us and to what extent do they lead us. But on the margins and the margins matter enormously, their character, their temperament, their ability to admit mistakes; their ability to convince us of something is hugely important.

01:40:49:01

One of the reasons I do what I do is that I was a journalist for a long time. And it was amazing how all-knowing and omniscient and correct journalists were and if only these people behind the desk who actually had power and responsibility understood what we understood, they would do better. Well it turns out maybe that's more—maybe life is more complicated than that. My sense is that people in the arena are dealing with their own shortcomings, the circumstances of the moment, the crises of the hour. They're dealing with it through the prism of their character, through their temperament. And most of them you hope are trying to get it right and are doing the best they can. And sometimes they get it right and sometimes they get it wrong but they are basically trying to do the right thing. Big question about whether the incumbent fits into that. But I think most people—and it's fascinating too, 'cause I see a lot of former presidents, how people tend to forgive and see complexity where they once saw things more simply. So the story of George W. Bush is a great example. I've watched audiences in very liberal enclaves who would have wanted him strung up in 2003, 2004, 2005, actually listen to him and actually come away dazzled. "I didn't know he knew so much, I didn't know he was so charming, I didn't know he could speak so clearly." And what

makes me think in part of the goal of history and biography is maybe if we could pre... if we could load that up beforehand that maybe these people are not always wrong. It's complicated because sometimes they are and eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. And I think this is just the nature of it.

01:43:01:16

They certainly understand it that way. They know that… let me put it this way. On the question of temperament and character, think about it for a second. What if in your job, in your life and you went around and 49 or so percent of the people you saw wanted you fired every day. What's the psychological toll of that? I mean, even if you have won a big victory, only 51% of the people you're ever gonna see or in your constituency are thinking, you know what, I want you there. They're on a knife's edge. And I don't think it's that complicated, I don't think it's outrageous for people to think how they would react in a situation. It requires empathy, hugely important aspect of not just leadership, but citizenship. Republics don't work if we're not able to put ourselves in someone else's shoes and see the world in that way. So why people tend not to put themselves in the shoes of the most powerful person, but instead just want more from them or want something different, part of the reason that I do what I do is to try to lower the blood pressure that goes up when that happens. If you put yourself in their shoes, I think you have a better chance of dealing with the crises of the present more calmly. Because you know they're not marvel superheroes, right? They're not all powerful. President Obama is pretty funny about this. He says, "No issue that

reaches your desk is easy because if it had been, it wouldn't have reached your desk."

Empathy and understanding history

01:44:51:19

JON MEACHAM:

I think the more history you know, the more empathetic you should become because you suddenly realize that maybe the people you thought were all good aren't, or the people you thought were all bad aren't. Empathy is the capacity to put yourself in someone else's shoes to feel a connection to them and to appreciate the world as they see it. Without history, I don't know how you could be empathetic. In our own lives, the zone there is our own experience. We would want someone to be nice to us, so therefore we are empathetic. I think in broad political terms, if we see people as imperfect because we're imperfect, then we're able to manage our expectations. And I'm not saying we should lower them. I'm not saying we should not expect great things from people to whom we give great responsibility. To whom much is given, much is expected. But if you—if you are watching the news, if you're obsessed with your phone and whichever side you're on and you're just perpetually outraged, it's not a wildly productive way to spend your life based on the historical record.

01:46:19:08

It's easy for people like me to say, "Be calm, Woodrow Wilson was bad too." You know, I understand the limitations of this argument and I understand that there are people who believe that the fundamental values of this country are under assault. So that requires an active and engaged but I would argue historically literate citizenship and seems to me the system's working pretty well. The rule of law is holding. If you are on the other side of this argument. Not the other side, let me say that again. Let me put this in a different way. History is not a narcotic and it's not a bedtime story. And I'm not saying because Woodrow Wilson was terrible and Donald Trump's terrible, therefore we're gonna be fine because we were fine after Wilson. There's nothing guaranteed about the American experiment. It's amazing we're here 242 years on. It could all end in a fiery crash. My own view is that the institutions are in fact more powerful than the whims and deficiencies of one single person. But it is a stress test. We're making it hard as possible to keep—to keep things going. And partly—and I understand the frustration … people will say, oh you keep saying everything's going to be fine, you don't know that. And it's easier for you to say, you're a white man. All of that's true. I am a white man.

01:47:46:15

But I think that if you had been standing in the political arena 100 years ago, you would have been worried about Wilson cracking down on civil liberties. You would have been worried about the Attorney General of the United States launching warrantless raids. You would have seen the rise of the ACLU as a

reaction to this. You would have seen lynchings. You would have seen a rise of the second Ku Klux Klan. Three to five million Americans fighting immigrants and people of color. If 50 years ago, 1968, 47 Americans died every day in Vietnam. Not captured, not wounded. Died. Dr. King is murdered, Senator Kennedy is murdered. Lyndon Johnson who had won 60% of the vote four years before is driven from the race. The Chicago Democratic Convention ends in horrible violence and on Election Day, 1968, the Governor of Alabama, George Corely Wallace carries 13.5% of the popular vote and five states on an explicitly segregationist platform—in 1968, 50 years ago. So I'm not saying therefore that 50 years from now, people will walk through the age of Trump in the same, way but I think they will.

The five elements that support the American experiment

01:49:19:01

JON MEACHAM:

A president can undermine democracy. A president could in the republican experiment, lowercase 'r'. But I think that the institutions, rule of law, congress, and the press and all of us I think are the bulwarks against that. By my count there are about five elements in the political spectrum that determine whether we continue or not. There's the presidency, the press, the people, the congress and the courts. And I think as long as two or three of those are rowing in the right direction, we're okay. We are testing that

without question. But one of the things we have to be careful of is just because we disagree with the direction a certain president is going, doesn't mean it's undemocratic.

01:50:22:00

Quite the opposite actually, because democracy is by its very nature a fluid set of decisions and inclinations. America's really more often than not a 51/49 nation. Sometimes we get as high as 60% thinking one thing for another but that's pretty rare. So again, this is why I think history matters. If you know that World War II was opposed by 40% of the country, if you know that Franklin Roosevelt always had 40% of the country against him. If you know that Joe McCarthy had a 34% approval rating after he was censured and fell from power, it seems to me that should give you some sense that there are gonna be a lot of people who disagree with you and your task then becomes organizing the people who do agree with you or trying to get people who disagree to agree with you. The former is probably more likely, and that's just the way it's supposed to work. It's not supposed to be easy and it's not supposed to be this sense that the middle way is always the right way. The middle way is not always the right way. It wasn't the right way on slavery, it wasn't the right way on suffrage, it wasn't the right way on Hitler. I'd argue it wasn't the right way on cold war totalitarianism. There was a path that we should have taken and a path that we shouldn't, but in each of those, we took the wrong path for a long time. And so the story of the country is how do you

find your way to that path and bring enough people along with you so that we're on it.

The role of changing technology

01:52:13:20

JON MEACHAM:

People I think want social media or cable news to be the death knell of democracy. But you know, slavery was pretty bad. The battles over the nature of power in the republic, for which we fought—over which we fought a civil war. The nature of civil liberties in the 20th century both during the First World War and during the McCarthy era. Every generation has some media step of evolution. Every—every generation has some communications leap presumably forward, sometimes it's just backward. But when we were a written culture, Jefferson and Lincoln wrote quickly and well. When we were a radio culture, Roosevelt and Churchill understood the radio. Television, Kennedy and Reagan totally got it. So … and at each point in that process, you had people worrying about the future of self-governance because the means of communication were becoming so much more complex. It's no coincidence that 1920s a huge moment in history because it's the first time a census proves—shows that there are more Americans living in cities than on farms. Radio becomes commercially available in 1921. If you were in an American

householder at point before 1921 and 22, you totally controlled the culture that came into your house. It was kind of amazing when you think about it.

01:53:43:12

You decided what newspapers you're subscribed to. Maybe your kid showed up with a book from the library you didn't know about, but that's about it. Suddenly you buy this radio and these people in these far-off places like New York and Hollywood, which you've never really heard of are affecting directly the life and views of your family. It was incredibly disorienting and it was part of the chaos of the 20's. I think social media's very much in that zone. Propaganda's getting more sophisticated, people are becoming more open to either quickly expressing opinions without thinking about them or absorbing the quickly expressed opinions of others. That's a problem. One of the things I say which parents always clap if they're in an audience is that, just because we have the means to express an opinion quickly, does not mean we have opinions worth expressing quickly. And teenagers are busy expressing their opinions so they're not listening, so they miss that part.

01:54:50:13

But I don't think Twitter's going to destroy democracy. I don't think it's helping. But I think that ultimately this is about the users, not the technology.

It's unquestionable that the rise of individualized technology has brought back a reflexive partisanship. That was very much a part of American life prior to the middle of the 20th century. People forget, but almost all

newspapers were partisan organs until the early 20th century. Let me be very clear. There were not many slave owners in South Carolina subscribing to William Lloyd Garrison's Liberator. They weren't interested in, hmm we should weigh the other side, we should think the other views. That just didn't happen in the same way today that people would only subscribe to a certain feed of people with whom they agree with.

01:55:54:13

I'm not saying because it's happened before therefore it's okay now. But I do think we need to tap the brakes on blaming the technology and the means of communication for an underlying problem. And the underlying problem is a perennial one. It is that we tend to be reflexively partisan as opposed to being reflectively partisan. Partisanship is not a bad thing. It is a part of the nature of free government. If it weren't, we would be an autocracy. So if nine times out of ten, my view dovetails with this party or that party, that's fine. It's the tenth. And America happens on the tenth example. If you get up and you're on the other side of the aisle and before you even get up, I think, "Oh Jesus, here we go again." And I just write it off and I don't listen and I'm composing my tweet attacking you before you even said anything, that's a problem. That's not being true to what the American Revolution was about, which was that reason had to take a stand with passion in the arena. But if you get up and finish and I think, "Jesus you're wrong." That's okay because I listened to you. And there's gonna be a time when you're gonna say something and I'm gonna

think, you know what, that's not so crazy. And I think that America happens in the moment where you say, "You know what, that's not so crazy."

Partisanship and Reason vs. Passion

01:57:24:04

JON MEACHAM:

The social sciences suggest that we are more partisan, more reflexively partisan than we have been in the past. Part of that is we didn't have the science before. Are we more partisan than we were in 1859? I don't know. But that's kind of interesting and not dispositive. It is clear that our partisan attitudes have hardened. And they've done it for all kinds of reasons, which are familiar: there's Gerrymandering, there's the media stuff you're talking about. So we are more partisan today. There's an interesting number. Something like 50% of democrats approved of President Eisenhower's job performance. Kind of amazing when you think about it. And it went steadily down to the point where no Democrat approves of Trump, no Republican really approved of Obama, that's a problem. And that's my argument about reason. It's that you know what, you have to be open to contrary views actually being right. And I would argue that there's a basic role for humility here, which is, do you really think you're always right? Really?

01:58:40:08

In your whole life, there's nothing anyone can offer that might be better thought out and might have more salience, might be more rational? Maybe people feel that way. And it's easier to feel that way, right? But we're gonna get out of this moment if we begin to see … if you're a conservative, this is the way I put it: if you begin to understand that reason was the original insight of the founding, that in fact the idea that which started with Gutenberg and moved through the European enlightenment, the scientific revolution, the entire reorientation of the world from being organized vertically to being organized more horizontally. If you understand that the American Revolution was about reacting to data in a non-reflexively partisan way, not superstitiously, but rationally. If you're a conservative, you should appreciate that that's what—that's where we started with this. If you're a liberal, you love data. You say you love science. So what if … don't go crazy, what if Donald Trump is right about something? I know, there's massive heads explode all over America but it's not impossible, so why wouldn't you want to deal with things rationally, one to another as opposed to reflexively denounce or support without thinking about it. I don't understand that and that's my argument, is that lets at least judge it one by one.

02:00:28:00

There is no prelapsarian moment of great rationality and that somehow or another Donald Trump had made us irrational. He's exacerbated it, but he's working with materials that he's found, stumbled across them. I just—I just don't … I think if you don't see the country as a series of near misses, you're

gonna render yourself crazy, because you're gonna think that everything was okay before this particular moment, and that's not true. Doesn't mean it's not bad now. But the people who now believe that the republic is ending are the people, many of them, who thought that Ronald Reagan was as Ronald Reagan himself said, a combination of Ebenezer Scrooge and the Mad Bomber. There were people who thought that George Herbert Walker Bush was a hapless WASP. There were people who thought that George W—that Bill Clinton wasn't liberal enough. They thought that George W Bush was a unilateralist. They thought that Barack Obama wasn't liberal enough. Well now all those guys look like Cicero, and so shouldn't that create humility about one's certitude about what's happening now? It's not but it should.

02:02:02:18

I think there's an argument to be made that reason is utilitarian. It's therapeutic, because what if you suddenly were able to evaluate everything that happened on its own merits as opposed to actually just pre-deciding and being outraged. What if you had to think about something before you were outraged? You'd at least get a minute or two before you were outraged so that might be healthy. I'm not trying to be Mr. Rogers meets CSPAN here. I'm really not. And I'm not saying it's all gonna be fine. I think the country survives, I think the institutions of the country survives, but I think it's on all of us to do that. And my argument is that if we don't arm ourselves with the historical understanding of how complex and fraught our history was, we are not going to be able to think clearly enough to react in real time to save the republic.

Hope vs. Fear

02:03:06:18

JON MEACHAM:

Fear is a natural result of a feeling that the world is closing in. That doors that once were opened are closing or that prosperity that once might be yours has been taken away or is no longer possible. Fear, I think Edmund Burke said, "There's nothing so unreasoning as fear which I think." And when you think about that, it makes sense. If you are fearful, if you believe it's the loss of what you love, which I think is the way Aristotle defined it, the loss of what you love. If you feel you're on the edge of a cliff the whole time, you're not gonna react rationally. You're gonna be thrashing to stay up there. And so fear creates an emotionally fraught—it's almost like an asteroid field of anxiety. Hope's different. Hope is pointing forward as opposed to pointing at someone. Hope is more unifying than dividing. It's an act of faith and it needs to be justified. You can't just … I'm not arguing that we all should be Panglossian and think that everything is gonna be fine. But if you undertake a particular course of action with a sense that in fact tomorrow can be better than today, you are more likely to act more generously and with less anxiety than if you are fighting for survival. If you are advancing across the Savannah, then you are doing so in the hope that something great is on the other side of it. If you're scuttling across the Savannah like this, because you feel your enemies are about to shoot you with arrows, you're not gonna get there as quickly.

02:04:59:12

It's simply the case that leaders and generations that have acted with a sense of faith in the future and a hope that tomorrow will be better than today have actually ended up doing better than those who have reacted out of fear, because if you are hopeful, you're looking down the road. If you're fearful, you're looking around like this. And you can see farther when you look down the road.

Progress in American History

02:05:31:00

JON MEACHAM:

It's wonderfully western and American to believe in progress. And it's one of those things—it's one of the fun things about history, is it feels … the idea that you would have to talk about it seems silly because it's so natural that of course there's progress. Well actually, no, think about it, I mean as a philosophical idea. Why would you think that tomorrow is going to be better than today? Not every country, not every people has done that. There's a wonderful intellectual history to progress, and I love it. It begins with Prometheus, the Myth of Prometheus, that we got fire, so we were able to begin to move forward. It comes through the Christian West through Augustine, the idea that you are perfecting … there is a journey toward

perfection beyond time. Very much an enlightenment era idea that there is a capacity of the mind to discern and learn and create a fuller embodiment of everything we can be. Of greater happiness, of greater prosperity, of greater liberty, whatever it might be. And in many ways, the American Revolution is the political embodiment of the idea that progress is an inevita—not inevitable, but progress is a real thing, that there is a journey to be taken and that that journey will reach destinations that are worth the trouble to get there.

02:07:04:05

There are a couple of different spheres of a way to think about this. FDR's Groton Headmaster Endicott Peabody, the rector as he was called, used to say, "There's a line in human affairs that goes up and down but ultimately is upward." Dr. King borrowed a phrase from the abolitionist Theodore Parker, "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." There is a presupposition that there is forward motion. That the work of the universe is forward and history's defined by the speed with which we stay on that … and the direction in which we stay on that path. Is that wrong? Is it possible that we can go backward? Absolutely. But what informs the journey forward is the belief that there is a path forward. And I think the alternative is worse. I think if you're thinking that the best we can do is to tread water and hold where we are, then all the incentives that have informed history, and this is historically based, right? So what is medicine about, what is science about but discovering that which will make life discernibly better? So, the whole arc of

the enlightenment, the scientific revolution has been forward. Politics is not always that.

02:08:39:06

So the idea that we are a shining city upon a hill, which is one of my favorite stories because John Winthrop, the Puritan, uses the phrase 'city upon a hill' in 1630 in a sermon called "A Model of Christian Charity". President Reagan started talking about a shining city on a hill. City on a hill, the original phrase comes from "The Sermon on the Mount," which means that Reagan managed to improve on Jesus, which I once said to Mrs. Reagan, I said you know, President Reagan … to the point where I've actually heard preachers say, "As our Lord said, we shall be as a shining city upon a hill." And I said to Mrs. Reagan once, "You know, President Reagan improved on Jesus." And she said, "Well yes, that's the kind of thing Ronnie did." So may we all someday be loved as Nancy Davis loved Ronald Reagan. But anyway, so the shining city on a hill, the idea that we are special, that we are the New Israel, which is a phrase that begins before the American Revolution. There was a huge scope of thought in pre-revolutionary America that not only were we the New Israel, but that the millennium was going to come here, that that's how special this was. That God was coming back to earth right now. Instead we got George Washington, but you take what you can get.

02:09:58:20

So the idea that we are special has had great pluses and great minuses, like everything else. We have projected power around the world to secure and

defend democratic values and we have done so usually without classic imperial conquest. That's the good side. Bad side is that sometimes we do things and we think they are divinely ordained so therefore they must be okay. It's all about the balance between our sense of ourselves as by and large a force for good and our ability to recognize that we are as fall and frail and sinful as the next and how do you balance that. In this difficult era, this difficult moment, I think the fact that so many people are engaged, that so many people believe that democracy is in peril, that the republic is at stake, that what Washington called the sacred fire of liberty might be going out, that people are so ready to fight for those things, is a good sign. It's a sign that 50 to 51% of the country, whatever it is, doesn't want the institutions of which they might have been skeptical beforehand by the way, one of the ironies of history, they want those institutions to endure. And look, here's—very straight forward. There is something in the American spirit that bounces us from guardrail to guardrail. So I'm gonna name five of the most different people you can possibly imagine. George Herbert Walker Bush to Bill Clinton. Bill Clinton went on Arsenio Hall to play the saxophone in the 1992 campaign.

02:12:07:08

President Bush thought Arsenio Hall was a building at Yale. I mean he had no idea, it was a totally different generation, totally different thing. So you went from Bush to Clinton. Then you go from Clinton to George W. Bush, two very different baby boomers. Then you go from George W. Bush to Barack Obama,

which I thought would be the largest contrast temperamentally I would see in my lifetime until we went from Barack Obama to Donald Trump. Think about that for a second. In a ten-minute period, on the Jan—on 20th of January 2017, we went from Barack Hussein Obama being the President of the United States to Donald Trump, and it's the same country presumably. So we go back and forth.

Equality of opportunity in America

02:12:56:16

JON MEACHAM:

Napoleon is alleged to have said that geography is destiny. There's no question that the scope and wealth of the United States has been essential. The frontier was essential. The idea that as Huck Finn said, you could light out for the territories and reinvent yourself was an essential American myth. The idea as Lincoln said that your son could come and be President the same way that my father's son did. All of that is unique because of the scope and scale of the country. The fact that you could in fact go become a stand up—a yeoman farmer, you could go do—make your own way. I don't mean to be sentimental about it. There are plenty of people who did not have that opportunity but by and large, there was more opportunity here than any place else. And seems to me that the nature of the country has been the belief

that one of the dumbest sentences ever written was by Scott Fitzgerald, who said that there are no second acts in American lives, which is 1000% percent wrong. There are nothing but second acts in American lives. And so seems to me that one of the goals for the present going forward has to be the preservation of this chance—the capacity of the country to have equality of opportunity, not of outcome. But to have that fair chance that Lincoln talked about.

The importance of interdependence between nations

02:14:45:10

JON MEACHAM:

One of the lessons of World War II in the immediate aftermath was, as both FDR said and Truman understood, that we were a very small world now and that it was more like a neighborhood. Airpower had brought us incredibly close together. Which is interesting because we think that the Internet did that but in the middle of the 20th century, you had American presidents who were thinking about the interdependence of nations. FDR said in his last inaugural that we had learned that the only way to have a friend was to be one, that the world was so close together now that we were like a neighborhood. And so what happened in one place mattered to us all. I think

that that understanding that Tennyson was right, that we're a part of all that we met, all that we've met is one that falls … the moment that insight feels very 21st century, and I think there's something worth avoiding that I sometimes think of as the narcissism of the present. The idea that suddenly this is like the Miranda in the Tempest, you know, the … oh brave new world that has such people in it, you know, and their father says, "Tis new to thee." We've been dealing for a long time with a world that feels very close, that what happens in a cave in Afghanistan matters in lower Manhattan, for instance. True now, and I think that what we have to do is figure out what is our responsibility, both to ourselves and to those who want to come here, and how do we project ourselves around the world in order to try to be a force for good as opposed to a force for ill?

How change happens in America

02:16:35:02

JON MEACHAM:

Change in America tends to come when something that the powerless have been fighting for finally attracts the attention and the action of the powerful. So whether it's abolition or suffrage or civil rights or economic opportunity or making the softer, the rougher edges of capitalism. Whatever it might be, it almost always begins among the many and finally reaches the few. There are counter examples, but by and large, the presidents we revere are ones who

simply have listened well, and I think that's an absolutely essential element of leadership at the very top. And it's not just presidents but it's people who are comfortable, people who don't struggle day to day. To whom much is given, much is expected. And part of citizenship is leadership.

Meacham's writing process

02:17:42:06

JON MEACHAM:

I'm just leveraging dorkdom. The great thing about history is you often don't know what you don't know. And so David Halberstam had a great line. I miss David. He used to say that a good nonfiction work is like a liberal arts education. It should take about four years. And you spend a couple years reading and then a couple years refining. What I love doing is try to find a moment that feels serene and unified. And then go actually find out about how dis—screwed up it was. Because…and you're never disappointed by that. So you think about 1948, we've won the Second World War, we're unified against communism. Well no, we're not. Strom Thurmond's out running for president saying let's segregate again. You look at 1965 and you think, my God, the new liberal order is here. Lyndon Johnson has built the great society; he's won 61% of the vote. He's about to lose more than 40 seats in the house, and Ronald Reagan is about to become Governor of California. Every action has a reaction. And so what I try to do is take the seemingly

straightforward and explain the complexities that were in fact in play at that moment.

02:19:15:02

My view of history is that it should be approached narratively because that's how it happened. And if you can tell the story of how certain events unfolded, of how certain people acted when they were in the maelstrom of the present, then you're able to come as close as possible it seems to me to capturing why they did what they did and how they did it. And if you know how and why, of both noble and ignoble moments, you then have the capacity to either replicate or avoid. But if you don't—it seems to me if you don't enter the stream of time with them, if you stand a bit apart and judge like this, that has its role of course, but I don't see that it's quite as useful. I think what's useful is the power of story to remind us that it's a damn miracle we've gotten this far. And it's probably gonna be a damn miracle if we keep going. But what's the story of the damn miracle.

Interpretations of the past shed to shed light on the present

02:20:33:10

JON MEACHAM:

I don't believe that there's such a thing as a definitive biography. I guess stuff can be authoritative, but biography can be no more definitive than life is without a definitive nature. I think that History with a capitol 'H' is a good starter, I guess to put it that way. But what's most useful in my mind is, can you have a fair minded, fact-based interpretation and retelling of the past in order to possibly shed light on the present and the future? And there are people who disagree with that. There are people who have different views of history and biography and they don't think we can rip people out of their context and put them in ours. And that's true. But I think to some extent, the moral utility of history is not for us to feel self-righteous about the past as Arthur Schlesinger used to say, but to tell the story of how frail and fallen human beings made their way through the twilight of events and transcended their limitations just enough to leave us a more perfect union. I think Abraham Lincoln is fascinating not because he was perfect and heroic, but because he was imperfect and barely heroic. And if Abraham Lincoln can be barely heroic, then we need to work really, really damn hard to get there ourselves. The past has been shaped not by perfect people or by titans or by giants but by people like us who at some critical moment managed to do the right thing and if they can do it, then we can, too. And I don't think we do ourselves any good by either looking down at the past condescendingly or looking up at it sentimentally. I think we learn the most from it when we look at it in the eye.

History as a record of the decisions that have been made

02:23:03:02

JON MEACHAM:

History is we hope a record of decisions made and decisions deferred. And to my mind, I wouldn't want to write about something that—where there wasn't an alternative course of action, because that's the inherent drama of it. So there—the nature of crisis, the nature of history is that people made a decision in real time to pursue path x as opposed to path y and that made the world either better or worse. And why did they pursue the path they pursued, why did they decide not to pursue that one, and to some extent, what would have happened if they had gone with the other one.

Why *The Soul of America* book ends in 1968

02:23:55:16

JON MEACHAM

Yes. I think I ended the argument in 1968 or so because anything more recent tends to fall more into journalism and present memory than history and people bring their own preconceptions in a way that is interesting to talk about but I may not have much light to shed on it. It was also, it was about a century of American life. It was really from Reconstruction to the Voting Rights Act into the cataclysm of 1968 and I think I can—I can offer immodestly … the argument I can offer is, this is what I think about what happened long ago. I know you know what you think about what just

happened so let's just wait until that falls into the long-ago category and then we'll talk about it.

The Paranoid Style in American Politics

02:24:55;09

JON MEACHAM:

Hofstadter—Richard Hofstadter wrote *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* in the early 60s. Basically, the idea being that there is a recurrent tendency in American life to blame some, usually an elite, but some group that is undermining the way of life for everyone else. It's a threat. So his context in 1964 was the John Birch Society. That the right wing, anti-communist right wing believed there was this cabal of new dealers and squishes who were working for the Soviets, that there's always this sense that there is some group, there is some force that is just beyond your control that's trying to take everything away from you. And it is one of the great insights in modern historiography, because almost every era, almost every moment there is some example of that paranoid style.

Dealing with the perennial forces in American life

02:26:05:22

JON MEACHAM:

Well from a kind of a global point of view, there are really three or four dominant themes, right? There's male supremacy, there's white supremacy, there's economic opportunity and there's our relationship with the rest of the world, whether are we isolationist or are interventionist. And all those issues continue to unfold. Those are the perennial questions. They all tend to—the first three anyway touch on equality. Are we—are we a country that can reasonably and rationally say that everybody has a chance if they work hard enough? Have we opened—are there enough ladders for people to climb up or have we taken those ladders away? And if we have, should we rebuild them and put them back? And I think that's really the defining question for this era, is gonna be was the post-World War II middle class, which was an extraordinary achievement, was that an aberration? And does the complexity of the changing demographics of the country make it ever harder to provide that opportunity to everyone?

02:27:37:20

Is there a white backlash against the changing demographics that in a way will bring down the whole house? And I think the next generation of political leadership is gonna have to figure out a way to argue that there is a path to prosperity and prosperity is absolutely essential to the health of democracy and to the security of liberty and individual rights. No democracy has ever survived without broad base prosperity. It has to be broad based. And so this is economic, it's political, it's cultural, and I think it just requires—not just, that sounds minimizing. It requires an understanding that the best we are is

when we live up to the declaration, and that you can sort of judge, there's a good yardstick at hand. Does this advance equality and the possibility of opportunity or does it reverse it? If it advances it, let's do it. If it reverses it, let's not. The United States is trying to do something that nobody's ever done, which is have a pluralistic, multi-ethnic, democratic republic, over a big expanse of ground with an 18th century constitution governing it. It's really hard. Why wouldn't it be hard? If it were easy, somebody else would've done it.

Segregation: the American Apartheid

02:29:23:11

JON MEACHAM:

Well, I talked about segregation in my native region as Apartheid because that's what it was. It was a legalized system which consigned people of the non-majority race to second-class citizenship, which is exactly what Apartheid was. And I think if we sugarcoat it, if we pretend—also if we pretend that some way or another the Civil Rights Movement is over, then we're not recognizing the reality all around us.

Growing up in Chattanooga and the idea of the Lost Cause

02:29:58:13

JON MEACHAM:

You know, I grew up in Chattanooga Tennessee on a civil war battlefield. I could find little minié balls when I was a kid. Interestingly I didn't get a lot of lost cause-ism. There was … part of it was in Chattanooga anyway, the monuments were almost all union monuments because they won and they were the only people who had any money to buy monuments after the war. So I was never taught, oh if only Stonewall had lived, blah blah blah. But I certainly encountered it culturally. And I understand, when you look at the history of the 1960s and 1950s why people of a certain disposition gravitated to that myth, because the people in the 1860s had gravitated to that myth.

The link between the Charlottesville riots and the Lost Cause

02:31:00:07

JON MEACHAM:

The immediate occasion for the Charlottesville violence was about Robert E Lee and the statue there. And part of the iconography of the Lost Cause was that these generals were defeated by forces beyond their control, northern material, massive force, and that somehow or another these are martyrs to a cause that was noble. Problem with that is that that cause was about human slavery. It was about not fulfilling the aspirations of the declaration and those officers took up arms against the Constitution, unlike Washington, unlike

Jefferson, unlike Jackson, who were slave owners and had their issues obviously, but who were devoted to the Constitution as a more—as an experiment. If General Lee had had his way, that experiment would have ended and I think that's a bright historical line in all of this. There's no question that Charlottesville was about the lost cause meeting this terrible strain of neo-Nazism. This idea of white nationalism, that somehow or another white people are under siege from the changing demography of the country and that therefore they are somehow justified to take up arms to defend a country that in their minds needs defending.

02:32:32:14

If you're looking for a sign of where at least the neo-Nazi world thinks they are in relation to the president, David Duke said, "This is why we elected Donald Trump. This is why we voted for him, was to create this white nationalist world." And again, it's perennial, but a lot of this thought hoped, prayed that it had become much more of a fringe, it had become much more of the past. It's a reminder that the battle goes on.