JON MEACHAM INTERVIEW 03
THE SOUL OF AMERICA
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Presidential Biographer and Historian
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Interviewed by Katie Davison
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Fear emerges during times of anxiety

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JON MEACHAM:

Sure, fear emerges in hours of anxiety. When you're on the edge of a precipice, you're fearful of falling over and you become less reasoning. Edmund Berg said, "There's nothing so unreasoning as fear." There are enormous structural shifts going on in the world. Globalization has created great economic opportunity for a lot of folks and diminished economic opportunity for a lot of folks. And whether you're on the winning side of that equation or the losing side, tends to determine where you are politically. The 2016 election, the 2020 election in many ways is shaped by this anxiety, can I, whoever I am, thrive in a global world? In a world where there are fewer walls, where there's diversity, where definitions of identity are changing. It's just a different world than it was say, in 1955. And as people try to find their footing in that world, politicians who appeal to fearful instincts tend to do well.

Lack of trust in the government and economic struggle as the primary causes of the 2016 election.

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JON MEACHAM:

I think there are two numbers that define where we are. One is 17%. That's the percentage of Americans who say they have trust in the federal government to do the right thing some or most of the time. That's down from 77% in the mid-1960s. So that's a huge trust gap. The other is $130,000. That's the number that some economists believe a family of four needs in annual household income to lead what they would think of as a classic post World War Two, middle class life. You save a little bit of money, grown-ups have a car, you go on vacation, that's a huge signifier of middle-class life, $130 thousand a year. Annual income for a family of four is about 55, $56 thousand right now. So, in that missing income gap and in that trust gap, you have the ingredients for a populous moment like this, where someone who says, "Those people are to blame for the fact that you don't have this money ... those people are to blame for the fact that your government has sold out." That's the recipe, that's the way this has happened.

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Progress involves inclusion and equality

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JON MEACHAM:

What's at stake in this political and cultural moment is the nature of the democratic republic, lowercase D and lowercase R, but for 240 some years, we have sometimes to the good and sometimes to the bad, made progress. The question right now is, can we progress in order to widen our arms, open the way to the mainstream for more people? Because as a clinical matter, and this isn't partisan, as a clinical matter, we've always grown stronger the more widely we've opened our arms. The more generously we've interpreted what Thomas Jefferson wrote when he said, "All men were created equal." He didn't include all men then. He didn't include women, he didn't include blacks, he didn't include Indians, indentured servants, we can go on for two or three hours about who he didn't include. But every era of American life that we want to commemorate, that we tend to want to emulate, are the eras in which we have broadened that definition. What's at stake right now is how do we make the ideal evermore real. We are retreating from the American ideal. Our reality is farther away from the American ideal today than it was three or four years ago. So, the question at this moment is: Will we continue to pursue a more perfect union? Or will we settle into a constant state of tribal warfare, fighting each other instead of opening ourselves up and competing globally?

How individual actions affect us as a whole

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JON MEACHAM:

The nature of free government is that we're all part of this. And so our individual dispositions of heart and mind matter. Government politics is not just about thinking about the right thing or deciding on a policy. It's about the entire core, the entire core, the entire soul. Socrates called it the animating reality; Augustine and Aquinas talked about it as the heart of who we are. If we don't try to do the best thing, if we don't try to follow those better angels, then we're going to choose the worst instincts. And if we do that, if enough of us make that wrong choice individually, that has a collective effect. And I'm not setting up some sort of idealized view that we're all going to decide to do the right thing tomorrow, and therefore we're going to balance the budget and have Medicare for all—this is not about that.

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It is about thinking, "You know what? I can help you out today on the off chance that tomorrow you'll help me out." Altruism doesn't have to be simply about doing the right thing, you can also be quite self-interested. And the covenant of a republic, the covenant of a democracy is that we take care of each other because you may need taking care of today and I may need it tomorrow and you're more likely to help me tomorrow if I've helped you today. It's a pretty basic insight and yet I think our political climate rewards this Hobbesian struggle of all against all, that we're just at war all the time. If you're not on my team, you're wrong. If you're not on my team, you're evil.

That is a perfectly good political starter, it'll get you power for a while but it's not going to endure well because it's a big complicated country, a lot of forces, a lot of factors that go into shaping what we do, who we are, and if we don't at least try, try to say, "You know what, I think being generous in this moment makes sense." If we don't try to do that, then we're certainly not going to get there.

1865-1965 exemplifies the struggle between our worst instincts and better angels

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JON MEACHAM:

The hundred years between Appomattox and the Voting Rights Act is a vivid case study in the struggle between our worse instincts and our better angels. It is the give and the take of attempting to do the right thing but always losing ground, always people in power holding on more tightly than they need to, to hold that power and excluding others. Until, we actually realized that including others makes us stronger and you see that from the end of the Civil War through the Civil Rights movement in vivid display. We became the most powerful nation in the world, in the history of the world after 1945. The drama of the middle of the 20th century was about our immense power and our willingness at last to recognize what had been adjudicated during the Civil War. And so, the idea that listening to our better angels is a sermon or a homily or a trope, I think is wrong. This is simply the historical case. Our history is one of opening our arms, it's slow, it's tragic, it's bloody, we haven't done it enough but in an imperfect, in fallen world we've done a pretty good

job. The best job? No. But you find me a moment in history that you want to go back to and I will, I almost promise you that that moment will be one where we have opened our arms and not closed our fists.

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That's a matter of history, not opinion, that's history. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It's not that complicated. Do you want to be treated the way you treat other people? That's a pretty good test. Does that sound homiletic? Maybe, but a republic is about human relations. F.D.R. said, "We have to master the science of human relationships." And so, a republic depends on mutual trust, mutual concessions of opinion, mutual respect. Not simply tolerance, but respect. You can't simply say, "Live and let live." I don't believe that, I think that there has to be a common ascent to an idea that in fact there are different ways of being in the world, we will respect that and hopefully the sum of our parts lifts us to a stronger nation and lets us fulfill whatever destiny there is. It sounds very grand but it has the virtue of being true.

Enlightenment Era

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JON MEACHAM:

The Enlightenment was about the discernibility of truth by observation and experience and reason and not simply receiving truth from someone in authority because it had always been said it was so. So kings and popes telling you this is the way the world is, that was more or less a pre-

Enlightenment view. Enlightenment was about, "You know what? It looks as though the earth may not be the center of the universe and so maybe the sun is..." and that's reason, that's Enlightenment. And that changes the cosmology, that changes how people see the world. The Enlightenment is about the capacity of reason and experience to hold sway over superstition and reflexive tradition.

Equality as a radical idea when the country was founded

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JON MEACHAM:

My view is that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, as flawed as they are, are essentially Enlightenment era documents. They were driven by this idea that individuals could alter their station in life and not simply be born into an order that was immutable. All men are created equal. That was a radical idea. Because kings and popes and prelates and princes were supposed to be more equal, they were supposed to be more powerful, they were supposed to be deferred to either by an accident of birth in the case of a monarch or an incident of election in the case of a pope, for instance. They had control over everything. So The Enlightenment idea was, no more people actually have the capacity to determine their own destinies. It wasn't as widely shared as it should be, it was very limited at the time, but the whole story of the country has been expanding that definition. Has been including more people in that promise, has been making that ideal real. When Thomas Jefferson sat down to write, "All men are created equal..." he was doing so not

simply because he was a bright, young politician in Virginia, though he was, but because he had been engaged in this trans-Atlantic conversation about the changing nature of reality. What had grown out of the reformations, what had grown out of Gutenberg, what had grown out of this translation of sacred scripture into the vernacular, what had grown out of the Enlightenment, the scientific revolution. This idea that truth was not handed to you from on high but truth was accessible to everyone.

Empathy as a necessary trait for leaders

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JON MEACHAM:

Empathy is a key component of a good leader because it's the key component of a good person. And as the Greeks taught us, character is destiny. President Kennedy knew that if he didn't put himself in Nikita Khrushchev's shoes during the Cuban Missile Crisis, things could have gone awry. It's a fundamental principle of strategy and global thinking that you always let your opponent have a way out. You let them keep face. Isn't that true in your life? It's true in mine. And so why wouldn't it be true in the lives of nations? George Herbert Walker Bush in November of 1989, the Berlin Wall, the most vivid symbol of the deadliest standoff in human history, falls. President Bush won't give a big speech, won't go to Berlin, people in the Oval office, reporters were pounding on him, democrats were pounding on him saying, "you don't understand the historic nature of this." He totally understood the historic nature of it. He was putting himself in someone else's shoes. He was

putting himself in Mikhail Gorbachev's shoes, the head of the Soviet Union who was trying to manage the end of that empire. He knew that, Bush knew, that having an American president as he once put it, "sticking it in your ear," I think he meant eye but that was President Bush, stick it in your ear, would complicate Gorbachev's task. And so he thought how would I feel if I were in his shoes? I would feel that I wanted the American president to be dignified and restrained. He was dignified and restrained. Christmas day 1991, the Soviet Union disappears without a shot being fired.

The danger of nostalgia

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JON MEACHAM:

The danger of nostalgia is that if you think everything was easy twenty minutes ago, then you do two things that I think are worth avoiding. You foreclose the possibility of learning from the past because if it was so easy what is there to learn? And secondly you don't do proper honor to the people who fought so hard to get us to where we are. So if you're John Lewis and you've nearly been beaten to death on the streets of Alabama, that was not some wonderful Edenic moment. Was Bloody Sunday this great moment where everything was all together and everybody was happy? Not if you're John Lewis and Hosea Williams getting nearly beaten to death. So why be nostalgic about the past? We have to look to the past, we have to learn from it, but we learn from it because of its complexity not because of its simplicity. "Make America Great Again!" To make America great again suggests that

there was a nostalgic moment where everything was great and that's where we should be. Find me that moment. Find me that moment where America, everything was perfect. You won't be able to. So, to make America great again is the purest exercise in nostalgia and it's dangerous because there is a greatness in America, I love this country but you have to love it with its imperfections and its sins and its derelictions, as well as, its triumphs and it's victories. That's a much more complicated understanding of the past than simply to make America great again. Nostalgia is a narcotic. It dulls our senses to the complexities of the past, and I think it's a dangerous way to look at the past because it irons out the complexities and without understanding the complexities of the past we can't learn from it and if we can't learn from it, what the hell are we going to do now?

Joe McCarthy's allegations about communists

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JON MEACHAM:

It was Lincoln's birthday, 1950, Joe McCarthy goes to Wheeling, West Virginia at the McClure Hotel, gives a speech saying he has the names of 205 communists in the Department of State. He then starts this campaign that's at once executed in the Senate through different committees, through different investigations, but mainly in the newspapers, mainly on the radio. He is the master of making the sensational charge, often with very little basis to it, and the press amplifies it. The United States Senator is saying there are communists we must report this. For four years, he used both the Senate and

his platform as a Senator to create this hysteria that the State Department, the Army, the Federal Government, General Marshall were all part of a broad communist conspiracy that created fear and anxiety at a time where the Soviets were getting the bomb, they were a legitimate enemy of the united States. What McCarthy did though was create hysteria where there needed to be a conscientious and careful campaign against the Soviet Union.

Joe McCarthy and the press

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JON MEACHAM:

McCarthy understood the newspapers, he understood the media of the day. He understood that headlines spoke louder than the details. He would have loved twitter. He understood when the deadlines were. He understood when the reporters wouldn't have time to check something. He would call press conferences just to get his side out and it was this ongoing story. It was almost a reality TV show, the problem is it was real for the people caught up in it. He needed a villain, he saw himself as the hero, he used the newspapers and radio to tell this story of struggle. This Manichean struggle where he, Joe McCarthy, was going to save America from communists.

Margaret Chase Smith as one of few who spoke up against McCarthy

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JON MEACHAM:

McCarthy's political base was a source of fear particularly for other Republican senators but also Democrats. Prescott Bush, George H.W. Bush's father, spoke out against him, but in a very modulated way. People weren't sure, people in politics weren't sure how wide and deep this anti-communist base was. And McCarthy took advantage of that. McCarthy gave the impression that he was leading this vast army. His other fellow senators weren't sure how big that army was but if it was big they sure as hell didn't want to run afoul of it, which is why Margaret Chase Smith's courage is so remarkable. Very early on, Margaret Chase Smith gives a speech called the Declaration of Conscience, where she talks about the violation of fair play, the violation of American norms that you simply couldn't hurl charges without evidence, particularly if you were in public office. She only got six co-signers. She was dismissed as "Snow White and the Six Dwarves." But she was courageous and she was first.

Dwight Eisenhower and Joe McCarthy

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JON MEACHAM:

President Eisenhower was very wary. He had failed to defend General Marshall, George Marshall, his former Chief of Staff, commander in World

War II against McCarthy's charges purely for political reasons, the 1952 campaign. Big scholarly debate, about how was Eisenhower a shrewd operator behind the scenes. My own view is that the truth is somewhere in between. Eisenhower was new to politics; he didn't fully understand someone like McCarthy. He didn't have McCarthy's in the military. He did have demagogues who were whipping up shadowy public opinion. And so, I think that Eisenhower took his time. And I think that that's one of the few significant black marks on President Eisenhower's record. Eisenhower argued that every time you mention McCarthy, it elevated him. And that's a tricky thing, right? So, at this distance we kind of want Eisenhower to denounce McCarthy. Eisenhower's judgment in real time was if I attack him, he becomes more of a figure. That's a tough one.

Consequences of McCarthyism

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JON MEACHAM:

There was an enormous number of lives that were wrecked, careers that were wrecked because of these charges. There were black lists. The irony of course is that he found a couple of dentists in the Army. The danger of McCarthyism was there was a real anxiety, there was something to worry about. It was worrying about the Soviet influence in the United States was a real thing. But he wasn't really interested in that. He was interested in using it as a means to power. McCarthy wasn't interested in the end of fighting

communism. He was interested in the means of fighting communism, because the means made him more popular, made him more powerful.

Measures taken by the press during McCarthyism

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JON MEACHAM:

McCarthy rose on screaming headlines: “Reds under the bed.” He fell when some reporters, including Edward R. Murrow, began assessing the validity of those claims and not simply saying, "Here's the senator saying this..." What the reports would say is, "The senator has said this, but he has no evidence." So in the midst of the McCarthy scare, Palmer Hoyt, who was the editor and publisher of the Denver Post issued a statement, a policy saying, "We are no longer simply going to report what Joe McCarthy says unless we can confirm it. Unless we can actually advance the story. We're not going to be a megaphone, we're going to be a filter." Hoyt's view was widely discussed, huge debates in newsrooms about what to do. It's the same kind of debate that goes on today. Just because someone in power says something crazy, do you have to report what that is? If you report it, do you say it's crazy or does that somehow violate the neutrality of the news? Hard debate then, hard debate now. If you're a journalist today trying to figure out what to do about a demagogic figure who makes outlandish statements, studying the McCarthy era is instructive because you had people of good will who were trying to figure out, how do we assess the validity of what this person is saying and not simply passing along the claim?

The fall of McCarthyism

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JON MEACHAM

Sunlight is a great disinfectant. It's a cliché but clichés are clichés because they're true. McCarthy rose in a print and radio era. He fell in a TV era. When people could see him, when they could actually see those hearings late in the drama of 1954, they realized, you know what? That's not who we want to be. And the fever began to break. It takes a long time. It took four years for McCarthy. Watergate took two and a half years. When people saw McCarthy in action they thought, "I don't really want to be part of this." Thomas Jefferson said, if he had a choice between having a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, he would take newspapers without a government. Seems to me that the informed citizen and journalists, historians, voters, all of us have an obligation to look at a situation whole, try to understand why people are doing what they're doing, what we should be doing and how do you maximize the chances of getting to that right result? In the case of Joe McCarthy, the right result was to shut this guy down because he was chasing ghosts, he was wrecking people's lives, he was creating anxiety and fear at a time when we needed a pretty united front against what was an existential threat. And I think when Palmer Hoyt, when Edward R. Murrow said, "This is what we think the truth is," they were living up to the best tradition of those better angels. They were telling the truth as they saw it and the people could accept it or not accept it, but I think passing along claims of those in power without assessing the validity of those claims, that's propaganda, that's not journalism.

Lesson of the McCarthy Era

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JON MEACHAM:

The lesson of the McCarthy era is we go on benders in America. And you wished we sobered up quicker, but that was a moment, more than a moment, it was four years, a long time, and I think people have to realize that when they're in the midst of something they hate and they think it's never going to end, it might not end, but in the past it has. So how did it end? It ended because people like Ed Murrow, people like Palmer Hoyt, people like Margaret Chase Smith, people like Prescott Bush, said, "No we don't want, that's not who we want to be. It's who we are, but it's not who we want to be." And so, they push those forces into abeyance for a time. And that, in this world, is a win.

Joe McCarthy and Joseph Welch during the Army-McCarthy Hearings

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JON MEACHAM:

McCarthy's investigating communists in the Army. The Army hires a counsel, Joseph Welch. Joseph Welch has an associate. The associate had some connection to a socialist organization. McCarthy goes after the young guy and that's when Welch steps in and says, "Have you no decency, sir? At long last, have you no decency?" Because McCarthy is picking on this young lawyer who just happens to be there as part of this representation team. Joseph

Welch gave voice to what people had felt but not said and that's how history turns.

Joe McCarthy violating the system

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JON MEACHAM:

Joe McCarthy violated standards of fair play, due process, basic decency. He did it and thereby gave a bad name to a good cause, in my view. Anti-communism was a totally legitimate force. But by overreaching, by demagoguing, by dragging innocent people through the mud, he trampled on the very values that he was purporting to defend. And so the question you have to ask is at what price do you defend a system when you're violating the best of that system in its own defense? He targeted people in the State Department, people who worked at the United Nations, educators, artists, actors, writers.

Major events in the Civil Rights Movement that swayed President Kennedy's opinion

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JON MEACHAM:

You have the Brown decision in 1954, declaring separate, but equal no longer a constitutional principle. You have the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, when Rosa Parks refuses to get up. You have Martin Luther King's emergence. You have the Little Rock Crisis of 1957 over integration. You have

a rising level of incidents of violence, of protests, of the Civil Rights movement adopting nonviolent principles, but then reactionary white violence against that. It begins to culminate, in some ways, in 1963. George Wallace stands in the schoolhouse door in Tuscaloosa trying to prevent, unsuccessfully, the integration of the University of Alabama. You have Dr. King, in August of 1963, delivering the "I Have A Dream" speech. In September of '63, you have the murder of the four little girls at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. All of these incidents have a slow cascading effect the opinion of the country, and honestly, the opinion of President Kennedy, who was a northern liberal, from the northern liberal wing of the Democratic Party, anyway, and was the head of a party that was very much divided on this question. Southern white Democrats were for segregation. The liberal wing of the north was against it, and Kennedy straddled that for a long time. Finally, after the crisis in Alabama in June of '63, he gives the great speech saying that, "Civil Rights is as clear as the Constitution, as old as the scriptures. It is a moral issue."

Lyndon B. Johnson's conversion on civil rights

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JON MEACHAM:

Nobody represents ideal leadership, but Lyndon Johnson's conversion on Civil Rights is pretty close. He was from a segregated state, Texas, he had not been a strong Civil Rights advocate in the Senate in the 60s. Partially because of his national ambitions, he became more liberal on the issue. Without

Dallas on November 22nd, 1963, it's hard to imagine that the Civil Rights legislation would have unfolded the way it did. Johnson seized the moment. In the aftermath of the assassination he decided that the presidency was for a big bold action. He wanted to do the big bold things other people might now. And pushed the Civil Rights bill through in '64. Manipulated, cajoled, wheeled and dealed and got it done. The mid 1960s is a controversial period in American life. Because of Vietnam, because of the Great Society, there are many different views of President Johnson and of the legacy of that period. About this, however, I don't think there can be any debate. In 1964 and in 1965, Lyndon Johnson took enormous risks to act on the climate that had been created by the incredible courage of the powerless.

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Johnson was not like Fortinbras at the end of Hamlet coming down and making everything right. He was, as a president often can be, he was marshaling the forces of those who had risked everything and, in many cases, paid the ultimate price. Had died in this cause. I think the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act taken together in '64 and '65, represent the high-water mark of closing that gap between the American ideal and the reality of American life. And that's as close as we've come in many ways, to bringing the ideal close to the real. And it was a flawed President who did it, but it's an example of what concentrated acts of citizenship and protest and struggle can do when they intersect with the attention and the skill of those in power. If America wants to get on track, if America wants to do some big things about education, about climate, about economic inequality, looking at '64 and '65, and what President Johnson did in concert with and because of what

enumerable citizens whose names we don't know, what they had already done. You can do a lot worse than to look in 1964 and '65 and see how even in a complicated, ultimately fallen universe, you can make progress.

George Wallace

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JON MEACHAM:

George Wallace represents the worst of us. He was reactionary; he was a segregationist deep into the modern era. He manipulated and fanned the flames of fear. He did so we can't see into people's hearts, somewhat cynically. How much of his platform he believed in his heart? I don't know. At critical moments in the struggle to bring the ideal and the real closer together, George Wallace embodied the forces of reaction versus the forces of reform. And America, at her best, is about reform, not reaction.

Looking at the past to understand the present and shape the future

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JON MEACHAM:

I think we have to be in conversation with the past in order to understand the present and shape the future. And if we look back, let's find the moments where we made progress, where we became more perfect, where we made Jefferson's sentence more real. And when we find those moments, let's learn from them. The past is not perfect, there's not some happily ever after we're

going to get to and there wasn't a once upon a time. But the nature of history is the nature of all of our lives. It's how do we get to 51 percent? How do we do the right thing just enough for the time? And I'm not saying you should only be 51 percent, but I've got basically all of human history on my side. Since we first got out of the caves and started hitting people with rocks, we have been driven by dark forces. Dark forces are perennial. The good news is that the forces of light can also be perennial. And let's just see how we can get that side to win a little bit more often. The world moves so fast, particularly now, that if you can pause for a moment, and put what's unfolding in this moment in context with what's happened in the past, that's a contribution. That's not to say that every moment has a precedent, although Shakespeare thought it did, the Bible thought it did, there's nothing new under the sun. But if you can make a coagent argument that there are things to be learned from the past, then that's an argument worth making, I think. And it's not dispositive. I'm not saying that... I'm part of a huge orchestra, chorus of voices who are talking about the country and how we got to be this way and what we might do next. And there are writers doing it, journalists doing it, historians, biographers, politicians, filmmakers, people are telling stories because they care about them and if you're lucky enough to find a way to make a living telling the stories that you care about, sign me up.

Meacham growing up in the South

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JON MEACHAM:

The South is the most complicated American region, seems to me. Southerners always think that. We've been really good on some things and really bad on others and we are driven by story—partly because there's nothing else to do. I think that the South has an enormous amount to teach the country because we have been given to such extremes. I'm pretty convinced that I wouldn't be doing what I do if I hadn't grown up where I grew up, where you had these vivid emblems of where we'd been. Whether it was the Civil War battlefields or John Ross' house for the Cherokee Nation, you could see the struggle to create a more perfect Union. And it was tangible. It wasn't intellectual. It was right there. And I think Southerners have a particular, not unique, but particular appreciation of the past. Faulkner was right, he once said, "The past is never dead, it isn't even past." And I think that's true.

How Meacham faces criticism about being a white privileged man

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JON MEACHAM:

People have said to me, "You're a white privileged man, telling us everything is going to be okay. And so, I feel, not to be overly personal about this, but I feel very much to whom much is given, much is expected. I've been incredibly

fortunate, and my reading of history, this is not a partisan point, my reading of American history leads me to say that we're stronger the more open we are. And it's not an ideological point. The fact that it sounds ideological tells you that we're in a difficult moment. But, I've been incredibly lucky and I think that there's a certain, I don't mean to sound overly grand, but I think there's a certain obligation to use that good fortune. I'm not feeding the hungry. I'm not healing the sick. But, I do know a lot about dead people. And what those dead people say, what their experiences say, is life is better the more open we are.

The Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement

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JON MEACHAM:

The Civil War and the struggle for Civil Rights are the most vivid manifestation of this struggle, unquestionably. 750,000 people died in the Civil War. The Civil War was, as Lincoln said, "Our fiery trial." And the Civil Rights Movement was trying to finish up what had been left undone because of white reaction. Because of a president from my state. Because of Andrew Johnson. And it took too long, it's still unfolding, it still defines, in many ways, who we are. Taylor Branch, the great Martin Luther King biographer, talks about how color defines even the act of vision—it's how we see. And I think it's incumbent on us to, whether you're a Southerner or not, to figure out what is it that creates the greatest good for the greatest number and what

brings that ideal and that real closer together. And my reading of history is that the more generous we are, the stronger we get.

Meacham's inclination to write about the Civil Rights Movement

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JON MEACHAM:

When I was in my 20s. Late 20s. I wanted to write a book about the reporters who'd covered the Civil Rights Movement and the more work I did on it, the more I realized they weren't the story. The story were the people on the streets, and in the Delta, and on the buses and, on the Edmund Pettus bridge. They were the ones to whom attention must be paid, as Arthur Miller put it in a different context. And so, what I wanted to do as I went through things, is I realized that there wasn't a volume that said, here's the best literary work on this movement. And in many ways the Civil Rights Movement was made possible by television and photography and that's how we see it, even now. But some of the greatest writers in American history, white and black, male and female, wrote about this extraordinary struggle, this crucible moment, and I felt there was an opening for a volume that simply put that together. I like to say it's the best book I ever xeroxed. My sense of the argument about that book was that it was the great domestic drama of the 20th century. And it had already receded into myth, that it was a fairytale: that Rosa Parks didn't get up, Dr. King gave a speech and everybody was happily ever after. And, when you climb inside these things, you realize that it's so difficult, it's so complicated. Every victory is provisional. Every step forward you're at

risk of being pushed back. And so that was very much part of that. I think I did that book 20 years ago, more or less.

Meacham becoming a presidential historian

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JON MEACHAM:

I was on Jury duty and I was bored. I was in New York City and I was reading a book called *Five Days in London* by John Lukacs. Wonderful book. Little book about the week in May of 1940 when Churchill really came to power and made things happen. And there was a footnote in the book about that Roosevelt and Churchill had to exchange 1,200 letters or something. And had spent more than 100 days together during the war. And those numbers jumped out at me because 100 days together, I think it ended up being 113—that's a lot. So they clearly had to like each other. I was struck by the amount of time they spent together and wanted to understand what was it like when these two monumental figures were in the same room together. The other thing that drove that was, I was in journalism then, and every time something happened, no matter what it was, whether the President was Democrat, Republican, didn't matter—we criticized it.

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And we were nostalgic. We were like, "Oh if only George W. Bush and Tony Blair could be like Roosevelt and Churchill." So part of my question was, I wonder if when Churchill and Roosevelt were around, people were saying, "Wow, if only they could be like Woodrow Wilson and Lloyd George." And it

turns out, yeah, kind of. When you read the journalism of a period, there's never a moment where they're saying, "Oh my God, this is the greatest thing that ever happened, thank God they're here." Or there's rarely a moment like that. And so, if even the Second World War was marked by chaos, unhappiness, near misses, what could we learn from that? What could we learn from the provisional nature, the complicated uneven nature of that moment? And if even that was uneven and complicated, then of course our time is the same. And so, what's there to learn from looking back?

Books that influenced Meacham

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JON MEACHAM:

Well the most important books to me, when I was growing up. There were three or four or five. One was *The Wise Men* by Evan Thomas and Walter Isaacson. *All the Kings Men* by Robert Penn Warren. *The Last Lion* by William Manchester about Churchill. James MacGregor Burns' two volumes on Franklin Roosevelt. Michael Beschloss' *Kennedy and Roosevelt* and *The Crisis Years.* These were all books that were about big moments, but the human drama of those big moments. And so I didn't wake up and think I'm going to write about presidents. But, I did wake up and think I wanted to write about important stuff. And if you write about those in power, you've crossed that hurdle at least. You never have to explain why you're writing a book about an American President.

Writing about President Andrew Jackson

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JON MEACHAM:

Well Jackson, I started writing in the height of George W. Bush's Presidency. And you had a president who was very much focused on his vision for the country, very much focused on executive power, very much focused on changing the arc of the country in the way President Bush was. I got a letter from President Bush, he read the book when he was in the White House and he wrote, as you might imagine, I'm sympathetic with a president who enjoyed the powers of his office and so, that worked.

Meacham winning a Pulitzer Prize

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JON MEACHAM:

The day the prize was announced I got an email from David Remnick of The New Yorker. And he said, "You're about to hear from your third-grade teacher." And about two hours later, I heard from my third-grade teacher. And my first editor, Paul Neely at The Chattanooga Times, wrote me saying, "Well, now your obituary's taken care of." So, at least that's done.

What motivated Meacham to write about President George H.W. Bush

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JON MEACHAM:

Writing about President Bush Senior was the result of this fascinating gap between what he was like in private not public impression. I met him in '98 with Michael Beschloss, and within 15 minutes I understood why he had become President. He had this quiet, persistent charisma, he struck you as someone who, however imperfect, you would trust... you'd give him the nuclear codes. "All right you handle that, we're going to do the rest, but you do that." And I wondered what it was A, that had gone into creating that kind of charisma. And why was it that it was so obscure and had been so obscure to me. I was an undergraduate in college through most of his Presidency. I very much had a 1992 view of him, which was that he was... it was time for him to go. But one of the fascinating things about history is how your view changes over time. This happened to Harry Truman, it's now happened with President Bush, Eisenhower. We tend not to fully appreciate what we have when we have it and that's the distinction, to some extent, between history and journalism. Journalism is reactive and emotional in the moment and history, you hope, is reflective and, you hope, is more deeply thought out.

Speaking engagements as part of Meacham's life

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JON MEACHAM:

I see the travel as a great privilege, because a lot of writers, a lot of people spend all their time in a room doing their thing. I do a lot of that, but I'm lucky that people occasionally show up to hear what I have to say about it, and I'm fundamentally in the storytelling business, and so I tell stories in books and I tell it on television sometimes, and I tell them on stages sometimes. But what holds that together, it seems to me, is trying to tell a story about the country that is illuminating. And people may not find it illuminating, they may want to say, "No, I don't think so." But I have the chance to make the case. In the course of a year, depending on whether I have a book out or not, I can do between 60 and a 100 speaking engagements and it's an ongoing conversation with people who care about the country, who care about the history, who care about the present, and are trying to connect these dots—or to see if they're connectable. And I consider it as much a part of my story telling enterprise as the books.

Meacham's relationship with his grandfather

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JON MEACHAM:

One of the reasons I'm as weird as I am, my Grandfather, who was a City Judge in Chattanooga, from the time I was 6 years old would take me down to

court with him and I would sit on the bench and God knows what the defendants made of this. I would go with him to drink coffee. Or he would drink coffee, I wouldn't, with the local courthouse crowd. So to me politics was always this very human undertaking. These were the guys I knew. The men I knew. I was lucky that my grandparents lived a mile down South Crest road from where we lived and it was very much, it took a village. My Grandfather fought in World War II, four years as a Gunnery Officer in the Pacific, came back gone to Vanderbilt Law School, practiced law, kind of frustrated by it by the mid 1960s and wrote three Napoleonic era sea novels based in the East India Company. Sort of a poor man's Horatio Hornblower. His name was, Percival Merryweather was his hero. And so by the time I came along, he was this figure of great authority. He's a judge, he's written books, the house was full of books, and so the whole ambient atmosphere was about public life and telling stories. And as I look back on it, I think those are the tributaries that created this drive to both understand the world, understand the past and find a way to present it in a compelling way. It wasn't like a Joe Kennedy household where we were fighting at the dinner table over Jimmy Carter's Malaise speech. But, it was a household where the morning came, the afternoon paper came, Time came, Newsweek came, the New Yorker came, the Atlantic came. So there was this... the air one breathed was about what was happening, what had happened, and how to tell the story.

Meacham's experience as editor at Newsweek

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JON MEACHAM:

My friend Evan Thomas once described my early days at Newsweek as drinking from a firehose. I go from The Chattanooga Times, I go to work for Charlie Peters, The Washington Monthly, I go to Newsweek, and because of a series of circumstances, became the national editor six months after I got there, I think. And I loved every minute of it. It was fascinating. You had the whole country, the whole world to write about and think about. And so sure, I was driven. And I'm glad I did it early because I now actually can't go to a meeting. Physically. I break out in hives. But the consistent theme, I think, is what's the human drama of the person in power or the person who's trying to get the attention of the person in power. Because, that's what journalism's about. That's what history's about.

How Meacham gained political consciousness

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JON MEACHAM:

My point of entry into political consciousness was thinking that Ronald Reagan was this enormous figure, which he is. And I think I could've fairly easily ended up in some sort of young conservative ethos. But because I started in journalism when I was eighteen, just turned nineteen, at the Chattanooga paper, I almost immediately on sort of being an actual person

having agency, almost immediately saw that the world was a hell of a lot more complicated than either a conservative ideology or liberal ideology would have it. And so the experience of being at the paper, of working for Charlie Peters, then to being in New York was transformative in that I just saw complexity, mixed motives, murkiness, good and bad, all mixed up together. I saw first-hand what Robert Penn Warren had been writing about in the novel I'd read when I was in high school. And without that experience, without having been at The Chattanooga Times, without having been at the Washington Monthly, without having been in Newsweek, I don't know what would have happened. Because what firsthand experience taught me was that simple answers are few and far between. And then that argument, which I experienced firsthand, I think is also true of the country.

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