JON MEACHAM INTERVIEW 02
THE SOUL OF AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Jon Meacham
Presidential Biographer and Historian
April 16, 2019
April 17, 2019
Interviewed by Katie Davison
Total Running Time: 3 hours

START TC: 01:00:00:00

History is more effective when argued by implication

01:00:07:14

JON MEACHAM:

I think history is a lot more effective if you argue by implication. If you tell somebody they're just wrong, they probably not gonna listen to your next sentence. And so to me, the goal is, here are moments in history that have felt like the one we're in and here's how we got out of them. And to me, the American story is the story of more generously applying what Jefferson meant when he wrote that all men are created equal. We don't build monuments to people who limit that definition. We don't commemorate holidays for people who decided to constrict access to the media mainstream. We celebrate rightly people who broaden the definition, who open doors, who open their arms. And that sounds partisan today, which tells us more about ourselves than about anybody else. But it's not partisan. It's simply I think a clinical reading of the very human mess of history.

History comes out of conflict

01:01:04:12

JON MEACHAM:

The American story is full of violence and oppression, but it's also full of peace and liberation. All history comes out of conflict whether it's racial or class or economic or political, tribal, that's inevitable. We live in a fallen world. We don't live in a perfect world. We don't live in a place where people come together and say, how can we make things better because that's the right thing to do. We live in a world where there are clashes of interests, there are winners and there are losers and the moments that speak to us most are not the ones that feel Olympian and distant but which feel messy, complicated, contingent, close run. We would think for instance that the Civil War should have been the beginning of a great new era: 750,000 Americans died, abolition is achieved, the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments are passed. This is the beginning of a new modern era. But five minutes after Appomattox, five minutes after Lee's surrender, the reaction set in. And that's the story of the country, is a couple of steps forward and a step or two back. You just hope that by the time all the steps are counted, we're a few more ahead than we are back.

48 Wheeler Ave, 3rd Floor Pleasantville, NY 10570 T 914-238-6800 kunhardtfilmfoundation.org

The Founders understood that we all have faults

01:02:24:09

JON MEACHAM:

We live in a world that is sinful and disappointing, a world where tragedy is far more often the state of things than a kind of comic conclusion. There's a reason Shakespeare's tragedies are performed more often really than his comedies, because I think they speak to us more. We're all more familiar with heartbreak than we are with heart fulfillment, and that's the nature of reality. The constitution was written for moments like this. It was written with an understanding that we are frail and fallen and given to appetite and ambition and that we have to as the Federalist Papers said, have to have ambition to counteract ambition. If we don't look the world in the eye, if we don't take account of our own tendency to do the wrong thing, then the thinking we do to try to set up our public affairs won't be particularly effective because people are going to do what they want to do.

01:03:28:14

The greatness of America in many ways lies in the fact that we've created a system where the Founders assumed we would do the wrong thing most of the time; we have not disappointed them. Winston Churchill once said, "You can always count on the Americans to do the right thing once they've exhausted every other possibility." And that's what we do. And so I very much have a theological understanding of the nature of people and the nature of the country, which is in fact the same. A nation is only the fullest expression of the individual dispositions of heart and mind of all of us. And if

48 Wheeler Ave, 3rd Floor Pleasantville, NY 10570 T 914-238-6800 kunhardtfilmfoundation.org

we can get to doing the right thing 51% of the time every day in a given day as people, that's a hell of a good day. I don't make it very much. And the country's the same way because the country is the sum of its parts.

The American Experiment and the American Soul

01:04:18:12

JON MEACHAM:

I can see why people would think that a message from a boringly heterosexual white southern man to—relax, it's all gonna be fine, would be annoying, would be off-putting. I have never been oppressed. I am part of a gender and a class that has had things work out most of the time. But if people like me don't speak out, that's unilaterally disarming in the struggle. To me, the message of hope is rooted in history. It's not coming out of a vision, some sort of ethereal vision of I would like the world to be this way. It's based on, how the world has been. The experiment which was based on this understanding that people were gonna get things wrong more often than they get them right, has in fact been worth protecting and perpetuating. And I think I'm right. I really do. Because if you had grabbed an American in 1866 and said, how are things going? Well, if you were a formerly enslaved person in the American south, things weren't going very well. You had the Ku Klux Klan on the march; you had the south trying to resist the implications of the verdict of the Civil War. If you were an Irish immigrant in New England and you were being told you didn't need to apply for a job because we don't hire Irish-Catholics because we think Roman Catholicism is what people today

would call Sharia law. If you were an Asian immigrant in California and you had a United States Senator in Washington say that we were worried that there was gonna be a yellow, Asiatic empire from California to the Rockies. That's not a great moment.

01:06:01:12

Nobody ever sat around at a moment in the past and said, wow, everything is perfect. If only everything could stay exactly this way. We're always questing, we're always wanting more. And sometimes you do that from a position of power. Sometimes you do it from this position of powerlessness. We all know what the American ideal is, it's fair play, it's liberty under law, it's equal opportunity, it's what Lincoln called a fair chance, freer industry, intelligence, and enterprise. We can all agree on that. If you wake people up in the middle of the night and say, "What's the ideal of America?" that's what they'll say. We're land of the free, home of the brave. But the question becomes, how do you make the ideal real. And that's why I talk about the soul of the country because in Hebrew and in Greek, soul means breath or life. The pagan world understood that there was an essence to who we were. And my view is that the soul of the country, you have your better angels on one side and you have your worst instincts on the other, and every moment, every era is shaped by the battle between those two forces.

Reconstruction

01:07:09:14

JON MEACHAM:

In Reconstruction, all the forces that continue to shape us; anxiety about race, anxiety about class, anxiety about power, shaped and suffused the era. So you come out of 1865, we think that it's a new world. We think that we've settled, we've adjudicated the great question that had bedeviled the American founding, which is the role of slavery and enslavement in American life. And we find that actually, there's still an enormous amount of racial animus that finds expression in law and in custom. People were not in fact willing to apply the entire meaning of the declaration to everybody, even though we just fought a war over that question, whether it's a states' rights or telling the government to stay out of your business, or all those touch points that continue to shape our politics were on vivid display from 1866 really through the 1920s.

01;08:15:17

You had a Supreme Court rule in Plessey vs Ferguson that separate but equal was a constitutional principle. You had the Ku Klux Klan rioting and committing vigilante violence. You had an American president, Andrew Johnson, who was unstable, egotistical, appealed to the worst in us and not the best, huh, any of this sound familiar? You know, as Mark Twain is alleged to have said, "History doesn't repeat itself but it does rhyme." All those forces are in play in America in the wake of the Civil War. The white resistance to the implications of the Civil War, that in fact that 13th, 14th, and 15th

amendments were the law of the land. We had decided that Jefferson's assertion that all men were created equal applied in fact to all men regardless of color. There was immediate pushback on that. In 1865, a Confederate journalist named Edward Alfred Pollard wrote a book called *The Lost Cause* in which he defined the cause of white supremacy as the new abiding concern of the southern states. So we've gone from slavery to supremacy. It's a difference of degree but it's not a difference of kind.

Appomattox: General Robert E. Lee surrenders to General Ulysses S. Grant

01:09:33:13

JON MEACHAM:

It was Palm Sunday, 1865, April 1865. General Lee is surrendering the Army of Northern Virginia to Ulysses S. Grant. They meet at Wilmer McClain's house at Appomattox courthouse, a village in Virginia. And if history were a fairy tale, this would be the moment at which we all lived happily ever after. The army of rebellion. The secessionist movement that had cost so much blood, so much toil, so much treasure, was ending peaceably. Lee goes and with dignity surrenders. Grant goes and with dignity and grace accepts the surrender. And that should be if this were a movie the moment at which then flowers spring and the sun comes out and the music swells, but it didn't. It didn't.

01:10:28:07

White supremacy replaced slavery as the consuming concern of white southerners. Lee did not leave Appomattox to return to a South that was

willing to accept the implications of the defeat. He returned to a South that wanted to keep fighting under a different flag, although sometimes the same flag, for a slightly different cause, but the essence was the same. The essence was, no we don't think that all men are created equal. We don't think that. We say we do, but in point of fact, we're not gonna act that way and we're gonna set up laws, we're gonna set up governments in the southern states, huge part of the country that is going to put segregation and racially based discrimination in law and custom. We're not interested in a new birth of freedom as Lincoln put it. What we're interested in is preserving our way of life as best we can since we lost. That's the southern view. That view continues to shape the understandings of an enormous number of folks 150 years on.

The Lost Cause

01:11:46:20

JON MEACHAM:

The Lost Cause was an attempt by the white south to give some meaning to their defeat, some explanation of their defeat, and then to give the future a shape as well. And so suddenly the south didn't lose because they were wrong, the south in this view lost because they were outgunned and outmanned and the pure brute strength of the north is what led to the southern defeat. It wasn't a moral failing; it was a material one. And if it's not a moral failing, then you have an excuse to continue to try to live under that system of law and custom. The Lost Cause was the origin myth in many ways

of the 20th century south and to some extent the 21st century south. The people who in the 1960s were resisting the implications of the Supreme Court decision about school integration; the people in the 1960's who were resisting the federal government's attempts to undo Jim Crow were all acting as if they were the last stand, the last battalion in the Civil War. That in fact the Civil War had not ended at Appomattox, the Civil War was simply taking a different form and continuing to unfold.

Bringing the Union back together

01:13:19:20

JON MEACHAM:

The task that was before Grant and before Lincoln and then before Andrew Johnson is almost unimaginable in its complexity because as much as we want the north to be as Robert Penn Warren said, to be a virtuous region, it was driven by racial questions as well. It was driven by and shaped by a sense of racism. If the cause was union, then what Grant was trying to do was create terms that would bring the Union back together as quickly and seamlessly as possible. Where things got complicated real fast was the north was in many ways shaped by racism as was the south and they were attempting a social revolution on the back of a military victory, which was very hard to do. And he knew, Lincoln knew that the country, we—having been brought together… no that's not right. What Grant knew and what Lincoln knew was that the Union would have to endure and was to endure and if it were gonna do that, then we were neighbors again. And so to be

harsh toward the South, to be punitive to the South would create more chaos in peacetime and a quasi-sort of military struggle that would continue after the full military struggle.

Abraham Lincoln

01:14:42:05

JON MEACHAM:

You know, Harry Truman once said heroes always know when to die and Abraham Lincoln in a weird way knew when to die. It's impossible to know whether he would have made a better success of Reconstruction. My own bet is that he would have, because what you saw with Lincoln was someone who was self-evidently changing and growing as president. If you go back and read the first inaugural, he says, "Look," to the southern states, "you have nothing to fear from me if you're a slave holding state." But he got to emancipation. The last statements he made on Reconstruction were more conciliatory but faced with a recalcitrant South, would he have conducted a policy that was ultimately more effective? Would it have been policy that protected the civil liberties that had been so hard fought in the war? My own bet is yes, but it's a mystery of history.

Andrew Johnson

01:15:46:00

JON MEACHAM:

Andrew Johnson's conduct of Reconstruction in many ways was the last southern battle of the Civil War. He was doing everything he could to reverse the verdict that had been reached on the battlefield. He vetoed civil rights bills, he opposed the 14th amendment, which provided equal protection under law. He did everything he could to return the country as much as he could to an antebellum way of being. And he did so not least because he was a white southerner. That was his constituency. He was not a Republican. He'd been put on the ticket in 1864 to balance out a wartime election ticket. Imagine if you had a Republican president who dies and then a Democratic president comes in and in our own terms starts passing Medicare for all and high tax rates after the Republican who'd won the election had run on an opposite platform. That's kind of where we were. See if any of this sounds familiar. Andrew Johnson was an unconventional American president who had come to ultimate power by an unconventional route. He did not have a natural political constituency in Washington and he believed very much that he had to govern for his narrow base of supporters and not for the country as a whole.

The North won the war, but the South won the peace

01:17:13:16

JON MEACHAM:

There's a long time debate about who really won the Civil War. It's a little facetious but the south got a really good deal out of the war. Perhaps the best way to put it is, the north won the war but the south won the peace. But it created a century or more of essentially an antebellum way of life in the south. Segregation replaced slavery, separate but equal replaced human enslavement, but that was the way the world was going to be for well over a hundred years. It's a hundred years from Appomattox to the voting right act, almost exactly. The voting rights act was proposed and the great energy behind it came in March of 1965. Appomattox was April, 1865; you had an entire century where the southern vision of race relations was largely predominant over what you thought would have been the implications of the verdict of the war.

Charlottesville riots and The Lost Cause

01:18:22:19

JON MEACHAM:

You look at Charlottesville in 2017: Neo Nazis, Klansmen marching around. That is precisely at least in terms of the Klansmen what the world looked like in 1866, '67. You have people who are resisting the verdict, resisting the tide of history in order to stand up for a racially defined, divisive way of life. And

the fact that in the 21st century, people calling themselves Klansmen are in Charlottesville, Virginia, the home of Robert E Lee, not far from Appomattox, basically fighting for an antebellum vision of the world is a remarkable thing. But it's not all that remarkable if you know American history. And if you know that five minutes after Appomattox, people were trying to figure out, alright we lost the big one, how can we win the smaller ones.

Edward Alfred Pollard's Lost Cause

01:19:36:07

JON MEACHAM:

Confederate journalist, writer, Edward Alfred Pollard writes this book called *The Lost Cause*. He writes it in 1865, its published in January of 1866, so not even a year after Appomattox saying that we now have to embrace this new war for white supremacy. He followed it up with another book two years later. He talked about a war of ideas. He talked about the fact that we had to, we meaning the white south, had to resist the encroachments of a consolidated government, which is what they would have called big government. He totally framed this idea of an acceptable resistance of the full implications of what the Civil War after emancipation and after Gettysburg had been about. Lincoln said this is a new birth of freedom. This is about enslaved people being forever free. Pollard and others say no, we don't accept that. What we're going to do is fight a rear-guard action decade to decade to decade saying that our way of life, a way of life based on skin color and exclusion is going to carry the day no matter what happened at Antietam

or Gettysburg or Appomattox. The Lost Cause was very much about big government versus states' rights.

01:21:06:06

It was very much about Washington versus the rest of us. It was very much about the feds are trying to tell us what to do. That argument which has shaped us in every ensuing decade … it has some origins way, way back. Jefferson versus Hamilton was to some extent about this in the early republic. But for our purposes, for the modern world, the reaction after the Civil War of the southern—white southerners trying to say, federal troops need to get out of here. We don't want Reconstruction forces, we want to govern our own affairs, all goes back to this idea that the war was lost but we could win the peace. The Lost Cause as an idea and the book itself caught fire and endured because it spoke to this deep longing on the part of a defeated people to both find meaning in the defeat and a way forward, but not a way forward in acquiescence to federal will, but a way forward in resistance to that will.

01:22:14:02

There were many white southerners who tried to argue that they were fighting for states' rights and not slavery. It's not an argument that holds up by any means but the postbellum vision of a Lost Cause gave them a way forward, a way to think of the struggle in—not just in racial terms but as a whole political identity. The Lost Cause sanctifies the southern vision of the world. It becomes a cause that was not defeated morally but was defeated because they were outmanned, they were outgunned. But let them say, you know what, we were right in our essence, we were right. And white

supremacy is a principle worth defending. The Lost Cause gave a defeated people both an explanation for why they lost. The industrial north and all its might had defeated us but we were right, we were right. And they're hypocrites because they're racist too and it enabled a bunch of white southerners to justify their racism from decade to decade to decade.

Confederate memory

01:23:40:18

JON MEACHAM:

Confederate memorials come a bit later. There was no money to build confederate monuments. Most of the monuments put up in the south in the wake of the war were Union monuments because they had won and they had money. The end of re—the true end of Reconstruction formally in the 1890's tended to lead to a burst in the monuments. It's a fascinating story about how confederate memory was formed. The war became more Virginia-centric than Tennessee or Alabama or Mississippi. General Lee became the saint. There was an attempt to make Lee the martyr and Lee was an appealing figure for that role. What else about Lee? General Lee became the sainted martyr who if only he had the strength, the guns, the men and material that Grant had had, he would have carried the day. And by being a martyr, it suggested that Lee was right but was unjustly defeated. And that meant that white southerners who believed in the antebellum vision of racism, of a race-based world were also right.

White supremacy as a political strategy

01:25:02:06

JON MEACHAM:

The political and cultural salience of the white supremacy argument was that anyone who was white, rich or middling or poor could unite against the blacks. And so as a political strategy, it enabled people of means to enlist those who might have different economic interests than people with means against a common enemy.

Religious angle of the Lost Cause

01:25:32:09

JON MEACHAM:

The religious angle of the Lost Cause created an energy, a common vernacular in a fairly churchgoing region. A key element of the Christian story is that in defeat, there is victory. There is no crown without the cross. There's no Easter without Good Friday. And so what Pollard and others were doing was saying, as a region, we're a little bit like Jesus. We had to suffer but a day will come when the tomb will open and we will rise again. The south will rise again is intrinsically a religious cry because Jesus rose again and anyone hearing that phrase in the American South either consciously or subconsciously would have associated their own fate with that of the God they purported to follow. You have to use what you've got, and the only thing that the white southerners had to build a resistance was sentimentality and

religion. And—well three things. White southerners had three things to make the Lost Cause work. They had sentimentality, they had religion, and they had racism. And it made a potent, potent cocktail when you put the three together.

Fighting the Lost Cause

01:27:01:20

JON MEACHAM:

If you're going to fight the Lost Cause, you have to fight on the field where they are, and the idea that a Christian society, a society that purports to be Christian would enslave others and discriminate against others in a systemic way has to be combatted at least in part with the same language and the same arsenal with which the cause was laid out. And so Lost Cause folks want the south to have been Jesus on Good Friday but Easter is coming. Seems to me if you want to argue that the vision of Gettysburg, with a new birth of freedom, the vision of Lincoln's second inaugural, "With malice toward none, with charity for all…" you have to speak in biblical terms as well, which is what Lincoln did. You have to speak in terms of do unto others. You have to speak in terms of the key element of the faith that in many ways was perverted to try to secure and perpetuate a form of enslavement.

01:28:19:15

The language to fight that is the language of liberation. Well what is the duty of a Christian? The duty of a Christian is to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It's in the word of the great commandments to love God

totally and to love others as you would want to be loved. And so in any policy question, that's applicable—healthcare, taxation, anything about the infrastructure of a democratic life can be about what would I, how would I want to be treated? And therefore I should treat others that way. And that's in many ways even taking the religious element out of it is the fundamental covenant of a democratic republic, lowercase d, lowercase r. If we don't have a sense of neighborliness, if I don't at least somewhat care about what folks in California are doing or people in New York and I'm in Tennessee, why should I pay taxes for them to benefit? Why should they pay taxes for me to benefit? Except that we're part of a covenant that runs on empathy, runs on mutual concessions of opinion, which is a phrase from Jefferson's, and really comes to be and endures because ultimately, I care what happens to you in the hopes that you're gonna at some point when I'm in trouble care about what happens to me. Without that covenant, free government falls apart.

Using history to face issues of the present

01:30:05:15

JON MEACHAM:

If you know that this is not the first time we've dealt with these issues, then you are able to revisit those moments and see how they got out of them. So how did we get out of them? Long shot over Reconstruction. We barely have and there are still—look at Charlottesville, there are still moments where it's very much with us. But we got out of it in a serious way in the middle of the 1960's because Lyndon Johnson speaking in the language of faith said that

God should favor our undertaking, that we should in fact extend our arms. We should not clench our fists. We get out of these moments by more generously applying what Jefferson meant when he wrote that all men were created equal. And that can sound gooey and it can sound lefty I guess in this climate, but it has the virtue of being true. There's not a moment—think about a moment you would want to go back to in American life and I promise you that that moment would be one in which reformers and others were trying desperately to widen the mainstream and not close it.

01:31:25:07

If you drive through Washington, the monuments are to people who are about opening things, not closing them. The monument to George Washington, the monument to Abraham Lincoln, the monument to Thomas Jefferson, the monument to the Second World War. Those folks were—Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, were not perfect. Not arguing that. No one is. But if those flawed people could leave us something that was worth defending and something on which we could build, if they could do it, then don't we have an intellectual and moral obligation … that sounds grand but an obligation to look and see how they did it?

1866: The founding of the KKK

01:32:15:10

JON MEACHAM:

So it's the winter of 1866, '67, down in Charles County Tennessee in a law office near the courthouse. And a group old confederates gets together and

they decide to form what would be called the Ku Klux Klan and the Klan was going to be the knights of the invisible empire. And the invisible empire was the ghost, the spirit of the confederacy that may have been defeated at Appomattox but would rise again and would now fight and would punish people who were cooperating with Reconstruction authority, would terrorize African Americans, would really continue the battles of the Civil War in an era when those battles are supposed to be over. It's very hard to put ourselves back in a pre-civil rights mindset, but to understand history we have to. It was perfectly respectable for white southerners in the 1860s and 70's into the 1950s and 1960s to believe that white people were innately superior.

01:33:23:09

The confederacy had been founded on this idea. The Vice President of the confederacy, Alexander Stevens gave a speech saying, "The cornerstone of the confederacy was the fact that blacks were inherently inferior." And to these people, the Civil War did not change that. And they were going to carry on this battle by other means. So the Ku Klux Klan became a paramilitary force to continue to fight for the cause of white supremacy when we were supposed to have settled that. And so when people say the Civil War never really ended, that's pretty much what they mean. The Klan was ferociously violent. US Grant when he becomes president does a pretty good job of shutting it down. The Justice Department comes into being largely to fight the Klan. Grant actually wrote out in his own hand the enforcement act, the powers he needed to break it. But the fact that it had to be done suggests the

strength, the depth, the durability of the underlying feelings of a confederacy that was defeated but was not going quietly into the night.

President Grant and the KKK

01:34:44:16

JON MEACHAM:

Grant as President decided that he would in fact break the back of the Klan, that this was an unacceptable paramilitary force in the country and in one of the few bright moments of Reconstruction, one of the few bright moments in race relations, he did what he could to use law enforcement, use the military to shut down this marauding vigilante force. Grant goes to Congress, writes down in a piece of paper on his own hand the powers he needs to exert federal authority into the states in order to break the Klan using his officials—it was the first time—we would see it again in the 1950s and 1960s where Washington was deputizing officials to go and fight in the states that otherwise saw themselves as sovereign. The lesson to learn is that the federal government when it puts its mind to something can create great change. It creates great backlash as well, but without the federal government, I'm not sure how my native region stumbles into modernity at all. And we think of this in terms of the civil rights era. We think of it in terms of President Kennedy and President Johnson enforcing the court orders, the Supreme Court orders of the middle of the 21st century. But their precedent, their case study was the way Grant reacted to the Klan. No southern state escaped this:

Florida, Texas, Virginia. There is no part of the old confederacy that escaped what I would call the shame of racially reactive post-bellum violence.

The rebirth of the KKK in 1915

01:36:54:10

JON MEACHAM:

On the Saturday after Thanksgiving in 1915 on Stone Mountain, Georgia, near Atlanta, the Ku Klux Klan was re-founded. And it's re-founded in reaction to a couple of things. A shifting economy from an agrarian to an industrial world. 1920 would be the first time we would record that more urban folks were living in urban areas than in rural areas. Immigration was at an extraordinary high. 1890's was the peak but people were coming in. There was white anxiety about cultural identity, about economic opportunity, about a shifting culture. Radio becomes a big force in the early 1920s. The second Klan is really about, how do we protect this American way of life. 1917 is the Bolshevik revolution. You have World War One coming with incredible anxiety about socialists and anarchists and dissidents and the country felt as if it were spinning out of control.

01:37:58:20

And so the second Klan, which ultimately attracted we think between two and six million Americans, it took the 1924 Democratic National Convention to 103 ballots because there were 347 Klan delegates at Madison Square Garden who would not vote for Al Smith, the Governor of New York because Al Smith was an Irish Catholic. The governors of Texas, Georgia, Colorado,

Indiana, and Oregon were all members of the Klan. Hugo Black, future Supreme Court Justice was a member of the Klan. Harry Truman almost joined, but he had a lot of Catholic friends and so that kept him from doing it. It was a big, broad based reactionary movement about what was seen as foreign and sinister influence in the United States. And what they wanted to do was make America great again. And what they wanted to do was try to create a paramilitary army that was both literal and figurative to defend this idea of what was called 100% Americanism. Americanism was a predominant phrase. Because there was a genuine anxiety that the Bolsheviks were coming here. So President Wilson closes down 400 newspapers.

01:39:24:10

A. Mitchell Palmer, the Attorney General under Wilson, launches a number of raids on suspected dissidents. An anarchist tried to blow up the Attorney General's house. He lived across the street from FDR, who was then the assistant secretary of the Navy. The Roosevelts were finding body parts in their bushes. It was an era where people in power were cracking down on civil dissent. They were fighting immigration; they were fighting the movement towards civil rights. The NAACP had been founded, 1909, coming out of what was called the Niagara movement, 1905. And so the country seemed to be changing. Immigrants, people of color, national culture, different ways of making a living. The familiar world of the farm where you controlled your whole life, you decided where you went to church, you decided what newspapers to subscribe to, you decided what books to read. You totally controlled your family until about 1920, '21, '22. And the Klan

stepped in, exploited and exacerbated those tensions to the point where in 1925 and '26, 50,000 Klansmen marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in what was a remarkable but not stunning public display.

What the KKK of the 1920s was focused on

01:40:50:01

JON MEACHAM:

Yeah. The Klan of the 19-teens and 20s was focused on immigration, disappearing jobs, a changing culture, and playing to a sentimental understanding of a country that had been lost but might be able to be recovered with the right set of political action, the right journey backward. It's incredibly resonant, the story of the second Klan. I'd argue that actually that's probably—that ten-year period, 1915 to 1925, is probably the most analogous period. Because you had a significant social movement focused on the other. You were feeling your world slipping away. Either you were—had been on a farm, were moving to a city, and suddenly the city you moved to for a job, that job is being taken by an immigrant perhaps. You reacted by either joining or supporting the work of an organization that was devoted to this mythic, racially charged vision of a country that had been taken away but you had to try to take it back and that was really the work of the second Klan.

What it meant to be a member of the Klan

01:42:06:16

JON MEACHAM:

Membership in the Klan was a group, a family, an organization, a sense of purpose, a vision, an idea that you belonged and that you were fighting a noble cause. And there are few things more seductive to human nature than the sense that you are fighting a noble cause and if that noble cause happens to run parallel to your self-interests, all the better.

"Birth of a Nation" and the KKK

01:42:40:08

JON MEACHAM:

So D.W. Griffith makes the movie, a big blockbuster of the era: *Birth of a Nation*. It presented this hopelessly antiquated white supremacist version of Reconstruction. It cast African Americans as evil and the other. And gave this idea of "Knights of the Invisible Empire," you could become a knight. Imagine this. You're a white guy, you have lived on a farm, probably grew up on a farm, you moved to a city, the job's not working out, the job might disappear because of somebody who doesn't look like you; maybe a Roman Catholic, maybe a Southern European. Whatever it is. And suddenly, somebody comes along and says, we're going to make you a knight of the invisible empire and you are going to fight for your racial identity and fight for your job and we are going to take our country back from these interlopers. It's an incredibly

seductive and attractive vision for people who are discontented and seeking some means of control in a world that feels as though it slipped out of their hands.

Woodrow Wilson's image deteriorating

01:43:53:20

JON MEACHAM:

You know, most presidents after they leave office begin to look better. Woodrow Wilson is that rare example of a president who looks worse the more time passes. He re-segregated the federal government; he cracked down on civil dissent and civil liberties during the war. He screened Birth of a Nation at the White House. The moviemakers—like all great movie makers used anything they could for promotion so they gave this sense that he endorsed it. There's some debate about that but he did screen it. You know, Wilson was very much a creature of his time. He was a figure of the progressive era but it was a white supremacist progressive era. And I don't think we do any justice to him to sugarcoat that.

The creation of the NAACP

01:44:48:18

JON MEACHAM:

One of the great things about America is that every action creates a reaction. So during World War One when Wilson cracks down on civil liberties, you get

the ACLU. You get the American Civil Liberties Union to fight for civil liberties. After Plessey versus Ferguson in 1896 and with the rising number of lynchings around the south the continuance of the black codes of segregation, you got WEB DuBois, you got the NAACP, a group dedicated, devoted to trying to make what had been the hope at the end of the Civil War a reality.

WEB Du Bois and fear

01:45:30:20

JON MEACHAM:

DuBois writes about fear quite brilliantly. He talks about the capacity of a mob, by which he means a white mob to do things together that they would never do individually. That there was a multiplier effect of fear and anxiety and hate and the back of the writhing mob there was this fear, this anxiety that tomorrow was not going to be what it could be for you and it was not gonna be what yesterday was. And fear is such an important element to the American story, and it's this perennial struggle between hope and fear. Edmund Burke said, "There's nothing so unreasoning as fear." You know, if you're on the edge of a precipice, you're not gonna act rationally. You're gonna try to get back from it. And so often people in American history have felt that they were on a precipice and so they lash out, they flail. You saw it with white southerners after Reconstruction. You saw it with the second Klan and the immigration, the shifting economy. You saw it in the 1930s. You saw it in the 1950s and 1960s with white southerners worried about integration.

You can see it now; industrial economies giving way to information economy. There are people who do not believe that tomorrow's gonna be better than today. It sure as hell ain't gonna be better than yesterday was, at least in their minds. And so you lash out, you struggle for something, you point. And it's their fault. It's those Mexicans, it's those Chinese, it's those Italians, it's those Irish, it's those blacks, it's those women, it's those Jews. It's an incredibly powerful political emotion. And the great political leaders are the ones who don't cater to it, who tamp it down instead of flame it.

1924: Democratic Party does not nominate Al Smith because he is Catholic

01:47:37:23

JON MEACHAM:

It's 1924, Warren Harding has died, Calvin Coolidge has become President on the Republican side. The Democrats meet at Madison Square Garden to nominate someone to take on Calvin Coolidge. There are about 347 Klan delegates there. It drives the convention to 103 ballots, most ballots in history because the Klan would not support Al Smith, the governor of New York known as the happy warrior, because Al Smith was an Irish Catholic and Irish Catholics were seen as this foreign force, a sinister force. Roman Catholicism was a particularly favorite target of the second Klan. Out in Oregon, the Klan dominated legislature, it passed a law saying every school aged child had to go to a public school in an attempt to shutdown the parochial schools. They were basically trying to put the nuns out of business. So in 1924 in New York, the convention went on and on and on. Eventually,

Smith was defeated. John W Davis, not a name that lives in the annals of history, becomes the Democratic nominee because of anti-Catholic sentiment.

Nativism

01:48:56:08

JON MEACHAM:

Nativism, like Isolationism, like racism, is a perennial force—it ebbs and it flows. It was flowing in American life particularly after the 1890s or so. You had a lot of immigration coming in. It didn't really stop until the 1924 immigration legislation, which put quotas on national immigration from different countries. Nativists are people who only trust those by definition who are born in a particular country. And so American nativists in the first part of the 20th century believed that American born Americans were the only true Americans and that anyone who immigrated here was somehow suspect.

The Red Scare of 1919/1920 and demonization of the other

01:49:44:15

JON MEACHAM:

Well, the red scare in 1919/1920 was about fear of immigrants and fear basically because the Bolshevik revolution which brought the communists to power and the disorienting impact of the First World War, it led to another

ism worth avoiding which is isolationism. You had a prevalent fear that radical socialist, communist, Bolsheviks were taking the country away. That's the perennial theme here, is that somehow or another some group has gotten over the city wall, is in our midst, and is trying to take everything away from us. The First World War creates all kinds of isms that are worth avoiding. There's nativism, there's isolationism, there was in the red scare an anxiety that communists were coming to get us, that Russia had fallen to the Bolsheviks, the royal family was murdered. This was a live fear in the country that revolution that had started far away would come here. And part of the appeal of the Klan, part of the appeal of a growing isolationist movement, a growing nativist movement, was if we were not 100% Americans, if we were not 100% Americanism, then somehow or another we would lose what we cherished most. And when the argument is you are going to lose what you love, few more powerful political arguments than that. People saying you're going to lose what you love and it's their fault. And I'm pointing right at the people and those are the people that we need to take on. And whether they are Catholics or Jews or immigrants or whatever they are, the force of the other, of demonizing the other has been one of our most perennial and least attractive and least productive cultural forces.

48 Wheeler Ave, 3rd Floor Pleasantville, NY 10570 T 914-238-6800 kunhardtfilmfoundation.org

Attacks on the press during times of fear

01:51:55:17

JON MEACHAM:

In times of fear, people turn on the press as well. They don't wanna read, they don't want to hear, they don't want to see disturbing messages. And if they believe that the press is somehow exacerbating the threat to the country, then they try to take out the messenger. Woodrow Wilson enforced the Sedition Act. His postmaster general closed down 400 newspapers and magazines that were deemed radical or un-American. Usually that meant they were pacifists. Usually that meant they just disagreed with them. And it takes a strong country, a strong leader to understand that as Jefferson said, "If the choice is between having a government with no newspapers or no newspapers with no government, I'll take newspapers with no government." Because without a free press, without free expression, without the ability to be wrong, without the ability to listen to someone with whom you wildly disagree but always defend their right to say that with which you disagree, without that, it's not a democracy. It's an autocracy. And if you want an autocracy, you better be sure your guy's the autocrat. Because today's autocrat is tomorrow's deposed autocrat. And it's one of the reasons religious toleration is so important. You know, if you want… if you want a state religion, you better be sure that your state… if you're in it, you better be sure it holds power because tomorrow you may not be the one.

The five elements that shape an era

01:53:36:06

JON MEACHAM:

Well, in my view there are about five elements that can help shape an era for good or for ill. There's the presidency, the congress, the courts, the press, and the people themselves. And my view is when two or three of those are rowing in the right direction, we have a good chance. In the rise of the second Klan, the presidency was not too bad. Harding and Coolidge both spoke out against it if in guarded terms. The courts were strong. Supreme Court ruled against it in a couple of key cases. The press did a good job. Joseph Pulitzer's newspapers, others did a lot of exposés. Although that somehow—that sometimes cuts the other way.

01:54:19:07

The Klan leadership in the 20s thought that having congressional hearings against the Klan had increased their numbers because they could say, "See! See! They know how powerful we are, they're coming after us. We must be doing something right if the people in power are coming after us." And that's one of the dangerous and seductive to some extent dynamics of populism: if you hold to a conspiratorial worldview, then you put yourself in a kind of tragic position that any counter argument, any argument that might challenge that conspiratorial worldview is seen not as a potentially prevailing argument but as confirmation that you were right in the first place. See? They're after us. And that's a loop, a self-reinforcing loop that our

greatest moments have been marked by moments where we have broken out of that.

1925: The Scopes Trial

01:55:27:10

JON MEACHAM:

There's no thing new under the sun and the Scopes trial in Dayton in 1925 was an early culture war, what we would think of now. Imagine how cable news would cover us. If OJ was a science versus faith issue. The trial was an emblem of this anxiety about modernity. You had people who didn't want to think they were descended from apes and believed that if the Bible could simply be true, then it would both invest them with a certain dignity and would put the people who seemed to be changing their world in their place. And so it was a media circus, broadcast on the radio. It was the wall-to-wall coverage of the era. And in many ways I think it's an example of how people who feel a great deal of stress lash out, and these were people who felt stress economically, socially, culturally, and they wanted their Bible to be the first and last word. And they didn't want to hear about science. They weren't interested in that because the one thing they had was Genesis. This is the way it was written. This is the way that it was. And if you're gonna come in with these newfangled theories and throw everything up in the air and I can't even count on my bible, then what can I count on?

The fall of the KKK

01:57:14:14

JON MEACHAM:

The Klan faded not least because enough people stood up and said we're not going to be superstitious. We're not gonna be as racially divided as the Klan wants us to be. And the fact of the matter is that we were created equal and that we should not be separating into these paramilitary armies doing battle against each other. I think the fall of the Klan in many ways is a victory of reason. It is a victory of people listening to their better angels, realizing that people who simply were from a different country are not innately inferior. That's not a reasonable thing to think. And it was really in many ways the triumph of the mind over the gut.

Dissipation of the Klan before the 1930s

01:58:05:23

JON MEACHAM:

One of the great miracles of American history is that the Klan dissipated before the crisis of the 1930s came. It came about because of internal Klan dissentions; we were very lucky because it was hard enough for Franklin Roosevelt to do what he did in the early 1930s. One would have thought given the cataclysm of the crash in '29 and the depression in '32 and '33 that the Klan would have sputtered back to life but it didn't. And we were incredibly lucky in that sense because it was hard enough for FDR to do what

he had to do. He had Wall Street bankers who were plotting against him trying to bribe the American Legion to come and form a fascist army that would throw Roosevelt out of office. You had—the line that got the biggest cheer on FDR's inauguration day was, "We are now at a point where we—he may have to govern as if we had been invaded by a foreign foe." And the crowd roared and Mrs. Roosevelt wrote that it chilled her to the bone that the crowd seemed ready for a dictator. The line we remember in sentiment is, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." That day, the more intriguing line, the more resonant line was one about a strong man. And so the crisis of the 30s would have been immeasurably worse I think if the Klan had endured that strength.

Causes of the fall of the KKK

01:59:37:05

JON MEACHAM:

The Klan fell because both Harding and Coolidge didn't give it oxygen, there were internal dissentions. The Klan itself was corrupt and there were enough people who had joined this to be a knight of purity that they realized if the organization itself was impure, it was not worth their money and their time and I think the courts did a good job. The courts ruled that you had to publish the names of the members. So suddenly what seemed to be a great idea when you weren't in the paper wasn't such a great idea when you were in the paper, that's a pretty good test. If you're not—if you're not willing to stand up

and be counted for what you're doing, then more likely than not you shouldn't do it and I think that to some extent was part of the Klan's fall.

Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge on race and equality

02:00:29:11

JON MEACHAM:

Harding and Coolidge both decided that they would issue general, but pointed statements about fraternal orders that seemed to be conspiring against a great American center. This is not to make a hero out of this. This was an era where political equality was still very much an ideal. People thought about political equality, but they weren't thinking so much about social equality. So even at the most progressive, a lot of people within the mainstream were about protecting civil rights but were not about creating a pluralistic, multi-ethnic, integrated society, as we know. One of the things to keep in mind is that, that pluralistic, multi-ethnic, integrated society is a very recent idea and even a more recent reality. Coolidge in particular wrote a letter that was quite well-known attacking someone who had attacked him for a repub—for an African American being a Republican nominee for congress. And Coolidge said, this is democracy, this is the way the system is supposed to work. So without lionizing the past, I think we do have to give due credit to those who in the context of their times took strides forward.

Rumors that Warren G. Harding was mixed race

02:01:52:01

JON MEACHAM:

Harding faced charges that he had descended from mixed race ancestry which was an attempt to smear him in the context of the time. You know, personal attacks, racially explicit attacks are a perennial force in American politics. It didn't just start with the 2016 election. And we recur to it again and again not least because it tends to work. And enough people, hopefully on the margins, but enough people react to them that it becomes politically salient for those who have that ammunition to use it. And the only way to fight that is not to let it work.

Critique of Meacham's argument

02:02:40:08

JON MEACHAM:

The critique of my argument basically is, here's a white southern man saying everything's gonna be alright. Maybe in part because my life's experience would suggest that everything would be alright. Fair enough. Fine. I don't think that's particularly helpful because if we don't look back, we're not gonna see what any of the analogies are, what any of the precedents were. But when we look back, we also have to give credit to a basic story of American progress. It may be slower than a lot of us would like, it may be more tragic, it ay be bloodier, it may be incomplete. It's all of those things.

But it's--the fact of the matter is that we have moved from a place where we would not want to be to a place that we prefer. Now is a place of preference a place of perfection? Absolutely not. But why would you foreclose the possibility of looking back and drawing some inspiration for the journey that we have taken? Why would you let the perfect be the enemy of the good? I don't see the point of that.

Women's suffrage movement

02:03:58:23

JON MEACHAM:

One can argue that to some extent women's suffrage began with Abigail Adams who in March of 1776 wrote a letter to John Adams, who was down in Philadelphia for the Continental Congress saying, "Remember the ladies because you all are always--your sex is too tyrannical," which we've also proven to be the case. There was a ferocious fight through the 19th century. Seneca Falls in 1848 was a moment where suffrage leaders made--issued the statement that all men and women are created equal. To some extent the battle for suffrage was sidetracked by the emphasis on African American male suffrage. There was always tension between there. The movement for women's suffrage interestingly has sort of slipped into the mist. We know about the Civil War, we know about the fire hoses and Jim Crow, we don't know much about the 19th Amendment. There were forced feedings in prison, there were hunger strikes. There were women who courageously were arrested in acts of civil disobedience outside the White House. There

were women who dropped a banner during one of Wilson's State of the Union Addresses saying, "What about the women, Mr. Wilson?" They were willing to risk everything.

02:05:18:06

They learned a lot of this from their comrades in England, from that battle and there were--there was violence at suffrage marches in Washington, people scorning, men scorning this effort.If you're a white man susceptible to the appeal of the Klan in the second decade of the 20th century, my God. Now the women want to vote. Immigrants are taking my job, Catholics are trying to change my culture and now women want to vote, what's next? You know? That was the view. It all sounds kind of crazy when you list it that way, but part of history is putting yourself back in the shoes of those in real time and that's what a lot of those guys thought.

Alice Paul

02:06:11:09

JON MEACHAM:

Into the 20th century, you had Alice Paul who launched a very direct campaign on, focused on the White House, trying to get Woodrow Wilson to endorse the suffrage movement. Alice Paul was born in New Jersey. She went to England to learn suffrage methods, figure out how women in England had won the right to vote, came back and launched a very focused campaign on Woodrow Wilson himself. Took up residence on Lafayette Square right around from--right across from the White House, made a point of having

people at every gate of the White House so that the President would have to see them when he came and he went. She was determined to take the fight directly to him and ultimately won. And she was a key factor in Wilson ultimately endorsing the amendment which finally extended the suffrage as Abigail Adams would have wanted I think.

Ordinary people effecting change

02:07:17:19

JON MEACHAM:

For those who think the country can't change, I sometimes submit that 100 years ago, more than half the country couldn't vote. Now again, it took too long but things can get better and one of the key things about the country is that… not that suddenly precedents like Fortinbras appear and put everything in order. Change comes when the powerful listen to the powerless. There's never been a significant leap forward in American life that has not come from the many and as opposed to the few—abolition, suffrage, civil rights. Lyndon Johnson, Woodrow Wilson, Abraham Lincoln were not singular actors who waved a historical magic wand and made things better because they wanted to. They were able to marshal the energy of an enormous number of people, innumerable people who sacrificed everything trying to get us to listen to those better angels.

02:08:33:17

Change comes in this country when the powerful pay attention to the powerless. And if you can tell the story to the powerful that we will

remember them fondly, they will go down in history as great people. If they do that, then that's one of the reasons to tell this story. It's not to romanticize the past, it's not to glorify a handful of white, male leaders, but as long as leaders are going to be in positions where they can effect serious change, why not give credit to those who did that in the past if only to encourage those who have the option now of deciding whether to do it or not. Do you want to be FDR or do you want to be Andrew Johnson? Do you want to be Lyndon Johnson or do you want to be James Buchannan? Most presidents I know would answer that they want to be FDR, they want to be Lyndon Johnson. They don't want to be Johnson, they don't want to be Buchannan. And if we don't tell that story in those terms, then we lose that arrow in our quiver.

Woodrow Wilson and the 1913 women's suffrage march

02:09:47:12

JON MEACHAM:

Woodrow Wilson should have seen this coming. When he arrived in Washington in 1913 for his Inauguration, there was a paucity of a receiving crowd and he actually asked, "Where are all the people?" And all the people were at a suffrage march elsewhere in Washington. A key example of the people without power doing the work of citizenship, while the powerful were lagging behind.

Equality for women today: 100 years after the passage of the 19th Amendment

02:10:19:09

JON MEACHAM:

On the one hand, 100 years after the 19th amendment, totally understandable why people would say change has come far too slowly. But we are trying to do something here that nobody else has tried to do. Which is run a pluralistic, multi-ethnic, democratic republic over a vast expanse of territory and it seems to me that the change is going to get more rapid. That is that once it starts, it's going to be total. And it wouldn't surprise me at all to see that one of the results of the shifting sense of identity and what I suspect will be a reaction to the more exclusionary culture of the post 2016 election would be if not the election of a female president, a very--a great openness to it. It's also worth noting that Secretary Clinton won the popular vote. I would feel very differently about all of this if the incumbent president had won the popular vote. He's president because of a quirk of an 18th century constitutional system. More people wanted her to be in charge of their destinies then wanted him to be. And that, however unsatisfying, is progress.

The need for patience and persistence to effect change

02:11:47:13

JON MEACHAM:

We never know when the movement gains momentum or not. It took 100 years for Jim Crow to fall apart; it took a long time for women's suffrage to

pass. Without the steady axe of citizenship and protest, with no particular expectation that there'll be a high return on your investment anytime soon, the story of the country would be radically different. And you know, you wish there were a three-point plan, you wish there were a PowerPoint that you could say, here's how to change the world, but there's really not. It's a long, complicated story. And often, often it's hard to know when or what will fully attract the attention and ultimately the power of those who hold office. 1965, Lyndon Johnson is surprised by Bloody Sunday. John Lewis is nearly beaten to death, Hosea Williams, almost beaten to death on the streets of Selma, Alabama. The images from the march go… Frank Reynolds is angering ABC News. He interrupts the broadcast premier of Judgment at Nuremberg to show this scene of a posse of Alabama officials attacking peaceful, nonviolent marchers. Eight days later, Johnson goes to Congress and says, at time-- "There are times when history and fate intersect to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom. So it was at Lexington and Concord, so it was at Appomattox, so it was last week in Selma, Alabama." Why Lexington and Concord and not someplace else?

02:13:47:06

Why Appomattox and not someplace else? Why Selma and not someplace else? Because in the mystery of history, there is this moment where the endless ripples that gather strength far from the centers of power finally wash over those centers. Well we certainly have agency in creating history, we just don't know when or how. We may know why—that's good. But think of this. What if Franklin Roosevelt had been killed in December of 1932 in Miami. An assassin tried to kill him, killed the Mayor of Chicago who was

sitting next to him. Would the 1930s and the 1940s have turned out the way they did without Franklin Roosevelt? I'm not sure they would've. The story of Reconstruction might be radically different if Lincoln had not been killed. What if Lyndon Johnson had decided to take a pass on voting rights in the spring of 1965? I know it might be frustrating, but history is not science. History is the story of all of us. And I think we all know when we're being honest with ourselves that we're incredibly complicated. And there are moments when I very much want to do the right thing, but for a number of reasons I won't do it. And there are some moments I don't want to do the right thing at all and certainly don't do it. The country's the same way.

The need to listen more closely to activists

02:15:25:10

JON MEACHAM:

Well, there have been three great inflection points in terms of the broad identity politics in the American context—abolition, emancipation, suffrage, and then the end of Jim Crow. A common lesson there is that the leadership classes lagged behind the activist classes. The activists were right longer than the leadership was. And what I would hope is that telling that story, we would prompt people to say, what are the activists telling us that we're not either listening closely enough to or not reacting to? Because if the voices of abolition were right early, and they were, and the voices for suffrage were right early, and they were, and the voices against Jim Crow were right early,

and they were, what are the voices now that are right and early and we're not paying attention to?

FDR restoring the country after the Great Depression

02:16:34:23

JON MEACHAM:

It's Christmas Eve, 1929. Stock market has crashed in October. The prosperity of the 20s has popped basically and God doesn't give you many metaphors like this, but Herbert Hoover is in the main part of the White House having dinner in black tie when the oval office goes up in flames. The west wing is on fire, uncontrollable, elemental, Hoover can't fix it. That's all you need to tell the story of the late 20s, early 30s. The country is in the throes of what becomes a global depression. We are paying the price for isolationism, paying the price for closing ourselves off in many ways, by instituting immigration quotas, by putting up high tariffs, by basically retreating to a kind of fortress America. We'd gone over, we'd fought the First World War, we didn't feel it had done what we wanted it to. We'd rejected the League of Nations, the idea that we would be engaged. We had this vision that somehow or another our oceans would protect us from history, protect us from the rest of the world and yet we were part of a global economy, even then. By the Spring of 1933, one out of every four American men were out of work. There were riots in the Midwest. There was a live question about whether democratic capitalism could survive the decade. As Churchill put it, as only Churchill could do, there was--"America was trying to burn brightly

against the baleful flames of Soviet Bolshevism and the Nordic flames of self-assertion from Berlin." Churchill could say anything well. Read the phonebook, he'd be great. There was a real question, you know, could self-government in a capitalist society work? A lot of people didn't think so. And onto that stage comes Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who had been one of the brightest young politicians in the Democratic party in 1920, run for vice president, has the most famous political name in America.

02:18:54:12

Goes to a boy scout camp on the way to Campobello off the coast of Maine, wakes up a few mornings later and can't walk. Wheels himself back into the arena, fights infantile paralysis, and becomes in a way the embodiment of the American notion that we can recover. And he believed we could all walk again, not least because he had taught himself to walk again. And that sounds homiletic, it sounds sentimental perhaps, but it's true, he did. FDR is alleged to have said, "That the two redeeming features of American life is that we have a sense of hope and a sense of humor," and he played to both of those, and argued fundamentally that our instinct for hope had to overcome our susceptibility to fear. And that was his singular contribution in many ways. We all know this, the only way to understand the market is to realize that it's not understandable, it's not a comprehensible thing because it's based on emotion, most of it. And the banks were closing, and basically, what makes things run is faith—faith that the dollar will be worth something, faith that if you pay this bill, it works out, but whatever it might be...and he did everything he could in that bleak winter to--1933, to restore that faith.

Douglass MacArthur had attacked the Bonus Army, World War One marchers who'd come to Washington looking for their pension.

02:20:40:09

MacArthur launched the army at it. When FDR became President, he sent Mrs. Roosevelt out to see them. And one of them remarked, "Hoover sent MacArthur. Roosevelt sent his wife." And that sort of told you the distinction between the two. Oliver Wendell Holmes had said of FDR that he had a second rate intellect, but a first class temperament. And temperament meant a lot in democratic leadership. There's something about the tone and tenor of the person at the center of things. Roosevelt himself understood the office that way. He wrote in a little piece that was published on September 11th, 1932 in the New York Times that the presidency is not an engineering or administrative office. It is preeminently a place of moral leadership. By which he meant temperamental leadership. If he could be buoyant, then we would be buoyant. History tends to render a different judgment often than the present does. And FDR was seen as I think as Walter Lippmann put it, "He's a very talented young man who simply seems to want to be president very much." And was not seen as the savior of the Republic, trust me. But there was something about I think his particular biographical experience that was essential in that moment. And his willingness to as he put it, practice a bold, persistent spirit of experimentation. Bold persistent spirit of experimentation. Try a method and if it fails, admit it frankly but above all, try something. And we went through almost three or four iterations of the New Deal. Agencies would be created, they'd fall apart.

02:22:34:23

They would, you know, it would just—it went on and on. But he spent that decade trying to save capitalism from the capitalists. Redefined the relationship of the individual and the state. You can argue whether that was a good or bad thing, but the American way was in the dock on March 4th, 1933, in a way that it was not in the dock on April 12th, 1945, which is the day he died in Warm Springs. And he's not alone in making that happen. He gave voice to countless others. People wanted that from him, and in that mysterious connection between chieftain and follower, you had the story of rescuing America from one abyss and then helping rescue the rest of the world from a different and even more deadly abyss. You know, my friend David McCullough likes to say, "No one walks around in the past and says, 'My what an interesting world the past is.'" It's all conditional, it's all contingent. Would a different President had done what FDR did? It's unknowable, unlikely. There was a particular set of circumstances, a particular set of skills that he brought to that. Are we less resilient than Americans were in 1933? Maybe not less resilient, we know each other less. We're unified by less. The cataclysm of the great depression itself created bonds of shared experience that helped us when the crisis of the Second World War came. So that—that's different. But at every point, when we've been challenged, the present generation has wondered whether they could rise to it.

02:24:33:11

Whether it was the founding generation, the War of 1812, the age of Jackson, the Civil War, World War One, World War Two, the Depression, the Cold War,

the crises of the 60s. And at every point, we have in fact risen to the occasion and continued to create a more perfect union. Does that mean the story continues to unfold that way? No, doesn't necessarily mean that way. There's no—there's no happily ever after, there's no once upon a time. But there has been—Saint Augustine. You haven't had Saint Augustine thrown at you yet. Saint Augustine once defined a nation as a multitude of rational beings united by the common objects of their love. Multitude of rational beings united by the common objects of their love. So one of the things we always have to ask is what do we love in common? In the 1930s we loved the experiment enough, the capitalistic experiment enough that we were gonna defend it. The Cold War we loved liberty enough that we were gonna defend that. So the question now is what do we love in common? Do we love these institutions enough, do we love a constitution that makes rapid change for the good very difficult, but it also makes rapid change for the ill very difficult? Do we have enough of that in common? My own bet is yes, but it's just that, it's just a bet.

The ego in the presidency

02:26:05:20

JON MEACHAM:

No one ever became president because of a vanishingly small ego. That just doesn't happen. People who put themselves in the way of high politics are people who believe that they have something to contribute that other people do not, and that requires a pretty strong ego. George W. Bush is very funny

about this. He says, "You know, it takes a lot of ego to say, "Hey, what about me?"" Ya know, of 300 million people. And he's right, it does. And so I think the remarkable thing about American presidents is they aren't crazier actually. I mean, most of them are pretty well adjusted; there are exceptions.

Populism in the 1930s

02:26:51:11

JON MEACHAM:

There are really at least two kinds of populism. Populism being the sense that the virtues of the many are being stymied or taken over by the interests of the few. And so a populist leader is one who appeals to the masses saying this group or that individual, they're trying to block you from your greatness or they're trying to take away what is rightfully yours. So you are a populist if you appeal to the masses against elites of some kind or the other of some kind. There's economic populism, which is, we want to make sure there's enough wealth for everybody. And there's cultural populism, which is a leader who says to the masses, this small elite is not letting you be all you want to be or wants you to think like them. They want to tell you what to think. In the 1930s you had all kinds—you had both kinds. You had Huey Long, who was an economic populist who wanted to—he was sort of the Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren if they had a Louisiana accent. Very much wanted to share the wealth. Wanted to create more of a wealth equality across the board. Father Coughlin, Charles Coughlin, the radio priest and others were more about the Jews, the bankers, they're trying to take away

what's yours. And what they have in common—what populists tend to have in common is that they want you to blame someone else and it's a politics that is less about positive motion forward and more about pointing fingers. It's not always true but that's largely true. Charismatic leadership is essential to populism because by its very nature populism is about inspiring an enormous number of people to rise up against a smaller number of people and so if you are charismatic, which means touched by the Gods, if you are someone who can rile up a crowd, you're more likely to be an effective populist.

02:29:09:04

The 1930s were a decade where people were anxious, they were anxious for, hungry for leaders who would give them a story to explain not only why they felt the way they felt but a way to get them out of it. And the populism of the 30s was about wealth inequality, identity groups, the out of touch nature of alleged elites at a time of isolationism, at a time when people didn't want to be engaged with the world because they thought somehow or another they had gotten a raw deal under Woodrow Wilson under the First World War. Things hadn't—they hadn't gotten what they were supposed to get for projecting that force. And so in many ways, the 30s were a backlash to the more global vision of Wilson in '17 and '18. I don't think there's any doubt that the isolationism of our own time is reaction to the forward leaning nature of both the cold war leadership and George W. Bush's forward leaning leadership after the attacks of September 11th.

Fear in the 1930s

02:30:36:00

JON MEACHAM:

When we think of FDR, we think of the great line, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Which is a marvelous sentiment. The line that got the bigger cheer that day though was, it went, "The current crisis is of such scope that he might require powers as if he had been invade—as if we had been invaded as a foreign foe," and the crowd roared. And it suggested to Eleanor Roosevelt who wrote that she was chilled by it, that they were ready for a dictator. That the world had become so seemingly complicated, so seemingly out of control, that this 18th century constitutional system of checks and balances was not commensurate with the challenges of global governance in a rapidly shrinking world. Sounds pretty familiar. And her concern and the concern of a lot of folks because dictatorship was on the march… look at Germany, look at Italy, look at the increasing totalitarianization of the Soviet Union, the anxiety was that amid the crisis of the depression, popular dictatorial leaders would present themselves as heroic figures who could restore prosperity, restore national greatness, and therefore the pesky yet wonderfully essential elements of democracy would go by the wayside. That was the fear.

The landscape of totalitarianism

02:32:06:09

JON MEACHAM:

Like everything else, totalitarianism, dictatorships ebb and flow. It's flowing right now. You know, in the—100 years ago or more, we were moving from an agrarian to an industrial economy that had enormous challenges. Populations were becoming more diverse, that created challenges of identity, of national sense of oneself. Same things happening now as we move from an industrial economy to an information economy. The rise of a mass media is usually a very, very telling sign for dictatorship. Because dictators—political leaders who master the means of communication of their era could move millions. Hitler understood the radio. FDR understood the radio. So, people who understand how to reach followers where they live are to be reckoned with.

Woodrow Wilson and the Lost Cause

02:33:08:19

JON MEACHAM:

It was the 50th anniversary of the battle of Gettysburg, and Wilson who'd been born in Virginia, who had southern sympathies, and was a Democrat, and a huge part of the Democratic base in that era was among white segregationist southerners. He went and gave an address that had very little

to do with Lincoln and a lot to do with the Lose Cause. It was a recon—it was thought of as reconciliation. It was that this was a national struggle, that there was equal valor and equal weight to the arguments on both sides, which of course would have surprised those who had fought for the union. It was really a kind of high-water mark of the revisionism of the Civil War, trying to make it less about race and more about valor and American identity as broadly put as possible. And it would take another 50, 60 years before really the popular imagination came to see the war as what it had been, which was a war over slavery and power.

"Birth of a Nation" and the Lost Cause

02:34:11:06

JON MEACHAM:

Birth of a Nation feels like a very primitive movie. It doesn't flow in the way we think of cinema, but for it's time it was quite advanced and it was a storytelling device of the modern world telling a story of the old world, of a world that had faded. It was very much about white supremacy. The actors are in blackface. There are scenes of anxiety because a white woman's about to be taken away by a person of color. It's every possible stereotype that you can imagine is played out in *Birth of a Nation*. And it had an electrifying effect around the country. It was a huge success financially, commercially, culturally, because it affirmed this white view of the war and Reconstruction not as the natural result of a struggle over slavery but of somehow a battle of northern aggression against southern valor and southern morays. And it was

curiously, for 1915, curiously really belonged in 1845. It was a movie out of time, yet all too tragically it did represent the prevailing racial views in a huge part of the country.

Overcoming stereotypes

02:35:35:10

JON MEACHAM:

Well stereotypes become stereotypes because there's some truth to them, right? It's like clichés are clichés because they work. Sure. There are regional distinctions, regional characteristics that whether it's accents, customs, or morays, but to be prisoners of stereotypes either in reality or rhetoric is particularly counter-productive. Because we all I think in our lives have to figure out a way to overcome what are intrinsic instincts are. And our intrinsic instincts are pretty much selfish. Not all of them but a good many. And so the story of growing up, the story of a human journey is in many ways learning how to reach out, to be gracious when you're inclined to be selfish and that certainly plays out regionally.

Meacham's childhood in the American South

02:36:42:17

JON MEACHAM:

My part of Tennessee was not hugely shaped by the Lost Cause, at least my universe wasn't. I grew up on Missionary Ridge, a battlefield in Chattanooga.

It's where Arthur MacArthur, Douglass MacArthur's father won his medal of honor when he was 17 years old. Grew up about 700, 800 yards from Braxton Bragg's headquarters, the Confederate commander. But about three miles that way was Chief John Ross's house of the Cherokee Nation. So you had this embodiment of the twin original sins of the American experience right there—African American slavery, Native American removal. So I—though I grew up in a place where the Civil War was ambient, we weren't really re-fighting it, at least in my household and the world I grew up in. Very aware of the significance of the battlefields around but by the 1970s and 80s at least in my part of the world, blessedly, we moved on. When I was little, you could still find minié balls, Civil War bullets on Missionary Ridge and around. So to me, history was just right there. It was something you went and tried to dig around for and I think that shaped how I think because it's at once remote and at hand which is true of the larger his—larger drama of history as well.

02:38:13:03

You know, Faulkner said wonderfully in Requiem for a Nun that, "The past is never dead, it isn't even past." And it's one of those tropes. I probably use it too much. But it's true. And there's something—I don't know if it's comparatively of southerners who are susceptible to that. I know plenty of New Englanders who still think that the Mayflower just pulled out. But I do think that because so much of the war unfolded—so much of the Civil War unfolded here, you know, if you're driving on… here's a great scene. Think about this. If you're driving on Interstate 75 in the American South, which is how I think a lot of folks get to Disneyland, or Disney World, whatever it is. If

you're driving there on an interstate in the American South, you're driving on a road that was built by Dwight Eisenhower, sponsored by Al Gore Senior and Prescott Bush, showing you some of the intimacies of history, in a… on a system that was built for Cold War defense in case we had to have massive mobilization in the event of nuclear attack or invasion from the Soviet Union, but you're driving past Civil War sites where people with muskets and cannons and cavalry charges were fighting over the nature of identity and power, you know, 150 years ago. And in those days, less than a hundred years ago. So the American story feels so vast…I mean, my God, Lexington and Concord to here, the Niagara Movement to here I just so—it seems so extraordinary. It's all the day before yesterday. I mean, we're 240 something years old. That's a blink in the eye.

Cultivating curiosity

02:40:11:08

JON MEACHAM:

I found that one of the most exciting things to do intellectually, which is not a word I would have used when this started is to look at something that's totally, commonly accepted and ask why? So here's a good example: why is this the second decade of the 21st century? What does that mean exactly? Why is it—why is it 21 centuries? How do we start to tell time? Well, it goes back to the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. That's how the west decided to structure its calendar. So, to me it's a fairly self-evident question to then ask, how on earth did that happen? How did a Jewish peasant born at the corner

of an empire become this central, cultural figure for more than half the world? And I can't tell you exactly when that started but those are the kinds of questions… look at a monument. There are always monuments you just drive by, right? I'm sure there are in your neighborhood, there are in my neighborhood, and asking why are they there. This will surprise you that I was a strange child.

02:41:24:15

I know, it'll go become as a shock to you. But I remember reading William Manchester's biography of Douglass MacArthur, called *American Caesar*, and it opens on Missionary Ridge, not far—I'm sure he was someone near where I grew up. Because Manchester as a great biographer wanted to go to the beginnings of the myth and the myth of MacArthur was, how could I match my father who at the age of 17 won the Medal of Honor in the Civil War? And the description of the world I knew, seeing it in a book, in print, I think triggered something which suggested that what was familiar to me could be worthy of commemoration and communication of others.

How Meacham's grandfather influenced him

02:42:18:00

JON MEACHAM:

My grandfather was born in 1913, classic southern lawyer, was frustrated, had wanted to go to the Naval Academy, but his mother who I think was quite a battle-axe thought that a landlocked boy didn't need to be going off to the oceans. So he went to Vanderbilt Law School, went back to Chattanooga to

practice and then the war came of course, and he spent four years in the pacific as a gunnery officer. And he came back and lived kind of the classic Eisenhower era ethos. By the time I came along. He'd gone on the bench and took me down to court. I used to sit on the bench with him in the city court of Chattanooga. God knows what the defendants must have thought; it must have been very frustrating. But it was fascinating and he would take me—he had coffee with his friends every weekday morning at an old hotel in Chattanooga called the Reid House. And so the mayor would be there and the police commissioner and old DA who was about 112 then. He was probably 70, you know. That's how things—but my sense was, he was Methuselah. And so I just heard all these stories. I just heard both conversations about what was going on in the life of the country but also what was going on locally, refracted through these straightforward courthouse types.

02:43:54:13

And one of the things that I'm convinced it did was is A., it made politics fascinating and it made politic fascinating and it made it very human because these were guys going out to win votes and running campaigns. And so I would see them there but then I'd see their name on a sign, out in the—you know, the city. And so I could connect those two things. And so the other thing that was fascinating was connecting the men I saw on the news or read about in the newspaper with the ones I actually had been around and heard and when you think about it, that's a huge part of the biographical enterprise, is either reconciling those two personas, seeing that they're constant, or pointing out that they're irreconcilable. So that's really what a biographer

does. And so I think I was—I don't use the word fated but I'm convinced that was a huge part of why I got interested in what I do.

Meacham becoming a journalist

02:45:00:23

JON MEACHAM:

I went into journalism when I was 18. The Chattanooga Times, which was Adolph Ochs first Newspaper. Ruth Humburg, his granddaughter and Paul Kneale, the editor, sweetly hired me. I had no qualifications whatever, but I wrote a couple stories that first summer, went back a couple more summers, went back after I went to college for a year and a half or so—loved it. And it's a disappearing world, that sized newsroom. That was a 40,000, 45,000 circulation paper. But it was just, you know, it was just straight out of a movie: too much drinking and a lot of chasing stories. It probably didn't matter a huge amount to the course of human civilization but we thought they did. Around 1991, '92, I was covering local politics in North Georgia, which was right over the line from Chattanooga. And I remember going to rallies in that year, Pat Buchanan was running in the primaries. Buchanan actually did well in that part of the state. And I remember going and there were religious conservatives with signs, very respectable people who had homemade poster board who had all these social indicators—divorce rates, crime rates, all dated not from 1973 which is the Roe decision but from 1962, which is the school prayer decision that declared sectarian compulsory

school prayer in public schools unconstitutional. And I'd never seen the drama of the conservative world pinpointed there.

02:46:50:15

I always thought '73 is the beginning of everything and all of this is a reaction to abortion. It wasn't. That was an exacerbating factor for them obviously, but it really began with the Supreme Court and the fact that an Eisenhower court created in many ways by a Republican had seemingly betrayed their values. I don't think I was a very good newspaper reporter. My editor Paul Kneale used to say, "Please don't put—please don't quote Edmund Burke anymore," when I was writing about North Georgia politics. A fair point. You know, it was—you know, President Bush was running for re-election. The south was moving from having been solidly democratic though going Republican in presidential elections to becoming deep, deep—what we would later call deep, deep red. So I was there right on the edge. I remember covering the Georgia legislature in the early 90s and there was one Republican in the Georgia House of Representatives. Now, if you're a Democrat, you couldn't get arrested. So I was right—I was there right at that pivot point. And it was interesting because President Bush Senior was very much part of the other—the same world.

Meacham's evolving relationship with politics

02:48:18:01

JON MEACHAM:

My first conscious political memory was being allowed to stay up to watch Richard Nixon resign, which would have been nine o'clock Eastern Time on August 8th, 1974. Thursday night. And I remember… and then a couple years later when the Watergate book started coming out, I started reading about it, because it was sort of fascinating, it was like a real life Narnia, you know? You know, it had heroes and villains. I read Bernstein and Woodward's *The Final Days.* I remember very clearly reading that early on and the drama of politics, the human part of it was totally fascinating. What I made of all of that was that politics was this crazy world where sometimes great things happened and sometimes terrible things happened. I remember reading about, you know, Martha Mitchell making slightly drunken phone calls to reporters and you know, that happened in my family. But it's just—it just happens, you know?

02:49:35:02

And I hadn't thought about it exactly this way until right this second but I'm sure that there's some connection there. The big moment for me, was in 1986. I read two books: *All the Kings Men* by Robert Penn Warren and *The Wise Men* by Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas. And that was transformative as well because you have the great—in many ways the great American novel in Warren's hands. It's about Willie Stark who's really like Huey Long but it's… as ever, it's mixed. He's light and he's dark and he's trying…And then

Walter and Evan had written this marvelous book about Averell Harriman and Dean Acheson, the foreign policy elite that had shaped the post-war world. And I remember in both cases, I finished the book and then started it again. And then years later when I was having a job interview for Newsweek with Evan, I told him this story. And I said, "I was a senior in high school and I read your book and then I started again." And he said, "God, you must have been a loser." Which was a fair point.

Meacham's trajectory as a journalist

02:50:50:21

JON MEACHAM:

I went from the Chattanooga paper to Charlie—work for Charlie Peters at the Washington Monthly. Charlie's a fabulous man, really helped revolutionize journalism, like wanted to be—wanted the Democratic Party to be culturally sensitive to what is seen as more conservative elements. There was a famous Washington Monthly cover in the 70s saying, criminals belong in jail, which was kind of a radical thing to say in the McGovern era. And Charlie was vital, taught me details mattered enormously. You know, never—never think you'll—never think of something you need to do and think, oh okay, I'll do that later. You know, if you see it, say it, do it. And he taught me also that publishing, the journalism was really an all-in thing. It was totally consuming. There was no, no doing it halfway. And then I went to Newsweek in New York and I was there for 15 years. I loved Newsweek. I'd grown up with it, and Time, and that was how the world came to you pre-internet. The weekly

news magazines were hugely important, particularly to somebody growing up in Tennessee. The arguments made in the magazine were made with some brevity, but one of the things you learn is that if you can't make an argument briefly, you probably haven't got it—you may not have an argument to make. And so I … I never thought that somehow or another it was anti-intellectual or surf—skimming the surface.

Why Meacham became a journalist

02:52:50:00

JON MEACHAM:

I'm convinced that because I loved books when I was a kid, I was a terrible athlete so I had to. That was kind of the choice, though they're not mutually exclusive. Growing up where I grew up, where history was ambient and not particularly divisive, right? I mean this was—it wasn't a Lost Cause world, it wasn't—ya know, I'm not some survivalist escapee, you know? It's not that at all. Growing up where I grew up, loving big narrative non-fiction and loving politics, both for—both—the first, the way into this was the human drama of it. You know, I wasn't sitting when I was growing up thinking, "If only we could do this with Medicare Part B, we would be okay." My interest was in the struggle and the personalities that did the struggling. And so journalism was a natural place to land and it sure as hell beat law school. I went to three schools in my life and they were all religiously affiliated more or less. I went to an Episcopal Montessori, a nominally Presbyterian Secondary School and an Episcopal College. And if you look at the Anglican tradition, it's all about

scripture, reason, and tradition. But reason and tradition are right in there. And so I'm convinced that the teachers I had and the institutions I was part of certainly helped me think in the way I think insofar as I think.

Writing *The Soul of America*

02:54:48:17

JON MEACHAM:

If the 2016 election had gone the other way, I wouldn't have written about the Soul of America. I'm not so arrogant or self-involved to think I can say, here are the four points that will lead us forward. But what I can do is try to take advantage of the fact that I've spent most of my life thinking about the past, and thinking about how the past became something either worth emulating or worth avoiding. My hope with all of this with the arguments I make, the case studies I try to bring forward is not that somehow or another it will instantly bring perfection to the world, but it may give us a sense of proportion. It may enable people, when they're looking at a headline, when they're looking at the chyron on cable, when they're looking at their phone, when they're just about to explode. What—either side, whatever's going on. They might say, you know what, we got through Fort Sumter so maybe I cannot have my head explode right this minute. I've been incredibly lucky, beautifully educated, professionally fortunate, you know, some folks want to read or listen to what I have to say which is hugely flattering or an honor. I have an obligation to repay their time or attention with something that is worthwhile. And I think that if you make a historically based argument, if you

tell the story of someone within the biographical construction that it has its own rules of course, but in the end, you do want the reader, the listener, to find something illuminating for their own lives and their own time so that it's not… My view is that history—there is a purely clinical way of looking at it and that's great. For me, it's more about let's tell this story and then let's talk about what we can learn from it.

Being a writer

02:57:14:20

JON MEACHAM:

I don't think of writing as lonely partly because I'm a biographer and so by definition I'm in conversation, virtual conversation with both the subject and all the people who have done remarkable work about that subject through the years. And so I don't—I don't think of it as a lonely enterprise. It's frustrating. It's hard sometimes. But I'm always—whenever I'm feeling sorry for myself, I'm reminded of an old HL Mencken line, that when writers feel sorry for themselves, they could go out and work on an assembly line and they would be fine. And that will send you back to your typewriter pretty quickly. But I think of this as being part of a conversation. You know, I've written about people, about whom much has been written: Andrew Jackson, Thomas Jefferson. And I've written about people where it's kind of the beginning of the conversation: George H.W. Bush.

02:58:15:20

But it is a conversation. I don't think there is such a thing as a definitive biography because is any one life ever definitive? I think that this is a big disputatious, complex, marketplace of ideas and that there's plenty of room for ideas. Am I disappointed sometimes at how stuff is received? Sure. If you're—ya know, whenever you write something, what you're really hoping is that people would just say, "Not since Isaiah has there been such a master of prose." That happens very rarely. But you know, look, it's—you can't be for the first amendment for yourself and then against it for others. That's the damnable thing about it.

Perennial forces in the 1920s

02:59:07:08

JON MEACHAM:

So it's 1924, really the high-water mark in many ways of the second Ku Klux Klan. There was a Georgia politician named Clifford Walker who had run for Governor and lost. He then became more closely associated, joined the Klan and he won. And he gave a speech out in Kansas City at a Klan meeting saying that he wanted to build a wall of steel as high on heaven to keep southern Europeans out, Italians, Greeks. Build a wall of steel as high as heaven and again, the rhetoric of isolationism, of nativism, of that's the other, we need to get rid of the other so we can be what we, whoever we is, was the prevailing sentiment of that time.

Politicians governing for their base

03:00:01:09

JON MEACHAM:

A politician's natural instinct is to govern for those who already brought you to the dance. They already support you. They support you because you support causes they want. We call it the base. They're the folks that you take care of. History tells us though that greatness in the sweep of time is often granted to those who don't simply govern for the base. In the 1920s you had politicians who were governing for the Klan. You have Reconstruction politicians who were governing for the white supremacists. But the one—the presidents we tend to remember fondly are those who surprise us and do something that the base doesn't like or is forced to learn to like.

FDR

03:00:57:15

JON MEACHAM:

When FDR died in 1945, there people who said, "I never met him but I feel as though I just lost my best friend." There were people who put signs in the window that said "A death in the family," in store windows. There were GIs of course who really had never known another president. He had been president since 1933, it had been 12 years so if you'd been 7 or 8 years old, that was your president. People didn't know who Harry Truman was. He was a monumental figure in the life of the country not least because he was the

first president to fully inhabit radio. His voice was familiar to them. His voice was as familiar to the country as subsequent presidents' visages would be. So he was ubiquitous, 'cause speed is relative, right?

03:01:49:20

Then that sort of thing is relative. And there were those who believed he was God and there was 40% of the country that couldn't say his name. They called him that man. So when we try to sentimentalize the past, when we try to say, "Oh, this era is so much different. If only we could be like the 1930s or 40s." Eh, you know, 40% of the country never voted for Franklin Roosevelt. At best we're a 60/40 country. And most of the time it's 51/49. I just think that's important to remember to keep things in perspective. Look, Franklin Roosevelt is no paragon here. He interred the Japanese Americans, he resisted anti-lynching legislation, but we have to judge people on the totality of their lives and the totality of what they accomplished within the context of their era. And by that standard, Franklin Roosevelt is one of the greatest executive leaders that we ever had.

The importance of the presidency

03:02:57:05

JON MEACHAM:

The thing about executive power is you're always against it until you have it and you're against it if someone you don't like is exercising it, but then you're all for it if someone you like is. The story of the American presidency has been a gradual and sometimes rapid accretion of power. Very unlikely that

that gets rolled back in a significant way anytime soon. It's why the presidency matters so much. Not simply for the—its cultural role but the person in that chair, the person behind that desk does have a remarkable ability to set the tone, tenor, but also the actual policy of the country. Seems obvious to say that but a lot of people sometimes say, well you know, you're exaggerating the role of the presidency, it's also about mayors, it's also about mayors, it's also about—absolutely true. But if you have that kind of executive power or Article Two power as is called under the Constitution, you want someone sane doing it. I don't think that's a particularly radical proposition.

Japanese-American Incarceration

03:04:04:23

JON MEACHAM:

In the wake of Pearl Harbor, there were anxieties particularly along the west coast that Japanese Americans might serve as agents of the Japanese Imperial Government, an enemy force. The Attorney General of California, Earl Warren and others argued that there should be an internment program that as a national security measure, people of that ultimately foreign descent were dangerous, were potentially enemies of the country. And so FDR issued Executive Order 9066 interning Japanese Americans. It's one of our most shameful episodes in American history and a reminder that even in the midst of a global campaign to defend liberty and to fight tyranny, someone as otherwise remarkable as Franklin Roosevelt was able to make a serious

miscalculation and a decision that violated fundamental principles of both human and American rights.

03:05:13;07

For Roosevelt, this decision would have been about politics mostly. The west coast was fearful and he wanted to make sure he did everything he could both to secure the country, but also to reassure those who were anxious. And so he made a wartime decision, a hasty wartime decision. In war, civil liberties do not do well—it happened in the First World War, it happened in the Second World War, it happened in the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln suspended Habeas Corpus. So in times of war, presidents more often than not curb civil liberties in the name of broader national security concerns. What changed everything was Pearl Harbor and the fact that bombs had been dropped, Americans had died, war had been brought to us by the Japanese led to that remarkable reaction.

America First: the isolationist movement of the 1940s

03:06:20:22

JON MEACHAM:

Out of this First World War, there was an enormous amount of anxiety that more global engagement would lead to entanglements, debt, the power of the few over the many and so America First, which was founded at Yale… so not a Midwestern thing, very much in the heart of the American elite. The isolationist movement was centrally based on the idea that our oceans would protect us and that we could, should not be thrown into foreign quarrels,

foreign entanglements because someone was always taking advantage of us. There was a populist streak in the isolationist movement. It was the same thing people would argue in more domestic populist moments. It was that someone is taking advantage of us and we need to be smart because they think they're smarter than us. And in this case it was the old world—we don't want to be outsmarted. And Lindbergh, Charles Lindbergh, ironically, given that he had proven how small the world was because he had crossed the Atlantic in the airplane becomes the central voice for this. The voice for what he calls and a phrase we might hear again, the silent majority.

How FDR dealt with isolationists

03:07:46:20

JON MEACHAM:

FDR dealt with isolationism incredibly carefully. He believed as he once put it that you can never get too far ahead of your followers because you might look back and no one's there. He knew that the country was uninterested in fighting another global war. He knew that to be in place, to make decisions that he thought he should make, he had to maneuver incredibly carefully and in many ways be deceptive. He once said, "I'm a juggler. I never let my left hand know what my right hand was doing." And that was—that was certainly true. Late 1940 campaign, he says, "Your boys are not going to be sent to fight in any foreign wars. And Wendell Willkie, the Republican nominee said, "That son of a bitch, that's gonna beat me." And it did.

Great leaders are those who wisely handle crisis

03:08:36:00

JON MEACHAM:

It's true that great presidents have known ultimately where they wanted to go and have managed to hold onto power long enough to get at least close. Lincoln was a skeptic on this. He once said, "That I admit plainly that events have controlled me." He was reacting to reality, but even within that, how you react within the constraints of time, you have a choice. Crises are about moments of decision where fate is decided. The initial meaning of crisis goes back to health. It's a—it's whether you—you decide whether you're gonna live or you're gonna die. And so in political life, crises present certain choices. Lincoln made the choices he made, FDR made the choices he made, Lyndon Johnson made the choices he made. Each with a sense that they knew where they wanted to go. And they might not get there with this decision or that decision or even another decision, but that there was a place that they knew the hill they wanted to get to. And I think that's what separates truly great leaders from people who are simply marking time in positions of authority.

FDR's death

03:10:01:22

JON MEACHAM:

In the second week of April, 1945, FDR goes down to Warm Springs to his cottage in Georgia. And he's working on a Jefferson birthday address.

Jefferson's birthday is April 13th. And some of the last sentences we know he wrote included, "The only limit to the realization of our hopes for tomorrow will be our doubts of today. We must move forward with strong and active faith." And they were in many ways his last words. He was a politician and a person who always preferred thinking ahead and hoping as opposed to fearing. Sounds banal. But if you've been struck down by polio, and if you've managed to come back into the arena, you know that that journey is possible. You know that you can move from fear to hope. And he fundamentally understood that the best American presidents, the best American eras were ones where you talked about strong and active faith, you talked about what he called in the same speech the science of human relationships. You talked about as he put it in his final inaugural, that the only way to have a friend is to be one in the new world. All of those messages, which can seem like we're talking about middle point pillows or coffee mugs or just being a homiletic, it was true for him. And the proof is in the fact that when he died that day, the country dissolved in an emotional wave in many ways. And that when we look back, we see someone who confronted two of the greatest crises in American history and we came out stronger ultimately than we went in. And believe me, if it had gone another way, we would hold him accountable. So justice requires us giving him credit.

48 Wheeler Ave, 3rd Floor Pleasantville, NY 10570 T 914-238-6800 kunhardtfilmfoundation.org

Eleanor Roosevelt

03:12:07:17

JON MEACHAM:

Eleanor Roosevelt always reminded Franklin Roosevelt of why he was truly there. She was a goad, a conscience, a source of perennial reminders that our better angels had to continue to fight our worst instincts. She had become his eyes and ears and legs long before she had found her own work in civil rights and progressive causes and women's causes, everything you can think of. One of the greatest women who ever lived. One of the greatest people who ever lived, Eleanor Roosevelt. And when FDR was thinking that he would go a little bit slower on this or that, she would be right there. And it drove him crazy, you know. He would—you know, he'd be sitting there just trying to have a drink at the end of the day and she would come in with a basket of letters and things you should do and you know, he was just, oh God, here we go again. I've often thought of I think it was—who said that… I've often thought of Lionel Trilling's line, literary critic, he once said of Fanny in Mansfield Park, Jane Austen's novel, that an evening would not be undertaken lightly. An evening with Mrs. Roosevelt would not be undertaken lightly. She was a very serious person and yet the plight of a lot of folks is a lot better today because she was.

The dual nature of reality

03:13:35:10

JON MEACHAM:

There's a school of thought that one of the reasons Earl Warren was as devoted as he was to the Brown versus Board decision in 1954 was that there was some guilt because of the Japanese internment. That's a subject of great debate but Warren is a great example, Chief Justice Warren of the nature, the dual nature of reality. He was wrong about internment and he was right about integration. FDR was right about the war and wrong about internment. You know, it's just—Lincoln was right about emancipation, but he was wrong about leaving slavery in place for the two years he did. So if you want someone perfect, you know, write a novel.

"Vinegar Joe" Stilwell and Ronald Reagan's apology for the Japanese-American Incarceration

03:14:27:16

JON MEACHAM:

After the war, Vinegar Joe Stilwell, Pacific Commander comes to California and goes to award citation to a regiment of Japanese Americans. And there was a young Hollywood actor who gave a talk at the same ceremony talking about how we might come from different places but the blood we shed on the beaches in the cause of liberty was all the same color and that was a young

man named Ronald Reagan who then as president 40 years later would apologize for the Japanese internment.

History shows that society almost always regrets decisions made against particular groups

03:15:09:07

JON MEACHAM:

I think the ultimate apology for the internment, the prevailing view that it was the wrong view is a cautionary tale for us, which is that when we have focused our fire literally and figuratively on particular groups, we have almost always come to regret it in the fullness of time. So African Americans, women, Japanese Americans during internment. Will that be true of immigrants today? I would bet yes because of the historical pattern. If you demonize, if you select out people based on ethnicity or nationality, whatever it is, you're really not acting in the full spirit of the American Revolution, which is that we have to find a way to open that definition of what Jefferson meant. And I don't understand why history doesn't have more of an impact on these decisions in real time. I do understand because it's emotional and it's fear based and all that, but part of my argument is whenever you want to say, this group is bad, this group must be discriminated against, think back and find a case where we've decided that or the mainstream decided that and didn't come to regret it. We always end up apologizing so why don't we not do what we have to—why don't we not do the thing that we apologize for in the first place. Could we try that maybe once?

When social reform works best

03:17:04:11

JON MEACHAM:

Capitalism survived the 1930s for a whole host of reasons. The industrial output of the Second World War, The New Deal played its role. Prosperity that ca—the prosperity that came after the war was really unparalleled in terms of its widespread impact. The creation of the post-war middle class is one of the great stories in history, and I don't think it's a coincidence that it was a prosperous America that ultimately undid Jim Crow and ultimately passed the Voting Rights Act. Because enough people who looked like me felt they were doing well enough that we could extend a hand. People who are interested in social reform would do very well to be interested in broad based prosperity too. Because the fear that keeps people from extending their hand is often based on an economic anxiety and if they're doing well, if they're feeling secure in their own place in the world, they are far more likely to widen the definition of the mainstream than they are if they're feeling economic pressure.

Private enterprise and public sector working together

03:18:28:14

JON MEACHAM:

The American story is of private enterprise and the public sector working together and whether it's the trans-continental railroad or the creation of land grant universities, the internal improvements before that, the interstate highways, the GI bill, public schools, you know, it's -- cold war spending. There's no question that the public sector has fueled private prosperity and there's no question that private enterprise has created innumerable jobs and opportunity. And I think trying to say all one is all good or one is all bad is ahistorical. You know, we—people who are anti-government are usually doing so in a house lit by the TVA after they've driven on an interstate build by Dwight Eisenhower shortly before they cash their social security cheque. If you're looking for an emblem of the absolute ideological rigidity of the age, there was a sign at an Obamacare rally where someone held up a sign that said, "I want the government to keep their hands off my Medicare." And you don't really have to know anything else. If I were trying to craft a big government centric policy these days, I don't think I would use the New Deal, I think I'd use the Marshall Plan, the rebuilding of Europe. The New Deal conjures up this vast bureaucracy that you know, as President Reagan said, "The closest thing to eternal life on earth is a government program."

03:20:09:09

And so it's still in the brain stem of the American public, the New Deal can put people off. Nobodies against the Marshall Plan. You know, that was an act

of generosity, it rebuilt Europe, it created stability, it created security, it helped us win the Cold War and it's limited. People think of the New Deal as a perpetual thing, which in many ways it has been. The Marshall Plan is a focused attack on something, the solution to a given problem.

America often goes from extreme to extreme

03:20:46:19

JON MEACHAM:

We feared big government long before the Civil War and that was Jefferson versus Hamilton. The anxiety about the power of the state versus the power of the individual is as fundamental to the American dynamic as anything and it predates the Civil War, postdates the Civil War. It's a little… it's intellectually dubious because we don't really define what we mean anymore by government versus private sector necessarily. But I think that there's no doubt that… well, let me put it this way. There's something about the American spirit that bounces us from guardrail to guardrail. So now that we have this right-wing populist, who knows what happens next. I mean, you could end up on the far left again fairly quickly because we tend to go from extreme to extreme.

McCarthyism

03:21:48:19

JON MEACHAM:

So Joe McCarthy becomes a national force on Lincoln's birthday in 1950, Wheeling West Virginia. He gives a speech saying he has in his pocket the names of 253 I think, 257 communists in the Department of State—never really found any. There had been communists in the government but they had been driven out mostly by Truman in a loyalty program that upset civil libertarians. "McCarthy," his own Lawyer Roy Cohn said, "was an opportunist. He was—he'd bought Communism the way other people might buy a car. It was a vehicle, it was a means to an end." He rose to power interestingly in a radio and newspaper world where his charges were sensational and immediately transmitted to the world. It's very interesting that he fell in a TV world. That people who watched what was unfolding decided that's not who we wanted to be, or at least that's not who we want to be right now. And my sense is that both Edward R. Murrow's program which basic ally just showed McCarthy being McCarthy and then McCarthy's own performance during the Army-McCarthy hearings of being a bully made people think this isn't what we want to do. Now they thought that after four years of it. You know, these things take time. That was four years, Watergate was 27 months. You know, it's not the work of a news cycle.

Senator Joe McCarthy and the press

03:23:23:13

JON MEACHAM:

There was a huge amount of debate during the McCarthy era about whether a re—journalistic institution should simply report what was said, broadcast what was said without assessing it's validity, without telling readers or viewers this is true or not true. This sounds somewhat familiar. And there was a lot of discussion, a lot of argument about, do you take McCarthy and treat him as a different kind of thing than simply the old news test of a United States Senator says there's a Communist loose in Iowa, therefore we must write that a United States Senator said there's a Communist loose in Iowa. Just because someone in power says something, does that make it news? And if it does make it news, does the journalistic organization have an obligation to assess the validity of what was said?

The growth of politics as entertainment in the 1950s

03:24:20:06

JON MEACHAM:

The 1950s really saw the birth or at least the growth of politics as entertainment. It became a serialization. It was serialized in the papers; it was serialized on radio and ultimately on television. And Richard Hofstadter, the great Columbia historian said that, "It's now possible to keep the mass of man in a constant political ferment." Because you have characters, you have

drama, you have shifting scenes, it's really kind of like, dare I say it, a reality TV series.

Why McCarthyism failed

03:25:00:03

JON MEACHAM:

McCarthyism fell not least because enough people said this is hysterical. This is not in fact a proportionate response to what's unfolding, and reason won out. It's actually quite a reassuring story. It took a longtime. Lives were ruined. It took four years but ultimately McCarthy falls from power because enough people realized there was not a red under every bed as the phrase went. I think the fall of McCarthy is an incredibly important case study in how reason can ultimately triumph over passion. The anti-communism of the era was a passionate thing. You felt the existential question and why wouldn't you? Nuclear weapons, unfolding struggle. People who would be inside the government trying to undo things. Totally makes sense. It's an amazing drama. But ultimately, we decided you know what, people who know about this say it's not that big a deal.

Conservative movements of the 1950s

03:26:18:12

JON MEACHAM:

In many ways, the conservative movement that has a connection with conspiracy theories begins in the aftermath of the Second World War. There was anxiety about the way FDR had handled Yalta. People thought that he had sold us out. That quickly moved into an anti-communist conspiratorial world where Eisenhower was seen as a dedicated agent of the communist conspiracy. George Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff during World War Two was seen as a communist agent. There was this ferment of completely wild and untrue views that the power structure was somehow working with the Soviets against ordinary Americans which plays in yet again to this recurring theme that there is some force, foreigners, powerful people, rich people who are trying to undo the America that is most familiar and most beloved to those who are listening to the conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories of the 1950s

03:27:26:06

JON MEACHAM:

Conspiracy theories are perennial. Richard Hofstadter called it "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." They ebb and they flow. There are completely respectable conservative voices in the post-war era, William F. Buckley being chief among them. But there are also for every Buckley there's a John Birch

Society in the 1950s. You have a… an incredibly fraught debate about the nature of freedom, the freedom of our defense against the Soviets.

Lyndon B. Johnson passing the Civil Rights Act after John F. Kennedy's assassination

03:28:01:27

JON MEACHAM:

It's Friday, November 22nd, 1963. It's a sunny day in Dallas. Kennedy and Johnson are in Texas trying to bring peace to the two wings of the Democratic Party in preparation for the 1964 election. Kennedy is shot to death in Dealey Plaza. Johnson becomes President, takes the oath of office on Air Force One. They fly back to Washington. They don't know at that point to what extent this might be a widespread conspiracy. That night Johnson is lying in bed in his house in Washington, a house called The Elms. And he's listing off things that he wants to do—foreign leaders that need to be called, funeral arrangements. But in the midst of this, he says he wants to pass the administration's civil rights bill without changing a comma. The bill that had come into being after a stand-off in the schoolhouse door with George Wallace in Alabama of June of that year. And it was kind of a remarkable moment because Johnson had a presidential race coming up. The reason they'd been in Texas was they were worried about the south. No more political man ever drew breath than Lyndon Baines Johnson. Everything about that moment would have led him to have made all kinds of promises, all kinds of rhetorical nods to the civil rights legislation, but not to pursue it. There was something in Johnson's soul that led him to believe that this was

the moment to strike. And as he later put it, "What the hell is the presidency for if not to do the big things that other men might not? What the hell is the presidency for?"

03:29:53:18

And he had a very clear vision that it was for doing big things that would loom large in the lives of people and ultimately in the life of history. Johnson had been a Senator from Texas, a segregated state. A lot of debate about to what extent he watered down civil rights legislation in the 50's but he did. He was in no way a leading progressive. He had been put on the ticket in part because the New England liberals needed a southern conservative in the Democratic Party of that time. And so you wouldn't have bet on that afternoon in Dallas or en route back to Andrews aboard Air Force One, that Lyndon Johnson was going to try to finish the work of Lincoln.

Civil Rights in the post-war era

03:30:42:11

JON MEACHAM:

The story of civil rights in the post-war era in many ways begins with Harry Truman. He integrates the military in 1948. That creates a huge backlash. A lot of conservative democrats left the party after that. In 1954, the Brown decision orders school integration. 1955 there's an enforcement decision that means we really mean it, you gotta do this. But by 1964, there'd been enough nonviolent activism that the full panoply of segregation was under attack. Kennedy after George Wallace, the Governor of Alabama steps in and says

he's gonna stop the integration of the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. They propose a far-reaching civil rights act. It was not going particularly well in Congress, which was dominated by white southern Democrats until the assassination. And what Johnson then did from '63 to '64 is he created a remarkable coalition of Republicans and Democrats that would finally undo what had been the reac—the racist reaction to the verdict to the Civil War.

Lyndon B. Johnson

03:32:00:10

JON MEACHAM:

Lyndon Johnson was one of the great persuaders in American politics. The Johnson treatment it was called. He would feel you. He wouldn't do very well now. He was always grabbing folks, and one of the ways he pushed the case for civil rights was he would tell the story of his housekeeper or his maids, both male and female who were African American, who would have to stop on the way back from Washington to Texas to urinate on the side of the road because they couldn't use public facilities. He—he used the particular to illustrate the universal. He also used the broad sweep of history; he weaponized history in a very effective way. He's sitting in the oval office with George Wallace one day and Wallace has been launching the counter attack against the protestors on Bloody Sunday, the Selma to Montgomery march. And Johnson puts him on a couch where he sinks down. And Wallace was a little guy anyway, Johnson was a big guy. Johnson's looming over him largely and he says, "George, what do you want people to say on your tombstone? Do

you want it to say, 'George Wallace, he hated,' or 'George Wallace, he built?'" And it was clear that in Johnson's mind you want it said of you that you built, and he really I think brilliantly appealed to a politician's vanity to do the right thing.

03:33:39:08

And that's a hell of a combination. You can appeal to do the right thing or you can appeal to their vanity. It's the truly great moments where you can do both. Johnson's historical stock is complicated. Obviously the deep unpopularity of the Vietnam War which drove him from office in 1968 has driven him from I think the full light and appreciation of history. That's changing somewhat as these things do, but here's a man whom you wouldn't have bet on like Truman—wouldn't have bet on Truman being a transformative figure. You might not have bet on Lyndon Johnson being a transformative figure who did remarkable things. Was he perfect? Hell no, God no. But is the country better off because of what he did on certain issues? Yeah, it is. Lyndon Johnson is a vivid case of the best the presidency can be and sometimes the worst politicians can be. He understood that being on a great stage required great action, required a breadth of vision, but he was a particularly sensitive politician, strongly disliked slights. I don't know anyone who likes being slighted so I should add that, but he was always politically attuned to a remarkable degree.

03:35:06:19

And that created a kind of internal drama that I suspect took a huge amount of wear and tear. He never got over the fact that he thought the Kennedys didn't give him enough credit. He was always anxious and insecure about his

social and educational credentials, even when he becomes the most—one of the most powerful presidents in American history. But none of that is to criticize him, it's just to say that's what happens in this most human of businesses. You know, politics is not clinical. It's as human as you get. And Johnson was as human as you got. Johnson believed in drawing on his life's experiences. When he argued for the Voting Rights Act, he talked about how he had taught poor Mexican children and had been so desperate—made so desperate by poverty and that becoming president gave him an immense amount of power in order to help them. As a Texan, as a southerner, he had a certain credibility with the region that needed the most reform but they turned on him. I mean, it wasn't as though Johnson going to civil rights was like Nixon going to China.

03:36:31:04

Goldwater, the states Barry Goldwater carried in 1964 were the states that were in Johnson's native region. The key thing about him, about Johnson I think, is that he saw the country whole. And I don't mean to sound sentimental about it, but that matters. He saw that being president meant rising above sectional concerns. Rising above his constitu—his old constituency and I guess that's one of the reasons he was able to make that leap from Senator to Vice President to President, in terms of a growing… a widening breadth of vision. Because he understood that he was president of everybody and the great presidents have understood that.

Politicians seeking re-election and what is expected of them

03:37:32:14

JON MEACHAM:

Politicians want to be reelected. That's kind of the oxygen they breathe and sometimes they'll say, it doesn't matter, I will stand on principle. And sometimes they mean it. George H.W. Bush meant it on taxes in 1990. Lyndon Johnson said it a couple of times, I don't think he meant it. Ultimately, he gave up the presidency but one of the fascinating things about this whole world is you have these intensely ambitious, driven people who are in a sphere of life where you're ultimately judged by how you transcend being ambitious and driven. So it's an inherent tension. You have to be tough and strong and egotistical to win great political power and then when you have great political power, you're expected to rise above the kind of conflicts that you mastered and won to get there. So actually we have a fairly high expectation. We don't think about it much, but a fairly high expectation of political leaders. They frequently disappoint. It's why we only talk about a handful in terms of we need to be more like X or Y. There aren't that many X or Y's.

What Lyndon B. Johnson wanted to be remembered for

03:39:05:03

JON MEACHAM:

Lyndon Johnson risked just about everything for civil rights. Now he won an incredible victory that year. He was lucky in his opponent; Barry Goldwater

was seen as too extreme. Johnson was playing for this conversation. He was playing for—and that sounds dismissive, I don't mean that. He was playing for the ages. He wanted to be Franklin Roosevelt; he wanted to be Abraham Lincoln. He wanted people to put him in that paragraph, in the paragraph of those who transcended the circumstances of their time and expanded liberty, expanded what Jefferson meant when he wrote that we're all created equal. That's what Lyndon Johnson wanted. He wanted something big and he got it. And he fought for it. And we have to give him credit for it.

Leaders reacting to the acts of the people

03:39:58:07

JON MEACHAM:

It's really important when we talk about civil rights in the 20th century to realize that we give Truman credit for integrating the military. We give Eisenhower credit for responding to Little Rock; we give Johnson credit for finishing the work of Lincoln and undoing Jim Crow, but they were reacting to innumerable acts of courage from people whose names we know and don't know—Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, the people who marched and died for this cause. Change in America comes when the powerful take notice of what the powerless have been saying and on civil rights—you see it in the relationship between Kennedy and Johnson and Dr. King—the presidency was a lagging indicator, not a leading indicator. When Kennedy watched Dr. King give his speech to the March on Washington, and when it was over, he said, "He's damn good." He appreciated, the performer in him understood

what King was doing. The complicated calculus, the tradeoffs, the deals cut to get to a legislative solution for the problems of injustice that were being pointed out in the great iconic moments is the work of politics and Lyndon Johnson in particular gets great credit because it would have been easy to have punted on this, should've said you know what, I'm not gonna deal with it till after the election. He dealt with it during the election. He was willing to take the risk.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s understanding of public attention and appetite for change

03:41:46:09

JON MEACHAM:

Martin Luther King understood America in fundamental ways. At Kennedy's funeral in Washington, Walter Fauntroy, an associate of King's said to Dr. King, "Civil rights will really pass now. Now we're gonna get it." And King looked at him and said, "We're a ten-day nation, Walter. We basically have an attention span that lasts ten days." Now it's about ten minutes or so but King understood that public attention and a public appetite for change came and went.

The 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery

03:42:26:05

JON MEACHAM:

Civil Rights Act was really about enforcing the 14th amendment, the idea of equal access. There was no special legislation though to try to enforce the 15th amendment, the right giving African American men the right to vote. And so there was a voter registration march planned from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery, Alabama. It was Sunday March 7th, 1965. John Lewis, young man, head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He'd been born with a stutter; he learned to speak by preaching to the chickens in his family's yard in Troy, Alabama. Lewis and Hosea Williams are leading the march, they go across the Edmund Pettus Bridge Lewis had packed for jail. He packed a toothbrush, a book, some fruit. They come down the bridge, the Alabama troopers and posse men say, "There'll be no march today." Lewis says, "May we kneel and pray?" He kneels; the posse men come after him and nearly beat him to death. It had happened a thousand times or more in the American South, but there was one thing different, and that was a television camera. And the footage of that attack was shown that night. ABC News broke in, interrupting the broadcast premier of *Judgment at Nuremberg*, to show what became known as Bloody Sunday.

03:43:59:19

And then a fascinating eight-day period unfolded because in the usual way the story is told, you go from the scene on the bridge to Lyndon Johnson standing in the well of the House of Representatives saying, "…and we shall

overcome." But that was eight days. And in those eight days Lyndon Johnson did something pretty remarkable. He enforced… he got Wallace in line. He also got King and the civil rights activists to acknowledge the authority of the courts. So he got Wallace to acknowledge the rule of law and he got civil rights folks to acknowledge the rule of law. He had everything in place, and then he steps in and says that the time has come for voting rights to be secured in the United States. And it's one of the great pieces of presidential literature written by Dick Goodwin who was a little hung over. He was upset he had not been assigned the speech in the beginning and so he'd gone out and had a fairly liquid evening, then came in. The first draft was terrible, they ask Goodwin to do it. And that speech, which echoes even now, is one of the great pieces of presidential rhetoric written totally on deadline. In the eight days between bloody Sunday and the speech to congress, Johnson made both George Wallace and the civil rights activists submit to the authority of the courts that were supervising the march. He made both acknowledge that there was a rule of law. So, he created a kind of balance, an equal poise. And then he came in really on the side of the activists.

George Wallace

03:45:46:20

JON MEACHAM:

George Corley Wallace of Alabama, From Barbour County used to chew on white owl cigars, which was not a good kind of cigar. He was a fairly progressive non-virulently racist democrat until he lost a couple of elections

and then became the segregationist we know him to have been. He was a populist; he understood the power of race among white voters, that white voters who might be poor would vote with white voters who might be rich because they would have a common foe in the African American world. Wallace said in his inauguration in Montgomery that he would support segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever. Wallace became the perfect enemy for both President Kennedy and President Johnson. He was the embodiment of this Lost Cause finding new energy in the cold war and ultimately the breaking of Wallace was a huge breakthrough for the country. Wallace had been a fairly progressive democrat.

03:47:09:19

He lost an election. He decided he wanted therefore to be victorious, so he adopted segregation. He became a much more virulent racist candidate out of convenience. One of the important things to remember about George Wallace is he did very well outside the south in 1968, 1972. He was—1964. He was a candidate who took a regional message to a national audience. And so, if you're a Northerner or a Midwesterner or a Westerner and you want to look down on the south, check and see how well George Wallace did in your 1968 presidential race. He won 13.5% of the popular vote. Kind of amazing. Five states, they were all southern states but Wisconsin, Indiana, I mean this was someone who had a message that was all too tragically American and not exclusively southern.

George Wallace's "segregation forever" speech

03:48:13:21

JON MEACHAM:

In January, 1963, George Wallace stands in front of the Alabama capitol in Montgomery and says, "Segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever." And it was this cri de coeur from the heart of the old south in a new world, in a world of the Cold War, in a world of shifting identity. And it would not stand for long but it was a powerful cry at that point and captured the fears of millions of people.

Meacham meeting George Wallace

03:48:53:07

JON MEACHAM:

… I met Wallace once, it was about 1995 or '96 and of course he was in a wheelchair. Had been an assassination attempt in 1972. And we met in Montgomery. A lot of history in Montgomery, Alabama. It's—there's the place where Jefferson Davis took the oath of office as president of the confederacy, it's the place where Wallace stood and did his segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever speech and Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, which of course was Dr. King's church is not far away. We were down in that same sort of square and Wallace at that point was quite old and you know, frail in terms of the chair. But he was sitting in front of this quite heroic portrait of himself and so you had this interesting conflict between the man

as he was and the man as he wished to remember himself. And in many ways that's true of the region he came to represent so clearly. Wallace had recanted some of his views. You know, some of it was convenient. He wanted to continue to win elections and African Americans were now enfranchised and so … he's a great example of how do we deal with redemption in American life, you know? Do you take him at his word or not, you know? Everybody has to make a decision on that.

Lyndon B. Johnson's last speech

03:50:26:18

JON MEACHAM:

The last speech Lyndon Johnson ever gave was at his library in Austin. He'd come from his ranch in Stonewall, there'd been a snowstorm. He was late. It was a civil rights symposium and Johnson knew it was—the end was near. He started smoking again, started drinking. He was told by his doctors never to smoke again or he won't make it and he didn't. But the speech he gave was about the centrality of civil rights as the American promise. And he said, "I feel embarrassed that I've done so little, that I was not able to accomplish more." Which is a remarkably open and candid assessment of what was otherwise … what was in fact an otherwise incredible legacy.

Divisiveness in American today

03:51:20:08

JON MEACHAM:

Why are we so divided now? There are a couple thoughts. First, the 1850s were pretty bad, so let's not run too far ahead here. I think that one of the issues is the parties have become purer. That is, the Democratic Party had a segregationist wing and a northern liberal wing. The Republicans had Midwestern conservatives but New England progressives, western conservatives. The parties have become more their essence. And so, you don't have—the parties don't play the filtering role they once did. Truman worried about this. Harry Truman said that he worried about the moment when all the liberals would be in one party and all the conservatives in another because then you would have this stark choice and the other side wouldn't have any incentive to cooperate. I think the death of incentive for compromise is a key villain here. Voters don't reward those who vote according to what their minds tell them as opposed to what their party caucus tells them. And I think some of this is on us. Lawmakers only here by and large from the people who are upset. If you're pleased that your Senator, your representative voted for the other side on something with which you agreed, let 'em know. Now you're probably not gonna know that because that presumes a pretty detailed grasp of what's going on which is unusual. But this is not brain surgery. Politicians are reactive, they are accountable, they are interested in pleasing you to make sure they continue in office. And if you want something different, you have to speak up.

The progress made between the 1860s and the 1960s

03:53:42:23

JON MEACHAM:

The work of the mid-1960s, the passage of the ’64 act, the passage of the ’65 act really finishes a century that began with the Civil War, of a huge part of the mainstream of the country not accepting a fundamental premise of equality. After 1965, it became very difficult for that to be a mainstream position. There are those who do, but 1865 to 1965 is a long, complicated story that ends well or well enough, which is about all you can do in terms of history. By securing open public accommodation, by securing the right to vote, we in many ways manage to come as close as we’ve been able to to level the playing field, and there’s an immense amount of work to be done and there’s a lot that’s happened since then of immense importance, unquestionably. But by and large, Lincoln would have recognized what Johnson… what Lyndon … by and large Abraham Lincoln would have recognized what Lyndon Johnson did as finishing the work of the Civil War. And that’s an extraordinary arc.

Lyndon B. Johnson not running for re-election

03:55:23:02

JON MEACHAM:

By March, 1968, Lyndon Johnson was bereft by the war in Vietnam. 47 Americans were dying a day in 1968 in Vietnam. The year had begun with Tet, the North Vietnamese offensive. Johnson realized that there was very little he could do while running for President and trying to negotiate an end to the war. He would have loved to remain as president; he was certainly open to being drafted, but Eugene McCarthy, Democrat from Minnesota had come in, challenged him in the New Hampshire primary, done very well. Bobby Kennedy at that point had entered the race, so he had the challengers from the left and saw the writing on the wall.

Lessons

03:56:14:21

JON MEACHAM:

Seems to me the key thing for this particular era is to understand that it is difficult, but not unique. The forces that are shaping the worst parts of us right now—isolationism, nativism, racism, extremism—are forces that are part of the American character. And that might be more depressing than you might want to think, but I think there's something somewhat liberating about knowing that we have faced these forces in the past, we have pushed them back, we have made progress. They're never permanently defeated. There's

no such thing as a permanent victory. I think about the soul because I think that there are our better angels here and our worse instincts here. There's Dr. King here and there's the Klan here, and every day is shaped by the struggle between these two forces. It's true of all of us and it's true of all of the country as well. Now we do better in America when we actually listen and try to use our brains as opposed to simply reacting with our guts, so we need to find some way to restore the role of reason. If I disagree with you 99% of the time, and so when you get up and say something, I think, "Oh Jesus, here they go again." If I don't listen, then I'm not being true to the American Revolution.

03:57:52:15

If you're a conservative, you should love this point because this was the original intent. The original intent of the country was that reason would take a stand with passion in the arena. So if you get up, you make your case, and I think, "Huh maybe they got a point." I'd argue that a lot of the best part of America happens when you say, huh, maybe they have a point. And we don't say huh, maybe they have a point nearly enough right now. So we need to use our brains. We need to use reason and we absolutely have to fight tribalism. We have to fight this instinct to pick one jersey or the other, pick one team or the other, and then the other team is just always wrong. Because I think we know in our own lives that's not true. I mean maybe people think they're right all the time, I don't know anybody who does. The country was built by people all willing to learn from their mistakes, who were willing to say, "Huh, I got that one wrong." And if you can't do that, then you foreclose the possibility of ever learning, of ever moving ahead. If we had not been able to

admit we made a mistake on segregation for instance, or how about this: If we had not been willing able to admit that we made a mistake in the 1930s and early 1940s by not actively opposing Adolph Hitler. If we hadn't admitted that, we wouldn't have won the Civil War. If we didn't admit that segregation was wrong, we would not be freer and more just and better country. If we weren't willing to admit that slavery was wrong, we would have been hopelessly knocked out of modernity. What's the common denominator there? The common denominator is we looked the facts in the face and we thought, you know what, what we thought was true and good yesterday is not good and true today and we use facts, and we use reason. That's not a partisan point. It sounds partisan today, but it's not. Ronald Reagan was right about the Cold War. FDR was right about Hitler in the end. There's a Republican, there's a Democrat. You know? It's not about that party label. It's about the capacity to say, "I want to live in a country that looks and feels like this."

48 Wheeler Ave, 3rd Floor Pleasantville, NY 10570 T 914-238-6800 kunhardtfilmfoundation.org