

David Rubenstein: The Highest Calling

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[00:00:00.0] Tanaya Tauber: Welcome to Live at the National Constitution Center, the podcast sharing live constitutional conversations and debates hosted by the Center in person and online. I'm Tanaya Tauber, the senior director of town hall programs. On September 12th, bestselling author, philanthropist, and National Constitution Center trustee, David Rubenstein, joined NCC president Jeffrey Rosen at the Center in Philadelphia to discuss David's new book, *The Highest Calling: Conversations on the American Presidency*.

[00:00:36.8] Tanaya Tauber: In this episode, David delves into his latest work, which features interviews with presidential historians and living presidents and chronicles the journeys of the leaders who have shaped America. He also explores the duties and responsibilities of the presidency, the triumphs and failures of its officeholders, and the future of the role in the 21st century. Here's Jeff to get the conversation started.

[00:01:00.5] Jeffrey Rosen: Hello, friends. It is so wonderful to be in person and to convene here at the beautiful National Constitution Center. What an exciting time from the presidential debate to Constitution Day on Tuesday, it is just nonstop constitutional illumination. Friends, it's such a pleasure to share with you a great American historian, philanthropist, and friend of the NCC. David Rubenstein has done so much to spark curiosity about American history through his philanthropy, his scholarship, and his interviews. Among his many talents is he's a marvelous interviewer, from his TV shows, and he just loves presidential history. I do too. I bet you do too 'cause you're here, and I just had the best day devouring this book, which consists of interviews with great American presidential historians on American presidents, as well as interviews with three living presidents: George W. Bush, Joe Biden, and Donald Trump. Please join me in welcoming David Rubenstein.

[00:02:25.6] David Rubenstein: Thank you very much for inviting me here, and happy to be here. You've done a great deal for the Constitution, and I've never met anybody as enthusiastic about the Constitution as Jeff Rosen. No founding father, nobody, has as much enthusiasm as you do for the Constitution.

[00:02:44.9] Jeffrey Rosen: You have great enthusiasm for American history and American presidents, and you say that one of your goals in writing the book was to spark curiosity and inspire people to learn more about American presidents. Tell us why you wrote the book.

[00:02:51.7] David Rubenstein: As a young man, I did work in the White House for President Carter, and I've lived in Washington for the ensuing 40-plus years, so I hang around Washington, and you get to meet presidents from time to time. I've always been interested in the presidency since I was a boy, and so I would say I really wanted to do this 'cause I have an interest in this subject matter, but I hope that I could interest people in learning more about presidents. Right now, we have about 160 million people who vote in presidential elections, but 80 million people who are eligible to vote don't vote. 80 million people. And so I think our democracy would be stronger if we had another 80 million people voting, or 20 million more some more than we have. We have one of the lowest percentages of voting of any Western democracy, and I think my book alone is not gonna change that, but I'm hoping that more and more people will get to learn more about the presidents. The debates that you hosted here the other night were a good step in that direction, but we need to get people more educated. As Jefferson said, a representative democracy works best if you have an informed citizenry, and sometimes our citizenry is not as informed as it should be.

[00:04:00.0] Jeffrey Rosen: It is not, and you have done a great service in inspiring people to learn more. I wanna talk about individual presidents 'cause what's so riveting about the book are the anecdotes that stick in the mind of human stories about particular ones but I do wanna ask some broad questions about what struck you as common themes. I was struck by how deep readers of history many of these presidents were, from Lincoln, Garfield, FDR, Truman, JFK, Nixon, George W. Bush, Obama, Clinton, Carter all of them are deep students of American history. Were you struck by that, and how has that reflected in their presidencies?

[00:04:45.8] David Rubenstein: Well, when you work in the Oval Office, you say, "Wait a second, how am I sitting in the same building, more or less, that Lincoln was in, or other great presidents Jefferson, other people?" And you do get a sense that you're a part of history, and I think a lot of presidents really wanna learn more about their predecessors, so they tend to read about them. When you talk to some presidents, they actually know a lot about history 'cause they've read about it 'cause they're occupying a very unique job. I call this the highest calling. That was a disappointment to some people 'cause I have said for many years that the highest calling of mankind is private equity, but I'm now gonna revise that and say the highest calling in the private sector is private equity, but in the public sector, the highest calling is the presidency.

[00:05:43.6] David Rubenstein: I start the book with my background in working in the White House and so forth, as a young man who really wasn't qualified to work there. But the part of the book where I talk about how the presidency did become the highest calling was really when Woodrow Wilson became president and after that. Let me explain. When George Washington was president, it was a great thing he was a great leader but nobody around the rest of the world was focused on George Washington.

[00:05:50.3] David Rubenstein: Even when Lincoln was president, he wasn't a world leader. He was known and admired but not a world leader. But when Wilson went to Paris to negotiate the Treaty of Versailles, when he entered Paris, hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people were cheering him. We'd never seen a US president treated that well abroad, and most presidents had never gone abroad. He spent six months six months in Paris, and it became clear then that the president was the most important person, certainly in the Western world and maybe in the world.

[00:06:16.6] David Rubenstein: While his successors were less significant, let's say, around the world Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover when Roosevelt became president and we went into the Great Depression and we went into World War II, he became the leader, as Wilson had been. Ever since that time, whoever is president of the United States, even if they're low-key like Harry Truman, they are the most important person in the world. When I go around the world on business trips, people ask me more than anything else, "Tell me what's going on in the presidency, what's going on in the White House?" People have an obsession with it 'cause, although we have 7 billion people on the face of the earth, people around the world wanna know what the president's gonna do 'cause it's gonna affect them more than any other person can affect them.

[00:07:02.7] David Rubenstein: So we have great inventors and we have great people that create internet-related companies and maybe devices that all of us use, but the life of most people around the world is probably gonna be affected more by what the president of the United States does than by any other single person, and that's why it's really the highest calling, and that's why so many people who are so ambitious and wanna help their country decide to become president, and I'll just find a point on this. Why should somebody wanna be president? Think about this. John Kennedy was assassinated. Lyndon Johnson was driven out of office. Richard Nixon had to resign. Gerald Ford couldn't get reelected. Jimmy Carter couldn't get reelected. Ronald Reagan was almost assassinated and then had the scandal of Iran Contra. George Herbert Walker Bush couldn't get reelected. Bill Clinton had impeachment and so forth. Donald Trump was impeached twice. So why do people want this job? To get it, you have to spend two years of your life basically running around the country begging for money, bad hotels, bad food, no exercise, no family time. Why do people want this 'cause I think they feel it is an obligation to give back to the country, and this is the best way to give back to the country, and I think a lot of very talented people have tried to get this job, and sadly, we don't get as many people trying to get it as I think we should.

[00:08:06.8] David Rubenstein: And final point, I would say, the real final point is when this country started, 1776, we had 3 million people in this country, 3 million people. Half a million of them were slaves, and they couldn't be in government. 1.25 million were women. They weren't allowed in the government. 10,000 were Jewish. They couldn't be in government. There were 500,000 people who were white Christian men who didn't own property, so they couldn't be in government. So you got about 400,000 people who could be in government and serve, and out of that, you got George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Monroe, James Madison. Think about that, plus not to mention Hamilton and Franklin. Why did we have such great leaders then, and now we have less? And my theory is that the really talented people in our country now go into private equity. That's my theory.

[00:09:01.3] Jeffrey Rosen: Is it right that the current folks are that much less talented? When I read the depth of reading, take the most reasonable ones, from Clinton to W. Bush to Obama, those three, and HW, who you knew well, you say could have been one of the founders. On balance, it struck me that our recent presidents have been better than I thought. What do you think? Just in general, in terms of being prepared, scholarly, students of history, about as good as you might hope for in a democracy?

[00:09:40.5] David Rubenstein: You mean the people today?

[00:09:43.2] Jeffrey Rosen: The relatively recent people today. We're a pretty good bunch.

[00:09:51.0] David Rubenstein: The people that become president today are reasonably prepared 'cause we get people who have come out of government, and they've been around, typically, Donald Trump as an exception. I think people are reasonably prepared, but nobody can really be prepared. Nobody can be prepared. I don't care if you're George Herbert Walker Bush, vice president for eight years, or Joe Biden, vice president for eight years. There's nothing like sitting behind the Resolute desk in the Oval Office and having to make the decision yourself. Every decision that comes to the president is a very difficult one. I would have gotten decided earlier. It's a really tough job, and it ages these people. You can see, look at the age. When Barack Obama became president at the age of 47, he had no gray hair. He left with a lot of gray hair. It ages you. It's a tough job. And I have to say, we don't pay our people that much as president of the United States, but obviously they make money after they leave in the way our system now works. But it is amazing how you get some talented people coming to the fore, and it is amazing how the American people take the election reasonably seriously. I just wish more people would take it seriously 'cause, again, 80 million people don't vote. They could vote.

[00:10:49.9] Jeffrey Rosen: One other general question. How much does character matter? You mentioned Wilson. Of course, his reputation has plummeted largely 'cause he resegregated the federal government and the degree of his white supremacism and racism. Is it being on the wrong side of history, or is character important in defining whether you're a success?

[00:11:02.4] David Rubenstein: Well, of course, being on the wrong side of history is something that changes the view of some of our presidents. So, for example, Woodrow Wilson was honored by the Democratic Party as a progressive leader for a long time, president of Princeton, New Jersey governor, and then just two years after he had been elected New Jersey governor, he became president of the United States. But as president of the United States, he resegregated the workforce in Washington, DC, which was a reflection of the fact he'd grown up in a segregated South and he was growing up during the end of the Civil War period of time. So he resegregated the workforce. He also deceived the American people by really being very injured and having a stroke, and his wife was really effectively president for the last 18 months.

[00:11:49.8] David Rubenstein: Take Jackson. We used to have Jefferson-Jackson Day dinners. That was the Democratic Party. Jackson now is vilified a lot in the Democratic Party 'because he was seen as an out-and-out racist and a person who drove Native Americans out of their homes and killed a lot of them and didn't seem to worry about it very much. In Jefferson's case, while he's still honored, we still have the Jefferson Memorial and we have Monticello, and I've been a big contributor to both of those. Jefferson is now recognized for having been an owner of more than 600 slaves, and he had a relationship with a slave where he had at least six children with Sally Hemings, and it's an interesting story. We have a chapter in the book about it.

[00:12:20.6] David Rubenstein: Sally Hemings, it wasn't uncommon for slave owners to have relations with their slaves. That was very common, honestly, very, very common. So Jefferson

was unique in that regard. But why did he pick this one woman that he wanted to have this relationship with? It went on for more than 20-some years. Well, the reason is really this. When his daughter had two daughters who lived past childhood, and when one of them was with him and he was in France, he wanted the other one to come over. She was too young when he first went there. When she was nine years old, he sent for her 'cause another younger daughter had died and he wanted the other daughter to come to him.

[00:13:05.3] David Rubenstein: So when the instructions went to Monticello, they sent a slave woman to take the child originally to London and then to Paris. And that slave woman was Sally Hemings, and she was 14. The age of consent in Virginia, by the way, at that time was 12. It had been up from 10. So she's 14 years old. Why did Jefferson fall in love with her so much, or whatever the relationship was? Well 'cause Jefferson's wife, who had died when Jefferson was 39 years old, on her deathbed, she said, don't marry again. I don't want any stepmother for my daughters. I had a bad stepmother. Jefferson said, okay, I won't. So he never actually married again. But Thomas Jefferson's wife's father was a man named John Wayles, W-A-Y-L-E-S. John Wayles was a slave owner.

[00:13:54.1] David Rubenstein: He had impregnated a slave, and the result was Sally Hemings. So when Jefferson saw a 14-year-old Sally Hemings, who was three-quarters white, he was seeing what his wife looked like at the age of 14 'cause she was three-quarters white and he had never seen his wife as a teenager. I think he probably fell in love with her, and he had a deal with her that said, if you come back to me, all the children we have, I will free them upon my death, which he did. He didn't free her 'cause it was rumored that he had this relationship, and he didn't wanna, in fact, help it along.

[00:14:23.3] David Rubenstein: When he died, he didn't free Sally Hemings 'cause in Virginia, if you stayed in the same state that you were a resident of, Virginia, and you were a freed slave, you had to go before the legislature to get approval of your staying there, and he obviously didn't want the discussion of his relationship with Sally Hemings. So she actually was released, in effect, from slavery by Jefferson's daughter. Jefferson has a different history now. We love Jefferson in many respects 'cause of the Declaration of Independence, other things he did, and as President of the United States, he was an incredible president, but he did have this relationship, which today, and he was a slave owner, and he measured very precisely the value of each of his slaves, how much money he was making from each of them, and so forth. History changes, and we look at people differently.

[00:15:04.5] David Rubenstein: There are two presidents whose reputations have soared in recent years. One of them is Harry Truman. He was kind of ridden out of Washington, very unpopular, seen as not up to the standards of FDR. Today, though, as a result of the wonderful biography initially by David McCullough that won the Pulitzer Prize, Truman is now recognized as the man who had the courage to drop the atomic bomb, which probably saved a lot of lives 'cause if we had to invade Japan by conventional means, we would have lost probably a million American soldiers, at least that was the estimate. He also helped create NATO, the UN, the World Bank, the IMF.

[00:15:48.1] David Rubenstein: He created the CIA as well, and he did the Marshall Plan, and all of that for a guy who had never gone to college. He wasn't that highly respected by many people at the time. In fact, his own mother-in-law said that Harry Truman used to follow a mule as a farmer, and he was behind the mule's rear end, and she used to say that's where he properly belonged, behind the rear end of a mule. She didn't think much of him. I don't know if any of you have mother-in-laws that don't think of you highly, but she certainly didn't think much of him. But his reputation soared. Another one was Jimmy Carter, my former boss. He lost overwhelmingly to Ronald Reagan, and he was humiliated. In fact, he just didn't really think he could have a life again. He went through severe depression, and he almost went bankrupt when he went back and saw that his brother Billy Carter had almost bankrupted the peanut farm. But he turned his life around, and his post-presidency, with more than 40 years, has done some incredible things for the country.

[00:16:28.0] David Rubenstein: I think it's made people look again at his time as president 'cause while he didn't get everything he wanted passed, he got a lot of things passed. Today, if your president gets the appropriations bills through and then gets the debt limit bill through, they're considered successful. Getting one more bill through is amazing. Carter got many significant things through the Civil Service of War and the Department of Education, Department of Energy, Panama Canal treaties, many really good things. He was a leader in human rights abroad and so forth. And the agreement in Camp David. Carter was derided as being not successful 'because he didn't get everything he wanted 'cause he tried to get too many things through. His reputation still has gone up, and I think some other president's reputations probably will go up in time as well. Historians say it takes about 40 years after a president has finished his term before you really know everything you can think of about a president and go through all the papers. We don't really know whose reputation will get better, but some of them have gotten better.

[00:17:21.4] Jeffrey Rosen: I wanna follow up about so many of these presidents, but say more about Carter 'cause you did work for him. Was his bad reputation a result of bad luck, the hostages in the economy, or was it part of his moralism and self-righteousness?

[00:17:56.6] David Rubenstein: Carter invented the modern way to get elected president. He was a one-term governor, George. You could only run for one term in those days. People came down to him and wanted his support as a southern governor, and they were thinking of running for president, Scoop Jackson, Ted Kennedy, and so forth. He said that he met these people and thought, hey, they're not any smarter than me. I can run for president. They're as good as me, I mean, no better than me. So he went to Iowa and had the clever idea of winning the new Iowa caucuses. If he won the Iowa caucuses, which weren't that expensive and didn't have that many people participating, he could then go into New Hampshire. And he did that. Now that's what other people have been doing ever since then. So how do you think George McGovern did the same thing to get the nomination? Barack Obama followed the same path, and so did Donald Trump. You go to Iowa. Remember this, Carter never even won Iowa. He came in second to undecided. Undecided won Iowa. Carter came in second. How many votes did he take to come in second? 12,000 votes.

[00:18:47.0] David Rubenstein: Today to win the Iowa caucus you need about 150,000 votes. But so few people participated and Carter was ahead of everybody else. He got 12,000 votes and that propelled him to the presidency. It is amazing that he did that. When he became president, he was 52 years old. Relatively young. We've had younger presidents. Barack Obama was 47, Bill Clinton was 46. He was pretty young at 52. But he had never been in Washington before and he brought up his Georgian friends and colleagues and they weren't really experienced.

[00:19:13.6] David Rubenstein: But Carter was an engineer and always thought he was the smartest man in the room and he probably was. In many cases. So he tried to engineer all these programs but he didn't really pay attention to politics. If you wanted to convince Carter to do something and you said the politics of this is good, Mr. President, he would say I'm gonna do the opposite. He didn't want anything to be ever seen that he was trying to do something for political purposes. And that hurt him.

[00:19:35.5] David Rubenstein: Obviously, the hostage situation was terrible. And he didn't really want the Shah to come in. He resisted it for a long time. And what happened was David Rockefeller and Henry Kissinger and Mr. Big Brzezinski and John McCloy basically put an effort together to convince Carter to let the Shah in. And Carter said no, it could result in the hostage-taking and so forth 'cause they'd already had such a situation.

[00:20:04.8] David Rubenstein: Finally, he reluctantly let them in. And it turns out Carter was deceived 'cause we were told the Shah had cancer and it could only be treated in the United States and now know that it could be treated just as well and was treated in Mexico. But he came in, the hostages were taken, and we thought they would go over in a couple of days and be done. Carter made the mistake of saying I'm not leaving the White House until they're back. So he was a prisoner of the White House for a year. And then every day, Ted Koppel on television was saying day X of the hostage takeover, and it just reminded people of Carter's weakness, I think.

[00:20:26.2] David Rubenstein: And Carter was probably taken advantage of politically for a while but then he also had a very tough campaign for renomination. When a president has a renomination effort in his own party and he barely can win, usually he doesn't get elected president. So when Gerald Ford was challenged by Ronald Reagan in 1976, Ford lost the election. And when George Herbert Walker Bush was challenged in his party for renomination, he won the nomination again but he didn't win the election. So Carter, the campaign by Kennedy against Carter, really hurt Carter. There were many things, and we made another classic mistake. We thought Carter is a nice person. He cares about human rights. He's not a bomb-throwing person. Reagan is a bomb thrower, we thought. So why would the hostage-takers wanna ever deal with Reagan? They certainly would wanna deal with Carter. But we were wrong. We were misled.

[00:21:00.8] David Rubenstein: We didn't realize that they said Carter was the one who let the Shah in, and therefore we can't wait to deal with Reagan. In fact, there was probably a deal cut by Bill Casey and others that kind of said, we'll get you a better deal if you don't release the hostages until Carter's out of office. And that's actually what happened 15 minutes after Carter was out of office. The hostages were released.

[00:21:31.5] Jeffrey Rosen: An amazing story and that decision, as you say, to let the Shah in at the last minute based on that wrong advice that he couldn't get care elsewhere, of course, was crucial. Alright, let's go back to the beginning. You mentioned Jefferson. You have that really incredible detail about how the reason that Jefferson couldn't free Sally Hemings, didn't feel he could during his lifetime, is 'cause he would have had to petition the Virginia legislature and didn't wanna fest the relationship up in that way. But contrast him with George Washington. You've got a great interview with Doug Bradburn, the head of Mount Vernon, about Washington. He did free his slaves on his death. But contrast their characters and why is Washington in retrospect seen as a greater man than Jefferson?

[00:22:21.8] David Rubenstein: Well, Washington was the military leader who won the Revolutionary War. We lost more battles in the Revolutionary War than we won. But Washington knew he didn't have very many troops. Sometimes he had maybe no more than 2,000 or 3,000 troops that were poorly fed, poorly clothed. When they were not too far from here in Valley Forge, they were basically walking around barefoot in the winter and Washington, to his credit, stayed with the troops. He could have said, I'm going down to the Ritz-Carlton downtown of Philadelphia. He didn't do that. He said, I'm gonna stay out there with his troops, and then I'm gonna stay with them. It was a real sign of leadership.

[00:22:53.5] David Rubenstein: Washington didn't really wanna be president of the United States. He served eight years as general. We won the war. He then was in the platoon to come back to the Constitution and preside at the Constitutional Convention. He didn't really wanna do that. But he finally was persuaded by Hamilton and Madison to do that. So when he was done with that, he said, I'm done. I did my part for the country. And he also said, no male member of my family has ever lived past the age of 50. I'm 57. I don't really wanna do this again. I just don't think I'm gonna have much longer to live. But he was importuned again by many people to run Iran. And he won unanimously. In fact, he didn't like the job when he got it. He wanted to quit after a couple months 'cause he went up to the Senate to get confirmation of some of the people. And the senators were fighting with him, arguing with him. And he said, wait a second. I'm president of the United States. I won the Revolutionary War. You're treating me terribly. Goodbye. I'm never coming back. He never went back to Congress. He was persuaded to stay out the first term.

[00:23:39.2] David Rubenstein: And then he had a resignation speech or retirement speech written for him by Madison. And he was ready to give it. And then ultimately, he was persuaded to spend a second term. And then finally, after a second term, he said, I'm out of here. And then he died in a tragic way. And Washington was a person who there are many stories about Washington that were not true. He never threw a silver dollar across the Potomac. He didn't chop down a cherry tree and tell his father about it. I don't think that was true. That was a made-up story. And he didn't have wooden teeth. He had animal teeth and human teeth.

[00:24:11.9] David Rubenstein: In those days, there weren't a lot of dentists. So if you wanted to make money, you had a dentist take your tooth out and you gotta pay the dollar. And so those teeth that were taken out were then put together in kind of dentures along some animal teeth. And they were made into dentures. And that's what Washington had. You'll never see a picture of Washington or Adams smiling with their teeth. In fact, nobody in those days was smiling with

their teeth 'cause they didn't have many teeth. Adams had one tooth. Washington had one tooth. And his entire denture was held together by the one tooth that actually was a natural tooth. It wasn't a pretty situation then But here's how he died. Very tragic situation. People used to come to Mount Vernon all the time to pay homage to him. And he didn't know who all these people were. They would come and pay homage to him. So one time, he's riding around on his horse, as he did every day, inspecting the farm and telling the farmers what to do and so forth the slaves, really.

[00:24:53.5] David Rubenstein: And then he came back and he was wet 'cause it was sleeting that day. He had guests there he didn't really know. And they were there to have dinner with him. So he invited them to stay. But rather than go upstairs and change in clothing, he didn't wanna be impolite. So he sat there in kind of wet clothing, not the smartest thing to do. So that night, when he went to bed, he got sick and the epiglottis in the back of his throat became swollen. And so they called for the doctors. But before then, Washington said, I wanna use the traditional technique that people use to get rid of bad spirits. What is that? You cut your veins. It's called bleeding. And you cut your veins and the blood comes out and the bad spirits go out. That doesn't work. And so he died. He died.

[00:25:41.9] David Rubenstein: And there was a big fight over what to do with his body. Should he go up to Capitol Hill, be buried there, which people wanna do, be buried in Mount Vernon. Eventually he was buried in Mount Vernon. And he was really honored by this country in many ways. But we didn't build the Washington Monument until it opened about over 100 years after he died. He died in 1799 and we opened the Washington Monument about 1888. So it took a while to get things done in Washington, even in those days.

[00:26:13.0] Jeffrey Rosen: The human stories are just so riveting. They're what leap out of the book and it's so great to hear you tell them. So let's just run through the presidents and get as many of them on the table as we can. Gordon Wood on John Adams and Jefferson, amazing interview. Wood wrote that great book, *Friends Divided*. At the end you asked him who he'd rather have dinner with. Tell us who he chose and why.

[00:26:30.8] David Rubenstein: Well, Jefferson had a really close relationship with Adams for a long time. Remember, at the Second Continental Congress, Adams was the leader. He was the real leader. He was the one who would break away from England. And he led that effort. And a man who's about nine years younger was Jefferson, who showed up as 33 years old. He's at the Second Continental Congress, relatively new. He didn't wanna be there 'cause his wife was ill, but he agreed to stay. And finally, when they decided we're gonna have a vote on whether we should withdraw from the ties we have with England, they sent all the delegates back to get permission to do that 'cause the delegates didn't have permission to do that. So the delegates were not there at the time.

[00:27:12.9] David Rubenstein: And then a couple people said, we need to have an explanation of why we're gonna withdraw from England if we do vote that way. And so they had a five-person committee, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, Roger Sherman, and Jefferson and John Adams. And 'cause he was the youngest person, 33 years old, and he was thought to be a good writer, a terrible talker. He'd only made one public speech as President of the United States

at the first inaugural. He hated to speak. He had a high, squeaky voice. He never liked to talk in public. But he was a good writer.

[00:27:39.6] David Rubenstein: So they gave him the assignment. And he was in Philadelphia, and he was renting a house. He had about 13 days to write it. And what did he do? He waited for the last three days. He was shopping, it turns out, and buying lots of other things. But for three days, he sat down and wrote it. He had two slaves with him, and he wrote it. And he wrote a sentence that became, as you and I have talked about before, the most famous sentence in the English language. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

[00:28:07.7] David Rubenstein: That sentence was mostly ignored. People were really focused at the Continental Congress on what the sins were of King George. There were 27 of them. They were edited heavily at the Continental Congress. He was so upset that he wouldn't even talk about it in the Continental Congress. He never objected to any of the changes. He later wrote a letter to his friends saying, here's my version of the Declaration of Independence. Here's their version of it. Isn't my version better? And in the end, nine years later, he finally admitted he was the author of it. In fact, in his epitaph, he now says that's the most important thing, was author of the Declaration of Independence.

[00:28:36.7] David Rubenstein: So what happened? On July the 2nd, we voted to break away from England. And the resolution was agreed to, the Adams Resolution. Richard Henry Lee and Adams had a resolution to do that. That night, July the 2nd, they took up the resolution, the Declaration of Independence. And they debated on the night of the 2nd, the 3rd, and the 4th. They finally agreed to the text. And on the 4th, they finally agreed to the text and they sent it to a printer. On the night of the 2nd, when the original resolution to break away from England was agreed to, Adams wrote to his wife Abigail saying, July the 2nd will be the day that we celebrate American history for the rest of time 'cause this is the day we broke away. And July the 2nd was the day that he thought was important, 'cause he was the person who was the progenitor of that. Why do we celebrate July the 4th and not July the 2nd?

[00:29:27.9] David Rubenstein: Well, the answer is, a year later, in 1777, on July the 2nd, they were in the middle of the Continental Congress, we were in the middle of a war, and they forgot. They forgot that they had to celebrate it and forgot it was July the 2nd. They realized at the end of the day, okay, so we'll get organized. So they got organized and they finally got it around to have the celebration of July the 4th. So for the ensuing 50 years, there was a dispute between Adams and Jefferson. What was more important? Jefferson's document, which Adams really thought he was responsible for 'cause he told Jefferson to write it, or the resolution to break away from England, which Adams thought was much more important. And so for 50 years, these men had some dispute.

[00:30:00.5] David Rubenstein: They became closer at the end of their lives. But amazingly, they both died exactly 50 years to the day of the Declaration of Independence having its side. They both died on July the 4th, 1826, which was seen by citizens of the country as a sign from Providence, our God, that these men were really unusual. And on his deathbed, Adams said,

Jefferson still lives. He didn't know that Jefferson had died a few hours earlier. And they're really incredible, the intellect that both of them had. But they didn't get along and they really fought over many things. But one of them was who was more responsible for the success of the revolution, the person who got the resolution through the Commonwealth Congress or the person who drafted the Declaration.

[00:30:55.6] Jeffrey Rosen: It's an amazing chapter, an interview, and you asked Wood what he'd ask Adams. And he said you accomplished so much. Why were you always so jealous and feeling like you weren't getting enough credit? And then you said, who would you rather have dinner with? And he said, I'm from New England. It would have to be Adams. Next, after your amazing chapter with Annette Gordon Wood and Jefferson, is Ted Widmer on Lincoln. Widmer wrote that book on the 13 days that involved Lincoln's trip to be inaugurated, including a stop at Independence Hall, where he said, I'd rather be assassinated on this spot than abandon the principles of the Declaration. Tell us about Lincoln.

[00:31:28.1] David Rubenstein: More people have, more books have been written about Abraham Lincoln than any other living American by far. And so you can say, why do we need to read more about Lincoln? Everybody knows everything about Lincoln. But I've read many of these books, not all of them. There are 20,000 or so books on Lincoln. But many of you have probably read the Doris Kearns Goodwin book. That was a really great book. But this book was a book by Ted Widmer, an American historian, who wrote something I didn't really know much about. It turns out that when Lincoln was getting ready to come to Washington, DC to be inaugurated, the inauguration of those days was in March, not in January.

[00:32:11.6] David Rubenstein: So they would get elected in November. But there was a long period of time before you were actually president. And during that period of time, the South was in revolt. South Carolina seceded. Other states were getting ready to secede. And Lincoln had to deal with that. The then incumbent president, James Buchanan, didn't seem to be particularly worried about it. He didn't really wanna do anything to stop it. And in fact, he probably was supportive of slavery. Lincoln was not actually against slavery. He just didn't think it should be expanded beyond the original 13 colonies that had the right to have slavery under the Constitution. So how did Lincoln get to Washington, DC?

[00:32:28.5] David Rubenstein: Well, he couldn't take a train that would go through Kentucky or other southern states. That would be a more direct route. But he was afraid that he could be assassinated there 'cause these were Confederate states or about to be Confederate states. So he took a very circuitous route, and went through the North. And he actually went to 60 different cities. And he made a speech in every city. Remember, people had never seen him before. He was a relatively unknown person. He had only been in Congress for two years. And he really had never been governor, never been a senator. And so people didn't know what he looked like. People had never heard him. They didn't have television in those days.

[00:33:05.0] David Rubenstein: So he was using it as an opportunity to get to know people and give his views. And he made 60 different speeches. And he made maybe his most famous one at Independence Hall. And then it turned out that there was a plot to kill him. It was in my hometown of Baltimore. And so therefore he cleverly used Mr. Pinkerton, who was a guard then.

They created the Pinkerton Agency to help him move a train, get him to a different train than was expected. And he got through Baltimore. But he came to Washington. People had said, dressed as a woman. That wasn't true. But he was disguised a bit. And he came in and he went to the hotel and stayed in the hotel for about 10 days before he was inaugurated. It was incredible when you think about it. And as great as Lincoln was, he said in his inaugural address, he did not want to get rid of slavery.

[00:33:24.6] David Rubenstein: He actually was in favor of an amendment to the Constitution that would have reaffirmed slavery in the original states. But later he became the great president that he became by winning the Civil War. And remember, a lot of times in those days, a lot of people in the North in Philadelphia and other places said, look, the South wants us to see it. Let them go. We don't need them. We can be a great country without them. Lincoln didn't believe that. He wanted to keep the country together. So he fought to keep it together. And he eventually realized that one of the best ways to win the war was to free the slaves. And he did that through the Emancipation Proclamation. And then eventually 200,000 freed slaves fought for the Union, though in segregated armed units. And I think Lincoln deserves more credit than any other person who's president for the country we have now 'cause had Lincoln not done what he'd done and other people in the North been president, they would have probably let the South go away.

[00:34:24.3] David Rubenstein: We'd have been two separate countries. We wouldn't have become the country that we became. Lincoln also had a certain humility about him. He didn't say I won the Civil War. I just won the Battle of Gettysburg. Don't deserve to pat me on the back. He never said that. He was a very humble person. Self-defeating humor. He also had, although he had no education to speak of, he could write the English language better than anybody we've ever seen, possibly except for Shakespeare. And so when you think about it, he wrote 272 words for the Gettysburg Address. He spoke for two minutes there. And those 272 words are the most eloquent statement about what this country is all about that anybody has ever written before then or since then. And he did it by himself. He didn't have a speechwriter.

[00:35:08.3] David Rubenstein: He didn't have a team of speechwriters. He didn't have ghostwriters. It's incredible. The second inaugural address, the most eloquent inaugural address probably of all time, was written by him himself. So an incredible person. And it's tragic that he died at the age of 56. And he died in part for two reasons that I'll just mention. He had a difficult relationship with his wife. She was complicated, let's say it that way. And a couple days before the assassination, Lincoln was in Northern Virginia inspecting the victory that they'd had in the Richmond area and Northern Virginia. And with him was Ulysses S. Grant, who was the victorious general, and some other generals. At one point, Lincoln is riding on a horse. They didn't have anything other than to get by on horses. He's riding on a horse. And for one period of time, another general's wife, an attractive young woman who was married to another general in the North, happened to be riding alongside him.

[00:35:56.6] David Rubenstein: Mrs. Lincoln got jealous. And she yelled at this woman and it got into a big argument. Well, Mrs. Grant, Ulysses S. Grant's wife, was there and saw this and said, I don't want anything to do with Mrs. Lincoln. On the night of, I think it was April 14th, Lincoln invited Ulysses S. Grant to accompany him to Ford's Theater. And he asked his wife, well, guess what? The president wants us to go to the theater with him. She said, no, I don't

wanna see Mrs. Lincoln. I don't wanna be with her. We've got to find an excuse. So they made an excuse that they had to go to New Jersey to visit their son. So they took a train to New Jersey. Had they gone to Ford's Theater, the military entourage around Ulysses S. Grant would have certainly prevented John Wilkes Booth from getting close to Lincoln. But Lincoln had no guards with him that night.

[00:37:00.9] David Rubenstein: He had one aide with him, a young man. And almost certainly that aide was unable to stop John Wilkes Booth. And John Wilkes Booth decided to assassinate Lincoln. He'd always been a slave, a defender. But Lincoln, after the 13th Amendment, was agreed to by the House and ready to go through ratification. It was agreed to. It was a great victory for people that wanted to end slavery. The Emancipation Proclamation only applied to certain states, and it really wasn't the law of the land quite the way the Constitutional Amendment would be. So you needed the 13th Amendment. After the 13th Amendment was approved by the Congress before the ratification, people came to the White House and said, we want a speech, Mr. Lincoln.

[00:37:34.0] David Rubenstein: Tell us about it. And he came out and he made a little speech, and he was asked a question about should freed slaves be able to vote? And he said something to the effect that if they are educated and appropriate and so forth, they might be able to have the right to vote in certain areas. John Wilkes Booth was there, he heard that, and he said, no voting for slaves, former slaves. And he was so incensed that he went ahead with his plot to go ahead and assassinate Lincoln. Lincoln died at the age of 56. Had he lived reconstruction, probably would've worked better. His successor, Andrew Johnson, wasn't really in favor of Lincoln's programs on reconstruction and reconstruction backfired and led to all the Jim Crow laws and the Ku Klux Klan and so forth. Had Lincoln lived in the country would've been much better off.

[00:38:18.4] Jeffrey Rosen: That's such a crucial detail that it was Lincoln's embrace of the right to vote that led to his assassination. And then you show how that was the centerpiece of reconstruction and Grant's commitment in at least the beginning to black voting rights, ultimately subverted by the compromise of 1876. Your grant chapter is great. It's with the great Ron Chernow. We learned from that interview that Ron Chernow learned his craft from being a journalist as well as an English major. And that's how he could tell those great stories. And he also tells us about Grant's alcoholism. He wasn't drunk all the time, but he'd gone to Benders. Tell us about Chernow and Grant.

[00:38:56.0] David Rubenstein: Yeah, Ulysses S. Grant was a person who didn't really want to go to be in the military, but his father was a, had a tannery. And when he was growing up, he had to smell the effects of the tannery all the time. And he kind of made him sick and he just couldn't wanna be around that he wanted to be in his father's business. Finally, his father got him an appointment to the military academy, and Grant went, but he kept thinking that there was legislation in Congress to get rid of the military academy. He kept hoping that legislation would pass so they could get rid of the military academy. But he went there in the middle of his class, not a great student particularly, went, fought in the Mexican American war with Robert E. Lee was on the same side, where they didn't really know each other.

[00:39:31.6] David Rubenstein: And then Ulysses S. Grant had an alcohol problem. And so when he was out west doing some military things, basically the army caught him being out, being drunk at, on when he was supposed to be on duty. So he was basically given the chance to resign or be kicked out, or court martial. So he resigned. He then goes back to his hometown and tries to find some jobs. He can't go into the tannery business. He didn't wanna work for his father, tried working for his brothers. That didn't work out. Finally, he gets some land from his father-in-Law. And he's working the land and he's basically chopping wood and he's going to near St. Louis. So he chops firewood and he goes into St. Louis every day to sell firewood. So he's on the street corners of St. Louis, selling firewood to make money for his family.

[00:40:11.2] David Rubenstein: And eight years later, he's elected president of the United States. Hard to believe. So, an incredible comeback story. But what happened was when the war broke out because he had some military experience, he came, got involved in the militia in Illinois and eventually was successful. Lincoln heard about him. He won some battles. He won more and more battles. Every other general that Lincoln had was not very successful. And Lincoln, when he kept appointing to this general people said to him, well, he knows he's an alcoholic. And Lincoln said, well, find out what he's drinking and let's give it to the other generals because he was such a good soldier. And so eventually, we won the war in part because Grant, and then later was elected President of the United States served two terms, a lot of chicanery and I would say things that were done, financial improprieties, not by him, but people around him.

[00:41:00.3] David Rubenstein: And he ultimately finished two terms and what was very successful. And then he left the country for a year and went on a tour around the world, which was very unusual for a president to do that. Came back, got in the business, put all his money into his son's business, it went bankrupt. And ultimately Grant had to figure out how to make money for his family. He was broke, completely broke, and he had to borrow money from one of the Vanderbilts. And he wasn't sure he could ever pay it back. So ultimately, he was persuaded by a person named Samuel Clemens, also known as Mark Twain, to write his memoirs. And he wrote his memoirs by himself. And they were considered the greatest presidential memoirs of all time. And he finished them just as he died of throat cancer. He'd smoked about 15 or 20 cigars a day that he got throat cancer was probably not a big surprise.

[00:41:42.9] David Rubenstein: And some of you ever remember the famous show on television, You Bet Your Life by Groucho Marx, any of you are old enough, remember this. And he always would say to people where, who was buried in Grant's Tomb? Well, actually it's Grant and it was elaborate in the New York area. That's where Grant is buried. And he actually became president at 46 served eight years and, and died very, very young. But an incredible person in many ways, a great general, sometimes a better general than a president.

[00:42:15.7] Jeffrey Rosen: And Chernow describes that moment where he saw the originals of the memoir proving that Grant actually wrote it himself.

[00:42:21.0] David Rubenstein: Let me just add one thing about Grant. Grant's wife had a certain problem with her eye. It was, I was kind of what I would call a wandering eye. If any of you know what that is, the eye doesn't look directly at you. And when Grant was away one time

on military things, his wife went to a doctor and said, can I fix this eye? Can you fix the eye so that I can look straight ahead and have a normal eye? And he said, I think I can do it. So he, when Grant came back one time, his wife said, guess what? I think I can fix my eye. And he said, I'm very upset with you. Why do you go talk to a doctor? I married you with the eye that you have. I don't want you to have a different eye. I love you as you are, and I don't want a different eye. So a credible bit of romance, I guess, from Ulysses S. Grant, his wife, never got the operation again.

[00:43:08.7] Jeffrey Rosen: No, it's a beautiful story. It really conveys the intensity of their relationship and calls to mind Woodrow Wilson's unexpected Lee, passionate love letters to his second wife. But let's keep going in order 'cause this is just so great to hear all these stories. Amity Shlaes makes a revisionist case for Coolidge, who has become a kind of hero among conservatives now for cutting capital gains tax and disciplining the budget and restoring federalism. Were you persuaded by her case for Coolidge? And tell us about Coolidge.

[00:43:40.0] David Rubenstein: Coolidge was a person who went to Amherst. Was a New England person who was very flinty, very cheap, didn't like to talk very much, not a particularly great student or anything, but he got elected to some local jobs and eventually got elected governor of Massachusetts. And there was a police strike at the time. And he famously said, there is no right of the police to strike against the public at any time. That statement went around the country and all of a sudden Coolidge became a hero 'because he broke the police strike. And so when Harding was looking for a vice president he picked Coolidge and Coolidge took the job. He'd only been governor a short period of time, but he was pretty well known for that one statement. And then Harding died of a heart attack and Coolidge became president. And he really hadn't wanted to be president. Most people become president, actually wanna be president. He didn't really wanna be president. And he was very laconic. And he doesn't like to talk very much, and he doesn't like to brag about himself. He never would be boastful. Very flinty, New Englander. And so one woman went to him and said, I have a bet with my friend that I can get you to say more than two words. And he said, you lose.

[00:44:42.4] David Rubenstein: He did run for reelection and he won. He could have run for another term, but he chose not to do so. And he allowed his secretary of commerce to be, to run it. It was Herbert Hoover. Coolidge was a person who just didn't seek the limelight. Most people who become president of the United States liked the limelight. That's why they got the job. And that's how they got there. Coolidge really didn't want to do it, but he was loved by the conservatives today. And Reagan put his portrait in there, in the cabinet room because Coolidge was in favor of balancing the budget. A balanced budget in the United States is when you actually have more money come, enough money coming in to pay your obligations. That's what, I don't know if people remember that, but that's what it actually was. And so he was in favor of balancing the budget. He was actually in favor of actually reducing taxes. And so that's why the conservatives really like him.

[00:45:32.5] Jeffrey Rosen: Franklin Roosevelt, your colleague Jonathan Darman, makes the case. They learned empathy from polio. What else did you learn from Darman?

[00:45:41.4] David Rubenstein: Jonathan Darman has a theory that FDR was a nice person, but he was intellectually not all that gifted. Nobody around him ever thought he was gonna be president of the United States, except his mother. Nobody ever thought he was well, that much of a leader. He was more in a feat, kind of an aristocratic person who had led a very, very pampered life. And then he contracted polio. And when he first got it, he probably got it by going to a Boy Scout jamboree. And at that point, he's probably where he got it. He didn't realize he had it for a while. He couldn't, he couldn't move his legs when he was with his family at Campobello. They didn't know what it was. It took 30 days before they had a doctor really diagnose it. Had they known what it was on the first day, they probably could have treated him more effectively, and he probably would've been able to walk again.

[00:46:25.8] David Rubenstein: But because he waited so long and they didn't give him proper treatment, he never could walk again. He looked like he could walk, but he was always holding onto somebody else. But the theory behind this article in this interview, is that Roosevelt was relatively a pampered AFE, not aristocrat, but because the polio gave him such drive to learn how to walk again, to appear to be vigorous, that he gave him a grit and a personality and a drive that he never actually had before. And so the theory is that without polio, Roosevelt never would've been elected president, and he never would've been able to do all the things he did as president. And he served 12 years as president. Sadly, he ran for a fourth term, and he was probably half dead at the time. He only lived 45 days into the second term.

[00:47:07.6] David Rubenstein: And then Truman became president. And Truman had only met Roosevelt twice in his life, once before he was president. And once while he was vice president, they only met twice. He had no knowledge of the atomic bomb secret. He didn't know anything about the war strategy. 'cause in those days, there was no office for a vice president in the executive office building or the White House. The only office was up on Capitol Hill. So they never saw each other. And then it's amazing that he became president of the United States with so little knowledge.

[00:47:34.0] Jeffrey Rosen: Truman, Jeff, as you said, the McCullough book is definitive, but Jeffrey Frank focused on his presidency and praised him both for the Civil rights accomplishments and also for the fact that FDR had wanted to pick Jimmy Burns, who was a big segregationist. Things could have turned out so differently if someone else had been picked.

[00:47:52.5] David Rubenstein: Well Burns had been Secretary of State, but he was a racist and was generally thought that might be too complicated to pick that person. So ultimately he picked Truman. Roosevelt's first vice president was John Nance Garner, who famously said the vice president's not worth a picture of warm spit. That's not actually what he said. He actually said, it's not worth a picture of warm piss, but it was cleaned up over the years. And so after eight years he was done. He didn't want the job anymore. Then they got Henry Wallace, who was very liberal and maybe thought to be too liberal. And Roosevelt was nervous about him. So he got rid of Wallace and he was looking for somebody else. And people recommended Truman, who has done a reasonably good job as a center, seen as part of a corrupt machine in Missouri. But he was seen as pretty honest himself. But amazingly, he was not a person who had had any college degree. Every other president in the 20th century had a college degree, but not Truman. And then he turned out to be, I think, one of our best presidents.

[00:48:50.9] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Eisenhower and Susan Eisenhower on her Father-in-Law. No, her father.

[00:48:57.3] **David Rubenstein:** That's his, her grandfather.

[00:49:00.5] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Her grandfather.

[00:49:00.6] **David Rubenstein:** Dwight Eisenhower had two children, two sons. One died very young. And then the other one John lived on. And he had four children, or three children, two daughters and a son, David, David Eisenhower, and then two daughters, Susan and Anne. And I was growing up as a little boy. I remember Eisenhower. Some of you might think nobody here looks as old as me, but Eisenhower was. I always thought he was an old man, but I looked it up. How old was he when he was elected president of the United States? 62. We'd love to have a president that young. But he was only 62 years old, and he was famous for playing a lot of golf. We wouldn't ever elect a president who plays golf. But Eisenhower, while people in the Ida era thought he didn't very little as president, in fact, he got the interstate highway system through, without using appropriated dollars.

[00:49:50.6] **David Rubenstein:** He got the space program off the ground. We built up an incredible strategic missile advantage over the Russians. And we didn't go to war, or no, no soldier was killed during Eisenhower's term as President. So we had a lot of prosperity. The United States zoomed past the rest of the world in the economy. We were right after World War II. We were 50% of the world's GDP. And so a lot of that prosperity came about under Eisenhower. But he was relatively not a guy that wanted to brag about it. In fact, he was one of the people who took greater pride in what he did before he became president than what he did as president. And Susan Eisenhower recounts his history as president. And then it turns out he was the best person who was president, who knew how to cook.

[00:50:29.8] **David Rubenstein:** He actually learned how to cook. He was from a family in Texas and Kansas. And he, his family were all German speaking. I mean, they were descendants from Germans, and they spoke German in his household. Think about this. He was a pacifist. His family were pacifists. And his father was a pacifist. And they spoke German in the household because they were descendants from German immigrants, just the one generation removed. Yet he was ultimately the person who became the general, who had to go to war and kill so many people as the leader of the military effort in Europe, and to go against his Germans. So it's a really unusual situation. He was also a star football player. And it was famous that he famously tackled Jim Thorpe in a way that injured Jim Thorpe. It was an effort to kind of stop this great football player. And but that tackle was so tough that Eisenhower never really regained his ability to play football very effectively.

[00:51:26.8] **Jeffrey Rosen:** And that incredible moving scene that Susan Eisenhower relates when right before D-Day, he goes around and asks the soldiers who are about to know that 70% of them might die. Do you go fly fishing in Michigan?

[00:51:38.9] David Rubenstein: And remember Eisenhower wrote out a statement saying, assuming that it didn't work. I bear sole responsibility for the failure. And he had that, and he carried around his wallet, and if it didn't work, he was gonna issue that statement because he wanted to bear the responsibility. If it didn't work, he took the sole blame. Interestingly, those of you who have prospered late in your career, think about this, at 52 years old, Eisenhower is a colonel with no great responsibility. He had been an aide to Douglas MacArthur, but he didn't really have a high regard for MacArthur. He thought MacArthur was too much of an egotist. But at 52 years old, he was thinking of leaving the military because he was a colonel and didn't look like he was ever gonna be a general, let alone a five star general.

[00:52:16.9] David Rubenstein: And so between the age of 52 and and 60, he became a superstar. And how did that happen? Well, because in the end, he was able to get along with people reasonably well. He was a very good writer. And so when Eisenhower, when Roosevelt wanted somebody that could get along with Churchill, which wasn't easy, who could lead the military effort in Europe it was supposed to be George Marshall, but Roosevelt said, I need more. George Marshall stayed in Washington. So Marshall and Roosevelt picked Eisenhower who had no combat experience. He had never had any combat experience, he'd never been in combat. So they gave him some combat experience by letting him lead the effort in Africa and then in Italy and later, with some combat experience, he then led the effort into Normandy.

[00:52:57.4] Jeffrey Rosen: Amazing. Alright. I'm reluctant to skip Kennedy, Nixon, Ford, Carter, and George HW But we got seven minutes left. And you have three interviews with Living presidents that I wanna ask you about. The first is with President Bill Clinton and Hillary Rodham Clinton. What'd you learn from that?

[00:53:14.6] David Rubenstein: I've known them for quite a while. I didn't work for them, but I've known them for a while and I had an opportunity to interview both of them together. And when you think about it, we've had a lot of powerful First Ladies, but nothing was comparable to Hillary Clinton because she was, when they were running for election the first time, they said two for the price of one. And what people didn't really know what they meant, but she was really an intellectual partner of Bill Clinton. She was a better law school student as Bill Clinton would say, than he was. And while Bill Clinton is really, really smart and has a great policy knowledge and has a beautiful brain in many ways Hillary Clinton is probably smarter. She's very, very smart, and she wanted to be more involved. And so, even though Eleanor Roosevelt broke the mold for a first day, and was very actively involved in helping her husband in some ways, Hillary Clinton broke the model mold again.

[00:53:57.7] David Rubenstein: And remember while she was First Lady, after she finished or as they were wrapping up the second term she ran for the United States Senate. No first lady ever ran for any office before she got elected to the Senate and then got reelected and then ultimately became Secretary of State. So I interviewed them both together, and it's a complicated interview because they don't like to do interviews together. I think they don't like to talk over each other and then get into disagreements. And so it, they don't really do that many interviews together. But this one I did in New York together, and I think it went pretty well.

[00:54:26.2] Jeffrey Rosen: It was great. You started off by asking about their grandkids and it was off and running from there. President George W. Bush, I hope I can share this. He painted your picture after the interview, he painted your portrait.

[00:54:38.2] David Rubenstein: Right. George W. Bush painted a picture of me. He's a painter now. And it sort of semi looks like me.

[00:54:44.9] Jeffrey Rosen: No, it's a lovely likeness. You look great.

[00:54:47.3] David Rubenstein: George W. Bush, I got to know extremely well because while I was working for Carter and his father was the vice president for Reagan and running against us after Bush was defeated for reelection to Bill Clinton he became an advisor to my firm, Carlyle. And I spent a couple years, many years, maybe 10 years traveling the world with him. And I thought he was the nicest man I ever met in my life, just a gentle soul, really smart, really funny in many ways. And through him I got to know W. Pretty well. And the reason that W has that name and not George Herbert, Walker Bush Jr. Is this, I asked Bush, why did you name your son Junior? He said, because when I was growing up in Greenwich, I had two middle names, George Herbert Walker Bush.

[00:55:29.8] David Rubenstein: And people made fun of me. Little boys said, how come you have two middle names? They made fun of me. I said, I don't want to do that with my son. So I said, I'm never gonna give him two middle names. W was a person who was not taken seriously by his family at all. When he said he was gonna run for governor the first time, his mother said, you'll never win. And on that first night of the election when he was running against Anne Richards, his mother and father chartered a plane to go to Florida to be at the celebration of Jeb Bush, who was running for Governor of Florida. And it turned out that Jeb Bush lost, and George Bush won. And how did George Bush go from being governor of a state to being president? Let me tell you an inside story, which I don't think it's quite in the book.

[00:56:06.2] David Rubenstein: I didn't wanna put that in. But what actually happened was this, George, the governor of Texas doesn't have much authority. The legislature meets 120 days every other year. Every other year. It doesn't really do much. The, and the cabinet is appointed by the Lieutenant Governor, not the governor. So after Bush was elected and then reelected all of a sudden the pollsters said, who would you like to see as next President of the United States? Well, overwhelmingly people said, in the Republican Party, we wanna see George Bush. And why would that be? 'Cause as Governor, you didn't really get to do that much, and he wasn't that well known outside of Texas. Well, the answer was, if you went into the internals of the polling data, it said that people thought they were picking George Herbert Walker Bush to run another term.

[00:56:44.4] David Rubenstein: So if his name had been David Bush, it might not have risen so high in the polling data, but he turned out to be a president, and had to deal with the most consequential attack in our country since Pearl Harbor. And that was 9/11. I think he rose to the occasion. I do think we could have handled Afghanistan differently. And the reason we didn't do better in Afghanistan, in my view, is that Donald Rumsfeld hated Colin Powell. And Colin Powell had vented the idea of massive force, which we used in Kuwait. And Donald Rumsfeld

wanted to say that the Secretary of State Dan, Colin Powell, we don't need the Powell Doctrine. I can get Osama bin Laden with a few troops. They only sent 10,000 troops in Afghanistan. So we let Osama bin Laden escape through Tora Bora, and as a result, we didn't capture him.

[00:57:28.0] David Rubenstein: And then took another 10 years to get him. Had we put more troops there. Had we followed the Powell Doctrine and put a hundred thousand troops into Afghanistan, we would've captured Osama Bin Laden, almost certainly. And the result was that we then decided to have a diversionary attack on Iraq, which I think was a mistake. And I did ask President Bush, if you had known there were no weapons of mass destruction, would you have gone in? And he said, probably not. And I think he was pushed to do it by a lot of the neocons. And it was, I thought, somewhat diversionary because it was kind of taking into account we hadn't captured Osama bin Laden. We hadn't really taken advantage of the loss we'd had on 9/11, but there was a tragic situation, I think in many ways.

[00:58:04.6] Jeffrey Rosen: That probably was not a very significant revelation. Two more interviews, president Donald Trump. When did you interview him and what did you learn?

[00:58:13.8] David Rubenstein: I've known him for, while I interviewed him one time before he was president, I got him to come to the Economic Club of Washington. And in the Green Room, he said, asked me if I'm gonna run for president. I said, president of what? He said, president of the United States. I said, you're not gonna be president of the United States. He said, I know, but it helped my brand a bit. He exaggerates sometimes. For example, he called me the day after that interview. I joined the Economic Club. He said, David, it's the highest rated show ever carried on C-SPAN. I just said he got the ratings and C-SPAN the ratings were the highest of any show ever on C-SPAN. So I called the head of C-SPAN and said, what were the ratings? He said, we don't have ratings, but I've gotten to know Trump.

[00:58:51.8] David Rubenstein: And actually one-on-one, leave the policy things aside. One-on-One, he can be a very charming person. I had dinner with him to prepare for this. Went down to Mar-a-Lago. And I've known Mar-a-Lago for a while because before he got involved in politics, my parents who lived in Baltimore when they moved to a suburb of Baltimore called West Palm Beach, Florida, I used to go down there and have events there. And it was very pleasant. And then I had dinner with him there, and we agreed to do the interview, but the only time we could do it was on the day of the trial. And I said, you're really gonna be able to focus on this interview. He said, no problem. So I had the interview, and then a couple minutes later, he went into one of the trials.

[00:59:26.2] David Rubenstein: The interview with Joe Biden. I've known Biden for a long time, and it's public knowledge that I let him use my house in Nantucket for Thanksgiving. For he likes to go to Nantucket for Thanksgiving. It's a 40 year family tradition, and I don't like to be in the cold weather on Thanksgiving. So he goes there, he likes my house. And I would say I've known him a long time. I'll see him this weekend because we have a celebration of the Blair House. I think the 200th anniversary of the Blair House, and I've helped reconstruct it. And so I've known him for a long time. He's a, he's pretty much what you see is what you get. He's a blue collar kind of guy, snap you on the back, really cares about relationships. I don't think he, at the time I did the interview, expected to win one, to run.

[01:00:04.1] David Rubenstein: And I think when the history is written, the biggest mistake that either party made or either person made in this campaign was to agree to an early debate. If Donald Trump loses the election, it'll be because he agreed to an early debate. Had he not had an early debate, and he had the same debate with Joe Biden in October, it would've been too late to substitute. And probably I think Trump probably would've won. From Biden's point of view, the biggest mistake was having an early debate because the debate forced, in effect, other Democrats to push him out and had a debate been in October, he would've not had time to really push him out. But in any event Joe Biden is, I spent an hour alone with him in the Oval Office, no staff, nothing.

[01:00:43.5] David Rubenstein: And you all know him probably pretty well because he regards this as his adopted state. I would say he's a nice person for sure. Hail Fellow well met he is, he's really a guy that really gets along with people with a blue collar mindset. And, but the most interesting part of the interview and the thing that I knew would be the most interesting is when he talks about his parents' very close relationship with his mother, very close relationship with his father and his family. And you know he's now he's got an opportunity to do some more things before he leaves office, but no doubt he'll be heard from again. And, I saw with other presidents, when you know you're not gonna be president again, you have a couple months to go, all of a sudden the energy kicks in and you try to get things done 'cause you're not gonna be able to do it much longer.

[01:01:31.4] David Rubenstein: And so I think he ought to do a couple things. And I know of some things he is already getting ready to do, and they'll be announced soon. So he's not just sitting around waiting for the time to come up. He's actually gonna do some things. And I also interviewed well, I interviewed for this book Bush. I interviewed Clinton and the Clintons and Biden and Trump. And then I had to have it write an addendum to the book saying, I'm sorry, I thought Bush and I'm sorry, Biden and Trump are the candidates. And then I had enough time to say, actually, it turns out that Kamala Harris is gonna be the candidate. I have interviewed her, but I didn't have time for this book to interview her. So maybe my next book.

[01:02:12.3] Jeffrey Rosen: That fact that Biden's relationship with his parents was most interesting comes through throughout the book and throughout the book, you illuminate the fact that the relationship of all these presidents with their parents is so crucial. Well, it's time for closing thoughts. You say at the beginning and the end that you wrote the book 'cause you hope, first of all, that your enthusiasm for the presidency is infectious and it is. I just couldn't put the book down, and I know the audience has, love the stories. And you hope to spark people to learn about American history. Why is it important for citizens to learn about the history of the presidents in a democracy?

[01:02:51.2] David Rubenstein: The theory of history is when you learn about the mistakes we've made in the past and any country's made in the past, you can correct them and do things for the better. So if you look at life as Darwinian and you're trying to make progress and progress, you make progress. If you learn what you did wrong and you do it better in the future, that's the theory of history. We don't learn American history very much anymore in school. We don't teach civics as much as we used to. And as a result, we have a lot of young people who

don't know much about our history. And in fact there was a survey that you're familiar with where native born Americans were asked to take the citizenship test that people take if they wanna become a naturalized citizen. And in 49, out of 50 states, a majority of native born Americans couldn't pass the basic citizenship test, which shows you we don't really teach civics or history very much anymore.

[01:03:34.2] David Rubenstein: And you mentioned, I have a final thing: a mother. So how would you like to have this kind of person for your mother? FDR, he was the only child of the second marriage of his father. And so his mother, Sarah Delano Roosevelt, finally allowed him to marry somebody because she had to approve it, of course, Eleanor, but she bought him a home in New York. It was very nice. Then she bought herself a home next door, and she cut a hole in between a doorway so she could go between the two homes. So how would you like to be Eleanor Roosevelt, having your mother-in-law with a pathway into your house for many, many years? Such a complicated relationship.

[01:04:14.9] Jeffrey Rosen: Well, may I, I've spoken at the Roosevelt House there, and you can imagine her jumping in and she would also listen in on the phone whenever he talked and he said, mama, I can hear you breathing.

[01:04:24.6] Jeffrey Rosen: David, you do end by saying that the reason to keep going, what keeps you young is having something to get up for, having a mission. And you also say the most important thing is what your parents would think about what you've done. I know your parents would be very proud of you for writing this book and for all you've done to inspire Americans to learn about history, please join me in thanking David Rubenstein.

[01:04:50.7] David Rubenstein: Thank you.

[01:04:55.8] Tanaya Tauber: This episode was produced by Lana Ulrich, Samson Mostashari, Bill Pollock, and me Tanaya Tauber. It was engineered by Dave Stotts and Bill Pollock research was provided by Samson Mostashari, Cooper Smith and Yara Ree. Check out our full lineup of exciting programs this fall @constitutioncenter.org/townhall. There you can register to join in person or online. As always, we'll publish these programs on the podcast, so stay tuned here as well. Or watch the videos. They're available in our media library @constitutioncenter.org/medialibrary. Please rate, review, and subscribe to live at the National Constitution Center on Apple Podcasts, or follow us on Spotify. On behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Tanaya Tauber.