



NATIONAL CONSTITUTION CENTER

The Promise of America Book Club:

Jon Meacham

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[00:00:00.0] Julie Silverbrook: 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 Julie Silverbrook, Chief Content and Learning Officer. The National Constitution Center is a nonpartisan nonprofit chartered by Congress to increase awareness and understanding of the Constitution among the American people. This month, the National Constitution Center published, in partnership with Simon & Schuster, *The Promise of America: Reflections On Our Enduring Ideals*, a keepsake collection of essays bringing together leading thinkers from across perspectives to reflect on the ideals at the heart of the American experiment and what those principles have meant across generations of American life.

Contributors include NCC Honorary Co-Chairs U.S. Supreme Court Justices Stephen Breyer and Neil Gorsuch, along with scholars and writers including Walter Isaacson, Akhil Reed Amar, Gordon Wood, Danielle Allen, and many more. In this episode, we are sharing a recent *Promise of America* Book Club conversation with Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and National Constitution Center Semiquincentennial scholar, Jon Meacham. What makes today's conversation especially fitting is that Jon is joining us not as a contributor to the volume, but as a reader of it, just like all of you. He brings his own reflections, questions, and insights shaped by decades of thinking and writing about the American story, leadership, democracy, and public life.

[00:01:29.3] Julie Silverbrook: And that spirit of shared inquiry is really at the heart of what we hope this Book Club Series can be. Not simply a book talk, but a genuine conversation about ideas, citizenship, and the ongoing American experiment. Jon's work has helped millions of Americans engage more deeply with the people, ideas, struggles, and constitutional debates that have shaped our nation. Through his writing on figures ranging from Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln to Franklin Roosevelt and John Lewis, Jon consistently reminds us that the American story is not simply about the past. It is an ongoing conversation about who we are, what we believe, and how we live together in a constitutional democracy.

Earlier this year, we were proud to announce Jon's appointment as our Semiquincentennial scholar. His work embodies so much of what we hope this civic moment can inspire: curiosity, historical perspective, thoughtful dialogue, and renewed engagement with the ideals that continue to shape the American experiment. In fact, we launched this Book Club Series earlier this year with a discussion of Jon's most recent book, *American Struggle: Democracy, Dissent, and the Pursuit of a More Perfect Union*. So it feels especially fitting to welcome him back today for this conversation about *The Promise of America*. Jon, welcome back to the book club.

[00:02:41.4] Jon Meacham: Thank you. You're exactly right. I'm here as an enthusiastic reader. This collection is, depending on your comic book allegiances, either the Avengers team of historians and commentators or the Super Friends. If you're DC or Marvel, I don't know, but it's a remarkable group of people.

[00:03:00.9] Julie Silverbrook: You said you wanted me to be in conversation with you, but you are now so far outside of my area of expertise. [laughter] I don't know anything about comic books. So let me bring it back to the principles of the American idea where I feel much more comfortable.

[00:03:14.3] Jon Meacham: Right.

[00:03:16.3] Julie Silverbrook: I want to begin with one of the central themes running throughout the book, which is that the Constitution itself cannot really be understood apart from the Declaration of Independence. The Constitution, of course, creates the structures of government, and the Declaration articulates the nation's aspirations and first principles. How do you think the relationship between the Declaration and Constitution has shaped the American story over time?

[00:03:37.6] Jon Meacham: Well, Danielle Allen, who has a marvelous essay in this collection, quotes James Wilson. Who says at the Constitutional Convention, the Declaration is the broad basis of the work that is unfolding in 1787 and '88 with the ratification. Jeff Rosen cites the Lincoln private notes that Lincoln made, calling the Declaration the apple of gold and the Constitution is the frame of silver. And it's, parenthetically, one of the fascinating things about what prompted Lincoln to be reflecting on the relationship you're asking about between the two documents, was a correspondence he was in in the winter of 1860, '61 with, of all people, Alexander Stephens, the Georgia Congressman who would become the Vice President of the Confederacy, would deliver the Cornerstone Speech in Savannah in which he lays out that white supremacy and the perpetuation of human enslavement was the cornerstone of the Confederacy.

But Stephens and Lincoln had been colleagues. They had served together in the House of Representatives. And Stephens writes Lincoln and says that he hopes a word fitly spoken, which is a paraphrase from Proverbs, would perhaps avoid secession if Lincoln would say, "I'm not

coming after slavery." That in many ways prompts Lincoln to say, well, really what should be fitly spoken is this dynamic that the Declaration is at the heart of the experiment.

[00:05:21.3] Jon Meacham: The Constitution protects it, perpetuates it, manifests it—you know, pick your verb. I think you laid it out a moment ago quite well. The Declaration is our mission statement, the Constitution is our user's guide. I believe that every generation that has more fully lived into the implications and the promise of that sentence in the Declaration that we are created equal, we are all created equal. I believe that the generations that live into that are ones that we not only commemorate but celebrate. And I believe the generations that constrict access to the mainstream, that limit the implications of that sentence, are ones that provide a negative example, what we should not do.

And again, Danielle Allen has an interesting insight that I think is important, particularly for folks who are skeptical of public action, who might be skeptical of kind of the post-1932 American political world, which is that saying we were... That all men are created equal, does not mean we're all the same. What Professor Allen points out is that what it says is that we all have the capacity to be moral beings. And that we have to be treated... This is me, not Danielle. We have to be treated before the law and before history, and I would argue before God, as having an equal relationship with that created order.

[00:07:04.3] Julie Silverbrook: I want to talk a little bit about the fact that many of these claims in the Declaration in 1776 were pretty radical at the time, right? So they've really become part of our mission statement or our ethos. But that wasn't really true in 1776. And so I want to talk a little bit about the transformation that happens after people sign their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. They pledge that to each other. They sign their death warrants signing this document. The idea that legitimate government rests on equality, natural rights, and the consent of the governed rather than inherited authority or monarchy was truly revolutionary at the time. Why do you think that it was not just transformational in the moment, but also around the world and across time?

[00:08:01.4] Jon Meacham: Well, it's an answer, as you say, to the way things had been since time immemorial, right? That human nature was structured largely, not entirely, but largely around strength. And that strength could be physical. It could also be cultural in the sense of hereditary authority. There was a strength to monarchical systems that had a claim, emotional, cultural, in terms of custom, but also in terms of the marshaling of authority over everybody else. And so in many ways, the world heading into the late 18th century in Philadelphia was organized vertically, right? There were popes and princes and prelates and kings who were either in office by an accident of birth, if they were a hereditary monarch, or an incident of election, if they were a pope or a satrap, and they were given authority over all of us.

Well, what's unfolding heading into the beginnings of the American experiment is a more horizontal understanding. So it goes from this way to this way. Not fully, but that shift is one of the great shifts in the history of civilization. And I would say in some ways it begins with... Not begins with, but you can begin to trace it with Gutenberg, the invention of movable type.

[00:09:45.0] Jon Meacham: Without movable type, you don't have *Common Sense*, you don't have Thomas Paine. You don't have the marketplace of ideas that begins to make the World of the Declaration possible. You have the Scientific Revolution. You have the European Enlightenment. You have the Scottish Moral Enlightenment. You have the Protestant Reformations. You have the translation of scripture into the vernacular, where people are suddenly reading for themselves. And so this shift to a more diffuse sovereignty, if you will, to sort of play off Montesquieu and Madison for a second. When we are all seen as agents with a kind of autonomy, then independence begins to be a more tactile reality. And so I think it's a huge cultural shift as well.

And also, we shouldn't rip it out of context. In a lot of ways, this is a sequential chapter, the American beginnings, a sequential chapter to Magna Carta and the Glorious Revolution. The late 17th century is critical here because you had a constitutional settlement in England that created a mixed constitution. And it was, in fact, the failure, the perceived failure of the British authorities to grant the American colonists what were seen as the full rights of Englishmen that in many ways fueled this struggle.

[00:11:33.3] Jon Meacham: And so this is a, as you say, this is a global, universal struggle, and it was the American contribution that I think made it most vivid. And because of historical circumstance, it required... The drama required a statement. It required a way of uniting this disparate number of colonists. In memory, right, they all kind of look alike. There's a lot of powdered wigs and fifes and drums. These were different, very different folks.

And the remarkable thing—and this is a personal point, I don't want to drag you into it—there's something scriptural. There's a... In purely sociological terms, I want to be very clear what I'm about to say. This is a sociological observation, not a theological one. But to begin something with "the word" is sociologically linked in the imagination of the West with the religious traditions that emerged from the Abrahamic faiths. There is a document. It is sacred. We are trying to live into it. The associations with it are seen as sacred, as set apart. Even Jefferson, whose religious feelings were all over the place, later wrote a granddaughter that the desk on which he wrote the Declaration in Philadelphia had acquired the characteristics of a religious artifact.

[00:13:16.8] Julie Silverbrook: Well, this is why Pauline Maier calls it, in her book, *American Scripture*. Where the National Constitution Center, as you know, is right across from Independence Hall. People take pilgrimages to Independence Hall to see the room where the

Declaration was drafted and the Constitution was drafted. So I think your observation is absolutely right. And from the very beginning, this had religious significance, but it clearly still has, 250 years later, the same significance.

[00:13:47.0] Jon Meacham: Well, it does. And the... So the issue is, like any kind of scripture, what does the congregation, what do the people of the given era, how do they react to it? How do they live into it?

[00:14:01.5] Julie Silverbrook: And we certainly have more tribes and denominations now, potentially, than we did back then.

[00:14:08.8] Jon Meacham: Yeah. So just as a... To throw this out, and this is not an original observation of mine by any means, but again, speaking just sociologically, in many ways partisanship itself has many of the characteristics of religious faith in our current moment. If you think about it, you have your own prophets. You tend to only talk to the people who are part of your particular tribe, as you say. You see the world as divided into different factions as opposed to being one people, which is a theme in the book—the notion of what is a people? What is "We the People"?

And so I think that an important thing for us today is to recognize, as Justice Breyer writes in the book, that there are nations that are based simply on force and identity. Then there are nations, and the American nation is one, that are based on an idea. And anyone who ascribes, anyone who agrees to our creed, can be part of this. You don't have to be born into it. You just have to be able to come to it.

[00:15:38.0] Julie Silverbrook: I want to talk a little bit about Walter Isaacson's essay, which really reminds readers that the meaning of the Declaration was shaped not only by the people who wrote it, but also by subsequent generations of Americans who have returned to its language and reinterpreted it, often in light of their own struggles and aspirations. Can you talk a little bit about figures like Lincoln and others who have used the Declaration to really renew and redefine the meaning of the American experiment in a particular historical moment?

[00:16:14.4] Jon Meacham: Absolutely. And I commend Walter's book. Are we allowed to do that?

[00:16:20.4] Julie Silverbrook: We can. We love all of the books written by all of the authors. This is a Book Club in the truest sense. Read more books. That's the message.

[00:16:27.0] Jon Meacham: Please, God, read more books. So Walter's great book, *The Greatest Sentence Ever Written*, which really grows out of his—now, I probably shouldn't mention this to Walter, but I guess it's been more than 25 years since he wrote a biography of Benjamin Franklin that I think sort of began Walter's thinking on this. It's an important, in a way,

a sequential volume to Garry Wills' book, both on the Declaration and Lincoln at Gettysburg. So directly to your question, the Declaration recurs as a significant grounding force in our hours of strife. And hours of strife are more often the rule than they are the exception.

So beginning in 1776, you have the statement, we fight the war, [and] the Constitution, as James Wilson said in Danielle's essay, becomes the broad basis. Then you begin to crash into the era of nullification. You have in the late 1820s and the beginning of the 1830s, the understanding in the country of slavery as what was called a necessary evil. That was the beginning. The beginning of the defense of slavery, if you will, was framed by the colonists arguing that it was Britain's fault, they had forced this on the country.

[00:18:07.0] Jon Meacham: The country couldn't do away with it quickly; it was a necessary evil. Abolitionist sentiment, not least because of technology and the ability for abolitionist publications to move around the country, begins to move pro-slavery advocates from a necessary evil argument to seeing it as a positive good. That was John C. Calhoun's phrase: "Slavery is a positive good." It is ordained by scripture. It is the natural order of things. And they begin to feel, in my native region—I'm a Southerner, particularly in South Carolina—they begin to feel the world's turning against them, all right? That sentiment about abolition, about emancipation, is rising. This is in the 1820s.

The tariff, of all things, becomes the occasion for an early skirmish in the determination of: will states be able to carry the day on slavery, or will a centralized government, the federal government, which might be less sympathetic, will that prevail? And so South Carolina begins to create a doctrine of nullification, where you can pick or choose federal laws that you want to follow. Of all people, and Jeff Rosen in this book writes about it, Andrew Jackson stands up. And Jackson says, no. In a toast at a dinner, he says, looking at Calhoun, "Our federal union: it must be preserved."

[00:19:48.6] Jon Meacham: And this is important because Jackson, culturally and politically, should have been much more in sympathy with the Southern planters and, frankly, the nullifiers. But he had taken an oath. He had taken an oath to the Constitution. And on December the 10th, 1832, he releases the Nullification Proclamation. It is one of the most important documents, I believe, in constitutional history that we don't talk about very much. And he speaks with the feelings of a father to South Carolina. And he says the Constitution forms not a league, but a compact. It is a perpetual union, and it was "We the People," not we the states, that formed this sacred covenant. And that's driven by the Declaration and the Constitution.

Cut to the winter of 1860, '61, what is it that Lincoln turns to when he is beginning to define the struggle for union, the case for union? It's the apple of gold in the frame of silver. And he most vividly said in 1859, in one of the great RSVPs of all time—it's a category, right? He's asked to come to Massachusetts to speak to a Jefferson birthday dinner.

[00:21:27.1] Jon Meacham: And he writes a letter saying he can't do it. But man, could he write a letter. He said all honor to Jefferson—to the man who had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to insert into a revolutionary document an abstract truth that all men are created equal, so that it would be a reappearing stumbling block to tyranny and oppression. So coolness, forecast, and capacity. And the Declaration was the stumbling block. That was the central thing.

There was another man in that era who was doing the same kind of work around the Declaration. And it is, to me, one of the most moving parts of the American experience is the faith that Frederick Douglass, born into enslavement, had in the capacity of people who looked like me to do ultimately the right thing. And in 1852, he gives a speech in Rochester, New York called *What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?* It's a remarkable document. It is a defense in many ways of the Declaration, of the Constitution, which he refers to as a "glorious liberty document." And he says, there is hypocrisy; this is not my Independence Day, but I for one do not despair of the Republic.

[00:23:04.5] Jon Meacham: The fiat of the Almighty, "Let there be light," has not yet spent its force. Imagine what it takes for a Black man born into enslavement in 1852 to believe that we were going to actually recognize the full implications of what the Declaration said. He called the Declaration the ring-bolt of the nation's destiny. And in a phrase that would be picked up in the 1960s, he says it is a promissory note to Black Americans.

So who picks that up? Martin Luther King Jr. Standing in 1963 at the March on Washington, he says, "I have a dream that the country will live up to the true meaning of its creed." What is the true meaning of its creed? The words that the man commemorated down the way on the Tidal Basin had written. And it's not just about individual rights; it's also about global security and liberty everywhere.

So in 1943, Franklin Roosevelt spent a lot of time getting the Jefferson Memorial built because the Lincoln Memorial was kind of seen as Republican and FDR wanted a Democratic monument. And he says in dedicating the Jefferson Memorial in the middle of this global struggle against fascism and totalitarianism, that Jefferson lived in a world where the freedom of the mind was under siege.

[00:24:52.5] Jon Meacham: We, too, live in such a world. And so, beginning with the struggle over human enslavement and the relative role of the federal and state governments to the era of the Civil War, to World War II, to the Civil Rights Movement, the Declaration is a central recurring theme in defining both how far we've come, but I would argue more importantly, what we must do next.

And I'm sorry, there's one other, I think, hugely important example here, which is in 1848 at Seneca Falls, the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments was: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal." It is the recurring touchstone of American

liberty. And whether we obey, whether we follow that, determines our destiny. And if we don't, it also determines it.

[00:26:04.1] Julie Silverbrook: I would commend people tuning in to read Danielle Allen's essay, which you've already mentioned. It's about the promise of equality. And she talks about how equality in the Declaration isn't just rhetorical, something that we individually invoke, but she really sees it as the moral foundation for the constitutional system that followed the Declaration. So she suggests that structures like checks and balances and separation of powers were ultimately designed to protect both equality and liberty. Looking across American history, when do you think the nation has most successfully connected its constitutional structures to its founding ideals? And when has that connection broken down?

[00:26:52.7] Jon Meacham: I think, I would argue that the mid-1960s probably mark a high point of the American promise being recognized. And even that is relative, right? The fact that it required legislation and that it produced the backlash that it did tells you about the contingency, the chanciness of our history. But I believe that in many ways, the period between 1932 and 2016 or so, American politics can be defined as a kind of figurative conversation between FDR and Ronald Reagan. And there was a rough consensus—huge, difficult, defining struggles—but basically, people accepted the rule of law. They would push, to shift metaphors, the envelope this way or that way, but the envelope stayed in place, right? It stayed complete.

What happens after World War II, a battle fought in many ways to defend and even promulgate the ideals of the Declaration and the Constitution around the world, right? In the 1941 State of the Union speech, FDR defines the Four Freedoms, and they're the freedom of speech everywhere in the world, the freedom from fear everywhere in the world, the freedom from want everywhere in the world. And when he's talking about the speech privately beforehand, his great advisor, Harry Hopkins, says, "Mr. President, I would cut the phrase 'everywhere in the world' because I don't think Americans give a damn about Java, about freedom in Java."

[00:29:01.9] Jon Meacham: And FDR looks at him and says, "Well, Harry, they're gonna have to because the world's gotten so small." And that's 1941, right? And so I think that there's a high point there. World War II, in many ways, is the greatest collective American achievement in our history. If you think about the industrial capacity, the projection of force, the commitment of blood and treasure.

But let's be clear, we were dragged into World War II at the very last moment and only after we were attacked both at Pearl Harbor and then Hitler declared war on the United States. So even the greatest thing we did was a damn near we didn't do. And I don't say that to be self-righteous as if, oh, I would have been such a great figure in the 1930s and '40s. I say it because I think part of the moral utility of history is that if even the best things we did, we damn near didn't do, that

means that flawed, fallible, fallen people were acting within history and yet they got it right at the very last moment.

[00:30:17.1] Jon Meacham: And that means to me that in our own flawed, fallible, and fallen moment, we have the capacity to do that. And we don't have to be perfect, which is a good thing because nobody is. I mean, Julie may be, but the rest of us are not. So I think we come out of the Second World War, democracy, democratic capitalism, free markets—you know, there's a period there, right? 1945 through the middle of the 1990s, where it seems as if liberal democracy, which prevails, ultimately, we believe, we think prevails in the great long twilight struggle, as President Kennedy called it.

Eisenhower steps in in the early 1950s. And if you think about it, and I think this is useful given where we are today, it had been 20 years since the Republicans had had power. That's a long time. No Republican president had appointed a Supreme Court Justice since Herbert Hoover. In many ways, almost half the country, certainly 40%, felt they had not been in control. And so that created this pent-up feeling that, boy, once we get power, we're undoing this New Deal thing. We're gonna roll back the Fair Deal. We're going to...

[00:32:00.2] Jon Meacham: This NATO, Marshall Plan, we're getting involved again in the world, we need to have Fortress America. And then the Republican who wins in 1952 is Dwight Eisenhower, who had a moral commitment to preventing World War III because he had sent the sons of other mothers and fathers to die in World War II. And he genuinely believed he had a moral commitment to NATO, to the Marshall Plan, to keeping the Soviet Union where it was and maybe rolling it back, but doing so without shedding more blood. And he ran for president because Robert A. Taft, who was the leading Republican of the era, wouldn't commit to NATO.

I bring all that up because what Eisenhower did in the 1950s was ratify a consensus of both—look, we have Social Security now. People have gotten accustomed in an industrialized society. It used to be in an agrarian world, we could take care of each other. We can't do that anymore because people live in cities. You don't know everybody. There needs to be a floor beneath your feet, and that was what the New Deal had begun to provide. There were voices that wanted Eisenhower to repeal the New Deal.

[00:33:28.0] Jon Meacham: He said no, that any party that tries to do that would be committing suicide, that we need to... He was a true conservative. We need to manage the world as we find it, not try to radically change it. And we need to stand against aggression abroad. That creates, I believe, a sensibility, a political ethos in the country that, as different as Lyndon Johnson was from Eisenhower, made the Civil Rights Acts possible in many ways, because it affirmed that the public sector, that all of us had a role in deciding and extending the promise of the Declaration.

And a different kind of moment in the middle of the 20th century would have been limiting and constricting. What Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson—what that era of the power structure

does with the remarkable work of the nonviolent witness of the freedom movements—is it brings the country to a moment where we are reminded of who we have been and who we ought to be. We have fought a war against tyranny and totalitarianism abroad. We are still fighting one in a Cold War. The Cold War imperatives, helping make the civil rights, the implication, realizing the implications of the Declaration—the Cold War frame is hugely important. It horrified John Kennedy.

Remember that terrible picture of the burning Trailways bus at Anniston... I think it was Anniston, Alabama, during the Freedom Rides? Kennedy's first reaction, as I recall it, was, "What are they gonna think about this behind the Iron Curtain?" Because the communists are arguing to the world, why are they so great? Look what they're doing. They're calling on us, they're ding us for violating human rights. Look at that. It was a reminder that we had to return, be refreshed and rearmed in many ways with what the Declaration said and make it real.

[00:36:11.8] Julie Silverbrook: I want to go to the language in the Declaration about the pursuit of happiness. And our CEO emeritus, Jeff Rosen, writes the essay on this in *The Promise of America* and in a book he wrote on *The Pursuit of Happiness*. And he argues that to really understand true happiness, it is the lifelong pursuit of self-mastery, virtue, and moral growth. And he believes that personal self-government, the government of the self, is essential to political self-government.

In your biographies and as you were just talking about, we have leaders throughout history who are both extraordinarily disciplined but also ambitious. They're also deeply flawed and have internal struggles, as we all do, right? We can only ever be more perfect, even me. We're never perfect, right? [laughter] And so when have our leaders most clearly lived up to that ideal of self-mastery and the government of the self? When have they fallen short and what did those successes and failures ultimately mean for the country?

[00:37:17.9] Jon Meacham: It's a great question. That is, in fact, the story of the country. And I would also say, if I may, it's not just the leaders, it's also the led.

[00:37:28.4] Julie Silverbrook: The people, absolutely.

[00:37:29.9] Jon Meacham: Because there's this strange alchemy, right? Sometimes the leader can push us in the right direction. Sometimes the leader is pushed. And so that's the marvel of... And the mystery of democracy and democratic leadership. I think that probably the finest hour for this would be Lincoln in the White House. In some ways, if I may, coming to emancipation, coming to a realization of his anti-slavery convictions, which were perennial.

And remember, there was a difference between being anti-slavery and being an abolitionist. And so he was always anti-slavery, was not fully with the abolitionists. The radical abolitionists of the era, in fact, burned the Constitution. William Lloyd Garrison very showily burned it and said, in

a phrase of Wendell Phillips, that it was an agreement with death and a covenant with hell, that the Constitution was part of the problem. Again, note that Frederick Douglass and Lincoln believed that not to be the case. And so you had this struggle between radical abolitionists, some of whom wanted to leave the South to its own devices, right?

[00:39:09.0] Jon Meacham: They didn't want to be... Did not want to be in union with slaveholders. Now, what Lincoln and Douglass saw was that if you break up the Union, not to preserve slavery, but to punish slave owners, what does that do to the four million people who are in bondage? It consigns them to their fate. And so Lincoln finds a way in the maelstrom of the war to realize the implications of the Declaration, to defend the constitutional order, and keeps the experiment going, keeps the conversation going. And the fact that people in the North were willing to fight for that is pretty remarkable when you think about it.

So I think the Civil War, what Lincoln called the fiery trial, and that scriptural, if you may, that sacred moment in the middle of it, when he goes to Gettysburg and he elevates the Declaration, right? That we were founded on the proposition that all men are created equal. Thereby jumping over 1787, going to 1776—"four score and seven years ago" was in fact the period of the Declaration, not the Constitution. After Gettysburg, the Declaration in some ways becomes the center of the story.

[00:40:56.0] Jon Meacham: It was always a huge part of it, but it wasn't quite as central. And so I sometimes think no one ever had a better friend than Thomas Jefferson had in Abraham Lincoln, right? That's the kind of pal you want who will elevate you in that way. So I think the Civil Rights Movement is... I mean, I think the Civil War is critical. I think that when we look back 60, 70 years ago in the country at what the freedom movements accomplished, that's hugely important. I also think that it was a moral... The moral capacity, the moral commitment to the spirit of the Declaration fueled the great stand in the Cold War.

So I think our finest hours—the Civil War, the Second World War, the culmination of the freedom movements legislatively, although they're now under siege, obviously, in the 1960s—were our great moments. And what that leads us to, without getting into partisanship at the moment, is this is a fundamental... We're living, you and I are sitting here talking in the midst of a very important hour in which the spirit of the Declaration and the organizing capacity of the Constitution are under stress.

[00:42:39.6] Jon Meacham: And I... You look around, you're not sure what congressional district you're in at the moment anywhere. What worries me most, if I may, about where we are now is the examples I just mentioned, right? The Civil War, the freedom... The Cold War, the freedom movements. Those were moments where there was a commitment to doing something that might be contrary to your short-term interest in the service of a long-term cause. It was sometimes about deferred gratification.

And in a lot of ways, and this goes to Jeff's point, he says in that essay you cited, that personal self-government is critical to political self-government, which is a reminder that this is a moral undertaking. The system we live in requires giving and taking. And that's very hard because most people would rather take than give. That's been true since the second chapter of Genesis, right? There was a piece of fruit. We were told not to take it. We took it, mayhem ensues.

The Civil War was a deferral of one's immediate gratification, if I had to go fight for the Union. The Cold War was a deferral... An investment of time and treasure to help other countries stand against communism that might not seemingly directly affect me.

[00:44:28.4] Jon Meacham: It was one of the reasons there's so much pushback against what was called mutual security in that era, which was the successor to the Marshall Plan. And one of the fueling factors of the opposition to freedom movements was the misapprehension—and Eric Foner is a terrific historian on this—the misapprehension that someone else having opportunity, someone else having agency is somehow a threat to my opportunity or agency. That it's a zero-sum game. And so if someone else has rights, maybe mine are being taken away, when in fact the opposite is true. It is the... And that goes straight back to the Declaration of Independence. Everyone has this sacred standing.

And then we have the struggles over who gets what, right? That's a form of politics. What we have to worry about right now, I think, is that there is abroad in the country and around the world, a politics of the strong, a kind of nationalistic feeling that it's time to build some walls, pull up the drawbridge, be more loyal to your own kind than to the creed. And we've seen that before and it hasn't turned out well.

And so what I would urge and what I think is so important about the work that you do is, let's remember your penultimate question. What was the great era? What characterized the great era? The great era was after Bloody Sunday, when people were being beaten on the street, the country decided, you know what? We need to be true to what we said in the Declaration and in the 14th and 15th Amendment. So let's just do what we said we would do. When we don't do it, we regret it.

[00:46:58.7] Julie Silverbrook: Justice Gorsuch closes out this volume by arguing, and other jurists and thinkers have argued the same, that the ultimate guardian of the ideals of the Declaration and Constitution, it's not the government, it's not courts, but it's the American people themselves. And throughout American history, people have played a critical role, right, in determining what the nation stands for. Looking across the leaders and eras you've studied and written about, which moments do you think we should be reflecting on as we mark the Nation's 250th as the examples for how we can renew our sense of constitutional and civic identity?

[00:47:41.1] Jon Meacham: There are moments of crisis that have determined whether we were going to have a more perfect union or whether we were going to fall into chaos and selfishness.

And so what I would argue to everybody as we head into this summer, is what do we want the future to say of us? Do you want to be Jefferson and Franklin and Adams, who were defining human liberty, and however imperfect and flawed and limited their view was, they were pushing in the right direction? Do you want to be Andrew Jackson or do you want to be John C. Calhoun?

Do you want to be Jackson saying that the Union is a compact, not a league, that he said in that declaration I mentioned or that proclamation: "Fellow citizens, contemplate the condition of the country of which you are a part; see its fertile fields and devotion to liberty, and say, look on this picture of happiness and say, we too are the citizens of America."

[00:48:58.2] Jon Meacham: Do we want to be part of that? Or do we want to be part of the movement that said slavery was a positive good? Do you want to be with Lincoln at Gettysburg? Or do you want to be with Stephens in Savannah, Alexander Stephens? And you can walk that through.

Now, some people might say that I've laid out unreasonable, caricatured extremes. Really? Are those unreasonable? Everything I just said happened in the Civil Rights Movement. It happened 20 minutes ago. In World War II, when you had isolationists who wanted to leave whole peoples to their fate, that was 40 minutes ago, right? And so the joy and the terror of American history is we have the capacity to change everything, and that's a joyful, exciting thing. And the fact that it's up to us to manage all this can be terrifying because no one's coming to save us. There is no Avengers team to bring it back. There are no Super Friends.

[00:50:29.4] Julie Silverbrook: You're going back to bringing up things I don't know.

[00:50:32.3] Jon Meacham: I know. I wanted to close out. I wanted to keep you confused. You know that great story about Eisenhower getting ready to go into a press conference, and there's an important question about foreign policy that they didn't really have an answer for. So his press secretary said, "But Mr. President, what are you going to say?" And Eisenhower said, "Don't worry, Jim, I'll just confuse them." [laughter] So that's my goal here.

There's a moral capacity, there's a moral component here. And I think the book that the Center has produced, the voices that are in it are vivid and essential reminders that democracy is not for spectators. It's for citizens. It's for us. And you can't choose the era in which you live, but you can choose how that era turns out.

And I'm not a partisan, right? I'm not a Republican. I'm not a Democrat. But I don't love what I see at the moment. I think a lot of folks probably share that. And so how do you orient yourself in that kind of chaotic, unhappy moment, dispiriting moment? I think that you do it by going back to first principles. Why are we here? Well, according to the framers, we're here to see that all... That we actually act on the principle that all are created equal.

[00:52:25.7] Jon Meacham: And that we are trying to form a more perfect union. And if you break faith with that, if you put your faith, you put your trust in the strong, as opposed to the just and the true, I promise you this: all of human history says that if you are strong in this season, you're going to be weak in another one. And the power of the rule of law, the power of the American promise is that we have created a politics that at its best is an arena of contention where if we win graciously and lose graciously, we are able to protect and defend ourselves by guarding and protecting and defending the dignity of others.

If you take politics from being an arena of contention to being a battlefield of total war, if you go from seeing rivals and opponents to seeing enemies, you are breaking faith with these sacred documents. So the most conservative thing you can do, the way to make America truly great, is to keep faith with the principles of how we started.

[00:53:52.0] Julie Silverbrook: Many of the questions we receive from audience members questioned *The Promise of America* and the enduring nature of the ideals grappled with in this book. And I think you just said it so beautifully and powerfully. For the ideals to endure, we have to, we the people, have to take this work on. And the first step really is to become more familiar, right?

[00:54:19.1] Jon Meacham: Yeah.

[00:54:19.2] Julie Silverbrook: And engage deeply with the ideals themselves. You cannot defend what you don't understand. And that really is the critical mission of the National Constitution Center and why this work is so important and why books like this are so important. When people ask why we did it, it's because we believe in *The Promise of America* and we wrote a guide for you, written by the best thinkers of this era. And so we hope that people will reflect on how they can help these ideals endure for the next more than 250 years.

[00:54:55.1] Jon Meacham: And can I say, since we're in a Book Club, the joy of this is each one of these contributors, this is like a hyperlink to the rest of your life. [laughter] Every one of these folks has written hugely important books and articles. This is the beginning of the journey, not the end.

[00:55:15.2] Julie Silverbrook: Yes, and I have to plug that you'll be joining Danielle Allen on July 1st at the National Constitution Center along with our friend Colleen Shogan and Robert Costa to talk about the principles of the American idea as part of our Independence Week celebration. So we'll continue engaging with this volume. Please read along with us. Jon, thank you so much for sharing all of your wisdom with us and being a reader and a reflector with us for this Book Club.

[00:55:44.3] Jon Meacham: Thank you. I appreciate it. I'm gonna send you some comic books to sort of get you...

[00:55:48.6] Julie Silverbrook: Oh, good. Okay. I have daughters, I'm like, I'm so outside of the loop.

[00:55:53.5] Jon Meacham: I just... We are... Super Friends and the Avengers, this is cultural literacy. I'm worried about you. So I'm going to work on this.

[00:56:00.5] Julie Silverbrook: Okay. Please address my knowledge gaps. [laughter] I mean that very sincerely.

[00:56:06.6] Julie Silverbrook: This program was streamed live as part of the NCC's Book Club Series on May 21st, 2026. This episode was produced and mixed by Bill Pollock, with production support from Charles Sahn, Scott Bomboy, and Lisa Marie Patzer. Research was provided by Anna Salvatore, Trey Sullivan, and Tristan Worsham. Check out our full lineup of exciting programs and register to join us virtually at constitutioncenter.org. As always, we'll publish those programs on the podcast, so stay tuned here as well. Or watch the videos; they are available in our media library at constitutioncenter.org/medialibrary. Follow Live At The National Constitution Center on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your favorite podcast app. On behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Julie Silverbrook.