The Founders, the Pursuit of Happiness, and the Virtuous Life

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[00:00:00] Jeffrey Rosen: Hello, friends. I'm Jeffrey Rosen, president and CEO of the National Constitution Center, and welcome to We The People, a weekly show of constitutional debate. The National Constitution Center's a nonpartisan, nonprofits chartered by Congress to increase awareness and understanding of the Constitution among the American people.

[00:00:21] Jeffrey Rosen: Last week, the National Constitution Center hosted our third annual President's Council retreat in Miami. It featured a series of meaningful conversations about the Constitution with a diverse group of illuminating speakers. During the retreat, I had the wonderful opportunity to talk about my new book, which is out this week. It's called The Pursuit of Happiness: How Classical Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America. After the talk, I was so honored to be joined by three of my heroes to discuss the founders and the virtuous life. Eric Slauter, the deputy dean of humanities at the University of Chicago. Melody Barnes, executive director of the Karsh Institute of Democracy at the University of Virginia. And the great columnist George F. Will. Dear We The People listeners, I'm so excited to share the conversations with you, and if you're moved to read the book and would like a signed bookplate, just let me know. Enjoy the show.

[00:01:20] Jeffrey Rosen: Dear friends, what better place to discuss the virtues of humility, self abnegation, and overcoming the ego than with a dinner panel at the President's Council Retreat?

[00:01:45] Jeffrey Rosen: I am so excited to talk with you about this quest that I've had to explore the history and philosophy behind The Pursuit of Happiness. I'm gonna talk a little bit, and then what a thrill to welcome George Will, Eric Slauter and Melody Barnes to talk with me about the pursuit of happiness and the founders.

[00:02:10] Jeffrey Rosen: So this project came unexpectedly during COVID. I was reading about Benjamin Franklin's famous project to achieve moral perfection. And in his 20s, he set out to achieve moral perfection. And he made a list of 12 virtues that he thought he should live up to every night. Prudence, temperance order, industry. He saved the one he found hardest for last, and that was indeed humility.

[00:02:44] Jeffrey Rosen: And he made a list and he decided to put an X mark every night next to the virtue where he fell short. And he tried this for a bit. He found it incredibly depressing, but he decided that he was a better person for having tried. I knew about this system 'cause a friend and I actually tried it a few years ago, about a decade ago a rabbi in our synagogue recommended the Franklin system, which was translated into Hebrew in the 18th century by a Hasidic Rabbi who admired Franklin and wanted to share his wisdom with Hebrew questers. And my friend and I tried it. We'd put an X mark every night next to the virtue we, where we fell short. We found it incredibly depressing and gave it up as Franklin did. But we also felt we were improved by the effort. What struck me during COVID was rereading the system in Franklin's autobiography. The epigraph for his project was this, without virtue, happiness cannot be. And it was from a book by Cicero that I never heard of, called the Tusculan Disputations. That was intriguing. Then a few weeks later, by another synchronicity, actually, I was at the Boar's Head Inn in Charlottesville next to the University of Virginia. And on the wall was a list of 12 virtues that Thomas Jefferson had drafted for his granddaughters which looked remarkably similar to Franklin's. Things like never put off for tomorrow what you can do today, or resolve to do what you ought and do what you resolve.

[00:04:17] Jeffrey Rosen: What was so striking is that Jefferson's motto was also from this book by Cicero that I never heard of, called The Tusculan Disputations, without Virtue, happiness cannot be. And when Jefferson was older, and people would write to him and ask him for the secret of happiness, he would send a passage from this book, which said, essentially, he who is tranquil in mind, who is neither elated by undue exuberance or despondent by overly great despondency, this is the happy man of whom we are in quest, he is the virtuous man. So I thought after these two synchronicities, I've gotta read this book by Cicero called The Tusculan Disputations. But, what else to read?

[00:05:01] Jeffrey Rosen: Soon after I came across a reading list that Thomas Jefferson drafted for how to be an educated person, and he would send it to kids who were going to law school and friends who would write and, and basically to many people who asked when he was old. And in the section called Ethics or Natural Religion, I saw at the top of the list, Cicero's Tusculan Disputations. And then there were a series of other books of moral philosophy like the Stoics, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca Epictetus, as well as some books of enlightenment moral philosophy, like not only John Locke, but also Francis Hutchinson, Lord Kames and David Hume. I thought, "I've gotta read these books," because this is a gap in my education. I've had the most marvelous liberal arts education, and I'm grateful every day for the superb teachers at wonderful universities who taught me literature, politics, history, philosophy.

[00:05:59] Jeffrey Rosen: But despite this gift, I've missed the great works of moral philosophy that we're on Jefferson's reading list. So I set out to read them. Okay, so it's COVID, and then some- something unusual struck, and I was just seized by the inspiration. I think it really was reading how industrious Jefferson was on his reading list. He would recommend times of the day that you should read particular books. So you've gotta wake up before sunrise, and read moral

philosophy and history, and then breakfast, and then you can move to I guess math or something like that. And then lunch, and you're down to novels and enjoying wonderful literature in the evenings, and Jefferson specified, which novels to read as well. So, seized by this, I'd never done this before. I found myself getting up before sunrise, reading from the moral philosophy, watching the sunrise, and then developing this completely weird practice of writing a sonnet, summing up the wisdom of the moral philosophy. I just felt like doing it, and it seemed extremely odd until I discovered that lots of people in the founding era did the same thing. Hamilton, Phyllis Wheatley, the great poet, John Quincy Adams, would wake up in the White House, read Cicero in the original, write sonnets, walk along the Potomac, and then start the day, so there's something about this literature that inspires sonnet writing and early rising.

[00:07:22] Jeffrey Rosen: So, and this was, I think, the most fulfilling reading that I've done in my life. Imagine a year of engaging in this habit, this practice is really what it was. And I read this literature that I never read before, and what I read changed my life. It changed my understanding of how to be a good person, and it changed my understanding of how to be a good citizen. And what I learned from the moral philosophy is that for the ancients, happiness was not feeling good, but being good, not the pursuit of pleasure, but the pursuit of virtue.

[00:07:55] Jeffrey Rosen: And they had a particular understanding of virtue, which is not intuitive to us. They were talking about the classical virtues of prudence, temperance, courage and justice, which had to do with the improvement of character, with self-mastery. With self-improvement, we would use phrases like being your best self. Aristotle in The Nicomachean Ethics talks about happiness as an activity of the soul in conformity with virtue. And by virtue, he has in mind good character. And by good character, he has in mind temperance. Temperance is a synonym for the kind of moderation of the passions that creates a good character. And for all of the ancients, good character was a battle between reason and passion. Passion is a synonym for emotion, and they don't mean that we should lack emotion, but that we should moderate or temper or master our emotions so that we can avoid unproductive emotions like anger and jealousy and fear, and achieve the calm balance and tranquility of soul that Cicero and Pythagoras and all of the philosophers believed was the essence of happiness.

[00:09:12] Jeffrey Rosen: So if we had to sum up in one sentence, happiness requires a life devoted to the pursuit of self-improvement so that we can be our best self and serve others. And that's what I learned from the literature, and then armed with this light and learning, and not only armed with it, but imbibing it, feeling it, because really, the feeling of alignment that living in accordance with divine reason affords is, is really a feeling of harmony of balance. Plato has a theory of the soul, which defined both personal and political psychology for much of history. Reason in the mind, passion in the heart, desires in the stomach, and the goal of reason is to moderate and align our passions and our desires so that we're all aligned with the divine unity of the universe.

[00:10:17] Jeffrey Rosen: It is ultimately a spiritual quest, and it is a very harmonious framework for both personal and political self-government. I discovered also that for the ancients, as for the framers, personal self-government is necessary for political self-government. We can't govern ourselves as citizens in a democracy unless we first govern the unreasonable passions and emotions in our own souls. And that's why we constantly see the framers of the Constitution insisting that without virtue, the republic will fall. That to imagine a republic without virtue is to imagine what cannot be and never has been. Virtue is important for democracy in two senses. First citizens have to find the temperance, the self-mastery to choose wise leaders who will put the common good, the ras publica above their selfish and demagogic ambitions.

[00:11:24] Jeffrey Rosen: And then the leaders have to find the virtues in themselves to set aside their immediate political interests to serve the common good. It's so interesting that both politically and personally, virtue requires delayed gratification, sober second thoughts, resisting your first and most immediate impulses for gratification so that you can serve your long term interests and those of society. So that unites the political psychology and the theory of democracy. And it was changed the way I thought about the Constitution because when you read the Federalist Papers through this lens, you understand why Madison says that this is the first government in history dedicated on the proposition of public happiness. And the phrase public happiness occurs throughout the Federalist Papers because the framers thought again, channeling Aristotle and the ancients that just as individuals have a duty to achieve political personal happiness. So societies are supposed to maximize public happiness.

[00:12:31] Jeffrey Rosen: So fortunate that this subject just fell to me. I didn't seek it, but it was given to me, and it really was tremendously clarifying and empowering on a, a personal and a constitutional level. The book tries to tell this quest through stories relating in particular portraits of the founders and their own struggles to achieve self-mastery and to be better people. And what's remarkable is how central this was to their lives. They talked about it constantly. They, they would write letters to their kids about it. They're chastising themselves for their own failings until their old age, and constantly wondering whether their fulfilling their duties of self-mastery or an industry or, and temperance, or whether they're like the rest of us losing their tempers descending to their worst selves and also betraying their ideals.

[00:13:28] Jeffrey Rosen: It's very striking too how explicitly they acknowledge the base hypocrisy and vice of slavery. None of the enslavers, the, the, the major ones in, in Hamilton and, sorry the Virginians, Jefferson and, and Madison and Patrick Henry, all insisted that slavery was inconsistent with the natural rights declared to be self-evident in the declaration. But in their more candid moments, they acknowledged that they just couldn't be bothered to live up to the ideals. Patrick Henry has this amazing quotation. Is it not amazing that I, who myself believe that slavery violates natural rights, my cell phone slaves, I will not justify it. I will not attempt to, I cannot endure the inconvenience of living without it. He just was too greedy, too avaricious, to use the Roman phrase that the framers themselves would use to give up the lifestyle that slavery

made possible. And of course, Jefferson was notoriously similarly avaricious as well as hypocritical in this respect.

[00:14:32] Jeffrey Rosen: And the fact that he constantly kept insisting that slavery was a grievous evil that had to be ended at some time in the distant future, which kept emerging and, and becoming further and further away. And then he died having freed only two people in his own life, who were his own children, and then freed two more keeping his promise to Sally Hemmings but left. Touched deaths to his daughters that they had to sell Monticello and his own enslaved population at his death. So it in no way absolves any of the enslavers of their hypocrisy, but it's striking that they recognized it and talked about it in these classical terms, 'cause the classical terms completely define their moral universe.

[00:15:14] Jeffrey Rosen: There are so many inspiring moments in their quest as well, for me, among the most, inspiring as Adams and Jefferson as old men, having written a Declaration together, split over the most explosive party split in history in the election of 1800, with the rise of partisanship and then reconciled through Abigail. And they're writing these beautiful letters to each other, and what they want most to talk about is the pursuit of happiness, and in particular, the connections between the eastern and western wisdom traditions. Adams is so excited when he learns that Pythagoras, the founder of Greek moral philosophy, is said to have traveled in the East and talked to the ancient Brahman authorities and read the Hindu Vedas. And Adams wonders whether Joseph Priestly had completed his translation of the Bhagavad Gita.

[00:16:06] Jeffrey Rosen: Jefferson excitedly writes to him and says, "I've got good news. Priestly finished the translation before he died. I can get it to you from Paris." And Adams is so excited. He says, "This will show that Pythagoras took the reason, passion, distinction from the East and from the wisdom of the Gita, that we are what we think, and life is shaped by the mind." That was the core of the Eastern and the Stoic wisdom that we have to control the only thing we can, which is our own thoughts and emotions. And then Adams wanted to distill all of that into his personal creed, love God, and all his creatures rejoice in all things.

[00:16:41] Jeffrey Rosen: Jefferson counters that after a lifetime of reflection, he's no longer a Stoic or a skeptic, and has become an epicurean. And by that, he means not the libels of the stoics, which is hedonistic pleasure-seeking, but the contraction, the rational contraction of desires so that we can live according to reason. And just the fact that they're excitedly reading and learning and growing and voraciously challenging themselves to pursue truth until the end is inspiring, and also a sign of their great industry, which was the one virtue that all of the founders maintained until their dying days.

[00:17:22] Jeffrey Rosen: It's so inspiring to see John Quincy Adams II having lost the presidency, become, based on his own stoic reading, one of the greatest anti-slavery advocates of his generation, a collapse on the floor of Congress with his last words, he murmured, "I am composed," a phrase that he got from Cicero because it was really self composure and self-

mastery that were his ideal. And he always beat himself up for having not achieved enough, but acknowledged, he said, "With more industry, I might have ended all war and slavery." He set a very high bar for himself.

[00:18:03] Jeffrey Rosen: But he thought he wasn't industrious enough in this remarkable life of self-mastery industry. But at least he was composed. The book ends by tracing this notion of the pursuit of happiness through American history. And it's so striking that it was central not only to the classical education of the founders, but it was embraced by Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, who learned it in popular readers like the Columbian Orator, which Douglass bought on the streets of Baltimore, paying in bread to the boys who were allowed to teach him how to read after his wicked master had forbidden, that he'd be taught how to read.

[00:18:43] Jeffrey Rosen: And he viewed that as a greater enslavement indeed than the shackles themselves, taught himself how to read in the Columbian Orator, found the wisdom of Cicero and the Stoics and self-mastery. And he said that that changed his life and led to his own devotion to what he called self-reliance. And Lincoln got it from Murphy's English reader. And it was taught to people like Louis Brandeis at the turn of the century. Ruth Bader Ginsburg got it from her mother, who told her to avoid unproductive emotions like anger, jealousy, and fear, and to focus on self-mastery and serving others.

[00:19:20] Jeffrey Rosen: And then it just dropped out of the curriculum. And why exactly are notions of happiness changed in the 1960s and '70s from feeling good, from being good to feeling good from the pursuit of virtue, to let it all hang out and you do you, and the me decade is a complicated question involving changes in psychology. David Brooks notes that Freud changed our ideas from character to personality. It had to do with changes in political philosophy from liberalism to post-structural criticism. And regardless of its source, it certainly had to do with changes in pop culture, which stopped celebrating the virtues of self-reliance and began exalting pleasure at all costs.

[00:20:06] Jeffrey Rosen: I was remember yearning in the 1980s when I went to college for some alternative to the hedonism that was being celebrated by popular culture and not finding it in the puritan theology that I was reading as an English major, because that required a degree of acceptance of truth by authority and faith. And also readings of the text, which struck me as unpersuasive about predestination by faith rather than good works and so forth. And what I didn't realize, because this classical moral philosophy had fallen outta the curriculum, is that it was hiding in plain sight, and it was just such a gift to learn about it and to embody it.

[00:20:45] Jeffrey Rosen: There are many implications for me of this learning which has redirected my thinking about constitutional education and personal education. And I think that the NCC has a great opportunity and responsibility to defend this ancient ideal, which is the liberal idea, and has also the American idea and in a culture in which it's very much under siege. And the way to do that is by sparking curiosity about it, and inspiring people across the country

of all ages to learn and grow, and read, and to be inspired by these primary texts and by these ideals, and to apply them in their own lives.

[00:21:41] Jeffrey Rosen: In the end, it all comes down to reading. And we face a great challenge for the fact that people are not reading today, that that challenge is as deep as the political polarization that afflicts us. And it's urgently important to inspire people, actually to engage with the texts. And, that's just what we'll try to do. But in addition, if we have an opportunity to change individual hearts and minds, and I'm just an evangelist for how wonderful it is to read these books. I remember very distinctly with being a really young kid and going with my mom to the Library of Congress for the first time.

[00:22:20] Jeffrey Rosen: The Thomas Jefferson Building, I think is perhaps one of the most inspiring buildings in DC. And I was standing in that gorgeous rotunda and just being filled with wonder at the thought that all of the books in the world were in that one place. And now we carry all of those books around with us in our pockets. These cell phones and tablets and agents of distraction and browsing and idleness are also portals to all the wisdom of the world. And it just blows my mind that I was able to read, sitting on my couch free copies of the text that inspired people throughout history or the actual books that the founders read with their marginalia in them.

[00:23:04] Jeffrey Rosen: All of this wonder and wisdom is just glimmering out there waiting. All we need is the self-discipline to read it. So I'm really eager to talk about how inspiring it can be to read and learn and grow, and also how necessary it is if we're gonna preserve American democracy and the liberal idea. And we're gonna do that together. But now I have the incredible treats and thrill of discussing these issues with three of my heroes, so please join me in welcoming them right now.

[00:23:44] Jeffrey Rosen: We're gonna begin with Eric Slauter. Eric is a distinguished professor at the University of Chicago, where he teaches a class on Thomas Jefferson's reading list.

[00:23:52] Jeffrey Rosen: And I guess we met at an event a few years ago, and I mentioned I was writing this book and you said, "Well, I teach a course on it." And tomorrow, Eric and I will convene a breakout session on the reading list, and we'll run through some of the books. But tell us about what it's like to teach the course on the reading list, what the students take from Jefferson's wisdom about the connections between virtue and happiness, and what are the big themes about divisions that the founders had about virtue and happiness that you teach.

[00:24:23] Eric Slauter: Yeah, thank you. Well, the first thing to say is that my students have other classes, so they cannot fulfill Jefferson's injunction of his 12-hour day devoted to the various branches of philosophy. I wanna start out by just saying thank you for the opportunity to, to read the book. I got the chance to read the book in manuscript. This is really the best pandemic project I've ever seen.

[00:24:48] Eric Slauter: And I think you've done an incredible service both in this book and through the National Constitution Centers founders library of really helping us appreciate not just what the founders wrote, but what they read and what they made of it. And so the course I teach is actually a course on the Declaration of Independence. It traces the early ideas about independence from documents like the 1689 Declaration of Rights. And it goes through the drafting process, the editing process. They're introduced to the various members of the committee of five, so Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, all of whom are incredible readers. And it goes all the way up through Douglas, Lincoln and all and, and on and on up to our own times about the ways in which the Declaration has evolved.

[00:25:43] Eric Slauter: And those three men were just voracious readers. Jefferson accumulated a library of 6,500 volumes by 1814. And at that point, the British had sacked the Capitol and destroyed the first Congressional Library. Jefferson wrote a note offering to sell his library to the country. It met some federalist opposition, who they were not completely convinced that Congress should buy the ex-president's books, especially books like Voltaire Works and other, other infidel philosophy. But the Democratic Republicans were in charge and were able to get it through. Jefferson throughout his life, created syllabi for friends and family. We're gonna talk about one of those lists tomorrow. But he, Adams, Franklin, they love to tell people what to do and what to read.

[00:26:48] Eric Slauter: Jefferson changed his mind about the various things should be on the list, and you're able to sort of synthesize the top things from the various lists. Jefferson sometimes read with a pair of scissors in his hand. He sat, he did a number of things in the White House that were questionable one of which was to sit with the a polyglot version of the New Testament, cutting it up and and producing a a book of moral philosophy that he called the Life and, and Opinions of Jesus, of Nazareth, who he thought was the greatest, one of the greatest moral philosophers.

[00:27:26] Eric Slauter: John Adams loved to make recommendations as well. He sometimes made them in advance of actually reading the books that he recommended, which I think we all have done. He was quite surprised when he finally did read Plato's Republic and was upset that he had been recommending it so often. But he did find in there a sense that education was the foundation for a political form. He read with a pen in his hand. And his books are now, I think, fully digitized by the internet archive archive.org.

[00:28:03] Eric Slauter: And you can see, he was a marginalia reactionary of the best kind constantly noting in the, in the, in the margins about what, what pleased, and, and more often displeased him about what he, he read, giving us a real sense of, of somebody who was not a passive consumer of but an active reader. And Franklin too. I mean many of his autobiography and that's an account of his life before he enters politics. But that's the life of a reader. The moral virtues that he talks about much, much later in his life in the 1780s, he goes back to the 1720s to create that list.

[00:28:47] Eric Slauter: And that list includes things like temperance. Eat not to dullness, drink not to elevation, which are, is a good thing for everyone to think about. But that was a phrase that he himself took from a book that he mentioned in his autobiography, which was Thomas Tryon. It's called aphorisms. Tryon was a firm believer that in animal rights he was a firm believer that any meat was a kind of unprovoked murder. And he wrote what was essentially the first vegetarian cookbook in the 1680s. Franklin loved this book because he was able to convince his brother that if his brother gave him the money for food, he would spend it cheaply on vegetables and then use the rest on books. And then he took exactly that phrase, eat not to dullness right out of Thomas Tryon. The historians in this room, we spend a lot of time thinking very much about how these people wrote, what they wrote, the Constitution, the Declaration. And so, a book like yours that points us back to the material that they digested and they really did they really, they were not shallow readers any of them.

[00:30:09] Eric Slauter: Franklin became a deist because he read books of anti deism and thought that the arguments were not very strong and so read against the grain. So they were, they were incredibly active readers, and that's what it took, they thought, to develop a kind of virtuous citizenry.

[00:30:29] Jeffrey Rosen: Superb. So exciting to hear all of that. Melody Barnes, we had the most wonderful discussion last night about the liberal idea, and we talked about liberty, equality, and democracy. We might add to the American idea or the liberal idea, the pursuit of happiness. You are at UVA Thomas Jefferson's University. His legacy is contested about many things. How would you describe what the pursuit of happiness meant at the founding and what the big debates over it were and remain?

[00:31:05] Melody Barnes: Well, first of all, I want to congratulate you for this book. I mean, you all would expect someone sitting here to say something like that, but I mean that very deeply and sincerely. It is an engrossing book. And the stories that you tell as you work your way through the list of virtues are thoroughly engaging. So thank you for this contribution. Yes, I am at the University of Virginia. I also sit on the board of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation and have spent quite a bit of time thinking about and engaging with Jefferson and thinking about and engaging with the questions that were at hand during that point in time.

[00:31:49] Melody Barnes: And it's really, it's interesting, and it's something that certainly comes out in your book as well, when you think about if you fast-forward to the period when the founders, many of them were reaching the end of their life, the things that they were concerned about as they had spent most of their life developing self-government setting out the ideals and the values for the country, this idea of virtue both personal self-government as well as public self-government that they believe was absolutely necessary, for the reasons you described during your book talk, that in, if we were going to move forward as a country, we have to put aside our selfish short term short term selfishness for long-term pursuits.

[00:32:38] Melody Barnes: And the ability to exercise and move forward in those values in a way that would allow the nation to move forward was absolutely critical. By the end of their lives, they were concerned that the nation that they had helped create was in fact not, maybe not going to survive. And for Jefferson, he was concerned very deeply concerned about the geographic disputes and this dispute around slavery. And certainly, if you are at the University of Virginia, if you come to Monticello, and if you haven't, I encourage you to be there. You find yourself in a place where you have to grapple with and think what it was like to be Jefferson walking those grounds, walking through Mulberry Row having owned over the period of his life, 607 people, and the things that you describe in your book.

[00:33:33] Melody Barnes: You've got Adams who is deeply concerned about virtue. Do we have enough civic virtue in our country to sustain what we have created? Does the population have that kind of self-control? And they've got Washington who's worried about partisan faction. Hamilton, who's worried about whether or not the federal government is robust. And I think when you look at the things that they were concerned about at that time, an answer to your question, it's also mirrored in the kinds of things that we are deeply concerned about today. And I think we are having a conversation with those same concerns at this moment. The history and the legacy as a result of the regional conflict, that was, that was slavery a debate about, and we talked about it some last night, about the role of the federal government in our lives and the way that that plays out, certainly the partisan faction.

[00:34:34] Melody Barnes: And whether or not we can take the time to move beyond the reflexive reaction to problems to really grapple with what the long-term implications are going to be. And do we have the health in our body politics that is a result of civic virtue to grapple with these problems in a way that allows our country to move forward? I think those are the questions they were thinking about then. Those are the questions that we are still grappling with today. And that long-term civic health question, the body politic, it is no mistake that we described this in physical terms is not healthy.

[00:35:22] Melody Barnes: So what are the habits? How do we exercise the muscles? What can we learn from this period and from the other philosophers and intellectuals of this day and the days that followed so that we can establish those muscles so that we can build them, and so that our nation is healthier, that our nation is able to survive?

[00:35:47] Jeffrey Rosen: Oh, that was beautiful. That was so well expressed. I'm just gonna repeat it 'cause I wanna add that to our discussion of the American idea, but you said that the founders are hopeful that people can achieve virtue, which they described as long-term thinking, sacrificing short-term impulses and gratification for long-term interest. But then, at the end of their lives, they weren't sure whether the experiment would succeed, and they disagreed about whether citizens could find the necessary virtue and also what role government should play in that. And that's exactly the proposition that's being tested today. So true.

[00:36:23] Jeffrey Rosen: George Will thank you so much for being here. You have written several books about the pursuit of happiness. So you wrote a book in 1979 called The Pursuit of Happiness: And Other Sobering Thoughts. You wrote, more recently, you've written Happiness in its Discontent. And in your great recent book, the Conservative Sensibility, you argued that America was the only country founded on the proposition of public happiness. But you noted disagreement from the time of the founding among Hamilton and Jefferson about what role, if any, government should play in making it possible for citizens to achieve the virtue necessary for the republican experiment. Please discuss.

[00:37:06] George Will: Well, an example of Jefferson helping government not legislate morality, but promote morality, was his greatest act, which was the Louisiana Purchase, was to get all this land so that they could have all those small farmers who, by their daily rhythms of life, would have the virtues he thought necessary. Whereas, his adversary, Alexander Hamilton, also agreed that it was the job of the government to promote a system which created certain virtues. He just had different virtues in mind. It seems to me the reason we are having the same arguments that they had in Pericles' Athens today in Joe Biden's America is that the political problem always and everywhere is the same.

[00:37:52] George Will: Human beings are opinionated and egotistical. They prefer their opinions. The question is how to get these people to live together. Well, if you live in Pericles' Athens, someplace you can walk across in a day a face-to-face society, then perhaps you can have a homogenized community without the plague of faction and more or less a consensus about the great questions of life. If so, then you can approach politics as the ancients did, define the best and the most noble and pursue it. Well, 25 centuries later, we've seen how awful things can get.

[00:38:31] George Will: And beginning with Machiavelli and then Hobbes and then Locke, the modern said, "We have a better idea. Let's define the worst and avoid it." Hence, the Madisonian revolution and political philosophy, beginning with Federalist 10, hither to the few people who had believed that democracy was either possible or a good idea, believed that it, it had to be in a small face-to-face society because factions were the enemy of democracy, and, therefore, a homogenized small society could be Democratic.

[00:39:06] George Will: Madison, who famously said that if every Athenian were Socrates, the Athenian assembly would still be a mob, was less sanguine about this. And he said, "No, we have a catechism. What is the worst outcome of politics? Tyranny. To what form of tyranny is a democracy? Prey tyranny of the majority. Solution, don't have majorities." That is don't have stable tyrannical majorities. Have majorities that are unstable, shifting coalitions of minorities.

[00:39:40] George Will: And the way to do that is to have an extensive republic bringing in a vast number of, of factions, and to understand that the first duty of government is to protect the different and unequal capacities of acquiring property, so that you will have this saving

multiplicity of factions which will prevent the worst, which is tyranny. Well, I think Jeff's book, which you're all going to read before the quiz tomorrow morning.

[00:40:12] George Will: Jeff's book, I think Jeff's opinion is that the framers took civic virtue to use your modifier, not just virtue, but civic virtue more seriously and hopefully than I think they did. I think they go to the other greatest, the second of the two greatest Federalist papers to Federalist 51, where Madison said, "You'll see throughout, throughout our system the process of supplying by opposite and rival interests the defect of better motives." Good motives are fine, virtue is excellent, but don't count on either of them. We want to have a safe policy almost that will work without anyone having good motives, won't work ideally, better to have good motives. But I think the framers had a hierarchy of virtues. They wanted virtues in the statesman, in the greatest understatement in the history of political rhetoric. In Federalist 10, Madison said, "Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm."

[00:41:24] George Will: Turns out to be true. But they thought there, there would be ways of filter, sort of trickle up virtue, and that you could get in a minority of the really virtuous, and then you would count on the virtue that Harvey Mansfield says, the virtue of acknowledging and recognizing virtue, that's what they wanted from the mass of people. They wanted the mass of people to recognize virtues, which would necessarily be rare in a necessarily few people. This is of course, an aristocratic-leavening of our democracy. But then, as Harvey Mansfield likes to point out, an election is an inherently aristocratic premise, which is that some people are better at things than others, and, therefore elections are preferable to lotteries because elections at least give you a chance of rewarding merit and recognizing excellence and nobility. So, since we've always in this country talked about virtue, but basically it has been the virtue of either of the yeoman farmer, populating the American West, or the crackling energy that, that the immigrants, the immigrant child, Alexander Hamilton wanted, the anti-federalists opposed the Constitution for exactly the same reason Hamilton supported it.

[00:42:57] George Will: They said, "You're gonna get a big government of this energetic, restless, muscular economy, and we don't like it. We want a more intimate government." Madison, in this case, agreeing with Hamilton said, "We don't want an intimate relationship with our government. We want the government to be doing big things as an umbrella over this energetic people." In that sense, the anti-Federalists and the Federalists agreed, they just disagreed about whether they wanted what this government was going to achieve. So we have always been talking about very little other than virtue. We often do it, however, in a disguised vocabulary, the vocabulary of what used to be called and should be called again, the subject of political economy.

[00:43:50] Jeffrey Rosen: So, you're so powerfully teach us that all sides at the founding are converged around liberating people to achieve virtuous self-mastery and happiness. But they disagree, as you said, about human nature and about the role of the government in accommodating. And you argue that Hamilton and Hamiltonians wanted a strong national

government to unleash national energy so that commerce could promote habits of politeness and civility, and the Jeffersonians, who are much more idealistic about democracy on a small scale in human nature, want a night watchman state so that agrarian shires and farmers are able to thrive.

[00:44:36] Jeffrey Rosen: Eric, I wanna ask you about the relation among the founders, different conceptions of human nature, democracy, and, and happiness. So let's try this version. The Hamiltonians think humans are fallen. They fear and the board democracy is the greatest danger, and they want a strong national government and a strong executive to resist populist pressures in order to allow the commerce and energy that will allow all to thrive. Jefferson's so idealistic about human nature, dreaming of the perfectibility of man, and imagining these small shires of self-governing farmers, wants a night watchman state and is really optimistic that these little communities will be virtuous.

[00:45:24] Jeffrey Rosen: And Madison, always the moderate, expects less of government, views the Constitution as a means of contestation, a place for people to productively disagree. But he, at the end of his life, learns about the importance of public opinion, and thinks that as long as public opinion can be educated by a new media technology, the broadside press, people will read the federalist papers and discuss them in coffee houses. And reason will slowly diffuse across the land, and that will ensure the long term thinking that Melody said was the key to virtue.

[00:45:59] Jeffrey Rosen: Have I got that right? And you teach the relationship between the founder's visions of human nature and what they expected of virtue. Help us understand that.

[00:46:08] Eric Slauter: Yeah. I mean, I think we heard last night from Charlie that the US Constitution incorporates human nature. And I think that's probably true. It incorporates one idea of what human nature was, but the question of what human nature was, was one of the great philosophical questions of the 18th century, 17th century as well. Locke's great essay on human understanding is a work about human nature. David Hume's first book is called A Treatise of Human Nature. It's one of the great questions that is animating philosophers across this period.

[00:46:49] Eric Slauter: We see it in big and small ways in the constitutional debates and in the period of the American Revolution. Everywhere from the nature of bicameralism, right? That bicameralism is preferable because, and should have different term lengths, because the house is always going to be hot and passionate, and the Senate is always going to be cool and reasonable.

[00:47:26] Eric Slauter: Right? And you're trying to structure that, right? As George was saying enlightenment statesmen are not always going to be at the helm. And part of the project is to find those structures that will reinforce virtue for a population that may not have it. The question of virtue throughout this period is of extremely vexed one, and part of it goes to the, to the way in which Montesquieu, for instance, thinks about human nature. And Montesquieu was writing in the 1730s, '40 and trying to really reconceptualize what political thought is going to look like. It's

not going to be the old style political theory of John Locke and Grotius and so forth, where you are, you have a kind of fiction of the state of nature. We're really looking at a kind of comparative constitutionalism and it's got a philosophic component in so far as he believes each polity has a different kind of spirit, right?

[00:48:25] Eric Slauter: So despotisms and absolute monarchies operate with the passion of fear. It's central to their operation. Aristocrats operate mostly on honor. And republics can only operate with virtuous citizens, right? So you see a constant stream of anxiety about whether or not the population is sufficiently virtuous to, to support a republic in this period. That's why in 17, in the 1780s, Franklin is looking back at the 1720s, and thinking about his own scheme for moral improvement. He's trying to imagine what are the practices that could be useful no matter what denomination of religion you were, or no denomination that might provide sufficient virtue for a population. If, as you say, self-government is largely going to be about the ability to govern one's self, right?

[00:49:27] Eric Slauter: These theories of human nature are up for grabs in this, in this period. But throughout, what you see is what I would call anxiety I mean, we have anxiety now about the nature of our populations. Jeremiah that you ended your book talk with about that we no longer live in a land of readers. I think you see some of that in this period. Think about all of those early Bills of Rights or Declarations of Rights that precede the state constitutions. Almost all of them. Hamilton makes fun of these in Federalist 84. He says they're like aphorisms that might make sense in a treatise of moral philosophy, but they don't belong in a constitution.

[00:50:21] Eric Slauter: And what he means is that, that they're just highly didactic. They're things like Virginians, the freedom of the press is one of the great bulwarks of liberty and can only be restrained by despotic governments. Now, that's not an enforceable provision. That's not Congress shall make no law respecting the freedom of the press. And so the language of all of those early state constitutions, their Bills of Rights were highly moral. They speak the language of ought to rather than shall. So even something like the future eighth Amendment appears not as excessive fines, shall not be imposed, but excessive fines ought not to be imposed. Because they were trying to guide legislators and so forth. I am as you learned, I'm a great collector of pocket constitution, so I was very happy to get a new one this, this, this weekend. And I've spent the last year or so buying them on eBay. What I've learned from that is that, and I mean this as no disrespect to the learned law professors, lawyers, judges, and committee members here. But the Constitution was mostly over time in American history, read by children, I think.

[00:51:47] Eric Slauter: I have some early copies here of examples of, of children's copies of the Constitution. This one from 1787 that was owned by an 8-year-old named Nathaniel Gleason. I mean, imagine the joy of an 8-year-old getting a copy of the Massachusetts Constitution as a present.

[00:52:07] Eric Slauter: We tend to think of the pocket constitution as largely a post Watergate effect. But in fact, Tom Payne is the great theorist of the pocket constitution, 'cause he says in his debate with Edmund Burke, "If you can't pull up a constitution out of your pocket, you don't really have one." And he says in the Philadelphia state legislature, that's exactly what the legislators did. And every family had a copy and, and so forth. So shortly after Shay's rebellion, the printer, Isaiah Thomas sensed there was a market, this was a rebellion that happened, insurrection that shut down courthouses. And that called for radical changes to the state constitution. Isaiah Thomas and Worcester thought, "I see a market here."

[00:52:58] Eric Slauter: Nobody really knows what's in that constitution 'cause it’s not easily available. But if I produce a pocket version then people will know at least if it's good or bad. The printer takes no takes no particular position. But like those other early state constitutions, the Bill of Rights is a highly didactic kind of thing, and you can treat it as something to be catechized about. The Massachusetts government, in 1805, decided to recommend for all public schools, for all common schools, the Constitution, the Declaration, and Washington's farewell address. This copy, as a shout-out to some of the teachers in the room was in the school district Library.

[00:53:44] Eric Slauter: This one, I showed to Shaun earlier because he had mentioned Jackson's nullification proclamation, but it's a copy owned by a young woman named Phoebe Hartnett in the 1830s. And it includes not only the Declaration, the Constitution, and Washington's farewell address, but also Jackson's proclamation against nullification. And why this is important, and why I think it is so important that the Constitution Center focus so much attention on that next generation, it's that the revolutionary generation was extremely worried, very anxious. They were anxious about their, the generation that had been, lived under monarchy and was going to experience a regime change to a republic. And they were worried about how their children were going to continue that revolution and continue that form of government. And I think that anxiety has never really gone away.

[00:54:45] Jeffrey Rosen: It's so moving. It's extraordinarily moving to think of an 8-year-old being given this constitution and, and reading it and, and printers and the entire industry is being devoted to educate the young in the, in the, in the science of politics in the constitution. And we've gotta do it.

[00:55:02] Eric Slauter: Yeah. It's why you have I love the Constitution onesies out there.

[00:55:05] Jeffrey Rosen: Absolutely. And that's the gateway drug to the interactive country. Absolutely. Who could resist? Absolutely. I want just tee up the right question, Melody, because you're so incredibly brilliant in kind of bringing themes together. So the question, I guess, is the evolution of the pursuit of happiness over time, from being good to feeling good, from self mastery to let it all hang out. You do see it throughout the 19th and early 20th century. Frederick Douglass invokes it, toque invokes it, it's invoked by William Walker, all the great abolitionists

and stuff. It does fall out in the popular culture. How would you describe the evolution? Why did it fall out and where is it today?

[00:55:56] Melody Barnes: I'm sorry, why did it fall move from doing good to, to feeling good?

[00:56:01] Jeffrey Rosen: That's a big question, but, before you do that, take us up from the founding to today, and what the evolution of the pursuit of happiness and the American idea.

[00:56:13] Melody Barnes: There's several things that I've been thinking about as I listen to this conversation. I mean, one, and George has talked, was talking about this idea of the small group that was involved in governing, and then we have the expansion of that group over time to include more. But even the masses that were involved were relatively small group. But throughout all of it, there was the idea and the importance that was placed on reasoning and education. We've talked about the fact that I work at UVA, the relationship with Monticello.

[00:56:53] Melody Barnes: UVA, unlike most universities, is not built around a chapel. UVA is built around the rotunda, which was a library. And it is a reflection of this idea of the, the centrality of education, the centrality of reasoning which the founders also believed was absolutely essential to the health of the democracy, the ability to think for yourself.

[00:57:26] Melody Barnes: And we've, we've seen the challenge to education over time, the lack of civic education over time. At some point, it seemed to fall out of favor. We are also now seeing efforts to try and recapture that part of efforts that we are part of with an organization called More Perfect and others to try and reestablish civic education in, in school. But the reason why I bring that up, and I think that that's more so important as we have importantly and necessarily seeing the expansion of those to include more people in our civic life, and voting, and participating is the absolute necessity for people to think for themselves.

[00:58:11] Melody Barnes: And now we are at a moment where civic education is challenged, the educational system is challenged. I know there's going to be a conversation about that tomorrow. And we also have a moment where the way that we receive information over that arc of time has also changed and challenges us. It has brought us benefits, but it also challenges us significantly from the rise of social media. Today, we talked about AI. But the many different ways that people get information and the, the, the important data point that disinformation fact travel six times faster than fact. So we are, we have more people engaged. We have institutions that are not necessarily providing the kind of civic training that's necessary. And we have this influx of information that we are being bombarded with constantly.

[00:59:10] Melody Barnes: And no good way to have dealt with, to deal with that challenge or to be able to sift through that information in a way that people are able to actively think for themselves and reason and all at a time when I think one of the biggest challenges we face is that people feel an existential threat. It shows up for people in lots of different ways, but people feel

who they are, who they are to this country, what this country is, all of those, those things are being threatened and being challenged, and at a time when they're not able to discern and make wise decisions. It doesn't mean that we can't, it doesn't mean that we haven't been through challenging periods before. But I think when we look at that arc, we recognize the challenge that we find ourselves in at this particular moment, and against the backdrop that you've described.

[01:00:14] Jeffrey Rosen: Exactly. That's exactly right. The ability to think for yourself and to reason. That was the definition of the pursuit of happiness, virtuous self-mastery so that you could think for yourself and live according to reason. And that's exactly what's under siege in a world of social media and existential anxiety about identity and a landscape where falsehoods travel further and faster than reason and truth. And, therefore, the goal of the movement must be not only to spark curiosity about the constitution, the declaration, the American idea, in order to empower people to think for themselves and to live according to reason. We're really fighting for the American idea and the liberal idea, we're fighting, as we discussed yesterday, for the enlightenment, faith, and reason.

[01:01:07] Jeffrey Rosen: And it is under siege, not only from our politics, but from technology and from a loss of faith in it. And that's exactly what we're gonna resurrect. All right, George Will, I just send us off into the night at the end of this extraordinary conversation, frame it as, as you think best. There are many questions I'd love to hear you on, including why happiness changed from being good to feeling good. What exactly explains that fundamental cultural shift that transformed our understanding of how to be a good person? How important is it to resurrect it? Do you think our democracy is a machine that can go by itself, or is it important to resurrect some commitment to self-mastery, and is the point of civics? Do we teach knowledge and the habits of deliberation or something more?

[01:01:59] George Will: Harvey Mansfield, I'll quote one more time. Harvey says, "The aim of education is to learn how to praise." Because to learn how to praise is to learn that there are standards, and that they can still be applied to things that are among us. Excellent things. 1981, I gave the godkin lectures at Harvard that became a book read by dozens. One of whom is married to her, what are the odds? I mean, astonishing.

[01:02:35] Melody Barnes: You should hear what happens in our kitchen at home.

[01:02:38] George Will: The title of the book was State Craft as Soul Craft. The subtitle was more important. What government does. Not what government ought to do, but what government cannot help but do, that is whatever regime you have will shape the souls of the citizens. So when you establish a regime, you're saying, "This is what we hope it will impress, we hope it will leave on people." And the economy, that's why it's called political economy, that we have the transactions, the cooperativeness, the commands, whatever, you are necessarily, when you establish a regime, you're establishing an aspiration for the character of people.

[01:03:24] George Will: Which is why our politics always has been full of energy and high stakes because you are arguing about the souls of the citizens at all times. I'm standing between you and nourishment and strong drinks, so I will subside.

[01:03:41] George Will: But it seems to me, Jeffrey, if you wanted or something changed when you're saying, "Well, how did we get here?" It's when we went from free speech. Speech is about someone else. It's about persuasion. It requires patience. That's what democracy requires. We went from free speech to free expression. Expression about you. We went from a kind of other regarding virtue speech to solipsism, expression was inherently good, protecting the expression, nevermind that people have anything worth expressing.

[01:04:21] George Will: It's the sheer expressing of it that matters. I think it doesn't. I'm not a little ray of sunshine at any time. At least of all on the cusp of the difficulties we're having because I think we've gone from speech, which is reasonable, persuasive, and other regarding expression, which is self-absorbed.

[01:04:51] Jeffrey Rosen: I must ask though, 'cause I think that you can provide an answer. Why did that shift occur from speech to expression, from virtue to autonomy? In, in the '60s it was a cultural shift, but it must have been reflecting an awful lot of other shifts. Why did it happen?

[01:05:08] George Will: I think what happened, and this goes all the way back to the 19th century. You can blame Marx, you can blame Hagel for Marx. Nevermind. What happened in the 19th century, and it's live in the third decade of the 21st century, is we decided there really is no such thing as human nature. That we are only people who require, acquire the impress of our particular surroundings, our culture. Once you say that, then the stakes of politics become enormous because politics and culture, everything becomes political because you are deciding with the laws you write, and what you teach in schools, what culture will leave, what impress on people.

[01:06:02] George Will: And when consciousness itself becomes a project, what you get is today. You get the woke and the anti woke arguing with extreme heat, and bitterness. Because what is at stake is the human nature we're going to acquire, not the human nature we have. Whereas, the 30th president, the last one with whom I fully agreed, I refer of course to Coolidge.

[01:06:36] George Will: Coolidge said in his magnificent address on the Declaration of Independence. So that there's a human nature and how restful it's settled. If there are humans, if there are natural rights, rights that are essential to the flourishing of people, of our natures, how settled, how restful it is. When you drop that idea you get today, which is not restful.

[01:07:08] Jeffrey Rosen: For showing us the connection between the declaration, human nature, virtue, happiness, and the future of their public. Please join me in thanking our panelist.

[01:07:31] Jeffrey Rosen: Today's episode was produced by Advanced Staging Productions. Lana Ulrich, Bill Pollock and Samson Mostashari. Was engineered by Advanced Staging Productions and Bill Pollock. Research was provided by Samson Mostashari, Cooper Smith, and Yara Daraiseh. As I mentioned, my new book came out on February 13th. It's The Pursuit of Happiness: How Classical Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America. If you'd like a signed book plate, email your address to me at jrosen@constitutioncenter.org, and I'll put one in the mail. Thanks so much to those listeners who've asked for book plates already, and hope you're finding the book meaningful.

[01:08:08] Jeffrey Rosen: Please recommend the show to friends, colleagues, or anyone anywhere who's eager for a weekly dose of constitutional debate. Sign up for the newsletter at constitutioncenter.org/connect. And always remember that the National Constitution Center is a private nonprofit. Support the mission by becoming a member at constitutioncenter.org/membership, or give a donation of any amount to support our work, including the podcast at constitutioncenter.org/donate. On behalf the National Constitution Center, I'm Jeffrey Rosen.