

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB HEADLINERS BREAKFAST WITH  
JON MEACHAM

SUBJECT: JON MEACHAM WILL DISCUSS HIS LATEST BOOK, *THE SOUL OF AMERICA: THE BATTLE FOR OUR BETTER ANGELS*

MODERATOR: ANDREA EDNEY OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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**ANDREA EDNEY:** Good morning, everyone. Good morning, good morning. Welcome to the National Press Club. I'm Andrea Edney. I am an editor at Bloomberg News, and I am 111<sup>th</sup> President of the National Press Club.

Well, we are so pleased to have with us here today Pulitzer Prize winning biographer, Jon Meacham, to discuss his latest book, *THE SOUL OF AMERICA: THE BATTLE FOR OUR BETTER ANGELS*. Mr. Meacham has a long list of *New York Times* bestsellers, including *THOMAS JEFFERSON: THE ART OF POWER*, *AMERICAN LION: ANDREW JACKSON IN THE WHITE HOUSE*, and *DESTINY AND POWER: THE AMERICAN ODYSSEY OF GEORGE HERBERT WALKER BUSH*. He is also a visiting distinguished professor at Vanderbilt University and was, of course, the former editor-in-chief of *Newsweek Magazine*.

But today, we're talking about *The Soul of America*, in which Jon explains that the partisanship and discord we are seeing in our nation today is, in fact, nothing new. He describes several examples of dark days in America's relatively short history, and reminds us that we have come through such darkness before. We are excited to have him with us, as he shares his insight and perspective. Lots of insight. You heard him. Please join me in welcoming Jon Meacham to the National Press Club.

[applause]

**JON MEACHAM:** Thank you.

**ANDREA EDNEY:** Take a seat. The first part of our program will be moderated by the co-chair of the Press Club’s Headliner Committee, Betsy Fisher-Martin. [applause] Betsy is Executive-in-Residence at American University and the former Executive Producer of Meet the Press. After the presentation is finished, we will open up the floor to questions. Everybody, please enjoy the event today.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Thank you, Andrea. Welcome, everyone. So Jon, you’ve packed a lot into the title of the book. *The Soul of America*—

**JON MEACHAM:** There's no hubris.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** *Battle for the Better Angels.*

**JON MEACHAM:** Right.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Take us through the title and the meaning that it has in relation to what you're writing about.

**JON MEACHAM:** Well, *The Soul* is, in Hebrew and in Greek, means “breath” or “life.” It’s synonymous. So when God breathes life into mankind in Genesis 1, which at this point seems to be a kind of chancy decision, He may be rethinking it, it could be translated as, “He breathed a soul into them.” When Jesus says, “Greater love hath no man than this, than to lay down his life for his friends,” “life” could be “soul.”

And so what I was trying to figure out, as the age of Trump unfolds, and I try not—I try to use the Voldemort principle and not mention his name much—but—

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** But there are some stunning clues throughout the book.

**JON MEACHAM:** It’s called argument by implication, Betsy, you know. So my sense is that people will say, if they disagree with what's going on, and this was true of the right and Obama and everybody else now, they will say, “Well, the country has been taken over. It’s been hijacked. And this is not who we are.” We’ve heard this a lot the last 72 hours, “This is not who we are.”

The hell it’s not who we are, you know. And so the Alien Sedition Act, the removal of Native Americans, the enslavement of an entire race, which required the deaths of three-quarters of a million Americans to adjudicate. Theodore Roosevelt, who Evan Thomas is here, who wrote a terrific book about that class of marvelous statesmen in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but Theodore Roosevelt believed that there were genetic theories of white superiority. He learned them all at Harvard. And while *The Melting Pot*, as a play, was dedicated by Israel Zangwill to T.R., T.R. also believed in race suicide, that if white people didn’t reproduce fast enough, we were going to commit race suicide.

Woodrow Wilson resegregates the federal government, passes the Espionage Act under which 400 newspapers were closed down. Mitchell Palmer, the Attorney General under Wilson, makes Jeff Sessions look like Oliver Wendell Holmes, you know. There was a bombing at his house on R Street. He lived across the street from FDR when he was Assistant Secretary of the Navy. And an anarchist had targeted the Attorney General's house. And guess what? The anarchist didn't plan very well. Go figure. And so it was like, best restaurant and a hospital, good anarchal play, you know, anarchist plan. And he blew himself up. But he blew the windows out of the house, and it enraged Palmer. And so they launched a, you know, warrantless raids against dissidents.

Obviously, we're having the conversation now about the border. Franklin Roosevelt, who saved Democratic capitalism, and arguably, with Winston Churchill, the idea of individual liberty, also issued Executive Order 9066 in 1942 on Japanese American internment. Now really, it's American Japanese, because they were actually citizens. And one of my favorite details to mention to people is, FDR did that on the advice of the Attorney General of the State of California. You all remember who that was in 1942? Earl Warren.

So Earl Warren was for interning the Japanese. And if you want to look at the soul of the country, which has both light and dark, Earl Warren is a pretty good place to start. He got something horribly wrong, but then he got something really right. And to me, that's the soul of the country, it's this tension between our best instincts and our worst instincts.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** The idea for the book came from, out of Charlottesville, right?

**JON MEACHAM:** Yep.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** I mean you've written a lot of these other books. And you've probably marinated over them for a while. But a lightbulb went off. You got a phone call. Tell us the story about how you came up with the—

**JON MEACHAM:** Yeah, I was minding my own business. [laughter] And Nancy Gibbs, the great editor of *Time Magazine* at the time, called on a Sunday afternoon, after the violence in Charlottesville, and said, "Do you have something to say?" And I grew up on Missionary Ridge, Civil War battlefield, in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Used to find Minié balls in our yard. So to me, history had always been quite tactile. If it weren't for Tennesseans winning the battle of New Orleans, Betsey would have grown up in a French colony. So I think it's important for her to thank me. [laughter]

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Thank you, Mr. Meacham.

**JON MEACHAM:** Which I don't think she doesn't know. [laughter] And so yes, I had plenty to say, I thought. So I looked back at four or five moments that had felt like this. And it kicked around. I got two questions a lot from people. One is, has it ever been like this? And the answer is, sort of. And the other is, how do we get out of it? And I got those enough that I thought there was something to say here.

The reason I did it is I think, if you make a historically-based argument, you widen your aperture of possible effectiveness, because conservatives should appreciate that you're arguing from the founding, you're arguing from the beginning, from tradition, you know, the Edmund Burke idea that society is a compact between the dead, the living, and the generations yet unborn. And, if you're arguing from data and experience, the left should be open to that, because you're not being theoretical, you're actually saying, "This is what we have found."

And so what I wanted to do was make the argument that, not that we've been through this before, so therefore, let's relax, it's that we've been through this before. Try not to set your hair on fire twice a day. [laughter] Once is fine.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Yeah.

**JON MEACHAM:** And try to figure out, what were the lessons from those moments that created—and I think this is important, particularly this week to say, what is our immigration issue? It's that people want to come here. So we're getting something right, for all the angst, for all the anxiety. There is a core value, the proposition of the country, that if you play by the rules, if you guarantee fair play for others, you'll get it for yourself, and that everyone has, as Lincoln put it, the right to rise.

And so I'm fundamentally an optimist, because, as Winston Churchill once said, you can always count on the Americans to do the right thing after we've exhausted every other possibility. [laughter]

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** So you mentioned immigration. How does Trump's posture in this, how does that, to you, sort of underscore what you've observed so far about him and his Presidency?

**JON MEACHAM:** Well, he's an identity politician, insofar as there's any coherence. You know, he's not an ideologue, particularly. He says ideological things. But it's not as though, you know, Ronald Reagan spent decades—Reagan didn't like to fly. And so when he was on the road for GE in the '50s, he had hour upon hour upon hour of train time. And so he read, you know, *Atlas Shrugged* and all the great conservative texts, Russell Burke. And that was a real ideology. Trump, I don't think, has that particularly. I think he's about Trump. There's an animating narcissism that, we're at the National Press Club, I don't know many reporters who are immune to narcissism. I'm sure everyone here is. But there may be some others. Man, he makes all of us look like Franciscans. I mean it's just incredible. So everything's a matter of context.

You know, these things happen. Did he know this was going to happen? Probably not. I don't know, maybe Sessions told him. I don't think they're spending a lot of time together.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Right.

**JON MEACHAM:** And so, but it emerges, in this ecosystem in which he lives, which is a lot like the ecosystem which all of us live in, I don't think that's a very reassuring thing. You know, I'd rather have the President thinking about things I'm not thinking about. But we have replaced the brain trust and the new frontier with Fox and Friends. So in that climate, it's reached a point where he now thinks that—from what I can tell—that to admit any mistake, to fix this at all, creates an impression that he was wrong. And like a lot of bullies, like a lot of narcissists, that's just not something in his imaginative capacity.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** You write about how someone else in history dealt with a narcissistic leader, Martin Luther King and George Wallace. Tell us that story.

**JON MEACHAM:** Yeah. Oh, well King—Another way to think about the soul, quickly, is the soul of the country has room for the Klan and for Dr. King. And that's the struggle. And when King—So King is basically, while a man of destiny, he was also, like a lot of history, contingent. So one of the reasons Dr. King became Dr. King is the Dexter Avenue Church in Montgomery was close to downtown. And the organizers of the boycott wanted everybody to be able to either walk or drive quickly, because they weren't—guess what. They weren't riding the buses.

So Dexter was a good place. So E.D. Nixon, the head of the NAACP in Montgomery, calls him and says, “Can we have this meeting here?” King says, “Yes.” And King admitted, before the meeting, “I really am a little anxious about this. But it's in my church. I have to go.” And from that, it's like the wing of a butterfly that creates a hurricane.

So cut to 1965, the March 7<sup>th</sup> is Sunday. John Lewis and Hosea Williams are leading the march to Montgomery. They're going across the Pettis Bridge. Sheriff Jim Clark and his posse men, that's a technical southern term, come across, you know. The images go to New York. They had to fly the tape. So it gets to New York, just in time for ABC. Frank Reynolds broke into the broadcast premiere of Judgment at Nuremberg on that Sunday night. That's how the country learned about Bloody Sunday. And so people were watching Spencer Tracy, you know, being a judge, looking at what Nazis have done. And then suddenly, these Alabama troopers appear to be the same thing. So it had an electrifying effect.

President Johnson took eight days to bring every—as he always would do—bring everyone under his control as best he could. And so he forced King to follow the federal orders. But he also summonsed George Wallace to the Oval Office, and wonderfully, a classic Lyndon Johnson story, you know, he'd gotten deeper cushions on the couches in the Oval Office, and taken Kennedy's rocking chair and made it slightly taller. You know, Johnson was a big guy anyway.

So poor little George Wallace, who's about this big, you know—So is Sessions. I don't know what's going on in Alabama. It must be a malnutrition. You've got to feed them better. But so Wallace sinks down like this. And Johnson is looming over.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Towering.

**JON MEACHAM:** And he says, “George, when you die, do you want your tombstone to say, ‘George Wallace, he built’? or ‘George Wallace, he hated’?” And as Wallace put it, by the end of it, basically he was almost running the NAACP. He just gave up, you know. “Whatever you want, Mr. President.” And I think Johnson and Truman are two of the great examples of people who really did grow and change in the office. You wouldn’t have bet five dollars that either one of them would have done what they did on issues of race before they became President. But somehow or another, the fact of their national elevation or election created a sense of broadmindedness about their authority, that I think we’re missing now.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** So about the evolution, if you were going to try to convince President Trump to change some of his ways, how would you go about doing that?

**JON MEACHAM:** Well, I might try to go into theoretical physics instead, because that would be more likely to be effective for me. I would appeal to his narcissism. I would say, if I had three minutes with him, I would say, “Mr. President, we know you care about success. We know you care about ratings. History is forever.” And I’d walk him to the State floor, and I’d say, “That’s where your portrait’s going to be. It’s going to replace the Obama one when it’s there. And you’re going to move around as things go. And what do you want us to think about when we look at your portrait?” And I think it will work, because he will probably not be able to imagine a world where we would not look at his portrait. You know, that seems like a natural thing we’d be doing. And history is forever.

And so the Presidents we remember fondly, the Presidents we want to emulate, and the Presidents we commemorate, are the ones who reach beyond their base. And that’s not a partisan point, it’s just historically accurate. President Reagan is rightly venerated. But here’s this right wing guy who, when he ran for President in 1980, he described himself as, “I know that the left thinks I’m a combination of Ebenezer Scrooge and the Mad Bomber.” And what does he do? He comes in. And his first press conference in the Briefing Room, he says, “The Soviet Union reserves under itself the right to lie, to cheat. They seek world domination.” And then, by the spring of 1988, he’s literally in Red Square playing with babies, literally. So, you know, he used his Screen Actor Guild skills to negotiate an amazing resolution. And he would not be remembered as fondly if he had not reached beyond that base.

Absolutely the same with Nixon. What’s the one thing we say about Nixon? Went to China. You know, the red-baiting, HUAC congressman, opens up China. And it’s the one great, to be sure, in Richard Nixon’s career. So you know, if you laid out these examples, I don’t know that he would listen very long.

I spent an hour and a half with Trump in May of ’16. Went to Trump Tower. I was on assignment for *Time*. My assignment was to find out what he was reading. It was not a long interview.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** That was a quick conversation.

**JON MEACHAM:** I could have kept the cab. And let me tell you a quick story. And so I wrote a book about Andrew Jackson about 10 years ago or so. And Jackson never came up in this conversation. And what Secretary Clinton would have done in the same situation, is she would have said, “Oh, I read your book on X, and it changed my view on Y forever.” And she’d be lying, and I would know she would be lying. But it would be this kind of nice establishmentarian fiction.

He had no interest in that. He said, “I insist on things,” this is a compliment. He said, “I never read any of your books, but you’re great on TV.” So I appreciate that. So that was good. But anyway, so then, after the election, the man I now refer to as the late Steve Bannon, introduces the Jackson analogy. And cut to May of ’17, March of 2017, Trump is coming down to Nashville where I live, to lay a wreath at the grave of Jackson, 250<sup>th</sup> birthday of Andrew Jackson.

And I’m sitting at home, and I’m thinking, I should probably do something. So I decided to write an open letter to the President, saying, “If you’re going to embrace Andrew Jackson, don’t just embrace the crazy parts.” And there are plenty of crazy parts to embrace, right. Jackson one said, there’s only two regrets in public life, that he had not hung Henry Clay, the Speaker of the House, and shot John C. Calhoun, his own Vice-President. We now know that no one felt that way about their running mate until John McCain. [laughter]

But anyway, so—But my view of Jackson is that he believed in the Union. He believed we were one great family. He gave us 30 additional years to form what Lincoln would call the “Mystic Chords of Memory.” He understood his vices, he made them into virtues. He was a good negotiator.

So I write this letter. “Welcome, Mr. President. But here is the Jackson I think you should model yourself after.” Had no effect whatever, of course. Local newspaper ran it. It was the entire front page of the paper, actually. But parenthetically. So the next day I’m walking into lunch, and my phone rings. And it’s George H. W. Bush. And so the President spent a lot of last winter in the hospital. And his staff gave him this piece. And he read it. And so he called up, and he said, “How are you doing?” I said, “I’m fine, Mr. President.” As Dana Carvey once said, the key to doing President Bush’s voice is Mr. Rogers trying to be John Wayne. [laughter]

I said, “I’m fine, sir. How are you?” He said, “I’m fine.” He said, “I read your letter to Jackson.” But ooh, you know, the old boy is losing it, right, if he thinks I’m writing letters to dead people. And I said, “Thank you, sir. Thanks for calling. You know, actually, it was a letter to Trump about Jackson.” And he said, “Yeah, but Jackson will pay more attention.” [laughter] So he’s fine. I’m sure that was responsive in some way. [laughter]

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** You mentioned lies earlier. The headline in the *Post* today, “President Trump seems to be saying more and more things that just aren’t true.” Is there any sort of historical precedent to this indifference to the truth that we’re seeing?

**JON MEACHAM:** No. I mean yes and no. We all, you know, in terms of a public persistent numerical situation, no. You know, you sort of—You could step back and say, if I were a Trump supporter, what I might step back and say is, “Okay, he uses hyperbole. He sort of rolls around. You know, he’s like Archie Bunker in the bar. But you know what? Lyndon Johnson lied about Vietnam. Richard Nixon lied about damn near everything. Bill Clinton did whatever.” So I can see making a case about it. But in terms of the actual volume, and one of the things I’m curious about, and we just don’t know, is to what extent does he believe what he says?

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Is it tactical?

**JON MEACHAM:** Is it tactical? Or is it just, is he just wrong?

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Yeah.

**JON MEACHAM:** And what I keep hearing is that, you know, the staff started out giving him three pages as a memo, and that didn’t work. So they went to one page. And then they went to half a page. And now it’s half a page with graphics. Literally. So I don’t know. And that’s troubling. Largely because one of the reasons he’s President, I think, is because of the number 17 percent. That’s the percentage of Americans who say they trust the federal government to do the right thing some or most of the time, 17 percent. That’s down from 77 percent in 1965. So we’ve lost 60 points over two generations. Fewer than one in five believe the government in a period where three out of four used to. And so I think that this trust deficit is this anxiety about institutions, is only getting worse.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Since we’re here at the Press Club, I did want to get some of your thoughts kind of on the role of the press in bringing awareness to issues or problems and being able to influence leaders.

**JON MEACHAM:** You know, it’s at once a golden era and a dark time. And so I think it’s totally legitimate to say he lies or he makes it up, because the role, as Ben Bradley taught us, is to follow the truth wherever it takes you. And you know, we had this debate about McCarthy. Joe McCarthy gave his Wheeling, West Virginia speech on Lincoln’s birthday in 1950, 205 communists in the Department of State. Number wandered down to 57. He never actually found any. There were communists in the government, but Truman had gotten most of them before McCarthy came along. And McCarthy’s insight was that anticommunism would take him from the back benches to the center of the national consciousness.

And Roy Cohn, who wrote a really good book about McCarthy, and published it in 1968, said that McCarthy had bought anticommunism the way other people might buy a car. And so he just, he was a total opportunist on this. And the press had a huge debate about it. McCarthy understood the rhythms of the media. He basically made most of his announcements at 11:30 a.m. and 11:30 p.m. And I don’t need to tell this audience why. You know, the afternoon newspapers’ deadline was noon. And the morning newspapers’ deadline



was midnight. And so he would make an extravagant claim. They didn't have time to check it. But a United States Senator had just made an extravagant claim. So it was news.

There was a man out in Denver named Paul Murhoit, who ran the Denver papers, who actually led a battle to say, "Just because someone powerful says something doesn't mean it's news if it's not true." And there was a huge struggle about this, in the way we sort of had one, I think more than a year ago now. I love—I spend a lot of time in airports. And to me, it's hilarious. Sometimes you'll get on a plane, and the CNN caption will be, you know, "Trump says XYZ. It's not true." And then often, if you're changing planes, it'll be a whole different subject that's still not true going on. I think that's useful and legitimate.

And you know, the traditional explanation here is we're balkanized, you know. If you watch Fox, you're on one planet. I didn't say this first, but I think it's one of the great lines of the era. Someone said they hope Hillary Clinton watches Fox, because it's the only place in America where she's the President, which is a great line. [laughter] And the same with [00:25:17]. So on the other side is CNN. But that's a return, really, you know, a neutral press, was a 20<sup>th</sup> Century exception to the rule of a partisan press.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** And you write about how McCarthy was able to sort of take advantage of this new medium of television, in a way that I think it could be comparable to Trump and Twitter.

**JON MEACHAM:** Absolutely. And here's something I think is possible. Television helped make McCarthy. It also helped bring him down.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** But it took a while.

**JON MEACHAM:** Four years. Yeah, 40—almost 53 months. There were something like five million televisions in 1950 in American homes. In 1954, when McCarthy was censured, there were 30 million. So he rode this up. And then, the Darby-McCarthy hearings were so disastrous, people watched it and realized they didn't want this sweaty guy representing them in this cause.

And Cohn's view was that, simply that the people got tired of the show. And that FDR once said, "There's something in the human consciousness, that need, that cannot stand having the highest note in the register played again and again." Now we're testing that in a significant way now. It's exhausting. I've tried to go on the wagon a couple of times, and I fall off by about 10 a.m. I just can't, I can't help it.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Our friend Anita McBride is here, Laura Bush's former Chief of Staff. So I wanted to ask you about the role of the first ladies and their influence over Presidents. You called, said Eleanor Roosevelt was, in many ways, the conscience of the White House.

**JON MEACHAM:** She was.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Can you talk about that? And Abigail Adams?

**JON MEACHAM:** Yeah. And Laura Bush has had a remarkable week this week. I think that's a landmark piece, and I think crystallized a lot of—a lot of what a lot of people were thinking. It's a reminder, too, of how important it is to be a shrewd steward of one's political capital.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Yeah, picking your battles.

**JON MEACHAM:** Yeah. You know. And I can't remember Mrs. Bush doing this, right, except for the girls' education.

\_\_: [off microphone]

**JON MEACHAM:** Yeah. No, she shares that with her mother-in-law. [laughter]

\_\_: [off microphone.

**JON MEACHAM:** Her mother-in-law was a woman of many words, and tough. And I must say, I had—this whole week with the first ladies coming, I kept thinking, how wonderful it would have been to hear how Barbara Bush framed this.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Yeah.

**JON MEACHAM:** It would have just been fabulous. Because Mrs. Bush, who never had much of a filter, it totally gave way in her 80s and 90s. Yeah. I mean Abigail Adams wrote a letter to John Adams in March of 1776 saying, "Remember the ladies as you form this government." And it took us until 1920 to do so. Mrs. Roosevelt was arguably the most important first lady, I think, in the history of the country. Not least because of what she did in the White House, but also what she did afterward. And Eleanor Roosevelt was—I've always thought of her as somewhat like what Lionel Trilling said about Fanny in *Mansfield Park* in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, that an evening with Fanny would not be undertaken lightly. I mean I don't think Mrs. Roosevelt would have been fun to go sing karaoke with. But she was—history has proven her right on everything she fought for, whether it was anti-lynching, or Jim Crow, or refugees. And she was against internment, all the way through the human rights world.

So they can be hugely important. Mrs. Johnson was hugely important. And often, it's mysterious, you know. Anthony Trollop had a particularly tense moment in a narrative about the Bishop of Baychester and his overbearing wife. Said that, "There are some scenes that no historian and no novelist should ever try to recreate. And that is when a wife truly tells her husband what she thinks." And so I think a lot of it is mysterious. But unquestionably vital.

And that's the great thing about biography and history, is—I mean think about it. We're all products of our environment. We're both prisoners of our experience, but also it matters enormously who we spend our time with. It shapes how we view the world.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Before we open it up to your questions, I want to end with a question that you pose in the book. You write, “How, in an honor of anxiety about the future of the country, at a time when the President of the United States appears determined to undermine the rule of law, a free press, and the sense of hope essential to American life, can those with deep concerns about the nation’s future enlist on the side of the angels?”

**JON MEACHAM:** Well, I think, as I say, we’ve been in these moments before. A half century ago, if we had been sitting here, in 1968, we would have been just about three years from having truly undone explicit apartheid in my native region. Forty-six American servicemen would have died in Vietnam. Not wounded, died, today. That was the daily casualty rate. We would have just buried Senator Kennedy, just buried Dr. King. We’re heading into Chicago and the Democratic National Convention. The year had begun with TET. And I’d rather be dealing with Twitter than TET, to be honest.

And so I think that we endure. I think we continue to have conversations like this as similar and same-y as they can seem sometimes. We have reached a place in the life of the country that is worth defending and preserving, because so many people were willing to endure so that they might one day prevail. Social change doesn’t come quickly. We’re at the third anniversary of the marriage equality decision. And, you know, one of the social science things to say is, “Oh, you know, opinion on gay marriage has moved so quickly.” I’ve never heard a single gay person say that, you know. Boring heterosexuals like me say that. And you go, “Oh, well the data says.” Three years.

Women have not yet voted for 100 years. It’s still a very young country. And it’s a tender flower. There’s a reason democracies haven’t lasted. And so it’s a real struggle. But I think the past suggests that, if we keep our eye on the ball, we’ll be okay.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Okay, time for some questions. Lindsay has a microphone. And Andrea too.

**Q:** Yes. Gill Kline. And I wondered. The origins of the conservative disbelief in the news media, where did that come from? I think goes back to the Civil Rights Movement, where the national press went south and upset the order that white people liked.

**JON MEACHAM:** Yeah, that’s a good place to start. I also think it has to do with McCarthy. You know, movement conservatism, Bill Rusher, the publisher of the *National Review*, said that basically, movement conservatism developed in response to Eisenhower’s failure to genuinely dismantle the Fair Deal and the New Deal. And so there was this reaction to what was seen as a liberal establishment. Also created the John Birch Society, which Eisenhower was a figure. So it was a kind of, it was an elitist argument, as opposed to a partisan one. And I think the press had a lot to do with that.

The other thing about—which is one of the reasons I’m hesitant to say that I think that the cable news world is going to ruin us—is we had that version of reality in afternoon and morning newspapers. The town I grew up in had a morning and afternoon paper. The

morning paper was owned by the family of the *New York Times*. It was Adolf Och's first paper. And the afternoon paper was somewhat to the right of Roy Cohn. And it was just these two different—you were on two different planets. And it was true in other cities in my state.

So you've been able to pick your news before this. And so I think that there is a distrust of the other guy's media. But yours, you think, they're telling the truth. But the Civil Rights thing is an interesting point. It also has to do with Vietnam. Seemed unpatriotic.

**Q:** Rick Pullen, *Leaders Edge Magazine*. Margaret Sullivan in the *Post* the other day wrote a column in which she said, "Journalists should create a journalism sandwich, in which you talk about the issue. Then you talk about what Trump said. And then you fact-check it." She says that, "The problem with the press today, is we're immediately saying what Trump says in the headlines, and promoting it." And I was just wondering how you felt about her opinion.

**JON MEACHAM:** So what's the first piece of bread?

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** What he said.

**Q:** The general issue of whatever it is Trump is talking about, and not the lie, possibly that Trump has said.

**JON MEACHAM:** Yeah. Sure. I think that a lot of this has to do with—and it puts the burden on the copy desk—So much of this has to do with the headline. And particularly in social media age, where a lot of the people that we think are reading our ninth paragraph that we spent so much time on, our mothers aren't reading our ninth paragraph anymore. [laughter] So the headline is so critical. It always has been. But now, in particular, because most people are spinning past it so fast.

I think we should—I think the fact-checking—I mean we used to just call that reporting, right. I mean I don't think we have to tie ourselves into big knots about this. If a public official says something that's demonstrably untrue, you write that it's demonstrably untrue. And I guess people think that, if you say someone's lying, it makes you appear partisan somehow. But I don't really—I don't agree with that. Anything else? Anita has a question, so it's going to be tough.

**Q:** Professor Meacham, Paige Canfield, mother of a 26 year old. How do you encourage your students to stay optimistic, when they're coming into the political world as it is now? Any great ideas?

**JON MEACHAM:** Yeah. I think you make historical arguments. You say, you know, that—And of course for them, you know, like George H. W. Bush is like U.S. Grant. I mean they don't have any idea. So that's fun. You know, you can sort of—For them it's all of the Peloponnesian War, if it happened before Clinton. And I think you just say, you make the argument that they live in a world where identity is fluid. And what I think is going on—

this is not an original point by any means—But to some extent, the Trump election is, in my view, either a last gasp or damn near it, for a white male dominated America.

And this is, what I'm about to say is not partisan, I promise. But I would bet a lot of money that if we were sitting here in 2038, the country is going to look and feel a lot more like Barack Obama's America than Donald Trump's. Demography is destiny. And so what I would argue to the young people I teach, and what I do argue to them, is their world was created by voices of the powerless, far from the corridors of power, who sacrificed enormously, in order to create a more perfect union. And the reaction to that has been extreme. But I think President Obama, for instance, who understood all of this at an intuitive level, because he came from so many different worlds, you will ultimately make more progress; you will ultimately shed more light if you avoid demonizing the other side.

I'm on a big kick about the following. The great thing about—particularly to conservatives. The great thing about the American Revolution is—and you got to love when that's thrown at you at breakfast, that phrase—[laughter]—And another thing, Patrick Henry—So I apologize. But you're here, so—[laughter] You have 12 step programs downstairs for dorkiness? So I'm on step seven.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** You haven't quoted any apostles yet.

**JON MEACHAM:** I haven't yet.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** That's coming.

**JON MEACHAM:** Oh that's good.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Because usually, that's your thing.

**JON MEACHAM:** That's true. I mentioned—No, no, I talked about Jesus.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Yeah, true. [laughter]

**JON MEACHAM:** I didn't quote the staff, I quoted the principal. [laughter] That great line. As Jesus to the preacher said—As Jesus said, and rightly—The American Revolution is the great political manifestation of the argument that reason should have an equal standing with passion in the arena, right. So what was—What was going on in the three centuries leading into Jefferson writing what became the most important sentence in the English language, that all men were created equal. And when you make a claim like that, most important thing written in the language, I'm always cognizant of the great story about the Texas school board candidate who he was fighting Spanish in the schools and said, "If English was good enough for our Lord Jesus Christ, it's good enough for me." [laughter] So always keep that in mind.

But all men were created equal is, in fact, I think, the most important sentence. And so what led Jefferson to write that? Well you have to go—I think there's a 300 year drama

there. Gutenberg publishes the first Bible in 1455. So the democratiza—The printing press, the democratization of information, the flow of power from the hands of the few to the hands of the many, starts with Gutenberg. Scientific revolution. European enlightenment. Scottish moral enlightenment. Translation of scripture. Reformations. An entire reorientation of the world, from being seen as vertical, where popes and princes and prelates and kings had authority over all of us, to a more horizontal understanding, where we were all born with the capacity to determine our own destinies. And that shift, I think, is the most important thing that happened in western life since Constantine converted to Christianity. It's that vital.

What's going on right now, what's in your pocket or in your purse or in your hand, your phone, is not a new chapter, it's actually a sequential chapter in the story of the flow of power from the hands of the few to the hands of the many. And what we're learning is that, to whom much is given, much is expected. Ms. McBride.

**Q:** But one I'm interested in, because I'm always interested in to books, to whom they're dedicated. And you picked Evan Thomas and Michael Beschloss, two greats in journalism, and historians. Can you tell us why?

**JON MEACHAM:** Well, any friend who would come to the Press Club breakfast—

**Q:** --it's worth the dedication.

**JON MEACHAM:** Evan and Michael have been the best and most steadfast of friends and advisors and role models. Maybe not role models as much. [laughter] I don't want to go too far. So here is my best Evan story. One of the reasons I do what I do is because of Evan. When I was in my second year in high school, it was the year *The Wise Men* came out. I'm sorry—Which was Evan's great book, with Walter Isaacson, about the foreign policy establishment. And it was the same summer I was reading *All the King's Men*. And so I read *All the King's Men*. And then I read *The Wise Men*. And I loved them both so much that I then reread both.

Cut to 10 years later or so. I'm having a job interview with Evan, not far from here, for *Newsweek*. And I said, "This is really exciting for me to talk to you, because you know, reading biography really taught me about the intimacy of history, and you know, great man theory versus geopolitical forces. It was really critical. And I read it twice that summer." He said, "You read that twice when you were in high school?" And I said, "Yeah." He said, "You must have been a real loser." [laughter] So that was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. [laughter] And look how far we got.

No, Evan is the greatest of men, and so is Michael. Thank you for asking that.

**Q:** Was there anything, while you were researching this book, was there anything that surprised you?

**JON MEACHAM:** Just how bad Woodrow Wilson was. He really doesn't come out very well. I'm trying to figure out what he got right, actually. He resegregates. We talked about this. He resegregates the government.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Suffrage, right?

**JON MEACHAM:** Suffrage, yeah. He finally supports suffrage because Alice Paul, who really ran this great campaign against him. But I was surprised by that, because you think Wilson was this—particularly for FDR's generation, FDR, I think because he'd been his chief. And when he was in the cabinet, Secretary of Navy, I think Wilson comes out a little bit—was a more sentimental favorite for Democrats. He'd also been the last Democratic President for 12 years. And so FDR's generation really only had Wilson to look back on, because McKinley, TR, Taft, Harding, Coolidge, Hoover. So Wilson was kind of the one guy for them. But really, when you climb inside it, it was not as forward-leaning in administration as I think it's come down in memory.

\_\_: [off microphone]

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Yes. Go ahead, sir. [laughter]

**Q:** Can I go now? I'm Jonathan Martin. I'm the lesser half of the host today. I was so struck, speaking of the Wilson era, by the teens and '20s. And it just seems to echo today, more than any other era, actually, in part because of the changing nature of the country then, the aftermath of a huge influx of immigration, transformation of a sort of rural country to more of an urban country. Can you just riff on that for a little bit? And I guess, what brought us out of that backlash period? I'm shocked that when Vanzetti and anarchy seemed so similar to MS-13 today, right? Just the anarchists, Italians, they're violent, it seems to be the closest comparison to what we're seeing now. What ends that, that period of backlash?

**JON MEACHAM:** I agree. And it's one of the things that actually should give us some hope. So 1915, the Ku Klux Klan is refounded at Stone Mountain, Georgia, by a kind of a circuit-riding PR guy, basically, named William Simmons. And it eventually gets three to five million Americans join up, the Governors of Oregon, Colorado, Indiana, Texas, and Georgia were all Klansmen. There were as many as 16 US Senators, as many as 50 members of the House. The 1924 Democratic National Convention, there were 347 Klan delegates. It took 103 ballots to nominate John W. Davis because the Klan was insistent that they not vote for an Irish Catholic, Al Smith, to be the nominee. And just a virulent time.

As Jonathan says, what was causing it, high rates of immigration that were capped by the 1924 restrictive acts that really weren't lifted until '65, when President Johnson signed that bill. The shift from agrarian to industrial, also the introduction of radio. If you were a householder in the United States, you controlled the culture that your family was exposed to, completely, for millennia. And then suddenly, in 1921-'22, you invested in this radio, and there are these people in a place called Hollywood and far off New York, who were suddenly influential in your lives. And it was a little destabilizing for a lot of folks.

So what, as Jonathan says, so what happened? Harding and Coolidge did the right thing, a sentence you don't often hear. The courts did the right thing. The Supreme Court, in two really significant decisions, one was striking down an Oregon law that the Klan had passed requiring every child to go to a public school, which was a shot at the parochial schools. It was an attack on Catholic immigrants. The court struck that down. And New York, because there was a lot of vigilante violence, had required that the Klan hand over its membership lists. And the Klan argued, "No, no, we're the Kiwanis Club." And the Supreme Court held with the New York court and actually said, you had to give it over. And that took a lot of the energy out.

There was also some internal problems. And the press did the right thing. Joseph Pulitzer's New York World ran expose after expose. William Allen White out in Kansas did the right thing. So it was a case where Congress was not really a good actor here. The Presidency was kind of on the edge. But the press and the courts and the people did it. And I think it's the clearest example that those elements in the republican contract can carry the day. But you're right, it probably is the most analogous.

**Q:** Hi. Scott Shannon, father of five, hoping that I'm going to leave my kids a better world than we had. In your book, it takes the optimistic view of who we are, and where we're going. It also spends a lot of time looking back. And I guess, you know, longest lived experiment in democracy was Athens. It lasted 300 years. Collapsed, seemingly overnight, historically in a historical vein. Versus the Roman democracy, such as it was, also collapsed very quickly with Julius Caesar. Participatory government, taking—you know, being hard work, requiring an engaged and involved populace, the [00:50:27] saying, "Democracy gets the government it deserves." And all of the points you make are valid. But always, there was a bulwark there, and there was something that appealed to our better angels that saved the day, if you will.

So while hoping that, in 2038, we're living in a world that looks more like what President Obama envisioned, I guess, as this gentleman said, maybe riff on where those bulwarks are going to be, that ensure that we have that future.

**JON MEACHAM:** Well, where was the bulwark, say, in '69-'70? Where we're at war, there's left wing and right wing violence. People believe the country was—the country was coming apart in many ways. You know, I just think that it's a matter of proportion. And I think it all—And every generation takes on an outsized significance, because there are problems. There are the problems you want to confront for your five kids. And so I'm not minimizing the challenges we face. But I think if you put yourself back in almost any of these moments, we didn't know it was always going to be a brighter tomorrow. We hoped so. The most successful national politicians have been politicians of optimism, from Jefferson forward, people who believed that there was something to build for.

And so, you know, yes, this is as though we've elected George Wallace President, to some extent. But I think, to pick your image, I think the bulwark is the Constitutional order. The Constitution endures, not least because it recognized that moments like this were inevitable. It's a human document. It recognizes our appetite. It recognizes our ambition. It's



a Calvinistic document. It thinks we're depraved. It thinks we need to have ambition counteract ambition, as Madison said in Federalist 51. It would have stunned the founders that it took until 2016 for this kind of conversation, because they were ready for a demagogue at every point. They thought it might be Patrick Henry or Aaron Burr. And so it took a while.

But I just have faith that having come through a revolution that was incomplete, having come through a civil war, having come through two world wars and its discontents, I just think we'll get there.

**Q:** I'm Wes [00:53:26]. How healthy is the religious community in America today? And secondly, if it's not very healthy, is it in any way a metaphor for what's happening in the political community as well?

**JON MEACHAM:** That's a great question. Sally Quinn knows more about this than I do, but I'll try. I think that the—Well, the evangelical—the political evangelical community is basically playing a very long and shrewd game. I don't know how it's going to work out for them in the fullness of time. But they basically decided that the Supreme Court was worth this guy, and that they were going to get a 40-year appointment, maybe two, and that they would just put up with someone who would otherwise have been anathema to them. It's really striking to me.

One of the reasons, if George W. Bush were here, he would tell you that he thinks the reason he lost the popular vote in 2000 was because of that late-breaking story about his DUI in Maine back in the '70s. And Dan Bartlett, who was his communications guy, Dan Bartlett's mother, in Southern Ohio I think, calls her son, who's working for George W., and says, "I just don't know if I can vote for your boss, because I thought we were done with having Presidents who lied to us," because of the Clinton fatigue. And there were, you know, and Karl Rove would say there were two, two and a half million people in the hardcore religious world who either stayed home or probably just stayed home, and believed in the Psalmist injunction, put not thy trust in princes. And so the fact that we've moved that far in 20 years is pretty remarkable to me.

The most interesting thing I think that's going on sociologically in the religious world is what's called the rise of the nones, N-O-N-E-S. It's particularly millennials saying that they are not affiliated with any particular denomination. And it makes me think that the next great party shift is going to be whichever party can capture the libertarian energy of this generation, of you know what? We want to keep government out of as much as possible. And I do think that's a coming thing. Because institutions are so unpopular.

Same time, my own view, and I'm an Episcopalian, so we barely count—[laughter]—There are only six of us left—is that there is a set of religiously inspired dispositions of heart and mind that are critical to life in a republic. And they don't have to be religiously inspired, but they often are. That was Jefferson's view. And so the idea of generous spiritedness, the idea that you take care of the wayfarer and the pilgrim, to pick an example at random today, is—and I haven't quoted Two Corinthians—you know, Two Corinthians walks into a bar.

[laughter] So I think those values do have a place going forward. And I hope that people—I noticed the Catholic Bishops denounced the thing that's going on.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** The Pope.

**JON MEACHAM:** The Pope. So I'm a big believer in we should separate church from state. But we can't separate religion from politics, because they're both about people.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Is there a breaking point, though, of the evangelical community's support for Trump? And what would that look like?

**JON MEACHAM:** But I think it's a microcosm of everybody. I mean we've all thought, right, we're all like Miranda in *The Tempest*. Oh brave new world, you know. Every day he does something, and we all think, "Oh, well this will be it." You know, it's like Lucy and the football, you know. We're just not, you know. We're not going to kick it. And the question is, does this inchoate but unmistakable bond between the President and 40 percent or so of the country, which is about where the number is, maybe it's 35. I think he's getting a 10 point bump simply because of the market and the economy. And people don't like the press. So it's like, it's sort of everybody's whining about him. My 401k is up. I think he's fine. The question is, does that 10 percent go away in the light of something from Director Mueller, in the light of something that happens?

But he's going to—If they carry him out in handcuffs, it's going to be with a 35 percent approval rating, I swear. That was Joe McCarthy. Joe McCarthy's approval rating two months after the Arney-McCarthy hearings, was 34 percent. It's not going below that. And so we're really, that's just impenetrable. Don't worry about it. There's a middle 20 percent that's really important.

Let me give you my current obsession. I think one of the things, particularly politically-minded folks have to think about, is I'd argue that we can understand the last 75 years or so of political history as a kind of figurative conversation between Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. That it was a contentious but a coherent conversation about the role of the state versus the role of the market. It includes the Bushes. It includes Obama. It includes Clinton. All the way through.

But there is a moment in 2016 where that conversation stopped. Because right now, it's a little—it's just too chaotic. This is a populist, nationalist, isolationist, protectionist miasma. And it's not about just where do we fall on the coherence spectrum. And I think one of the questions going forward is, at what point does that conversation either resume or does a new one begin between Trump and his incoherence, and something else? And I think that if you're looking at it totally historically, I think that's where we are.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Great. That is a good place to end it. A couple of announcements. If you have not bought a book, Jon will be very nicely signing them right up here after the end here. We want to present you, Jon, with a coveted National Press Club mug. And thank you very much for coming out here this morning. And a couple of

announcements. We have some interesting things coming up that we hope you will join us here at the Club for. On June 27<sup>th</sup> we have the CEO of Delta Airlines here. July 12<sup>th</sup> we have the CEO of Union Pacific. July 16<sup>th</sup> we have the Commissioner of Major League Baseball coming for a luncheon. July 11<sup>th</sup>, Alan Alda will be here. And July 24<sup>th</sup>, we have the Miss America CEO and the Chairwoman Gretchen Carlson coming. So again—

**JON MEACHAM:** You all came to the wrong one. [laughter] Those are all great.

**BETSY FISHER-MARTIN** Thank you everybody.

[applause]

END