

Is National Unity Possible?

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SPEAKERS

support message, Jon Meacham, Bill Haslam, Samar Ali, Tricia Johnson, Cordell Carter

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- S** support message 00:00

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 - T** Tricia Johnson 00:38

This is Aspen Ideas to go from the Aspen Institute. I'm Tricia Johnson. National unity seems like a far off dream in an era of deep polarization in the United States. Though disagreement is the oxygen of democracy, today's divides seem untenable, particularly because many people are no longer relying on facts. Presidential biographer Jon Meacham says history can offer lessons on how to heal national fissures.
 - J** Jon Meacham 01:06

To achieve unity, we have to understand the roots of disunity. We have to understand the problem before we can achieve a solution.



Tricia Johnson 01:14

Today, he and other political experts explain how history, research, and reasoning can unite Americans. Aspen Ideas To Go brings you compelling conversations hosted by the Aspen Institute. Today's discussion is from the Institute's Socrates Program. The United States is facing one of the most difficult tests in his 244 year history. American democracy is struggling economic and social justice are under interrogation. Faith in institutions is declining and a pandemic is touching us all. Partisan warfare has replaced evidence based problem-solving, and 280-character tweets and splitscreen sound bites are reinforcing ideological differences. The path forward is uncharted. That's why today's guest join an effort to reunite the country. Historian Jon Meacham former Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam and political science research professor Samar Ali are part of the Vanderbilt Project on Unity and American Democracy. The Project is working to reintroduce evidence into the national conversation in order to supplant ideology with fact. Meacham, Haslam, and Ali are interviewed by Cordell Carter, the executive director of the Socrates Program at the Aspen Institute. Their conversation was held April 1. Here's Carter.



Cordell Carter 02:37

So the very first question: What exactly are you all doing together at Vanderbilt University?



Jon Meacham 02:44

Thank you all. This is a project to try to understand where in the past and then where in the present, the actual role of facts and evidence can be introduced and used in the public square, to reach decisions, not necessarily to reach a given policy outcome. But to have a climate in which, as the founders and the framers do different groups, as both those groups saw, how can rationality take a stand against passion and appetite and ambition in the public arena, the fundamental question of all human societies since the sacred grove, right, people have understood that, to have a republic to have good governance that is about the many and not simply the few required this conscientious assent to the idea that we should in fact, use our minds as well as our hearts in our guts to reach public decisions. for any number of reasons that we can talk about the United States of America as we approach our 200. And 50th. commemoration has been in a kind of flight from a fact based political culture. I don't believe that it's both sides. I do think that there's a concentration of this reluctance to accept reality that you don't agree with on the right at the moment, we came as close to losing the Constitution in the country, as we have since 1861. On January 6, so patriots, citizens who want the American experiment to be able to put facts put evidence on the table, and then decide what to do in the ordinary protocols

of politics, which is the politics at its best, is a mediation of differences, not this shermansque Total War. And so our goal is to mean dramatic Part of it is where in the past, have we seen a moment where there was public action that generally produced a greater good for a greater number. And, you know, President Biden was talking yesterday about infrastructure, I don't think anybody would disagree that, for instance, the Transcontinental Railroad, the interstate highways, the entire infrastructure of what was at each point, at that point, modern America created greater prosperity, there were problems with it. One of the things I'm proudest of having been snarky about him about my friend Bill is arguably one of it, his signature achievement, when he was the governor of our state was to make Community College universal, which was the only time I think Barack Obama came to Tennessee was to pay homage to bill and to try to take that program national. And that's infrastructure, right? It's an investment in human capital. It's not a it's not a literal road. But it's an engine of social mobility. It's about explaining how facts and evidence can and can ultimately lead to a more perfect union.

S

Samar Ali 06:16

In part, this is restoring trust in each other in our government, and in our democracy, and helping connect all of the different elements that are working on this. And there's a there's a, there's a trust deficit at this moment. And we're in the middle of the fourth industrial revolution, of where technology and social media have drastically changed how we engage with each other, how we communicate with each other, how we organize. And that gets also at this, this the piece of trust. And I think that it's really difficult to build and to maintain an American democracy. If you don't have that. And there's this debate these days about unity or American democracy, I would argue you really can't have a well functioning American democracy without unity.

B

Bill Haslam 07:09

Great. And I'll just add a couple things. From the very beginning, the story of our country has been about learning how to live with our deepest differences. We can all say we want an infrastructure plan. It's not about agreeing on what the details of that infrastructure plan should look like. What things I learned so much, and being in offices, this stuff really matters. government's role is to provide services for people they can't get for themselves. You can't don't care who you are, you can't build your own interstate system. You know, Bill Gates, can I have his own interstate system? He can I have his own national defense? What we have to decide is what's the you know, for the dollars we pay in taxes? What are the services we want back out of that, and obviously a lot of disagreeing about what those dollars should be paid, you know, how how many dollars should be paid for those services, in terms of where your philosophy is. But I think the point I want to bring to the

table is all this really matters in the arguments about who's canceling who and some of the culture discussions going on, that we need government that really works in, regardless of where you are on the spectrum. We want to be about how we encourage those conversations to happen.

C Cordell Carter 08:17

Now, Governor, you know, I happen to think state and local is where it's at in terms of government, because it's so local, you see the folks that are impacted by your policy, at your places of worship at the grocery store at the parks, you can't really escape the constituents or around you. Moreover, you actually have to balance your budget. Right. So I wonder for the the naysayers who say, well, Governor Haslam is easy for you to say you had a mandate to actually balance your budget, you see your constituents, do you see a dramatic difference between getting things done at the state level, with those barriers and constraints that we know they're there versus this fractious, 50 state union? This parentless model that sometimes gets a little weird with the influence of media?

B Bill Haslam 09:02

Well, again, I have the bias of being a governor, and then also being the bias of being someone who thinks you should actually pay for what you what you purchase, which, like I said, I think is I think it has a lot of merit over the long term. But I think Cornell your points are really good one, one of the beauties of our system is that states can all do it thrown away, you know, if you want to have this kind of pension plan in place for your state employees great. And that'll require this kind of tax payment, you keep going down the line, and states can make those choices. And then those Can I think, become laboratories. One of things I don't think we do a very good job of is looking around the states and saying, who's doing that? Well, what can we learn from, you know, Connecticut that Alabama could use or Montana that Mississippi could use? I think there's a lot to be learned there. Does it make it easier that you have to balance your budget? Yes, because you don't get in the philosophical arguments, but it also makes it harder because then you actually You have to balance your budget. And government in states is not about choosing between good and bad. It's between choosing between good and other good things that people are actually willing to pay for.

C Cordell Carter 10:11

Great. And Professor Meacham, you made a distinction earlier, between the founders and framers. And I literally was running a seminar last night for colleagues at the Latinos and society program here at the Aspen Institute. And we were talking about some founding

documents, namely, the Declaration of Rights and grievances of the Stamp Act, Congress, and the Declaration of Independence. And I used the following term. And I and I would like you to challenge me on that, that the founders were an exclusive group that use very inclusive language. And it's our job to hold them to it. So as you think about that distinction between founders and framers, and as it relates to some of the issues, we have barriers to national unity, because what are your thoughts about that framing I put for it?



Jon Meacham 10:59

Well, I'll give you a very, it's a personal answer. But Lincoln thought the same thing. So it's a little like the preacher who got up one morning and said, as our Lord said, and rightly, my bias is toward case studies, where have things worked before, when we talk about unity in this country, we're often talking about 60%, agreeing on something, the era we're talking about more dispute, but probably 20 to 25% of the folks and the white folks in North America, were loyalists, my family went to Nova Scotia because they were royalists. So there's a there was huge diversity of opinion, then, at every point, from the summer of 1776, unto this hour, America's finest hours have been defined and defined finest hours by what are the moments we look back on and we celebrate them, we commemorate them, we want to emulate them, or most of us have been when we have taken the sentence that Jefferson wrote, which was the most important is the most important sentence I would argue ever originally rendered in English, that all men were created equal, and were endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. When we have applied the implications of that sentence to more people, when we have actually lived into the symbiotic meaning of the words all are created equal. And again, don't listen to me. Listen to Seneca Falls, the Declaration of Sentiments and rights. And Seneca Falls in 1848 says, We hold these truths to be self evident that all men and women are created equal. Martin Luther King stood at the Lincoln Memorial and said, When are we going to live out the true meaning of our creed? So this is not a radical view. Lincoln's political achievement in many ways, in the late 1850s, and early 1860s, was to argue that there was a civic religion in this country, and that it did not go back to the Constitution, which was an exercise and compromise. And that's why I make the distinction between framers and founders. So the framers were compromising they were seeking a more perfect union through these compromise means Jefferson was making a universal point. But what Lincoln did, particularly at Gettysburg, remember, he says Four score and seven years ago, and that wasn't 1787. That was 1776. So he was taking the declaration, as the fundamental idea, the fundamental creed. And I believe as firmly as I believe anything about politics, is that the United States of America thrives or fails, in direct proportion, to the extent to which we live into that Jeffersonian sentence, or we fall short of it. And from Seneca Falls to Selma to Stonewall, from Lexington and Concord to Gettysburg, to Normandy. The moments that have defined us have been moments where doors of opportunity have been open to

more people. And what Lincoln called in August of 64, an open field and a fair chance were available to all this may sound like a homily. It may sound like a fourth of July thing, but it as Henry Kissinger used to say it has the virtue of being true. And so I would urge everybody, but particularly those on the center right and oak to to actually be conservative and look at what is it about the American tradition that you want to conserve. To achieve unity, we have to understand the roots of disunity. We have to understand the problem before we can achieve a solution. So if I can jump in and just ask, why are we so divided? governor?

B

Bill Haslam 15:26

Well, the first thing that I think it's important to recognize is just how divided we are. I mean, this is a pretty evenly split up country. You can argue the last election that America kind of voted for divided government. We got a senate equally split, we had a President Biden that won a clear, but not overwhelming victory. I want to be really clear, he clearly won. Okay, I don't want there's no should be, but it wasn't an overall this was in a landslide election, and a congress a house and ended up being closer than people thought it would be. I think one of the important things Roz is there are a lot of people that no matter where you are that don't think like you do. And I think that's one of the big mistakes we make. We've we've segregated ourselves into tribes that look like us and think like us in worship like us, and are educated in similar ways to us. And so remember that your world is not, is not the is not where buddy is my, my dad was a young business guy in the 60s. And you know, in, in 64, he he thought Barry Goldwater was going to win, because everybody he knew was for Barry Goldwater, well, obviously didn't quite work out that way. But you get the point. And we've only become more so and then you realize we can choose our news today. in whatever form we want. And we love it when it tells us what we already think. So we watch more of that. And then our our phone prompts, sees what we like and gives us more of that. I think that the fundamental thing we have to start with is realizing that there's a lot of the country that doesn't think like like I do, or like you do. In starting there is one of the big things. One of the reasons I joined this project is this idea that not only do we are we divided we disagree, but we've actually become contemptuous of each other. I don't think that's too strong a word to use at all, both sides have become contemptuous of each other. And if we can start treating each other with a little bit more grace, I think the conversation could lead to better places.

C

Cordell Carter 17:23

And Samar, you know, as a southerner, as a Muslim, as a woman, you're used to being an oddball. And so I just wonder, you said the word trust earlier. And I just wonder if you can dive into that a little bit.

S

Samar Ali 17:40

We can add a lot of descriptions to what I am. But I'd also just add one more. And that's that I grew up in rural America. You know, one of the things I've been doing in my work is mediating, and mediating across divides so that we can transcend them. And I in some of the most deadliest conflicts that I've I've tried to mediate and witness, what I see is this framing of friend versus enemy. And I'm when I'm listening, I'm hearing Governor Haslam talk about this, I'm really worried that we're creeping into that framework, a friend versus enemy rather than seeing each other as neighbors. And we're entering into deadly competition rather than friendly competition, and zero sum politics rather than this, what we use the word compromise. And democracy requires compromise. And I don't see how we function as a government and deliver what the people need. We the People need if we don't do that. And when I'm listening to John speak, and I'm hearing him talk about, I always learned something about our history. He's rooting us in our principles and values. And oftentimes, when people are in a state of fractured society, the way forward is, is to actually talk about what are commonly shared principles and values, we're not going to agree on everything. But what are two or three things. Jon mentioned, the quality that we can root ourselves in to say, that is the American way. And he's describing for us where we are, how we got to where we are now. And now the question and this is Project United American democracy is where we go next. And that's our living generation right here to decide. We're at a crossroads. And I think this is an all hands on deck moment.

C

Cordell Carter 19:30

Well, speaking of crossroads, the higher education industry is also at a crossroads. For those that are not heavily endowed, like Vanderbilt, you know, predictions are that a lot of universities are going to fail. And I wonder, what is the role the university in our democracy and our civil society? How does that role change in a post COVID world where many, many universities may not be here 18 months from now?

S

Samar Ali 19:56

I'll jump in really quickly. But just to say having been worked around the world, America's universities and institutions and our educational institutions are world renowned and respected. And one of the questions I've always received is, how do we learn from America's innovation, America's ability to innovate. And a lot of that, I think, is tied to our academic institutions, along with many other things, including our how our entertainment intellectual property laws, and and just how we're structured. But I think also universities are a place for us to debate. They're a place for us to come together to research to understand these questions and to embrace different views to try to figure out what are the solutions to our most complex problems? And then how do we help model that and

execute on it here, nationally and globally?



Cordell Carter 20:50

Right, Jon, over to the Governor.



Bill Haslam 20:52

Thoughts on universities: Number one, your points are great when most schools are not Vanderbilt, and most people are not going to go to Vanderbilt, they're going to go to their community college or a local four year school close to their home, it's really important that we maintain access for everybody. In today's world, that's where I'd start to do that. By the way, it means making certain that we're doing a great job in K through 12. And so having them be prepared when they get there, that substance of higher education had been the models for the world. And to continue to be that I have two, two quick thoughts, one for the right and one for the left. For the right, this idea that we're restricting who comes into our country will end up hurting our academic institutions and the kind of beacon that they've been. And so I worry about that, from some of the ideas coming from the right from the left, I think there has to be a recognition that higher education has become a fairly hard left leaning institution. And we have to take that into account in terms of the makeup of who teaches and leads at our schools, as well as all the other things we want to make certain are in the mix. Great.



Cordell Carter 22:04

Thank you. Mr. Meacham?



Jon Meacham 22:06

I agree with Bill, he ran a state university system, a community college system, it's an engine of social mobility, it is also now I think I'm right, the largest signifier of whether you're a Republican or a democratic voter. So that isn't the gap between college educated folks, one of them because it's one of the most pronounced, and I guess, where I would disagree, or at least offer a slightly different perspective. And it goes straight to the heart of what we're talking about -- if facts and evidence and your life experience leads you to a certain perspective. So if it leads you to a left leaning one or a right leaning one. Yes, you have to listen. I don't think it's within the remit of citizenship, to have to compromise for compromise sake. That is, if I believe something, I believe it. And now I understand that in reaching certain policy manifestations of that requires a give and take. But it's really important. I think that some people, particularly on the on the center, left

and over, tend to think that when they hear unity that folks like us mean, give 45% and try to get 55%. And on the on the principal point, as summer was saying, I don't believe that. I'm not willing, I don't think it's right to compromise with and maybe this will get me in trouble. But members of a caucus who self evidently wanted to overturn a national election. I just don't think that's right. And I and I understand all the human factors that led to that. But I think the central question, and I have an I have a rule for myself. Now, I don't do anything, even semi publicly with folks if they don't believe and they won't acknowledge that the election was in fact, a legitimate one and that the 46 presidents are legitimate president, if you are not willing to say that you're not a responsible partner for peace. To me, you're not in foreign policy terms. You're not a rational actor. And so does education. lead to that point of view? I hope so. I'm just a hopeless, you know, slightly hapless liberal arts guy. But it comes out of the Enlightenment, the world that I absorbed, and I was lucky enough at a very privileged education, for which I'm in the grateful every minute of every day. But it leads to what Benjamin Franklin. You know, Benjamin Franklin made one important with the central edit in the Declaration of Independence is Franklin changed, that it was a sacred truth to it was a self evident truth, thereby grounding it not only in the theocentric, but in the observable, discernible realm of rationality. So that is one of the most important edits ever. If you think about it, it makes the Declaration of Independence informed by both religion and reason. So to some extent, it's the most unifying document, it's one of the great examples of what we should be doing is it opens the doors for people to come in any which way. And my argument is that, that the American experiment at the moment, which we've seen a new is incredibly fragile, and susceptible to demagoguery and passion. And, by the way, I'm not Democrat. You know, I supported Vice President Biden, I hope President Biden when he asks now, but it's not about some pre existing ideological disposition. I go crazy when when the left attacks Ronald Reagan, for instance, I'm George Herbert Walker, Bush, his biographer, for God's sake, I mean, I'm not a crazy lefty, though, has some things I am. I believe that there is a set of American traditions and principles that are probably not necessarily as durable as we thought. But that does not mean therefore. And I love I love that the right my my last point here, one of the things that that is both amusing and tragic, is that the cultural right wing in the United States, which hates victimhood, is now totally imprisoned by a narrative of grievous themselves. And I think that people who are beyond the orbit of the former president will do an immense duty to the country into themselves by disenthral, themselves. From what Samar was saying, from this total war.



Cordell Carter 27:36

You mentioned a few moments in American history, specifically, the Gettysburg Address, the revolutionary period, I just wonder, is this moment different than the others? Or is this the normal cycle of things, which scraps and how we'll say that? The fourth turning? Are

we just in the fourth turning? Now we're at eight years past the New Deal era? Or is this uniquely different? Is our democracy so threatened that it requires an effort of national scale to to keep it?

J

Jon Meacham 28:09

Very quickly. It is 1860/1861. Right? To some extent it's 1933. But it's more 1860/1861. Because we have competing and conflicting visions of reality that are informed by economic interest, geographical disposition, and theology. And we do not have a unifying national media. Right. If you were a planner in South Carolina, you were not reading the Liberator. If you were an abolitionist in New York City, you probably weren't reading the Charleston Mercury.

B

Bill Haslam 28:45

Samar, go ahead, and then I'll weigh in last.

S

Samar Ali 28:48

We know that fear sells on the internet. We know that it sells on social media, we have to figure out how to digitize it the same. And people are being targeted by by toxic polarizing messages. And I think that we can we need to learn how to hack those algorithms to reach people who are being targeted with a toxicity with messages that unify. And it reminds us of our common humanity. And why that's important is because dehumanizing someone, it's a very dangerous game to play. And it doesn't lead anywhere good. It sets negative norms that oftentimes lead to hate and violence rather than positive norms that lead to productivity. And I think that in order for us to do that we have to root ourselves in is working on a system that works and represents everybody. And that's important what we're talking about doing here. And I would just add one more thing, and that is your question. I think that one of the top three most concerning national security threats to our democracy and country at the moment is polarization. is is this deep seated polarization between us.

B

Bill Haslam 29:52

I think well said. Well said. I don't think you can day the end. Impact of social media, you know, the abolition wasn't reading the, the Charleston Enquirer or whatever the the Charleston paper is. But today, those little rabbit holes can come can come and go so many different places, that I think that the conversation is so much more fragmented today, fragmented in different directions. But it's, it's somebody said, you can't find the

head of the snake to cut it off anymore.



Cordell Carter 30:28

We will go to some of your questions. Now, recently, people in United States seem to equate democracy almost solely on voting. And while that is one aspect, is an active participation of citizens in the creation of policy, town halls, etc. also an indicator of a healthy democracy?



Bill Haslam 30:46

Amen, amen. What we really want is a citizenry who's engaged, but one of the concerns is this, it's almost impossible to have a town hall anymore, because one or two people can literally show up with a megaphone and take it over. And I've seen that happen on multiple occasions. And I was with somebody the other day, who was actually on the side of an issue on an education issue them for and they were talking, describing, going in and disrupting this elected officials, Town Hall. And they took such great pride in that we made her answer this question, and I thought, I appreciate your passion. But that's not good for democracy. What democracy needs is public officials who have the the freedom to go out in the middle of people have conversations without being shouted down. And I worry today, it's like, show me somebody that's having a true town hall with discussion today. That's where it's actually working, because people are afraid to do it.



Cordell Carter 31:49

Here's another one. In a recent video series called Amend -- the premise is that the 14th Amendment is the second founding of the country because it extended the rights enumerated by Jefferson to more people. Are we due for a third founding?



Jon Meacham 32:04

Samar used the fourth industrial revolution. You asked about the the turning. There's a lot of interesting thought. My friend Eddie Cloud is particularly good on this, that Yeah, there needs to be a third reconstruction. We screwed up the first one so poorly. The second one was 60 years ago. Now. One way to take the anti racist sentiment that is abroad in the land, and Marshal that would be whatever the series of reforms would be that would, legally constitutionally culturally, would in fact, make make that manifest. It's interesting, isn't it, that we have to keep refounding ourselves. Yet, that's an inherent inherent element of democracy. I mean, we are in fact, an organic thing. And we can grow upward. And we can grow into the ground. And, you know, one way of two quick, sort of dorky points, as

opposed to my long dorky points. One is that without Barack Obama, we probably don't get Donald Trump. And without Donald Trump, we don't get Joe Biden, I would just keep that in mind. The other is, I firmly believe that over the last 80 years or so, the country was defined by a figurative conversation and tension between FDR and LBJ over here, and Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush over here. And that until 2017, that was the tension and the field on which the country was governed. You raise this rate or lower that rate, you projected force against commonly agreed upon foes and rivals, literally or figuratively, but it was a coherent conversation that fell apart in 2017, for all sorts of reasons, partly because that conversation was not seen by a lot of people as commensurate with their needs, and that that's democracy did. I do think that the President Biden represents not a return to a slower conventionality? But a restoration of that conversation that may have its problems. But at least it's a coherent conversation.



Cordell Carter 34:30

This question is for Samar. You said democracy requires compromise. Is there anything in your opinion in which we should not be willing to compromise?



Samar Ali 34:40

Our democracy. And Jon mentioned this as well as related to accepting the presidential election results, I think also allowing everyone to vote not disenfranchising voters seeing each other's humanity as equal I think that again, one of the most important principles and hallmarks of American democracy, and how we've defined that in the 21st century is equality. And, and freedom of expression. And, and and i think adhering to the US Constitution and those principles. And so I really do think that we can't compromise on that foundation. And then we get there everything else, you know, we can work, we can talk about compromise. But if you're going to lean towards an authoritarian government, and that's your preferred choice of government and governing, I think that's in direct conflict with what what this country has always been working towards.



Cordell Carter 35:41

Another question -- if returning to shared values and asking some of these fundamental difficult questions the way forward, what changes do we need to see in the incentive structure to encourage civil discourse required to have this dialogue?



Jon Meacham 35:57

That is such a vital point. We have to incentivize officeholders to give the other side of

voter tip. We can't live in this sort of, forgive me Aspen Institute world, where you see a PowerPoint, you go, Oh, yes, that's the rational load. There are people we know, who are secretly rational, they just hide it really well, once they get into office. So somehow or another and this goes to the town hall point, or it goes to I think, actually more a corporate point. I'm fascinated parent theoretically, that so much of the potentially effective action on issues of social and cultural concern are coming from the private sector. Whether it's Coca Cola and delta in Georgia, I think they want to take the all star game out of the major league baseball players want to take the all star game out of Atlanta, North Carolina, when they did whatever they did, it was a transgender think, last the NCAA tournament, Walmart, I think has stopped selling guns, or did for a while. The private sector has a role to play here. I think that the corporations that decided they weren't going to give money to the nullifiers on the presidential election, were doing exactly what you would want a, a complicated, just disputatious democracy to do. But somehow or another. And I don't know, and I'll throw it to Haslam, because he's had to do this. How do you make it safe for these senators, and that's where they are to do what was possible. I'm not a sentimentalist about this right. We we had Fort Sumter. Right? There's not some mythical moment that if only we could go back to everything would be fine. Because I've never heard a single black person, gay person. And I haven't heard many women say, oh, wouldn't it be great if it were 1910? Again? Right, Calvin Coolidge was not some master of a moment of national unity. Part of the problems, one of the issues that we have here is that this is a democracy, that, in fact, is only 55 years old. To go to your previous question. The electorate we have in this country has not been in place for more than since really, the first presidential election we held in this country with an integrated electorate was in 1968. So in my lifetime, so this is a young democracy, actually. And you're seeing a reaction to it. But how do you make it so that a couple of senators can actually vote for a Biden Supreme Court Justice, or an infrastructure bill? Without getting into the specifics, but right now, it looks as though there's been anyone broken? And I don't think so?

B

Bill Haslam 39:11

Well, it's a fair question. Of course, I'd have to push back and say that goes both ways. Well, what's an infrastructure bill, you know, is infrastructure bill truly about, you know, they lead with it. This is about the roads and bridges and fixing our airports and rail lines, etc. But it's about more than that, too, if you look at what's in the bill. And so my sense is the country is hungry and ready for an infrastructure bill. I'd love to see the president proposed one that totally was focused on infrastructure, and then there are Republicans to come with him. I think he could do that. JOHN, and I've had this conversation with the last 1.9 trillion that was spent, honestly think that Biden could have proposed less in the in that package, devoted part of that to, to phase one of an infrastructure Bill, I've gotten

bipartisan support on both of those had two big wins coming out of the gate. And if you want to look at strictly from a political standpoint, maybe could have choked off life from a republican party for a long time if he had taken that approach, but instead, I kept people saying, No, Obama didn't go big enough. That's the problem go big now. We'll force it through, even though it's the it's split 5050, we'll force it through. I think if he did come back with a different approach, he could have gotten some Republicans and changed the equation for a long time.



Cordell Carter 40:32

But speaking of Republicans, Governor senses, there's a question that's very germane. Why has today's Republican Party seem to have given up on broadening its appeal to people of all regions, faiths, backgrounds? And I'll just add another piece? Why is it playing to white anxiety?



Bill Haslam 40:50

Yeah, I think it's a great, it's quite it's a great question. And I think it's a big mistake the Republican Party's making. I mean, it's not, you know, the, the the old big 10 appeal that, you know, Meacham would tell you that Reagan and HW Bush had, has gone. And instead, what you had was the Trump approach of saying, forget trying to expand, let's just try to get all of our voters there. And so to get them there, we need to get them as outraged as possible. And so it was not just doubling down. But it was quadrupling down to make certain that we turned out our base and every decision that President Trump was made with that basic philosophy in mind, I personally think it's a bad long term strategy. And we'll we'll come back to haunt the party, if a well already has.



Cordell Carter 41:38

How can we have national unity when voting, and even democracy itself has become a polarized partisan issue?



Bill Haslam 41:47

Some of that, I think, is to everybody always says, well, let's go back and look at the facts. Some of the controversy around the voting laws in Georgia and I would, I don't know them to the nth degree. So I don't want to be the one, you know, dissecting them. But I saw a pretty interesting piece today that compared that Georgia's voting laws to Delaware's in Georgia's laws make it a lot easier to vote it more times than Delaware's to like six, something like 56% of people in Georgia voted early, something like 29%. And Delaware

did. So be really careful when you start, you know, saying look at what they're doing. They're trying to shut off voting and compare it to actually what is happening.



Cordell Carter 42:27

There seems to be a great resonance and what Mr. Meacham said about the usefulness of our democracy, from basically the first free integrated electorate was 1988. And I just wonder if that means with a 54 year old democracy, that perhaps more grace should be extended, that this is just growing pains. And perhaps this is not nearly as dire circumstance, as we deem it? Because we're using the wrong clock. Our clock is 244 and a half years, and it should be 57 years. What are your collective thoughts about that?



Jon Meacham 43:05

I don't think we're using the wrong clock. I just I offer that as a sign of if part of human history is in theater, Parker's image to divine, a path forward by conscience, and that he you can't quite see where the arc of the moral universe goes. But as Parker said, and then Dr. King picked up, and President Obama had it on the woven into his Oval Office carpet. If the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice, then that's not an argument for patience. It's an argument for preserving a culture in which there are people who insist that arc swerves because the nature of politics is such that if it's going to bend at all, you need people insisting that it's work. And that's the dialectic. And so I offer that not as a lift, let's be patient with our problems. I'm kind of horror struck to have to say that again. In my lifetime, folks, because of the color of their skin, were denied access to the ballot box. When I was 11 years old, and Chattanooga, Tennessee, three Klansmen, shot four women were acquitted by an all white jury and the city erupted. And I grew up on a civil war battlefield. So I was living 800 yards away from where a Confederate General Braxton Bragg had his headquarters watching. Rage over the inadequacies of a justice system to address violence. Cry. That's me. Right and look at me. I mean, I'm a boringly heterosexual, white Southern male episcopate. Everything works out for me in this country, I'm fine. But I do believe, to go back to the declaration point, that without a determined and focused vision, on creating an engine of social mobility and a climate of moral behavior, then we lose the country. Somebody asked, you know, do we really think this is 1861? Yeah. Because guess what, in 1861, Winfield Scott posted guards at the Capitol because there was a threat that a mob was going to come and do what interrupt the electoral vote count. They didn't get to the Capitol in 1861. But they got there this time.



Cordell Carter 46:02

And interrupt, they did. Well, we are at the end, but I want to give Governor Haslam and

Samar each 90 seconds for kind of closing remarks before I close this out.

S

Samar Ali 46:12

We can't afford to be denialistic about this. Denialism of the moment that we're in will be a dangerous choice to make. And I'd say that in order for us to be ready for this moment, I think we have to talk about first, what is what do we envision our shared future to be? envision that. And once we commit to that, and we restore agency, and we take responsibility to working towards that, we talked about what it means to belong, and what is our shared and we're gonna identity, then in order for us to move forward, we are going to have in my opinion, to have to have a truth and reconciliation process. But before we do that, and before we rehash and not even rehash before, we before we analyze, again, our history, we need to commit to what does a shared future together look like?

C

Cordell Carter 47:11

Governor Haslam?

B

Bill Haslam 47:13

Well said. I would say this, I'll steal chestertons words when he says I know what the problem is. It's me. And I think we all have to start there. I've written a book on how we should listen to other people better and realize the other side has good points, etc. And I get mad when I watch the news. And they say stuff I don't like. And so I realized that it has to start with me. I'll say this to this group. And I'm, I'm making a guess here, but I bet I'm right. I bet if we polled the audience here, it would lean slightly to the left. And because I'm seen as a major might say, there's no such thing. But as I'm because I'm seeing this sort of somewhat reasonable Republican, I get invited to a lot of things like this. And I noticed we have a lot of groups that are there. They're on the 40 yard line of the left side, but they think they're in the right in the middle. And I don't I don't say that we all think that it's a great chance to ask ourselves, what are the things that I can do better myself before I go and try to fix my neighbor?

C

Cordell Carter 48:14

Great. Great. Well, I thank you, Governor Haslam, somar and Jon Meacham so much for joining us today, and Bravo for the project. You're starting at the Vanderbilt University. So thank you again. Thanks, Cornell. Thank you.



Tricia Johnson 48:32

Jon Meacham is a Pulitzer Prize winning historian. Samar Ali is a research professor of political science and law at Vanderbilt. Bill Haslam served as a 49th governor of Tennessee. They're part of the Vanderbilt Project on Unity and American Democracy and were interviewed by Cordell Carter. He leads the Socrates Program at the Aspen Institute. Make sure to subscribe to Aspen Ideas To Go wherever you listen to podcasts. Follow Aspen Ideas year round on social media at Aspen Ideas. Today's discussion is from the Aspen Institute Socrates Program and this show is produced by Marci Krivonen and me. Our music is by Wonderly. I'm Tricia Johnson, thanks for joining me.



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