

How The Declaration of Independence Changed World History w/ Gordon Wood

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SUMMARY

The discussion centers on the significance of the Declaration of Independence as a foundational document for the United States, embodying Enlightenment ideals of equality and liberty. Historian Gordon Wood emphasizes the transformative nature of the Declaration, its role in shaping American identity, and the complexities surrounding its authors, particularly in relation to slavery.

- The Declaration of Independence is viewed as the most important document in U.S. history, establishing foundational values of equality and liberty.*
- The U.S. is considered the first nation created on Enlightenment ideals, with the Declaration serving as a powerful manifesto for democratic revolution.*
- Despite its aspirational language, the Declaration's hypocrisy regarding slavery is acknowledged, as many signers owned slaves.*
- The importance of education in fostering an informed citizenry is highlighted, with current educational shortcomings noted.*
- The Declaration's assertion that "all men are created equal" reflects Enlightenment thought, emphasizing equality as a natural right rather than a social construct.*
- Lincoln is credited with redefining the founders' legacy, using the Declaration to argue against slavery and unify the nation.*
- The conversation touches on the historical context of the American Revolution, the role of grievances against British rule, and the evolving identity of Americans as distinct from their British origins.*
- The discussion concludes with a reflection on the current state of American society, emphasizing the need for a balanced understanding of history to navigate contemporary challenges.*

- The Declaration is by far the most important document in our history. It not only legally created the United States, but it infused into our culture these values that we still honor: Equality and liberty. It's our adhesive. It's the only thing we've got. - The United States of America is arguably the first nation in human history to be consciously created on the basis of Enlightenment ideals. Those ideals were captured in equal parts with power and poetry in the Declaration of Independence 250 years ago.

At its worst, the Declaration can be called hypocritical for a soon-to-be nation that enslaved 20% of its population. Yet, at its best, the truths it held to be self-evident can be seen as transformational aspirations that uniquely set America on a course to make the first case

for slavery's abolition, and create the freest and most prosperous land in human history. That's certainly how Martin Luther King saw it. - [Dr. King] Very seldom, if ever, in the history of the world, has a sociopolitical document expressed in such profound, eloquent, and unequivocal language, the dignity and the worth of human personality.

- King understood our history in a deep and profound way. It's a vision that has animated millions of people to immigrate to this country seeking a better life. In my experience, you'll find no greater champions of the American ideal than first generation immigrants. The same, tragically, cannot be said for the rest of us. According to a recent poll by the Wall Street Journal, patriotism has utterly collapsed as an important value for most Americans. Look no further than our failing education system for one major culprit.

Nationwide tests found that only 13% of eighth graders met proficiency standards for US history, and only 22% scored proficient in civics. This reminds me of a famous quote, often attributed to Thomas Jefferson himself, "An educated citizenry is "a vital requisite for our survival "as a free people." By that measure, we are failing future generations, and that's why I am so excited about today's guest, Gordon Wood. He's one of the world's leading experts on America's revolutionary history, and currently a professor at Brown University.

Throughout his storied career, Gordon has earned a Pulitzer Prize, a National Humanities Medal, and the Bancroft Prize. He's even become somewhat of a pop culture icon, being mentioned in both "Good Will Hunting," and "It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia." - That's gonna last until next year. You're gonna be in here regurgitating Gordon Wood. - Does no one know Gordon Wood is? - People ask, "What is an American?" What can you say? You say, "Well, we believe in equality.

"We believe in liberty." I mean, that's how we define ourselves. I think most people do. They don't refer to an ethnic base. So in that sense, it's become the basis for the country, that set of principles. - Gordon has authored, co-authored, and contributed to dozens of books on the American Revolution, including his award-winning titles, "The Creation of the American Republic" and "The Radicalism of the American Revolution." This Independence Day, or any day for that matter, I can think of no better guide to the origin story and enduring legacy of the United States of America than Gordon Wood.

Gordon Wood, welcome to Dad Saves America. - Glad to be here. - One of the things that we try to do with the show is explore the issues that our kids need to know about if they want to succeed and if they wanna contribute to the success of the country, however that might be defined. And I think that we're coming up on the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and hopefully this conversation will actually go live during the 4th of July.

So the declaration is this moment in American history, it's like a defining moment, at least that's the way we all celebrate it every fourth, and I wanna read something that you wrote in your book, "The Radicalism of the American Revolution," which we have here, that I think tees off our conversation really, really great. You wrote that "The Declaration of Independence was "the most powerful manifesto "of democratic revolution ever written. "And it succeeded beyond the wildest dreams "of those who participated in it."

So what did you mean by 'powerful'? - Well, influential and how important it became to Americans. It was not what they thought. The people who wrote it had no idea it would become as important as it turned out to be. Jefferson was not really known as the author till probably the 1780s. And then in the 90s, it was picked up by the new Republican Party, which he was heading, or one of the leaders of, and then he became aware that this was an important document.

And if John Adams had known how important it would become, he would've written it himself. - Interesting. - He was so jealous of Jefferson, who developed this fame. And it really isn't until 1817, I think, Ezekiel Niles, who was the greatest journalist of the period, wrote an open public letter to Jefferson saying, "Mr. Jefferson, we are such a diverse people." Already, he thought we were diverse, with so many different kinds of people living here.

"You need to make something "of the Declaration and it's principles "to hold us together." And Jefferson came to realize that the Declaration was really his claim to fame. He lists it as number one of his accomplishments on his gravestone. He had three things he listed. Not his presidency, but the Declaration of Independence. And, at this point, he writes his son-in-law and says, "Save the desk on which I wrote the Declaration.

"It's going to become a sacred relic." So it took a while for people to realize just how important that was. And of course, the person who made the most of it is Lincoln. - Explain. - Lincoln is confronted with a nation that's falling apart, and he wants to... He goes back to the founding to justify his antagonism, his opposition, to slavery. And he says, "All honor to Mr. Jefferson" for the statement that "All men are created equal."

By this point, equality had taken over the country, and Lincoln uses that, that word, what it meant, to further his position as one of the leading opponents of Southern slavery. But he's the one who, I think, creates the aura that we have for these founders.

- Interesting. So you think it's Lincoln that really--

- Oh yeah, because in-- - Congeals our modern sense of the founders.

- Exactly. In the antebellum period, in the 1830s or 1840s, when people talked about the founders, they meant the 17th century founders; John Smith, William Bradford, John Winthrop, William Penn.

These are the founders, the colonial founders. It's Lincoln who really changes the meaning of that word, 'founder.' And he has this wonderful speech with an image that still overawes me, where he says, "Those men who wrote the Declaration," and he says 'men,' at that point, on more than one, the founders, "We people today are flesh of the flesh "and blood of the blood "of the men who wrote that Declaration." And it's an extraordinary statement 'cause he starts by saying, "Look, we're a very diverse people.

"We have these French, we have Irish, "we have Swedes, we have Scots and English, "all of these. "How do we--"

- Diverse from... In the context of a European history, right?

- Right, exactly. He was talking in late 1850s. "How do we hold these people together?" And it's exactly at the same point that Niles asks Jefferson, "We're not a nation like most nations, "we don't have an ethnic basis. "There's..." - Yeah, it's not a blood and soil country, right?

It's not like "Oh--"

- I mean, the French know who the Frenchman is, and the English know who an Englishman is. But an American, there's no ethnic basis to that. To be an American is not to be somebody, but to believe in something. So what do we believe in? Those things that came out of the Declaration. - So we're gonna touch on a lot of stuff in this conversation, and I'm gonna save our conversation about slavery for a little later because it's really important for us to talk about, especially in the context of "All Men Created Equal," it's this a contradiction right from the start.

But I think the other

thing I want to ask is, in this first statement that I read, you say that it succeeded. Now, in a sense, it's obvious that it succeeded because the American colonists won the war against the British, but is that sense of success... How else did it succeed? It seems like you meant more than just "we won the war," in terms of the success of the Declaration as a document. What does that mean, to succeed?

- It's the basis of our culture, of our nationhood. If people ask "What is an American?" What can you say? You say, "Well, we believe in equality, "we believe in liberty." I mean, that's how we define ourselves. I think most people do. They don't refer to a ethnic base. So in that sense, it's become the basis for the country, I think, that set of principles. I mean the Declaration is by far the most important document in our history.

I mean, bar none. I mean, think of it. It not only legally created the United States, but it infused into our culture these values that I think we still honor: Equality and liberty. So it's our adhesive. It's the only thing we've got and no other nation is

like ours in that sense. - This is one of the things that I've heard said... And I'm so excited to talk to you, 'cause you're one of the preeminent historians of this time in our history, I have heard it said that the country is based on i...

That it's the only modern country that was founded on ideas. And this is very romantic statement. And to what extent is that true? Is that a fair statement, that America's--

- I think it is. I mean, the French also like to claim that they are an Enlightened state and they don't have any ethnic base, but they do, of course. They can't believe that these Arabs who've been living there for three generations are really French. "We know what a Frenchman's like."

So I think we are the

only nation that really... There are empires. Ottoman Empire had many diverse peoples, but that was an empire. But as a nation, we are the only ones, really, I think, based on a set of ideas. - You said of the founders, "the founding fathers who drafted "the Declaration of Independence were radicals "who believed that the old order was corrupt "and that a new society, "based on the principles of democracy "and freedom, was necessary."

What did you mean by that? When you say 'radical,' what does that word mean? - Well, there's degrees, of course. John Adams wasn't as radical. He was radical in that he wanted to break from Great Britain, but he wasn't as radical as Jefferson was in wanting to change the society. Jefferson had a whole set of reforms. In fact, many of them had reforms. In the states, almost coinciding with 1776, even before the Declaration, the states were beginning to move towards reforming in five areas: Religion, abolishing the Church of England, setting up some kind of...

In most states, there was

a collective establishment. Third was criminal punishment. We didn't have prisons in the colonial period. If you committed a crime, you are either executed, lots of capital crimes, 200 on the books in England, or you suffered mutilation, you chop off an ear, chop off a nose.

- This is some biblical stuff. - There were no prisons, no penitentiaries. We established the first penitentiary.

Pennsylvania took the lead. That became a reform. Now, we don't think about penitentiaries as being reformed, but they were. And in Pennsylvania, all the capital crimes were eliminated, except for one, for murder. That was really way ahead of anything that was happening in Europe.

- Is that true? So the colonies led the

way on that compared to-- - [Prof. Wood] The Americans. - Compared to all of Europe? - Oh yeah, yeah, we were way ahead of that.

We were seen as an Enlighten... I mean, people in Europe looked at this experiment, they saw what was

happening, and they saw it as an

Enlightened experiment in bringing Enlightened notions to law. So let's see, the religion is the... I'd mentioned religion,

criminal punishment, and the--

- A state. - The state. And a fourth would've been, of course, anti-slavery. The northern states, the first states in the world where slavery was legally established to abolish it.

- Okay, I want to put a pin in that. - [Prof. Wood] Yeah, yeah, you want to go back to that?

- Because we can spend this... And I want to spend enough time really devoted to it. - [Prof. Wood] Did I mention all five? - And I think there's a fifth one, right?

- Oh, education. Once you're gonna become a republic, which means the people choose the leaders, you've gotta have an educated populace. Every one of the founders, it seems, Jefferson certainly, Benjamin Rush, they draw up plans for public education.

Jefferson has a three-tiered plan that's very simple; grammar school, high school, college, all publicly supported. But of course, these things don't get implemented

right away, this notion. But the idea is set right from 1776 on. - So you have these people who've been living here in this continent and are reinventing what it looks like to have a civil society. "What are the rules we're going to live by?" And they are breaking from the past-- - They're drawing on the Enlightenment.

But by the end of the 18th century, Western Europe saw itself as full of these ideas flying around from all over, and the Americans become the first people to really implement. They have a chance to implement them. That's why Jefferson's so excited. I mean, he was very widely read, probably the most widely read person in America at the time. And he just was so excited about having the opportunity to implement each of these reforms. Now he gets frustrated, gets frustrated on all

of them in some sense, but he tries in every area that I mentioned, those five areas, including anti-slavery.

- You know, when I

realized I was gonna have the opportunity to talk to you, the first thing I did was go back and say, "Well, let me actually just read "the Declaration of Independence," because gosh, it's

probably been since school that I actually sat down and read it. And for most of us, if you went out on the street, I think we'd all be sad by whether or not we could find anyone that said, "Oh yeah, I read "the Declaration of Independence."

So I'm gonna read some blocks of it and I want to talk about some of them. - Well, the first two paragraphs, people are familiar with, but the rest of it probably not. - Well, so it's only 1,337 words long, and there were 56 signers. But there's all these ideas in this relatively small number of words. So right at the top, and this is a little bit of a block of text but I wanna read it word for word, we'll put it up on the screen.

"The unanimous declaration "of the 13 United States of America, "when in the course of human events, "it becomes necessary for one people "to dissolve the political bands "which have connected them with another.

"And to assume among the powers of the earth, 'the separate and equal station' to which the laws of nature 'and of nature's God' entitled them, 'a decent respect to the opinions 'of mankind requires 'that they should declare 'the causes which impel them 'to the separation."

So my first question about this is, is this the first use of this name, "the United States of America"? Where does this-- - Well, they had talked about the United Colonies, but it obviously was not much of a name because it... And they later wrestled with it. But it's all they could come up with at that point, because they really are very separate states. And they say that, later in the Declaration, as you'll get to the end, they read, "they are 13 independent states" with the independent right "to do this and that."

And this first one, I think, is showing the world, "Look, we're a nation now, 'we're one people.'" But to call us 'one people' was quite bold for Jefferson. But he's announcing to the world, the powers of the earth, "We are going to be an equal to you guys." That's what he's essentially saying in that first paragraph. - It seems like he's also setting up to a beginning of the justification of this document, right? - Yeah, sure.

This is why we're announcing it. "We're telling the world 'we're coming to be one of 'the competing powers of the earth. 'We've arrived.'" It's a statement of declaration of "Here we are, folks." - What did the word 'state' mean at that time? Because you are... They're colonies. And I guess this is an early time for the development of the nation-state as a concept. Put this word in context for me. - The term 'nation-state,' I think is...

I'm not sure when that would be invented. But a state was... England was a state, or Great Britain was a state. France was a state. So here we have 13 states. The states are really very independent. It's like the EU, that's the best way to think of it. You got 13 states, each of them thinking themselves, "We're sovereign, we can do what we want." - [John] "I'm a Pennsylvanian. 'I'm a--'" - And they do form a treaty right after the declaration.

It takes a little while, but by 1777, they draw up a treaty. It doesn't get ratified until 1781. But it's a treaty among 13 independent states. It's like the EU. - What's that treaty? - Forms the Articles of Confederation. And so, that's the best way to think of the United States at the outset. It has a literal meaning that has been lost. The Civil War... After the Civil War, we became "the United States is."

Prior to the Civil War, "the United States are." Always a plural verb. - And I've heard this phrase, that "these United States..."

- Yes, of course. It would be like trying to talk about the European states as being one. They'd like... Many people there would like to be more united than they are, but they still are quite different. And I think you can

better understand the beginnings of the United States if you think of it as similar to the present day EU.

- How onboard were these 13 states to this document at the time that its-- - Well, they got them all to vote and it's unanimous. But I think there were probably more loyalists in the middle colonies, the middle states, New York and New Jersey, than elsewhere. Virginia had very few loyalists. Massachusetts had some, but not very many. It's the middle states, in New York and New Jersey, and that area, that had-- - [John] They were on the fence?

- Yeah, they had a little more diversity. It was more ethnically mixed and that created some problems. But no... But the people who are loyal, really... This is where the Brits miscalculate. They think there's more loyalists than there are. Maybe, at best, 20% of the population was loyalist. The population at the time of the revolution is two and a half million people, 500,000 of whom are African slaves. And of those, I would say 20% were loyalists.

They really thought that they had a lot of people who would support the crown, and they were just flabbergasted at their lack of support. When Burgoyne goes through New York, he just can't... He's coming down the Hudson Valley, he just can't recruit people. - So are you saying that the King thought that he'd be greeted as liberators? - Well, not quite that, but they thought they were putting down a small group of factious people in Massachusetts.

They just miscalculated how much support there was for the cause. - Okay, I want to move to the text a little bit more because here comes the part that I think most people are familiar with, and that is "We hold these truths to be self-evident. "That all men are created equal. "That they are endowed by their creator "with certain unalienable rights. "That among these are life, liberty, "and the pursuit of happiness." There's a lot of ideas in here, and I want to break them down with you, Gordon Wood.

So the first, why are these self-evident? What's that claim about? - Well, how are you gonna go proving these things? Why don't you just say it's self-evident? I mean, Jefferson never claimed that this was original with him. He's just sort of putting forth what he thought was conventional wisdom among people who thought like him. Enlightened gentlemen. And I think there's no way of proving all this. It's just that this is what we all know, "self-evident." And then he refers to a natural basis to rights.

Actually, most of the rights they thought about, all through the debate that leads up to the Declaration, are English rights. I mean, that's what they're talking about. And those English rights were quite considerable, and they're important. But you can't keep talking about English rights if you're gonna break from England, so they begin talking about natural rights. - What does that mean, 'Natural rights?'

- It's in nature. Nature is what ought to be. It's the best. What's natural, that's an Enlightened presumption.

When you refer to nature, you're referring to something that's what should be. - Well, I know that there's "Life, liberty, property," what Jefferson has written here rhymes a lot with John Locke. So is he--

- [Prof. Wood] Of course. Locke was very important to these people.

- So help me understand, what was John Locke's fundamental argument that seemed to have such sway? - Well, Locke is a very, very radical thinker of the 18th century. You don't have to have read John Locke to reach the idea that life, liberty and pursuit of happiness (indistinct).

But it certainly did

resemble Locke's "life, "liberty and property" he has. Now, "the pursuit of happiness" was a wonderful, nice change. And...

- And a weird change, as if like a flourish, right?

- Well, happiness is being celebrated in the Enlightened, among Enlightened circles, and they're now talking about happiness as something that we are owed, that we can have happiness, in a way that hadn't been done in medieval times. So that's not so strange that he should invoke happiness.

The creation of "all men

are created equal..." - That's a big one. And here's a question about that, and it's pairing with this notion of natural rights, I look around the world, I look around my neighborhood, people aren't equal. I'm not the strongest, I'm not the tallest, I'm not the smartest. - They aren't saying... He isn't saying all people are equal, he says all people are created equal, and that is a very enlightened notion. It, again, goes back to Locke's philosophical position of that we're born as a blank slate, and what differences occur as we mature come from experience through our senses.

So inequality arises through experience, but we're all born with that same blank slate. In other words, to be Enlightened at this point is to believe entirely in nurture, not nature. You have to understand, the revolution... And this is what's radical about it, the revolution is the repudiation of blood. Up to this point, the aristocracies in Europe had always assumed that they were superior because it flowed through their blood.

I mean, that's the whole idea of monarchy after all. And this is a repudiation of that. What matters is what you do with your life. You are born the same as anyone else. They even applied this to blacks, Africans. Many Enlightened people trying to explain, "Why are some people black?" "Well they are in Africa, the sun is hot, "it's scorched their skin. "And if brought to a more temperate climate, "they would become white over time." They actually thought in those terms.

Climate becomes a very important part of this environment that affects people. So the idea of "all men are created equal" means they're all born the same blank slate on which is etched there... Through experience,

coming from the senses, is in that etched, and what you make of yourself. That's why education becomes so important to this generation. Education wouldn't be important to people who feel "Well, you're born... "Whatever you're born with, "you're gonna stay the same "the rest of your life anyhow."

- It's quite a utopian position to take that we're born as blank slates, isn't it? And I mean that, I guess, in a positive sense. It's looking to the perfection of the world.
- That's the gist of Locke's philosophical works. That's what he says. It's a radical position, but it seemed to people to be liberating, as you can well imagine. If we are all the same, then we can change the environment and then enable people to have a better chance at developing.

But the original conception, "all men are created equal," is this Lockean point of blank slate with experience etching what you are. So they could account for... They knew that people were not the same, but they wanted to break from this aristocratic notion that blood mattered, and that you were born to be what you are, and it's too late. I mean, they always had this notion that if they saw a handsome child in poverty, that kid had to be the offspring of an aristocrat.

In other words, a bastard child thrown out into the... That's the way they thought. - I wanna get a little semantic and dig into some other things, like "all men." So we're sitting here, it's 2023, you hear "all men," and my son's generation with... Their backs will stiffen. So was this colloquial for all people or was it more specific? 'Cause women couldn't vote, women didn't have equal rights. - I don't think they were thinking, "Oh my god, we are not including women in this."

But they certainly did not expect women to become political leaders or to engage in... They're too dependent. People who are dependent, and that's children up to age of 21, and women, are denied the suffrage 'cause they're dependent on someone else. And they cannot have a will of their own, as Blackstone, the great English jurist put it. They could not have a will of their own. So that's the rationale, and most women accepted that role.

They had their own skills, and own talents, and so on. But there's a beginning of some kind of feminist spokesman. Mary Wollstonecraft, the English, wrote a book in the 1790s, "On The Rights of Women." There was a woman in (indistinct)... Sargent Murray in America, who wrote in the 80s and 90s, 1780s and 90s, feminist... The beginnings of it. - Is it a fair reading to say that "all men are created equal" was meant to mean all of humanity?

- [Prof. Wood] Yes, yes.

I think they meant all human beings. - Before I move on to the next part of the Declaration, you've talked about the Scottish Enlightenment, and so Adam Smith has two books that are happening basically at the same time. "The Wealth of Nations," which I think-- - It came out in '76. - Yes, I was like, "do I

remember this--" - The other book came out earlier. - And then, "The Theory of Moral Sentiments." - "Theory of Moral Sentiments" is very much in the line of the sociol...

The sociability argument, where he's just another version of that. Hutcheson, his colleague... Francis Hutcheson's making the same point. - Yeah, this is the thing that I find interesting is a good friend of mine, Russ Roberts, who's got a great EconTalk podcast that Liberty Fund hosts, he's pointed to this phrase from Smith, that "Man not only wants to be loved, "but to be lovely, "to be worthy of love." It's a kind of early evolutionary psychology, that our empathy, our love, our goodness is useful to us.

We evolve in groups and so we want to be good to each other, and the state gets in the way of that. - That's right. It's very hard to explain why radicals in the late 18th century should be such anti-state, but that comes from the notion of monarchy. Monarchy is a corrupt, interfering force that prevents us from this natural flow. I mean, think of the French trilogy in their revolution. What is it called? - It was a...

What was it? Liberty, equality, and fraternity, right? - Fraternity, that's it, right? What's one of the great institutions of this period that's transatlantic? Freemasonry. What is freemasonry but fraternity, people coming together? And so, a lot of-- - So for the kid that only knows the word "fraternity" by college parties, what does fraternity mean? - It means that brotherhood, coming together and treating each other as friends. Even strangers coming together, that was the beauty of freemasonry.

And it explodes in America in these years. - This is a little bit of a tangent, but since these are some things that I think people hear in the popular culture, Freemason is something that sounds like a conspiracy theory-- - Well, it did become that. - So what was that and were many of the founders, or framers, part of this fraternity? - Some of them were and some of them disliked it. I mean, Washington really loved being a Freemason.

He'd go to the meetings. It was a way... It's a kind of surrogate religion for lots of people who really weren't prepared to go and bear their souls in church, but they want the congregational-ness of a religious life, and the freemasonry offered that for them. It has its little secret things and its handshake and all, but once you... You brought people from different walks of life together in a kind of equal basis. It doesn't matter who you were, what your background was, and you came together and celebrated your brotherhood, so to speak.

So it does have relationship to fraternity, and the term "fraternity," as college kids would know, does have that notion of brotherhood. - Okay, I wanna move on to the next part. So this is a big block, I'm gonna make sure I read it correctly. So we've come out of "All men are created equal," and "that to secure these rights, "governments are instituted

among men deriving "their just powers from "the consent of the governed, "that whenever any form of government becomes destructive "of these ends, "it is the right of the people "to alter or abolish it "and to institute new government, "laying its foundation on such principles "and organizing its powers in such form "as they shall seem most likely "to affect their safety and happiness."

There's that word "happiness" again. So we've talked about this already, but this notion that the sovereignty, that the people actually have the right to overthrow... Overthrow their government, I mean, we got... He's still got a king, so there is a sense of "where's he getting this from?" - [Prof. Wood] Well, even the-- - Where's he getting this from? - First of all, they have to understand, they're coming out of an English tradition which is already radical.

I mean, there's no country
like England in Europe. I mean--

- Explain that. - Well, the English are at the radical edge, if you will, and they are mocked as such. I mean the French see the English as being crazy. "They don't have the distinctions "that we have," and so on. And the English took great pride, as Hogarth prints show. In John Bull, and his beer and beef eating, "We are a real people "and we believe in equality."

They would actually talk about they were more equal to each other than the French were. And so, Americans are extreme Englishmen, which is what Burke pointed out. We are so libertarian that we snuff tyranny in every breeze. And we're the descent of dissidents, I mean, we just were so radical compared to the English, but the English are already radical. And George III says, "Liberty is at the basis of our constitution." I mean, so the English celebrate liberty first before we do, so to speak.

We are the heirs of that

liberal English tradition. - So who else existed at the time for us to get a sense of the context?

- Well, France, Russia. The Germans are no state yet, just a bunch of principalities. And the same is true of Italy. But France is the other dominant power, and France is a Catholic power. Strong, centralized, a monarchy. Russia, of course, way off in the east, is a monarchy. There are no...

I mean, there are few little republics. There's the Dutch, who are kind of a half republic, and then you have Venice, a little city of republic. But there's nothing like what's gonna be created, or is being created, in 1776, the United States. Even one of the states, like Pennsylvania, is a huge block of territory, and the idea that you could have 13 of them, that just boggles the mind. There's nothing like that in Europe at the time.

You have to go back to Rome, and they often refer to Rome. And of course, that's an object lesson. We don't want to do what... Rome finally fell, so we don't want to get into that problem. - And it's a sidebar, but the--

- And there's a lot of talk about republics and
"how can they sustain?" 'Cause a republic is a

fragile kind of polity 'cause it's dependent on the people from below. I mean, we have that same issue today.

We talk about autocracy, which is power from the top down. Much more stable, and you can have a large territory. They assume that you could only govern a large territory with an autocracy, and some people might say, "Well, that's understandable. "Look at Russia, it's such a huge landmass. "How else could you govern it "except through an autocracy?" The idea of a republic, which comes from the bottom up, very fragile, very likely to fall apart, so you've gotta worry about that.

And then, the Americans, of course, did. - I want to get into the grievances but before I do, I wanna understand, how did these people see themselves? Because here we are, and they're British colonies and they're English subjects, but they've been living across an ocean for 100 years, right? So I think the first settlers in Virginia are in 1610s or 1607, something like that. - [Prof. Wood] 1607, the colony.

- That's 1607, so you're talking about 1776 is almost 170 years later. So multiple generations have lived in this continent. and built the society that they're living in. - But by 1776, it was a pretty flourishing place that two and a half million people... England and Scotland, eight or nine million. And its birth rate was doubling every 20 years, faster than any place else in the world.

And we could see ourselves... And they knew about it. Franklin talk talks about this. Demographic growth was enormous and was a sign of a healthy state. The standard of living was so high, I mean, so high, that is the available wealth, that kids get married a year earlier. They get married a year earlier, they had one more kid. We had the highest probably fertility rate, at least to 1800, when it was measured, was seven. That is the average woman was...

Women were having seven children. Now, some women didn't have any children, but others had 14 children. So we had fertility rate of seven and that was just extraordinary. And we were growing so fast that people could anticipate that we would soon overcome Great Britain in size. So there's a sense that we are a strong, flourishing people with real advantages to becoming a great nation. - As we move through the document, I'm not gonna read all the grievances 'cause there's a lot.

There's 27 plus grievances that are listed that come next. And this is where we get into the meeting. - This is Jefferson though. You understand, he wrote a pamphlet, the most radical pamphlet in 1774, called "Summary View of the Crisis." It's more radical than anything until Thomas Paine's "Common Sense," which came out in January of '76. Jefferson already throws out his grievances against the crown. He throws everything but the kitchen sink in there.

And to some extent, it's a put up thing. I mean, just looking for anything I can... If he hears that there was some North Carolina... Some issue in North Carolina with the Royal governor, "Well, I'll put it in." I mean,

the basic issue is buried in it. The taxation issue is--

- Well, this is what I wanted to ask you about, 'cause as I'm reading this, I'm like, "Where's the taxation without..." You gotta wait almost two thirds of the way down the list.

- I know, I know, because Jefferson just...

He tries to throw everything in. In fact, the original draft, he blames George III for slavery in America. "You have brought all these people in." And of course, that was too much for his colleagues. That was just such a mischaracterization, and they took it out because they realized that it was just an embarrassing. It would be too embarrassing. But Jefferson just looking for everything he can think of put in. But the basic point is control. That taxation was just one element.

"If they can tax us, they can hurt us. "If they can do anything "that we don't consent to, "we don't want it." And so, by the time he's writing, the colonists had reached the position in the imperial debate that they were tied only to the king, not to parliament. - What else is happening on the ground? Is it really... - [Prof. Wood] There's a war going on already. - So set the stage for if I'm a Pennsylvanian, or a Virginian, and I'm sure the differences are vast in these different states, why would this be animating me?

Is it really like, "Oh, you taxed my tea "so we're gonna go to war"? - You mean in 1776 or earlier, during-- - In the lead up to it. Is it the quartering? The having British troops? Is there a lot of strife happening? - The idea that they

could be taxed by Britain, that is their property taken away, that electrifies the colonists. - So it really is we're the anti-tax country from the start?

- (indistinct) No, but the implications of it.

If you could tax us just a little bit, then you can tax... Legally, you can take more and more, and we would have no control. How are we gonna stop the parliament? Oh, the Brits say, "Oh, well, maybe we'll give you 100 members." They don't want that 'cause that's what they did to Scotland. The Scottish are brought in, in the Act of Settlement, in the beginning of the 18th century. They're given 100 members in Parliament. Well, the Americans don't want that.

I mean, it's suggested

even by Franklin, naively. He didn't quite understand how... - How much of what's happening is about being separated by the Atlantic? How much of it is it just like, "there's this giant distance that takes months, "during which time there's "a good chance you'll die, "to come back and forth." - There's a book written about that. If they'd had modern communications, things might have been different. I'm not sure. The British, they don't really understand what's happening.

Too many of the officials are ignorant of the colonists and they're worried about them. They're the ones who talk about independence. "These colonists are gonna become independent." And they refer to them as Americans well before the colonists

call themselves Americans. - Okay, so who starts to call them? - The British officials referring to this vast array of colonies they have over there in this continent that's called North America, they refer to them as the Americans. The colonists, "we're Virginians," "we're from Pennsylvania," but they don't see themselves as Americans.

It's the British actions that create... When they have to come together in the Congress, then they think of themselves as Americans. - So before I move on to this concluding paragraph, I just wanna make sure we haven't missed any grievances that are worth talking about besides taxes. - Well, the one that was kicked out, that Congress took out, was he blamed George III for slavery. But otherwise, he's blaming him for all kinds of things. And they're serious, some of them, and some of them are marginal.

But he just throws everything he can think of. As I say, (indistinct) everything but the kitchen sink is in there that he can think of as a grievance to justify this revolution. But the main problem, the underlying thing is we're not to be controlled by a mother country 3,000 miles away. They were willing to have Great Britain manage their international trade. That was one position they took. - "Hey, you got that Navy. "That's pretty helpful." - Yeah, and so they had agreed that...

The British had passed navigation acts. It's an awkward position for them 'cause they'd reached, by 1774, that they were tied only to the crown. But then they knew that Britain would wanna manage navigation acts, that is the international trade. So they said, "We'll allow you to do that "from the necessity of the case." I mean, it's a kind of weak concession in a way 'cause it violates... They've already said, "Parliament has no authority over us, "but we're gonna let you do this on the side "because we think it's probably good "for the whole empire."

That's the position, the last position, they made to the Brits. The Brits don't accept that. Now, later, they would... I mean, in 1778, when the French come in on our side, the Brits are so frightened by that, that they send a commission over here, the Carlisle Commission, to the States, offering them everything! Everything they wanted except independence. That very position that we had reached. If they'd done that in '74 or '75, it would've nipped the--
- We'd be Can...

It would just be one big Canada then. - Well, I'm not sure about that but it would've delayed it. Let's put it this way, it would've delayed it. I think some kind of independence was inevitable 'cause it was such a burgeoning society and its sense of itself is increasingly confident. It couldn't have tolerated any connection, unless the Brit just left us alone completely. - Well, and it is interesting to think it wouldn't take that long before we were just so much bigger in population.

- That's right. - "We're not listening to you anymore. "Sorry, we're out." - Already by the mid 19th century, we were able to take on... We could have taken on any European power on their own terms. We can look at the Civil War. I mean, what an army we put together. It would've been just a matter of time, I think. - So as we come to the conclusion of the text, I've jumped over the grievances, there's a paragraph here.

"In every stage of these oppressions, "we have petitioned for redress "in the most humble terms. "Our repeated petitions have been answered "only by repeated injury. "A prince whose character is thus marked "by every act which may define "a tyrant is unfit to be the ruler "of a free people." We are touching on this again and again, but I guess the first is the notion that they were free people. And we've talked about this already, but again, I come back to it-- - They were always talk about they were free people 'cause England's...

The English are free people. I mean, the whole debate, right up to, really, the end, they talk in terms of "We are the defenders of the English constitution." It's a curious revolution in that sense. It's undertaken on behalf of an uncorrupted English constitution. That they are a free people, just as the English used to be. But now, "We are the free Englishmen. "We're saving you from your own corrupt system." And so, they don't see themselves, until the very end, as needing to be independent.

They're defending themselves as Englishmen. And in fact, you make a case... And they understood the irony of this, that "we're revolting on behalf "of the English constitution," and it's a curious kind of thing. They have to drop it when they... They're talking about English rights, all of their rights. And English had this tremendous tradition of rights. I mean, the Bill of Rights, the first Bill of Rights that we talk about, is 1688. Glorious revolution, they get a Bill of Rights against the crown.

The only thing that's unique about American rights is the right of religion, 'cause the English keep an established church, but all the other rights, jury trial, all that stuff that's in the 10 Amendments, the Bill of Rights are English rights. - We've talked about this already, but there's this interesting identity question, especially when you think about that these Americans-- - Read the last pa... Of the Declaration, the last sentence of the Declaration, tells you a lot.

- "We, therefore, the representatives "of the United States of America "in general Congress assembled, "appealing to the supreme judge of the world "for the rectitude of our intentions, "do in the name and by authority "of the good people of these colonies "solemnly publish and declare "that these United Colonies are "and, of right, ought to be "free and independent states; "That they are absolved "from all allegiance to the British crown.

"And that all political connection "between them and the state "of Great Britain is "and ought to be totally

dissolved. "And that as free and independent states, "they have full power to levy war, "conclude peace, contract alliances, "establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things "which independent states may of right do. "And for the support of this Declaration, "with a firm reliance on the protection "of the divine providence, "we mutually pledge to each other "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

- "To each other." There's no nation that they can appeal to. There's no patria, there's no fatherland. They have themselves. What they're appealing to is kind of... When you think about it, it's kind of sad that they really... They're sort of indenting the nation. There is no nation. There's these 13 states, and it's not quite clear that each of those states doesn't have the right to form alliances and do these things, as independent states could do it.

It's unclear, isn't it? It doesn't say that they collectively have that, right? They're saying these are 13 states that had the right to form alliances and be internationally potent. - This is really interesting too when you... Because as you described it, and when we were talking about the concept of the state, and this word 'state,' Pennsylvania is big. Pennsylvania could be a country. - [Prof. Wood] Of course. - And so could Virginia, and so could North Carolina, and Georgia.

These can all be countries. In comparison--

- And they are. Like the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the com... Three of them I think choose the term 'commonwealth,' which is interesting, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, to kind of go back to their ancient republic origins. - This is gonna bridge into the next part of the conversation really well, which is about slavery. You have 56 signers of the declaration. How are they chosen? How does it come to be this group of people in particular?

- Well, they're selected by each state. They were delegates. Each colony had one vote, but they could send delegations of seven, or eight, or two, or three, or whatever. So that's how they get in there. - The mechanics of this are really interesting because you don't have telephone... I mean, you don't have any means of communication other than sending a letter by horseback, basically, right? - [Prof. Wood] Right, exactly, that'd be the fastest. - So letter by horseback, fastest way to communicate, vast landmass of these 13 colonies, and yet there's this thing that is referenced in the text called "in general congress."

So what does that mean? What is the General Congress? - Well, the congress that had met, the Continental Congress, as we call it. This was the second Continental Congress. It began in May of '75 and it was still in existence. - What's that word mean, Congress? Because it's not the US House-- - It's coming together of separate states, like the Congress of Vienna which settled in Napoleonic Wars. It's a collection of states. Keep in mind, these are independent states.

Look, more people... Those people who met, more of them had been to London than had been to Philadelphia. That tells you something about it.

- What unifies them all is their Englishness, their Britishness. - Right, right. But they were suspicious of each other. I mean, John Adams wonders about these southern slaveholders. "What are they gonna be like? "Are they a bunch of aristocrats "that I would not like?" He's pleased by it, 'cause they're very radical. It's Massachusetts and Virginia that are the most radical colonies.

The two of them really bring it about. I mean, they take the lead. - So this moves us into this question of slavery and the weirdness of this from a modern context.

- Of course. - So here you have this declaration and you just brought up Massachusetts, so I want to just read something. A couple things, I gathered. So one was that John Adams, in Massachusetts, had called slavery "a foul contagion "in the human character" and "an evil of colossal magnitude."

This is one of our founding fathers. And yet, the Declaration calls "all men are created equal," but some of them own slaves. Obviously, Thomas Jefferson. You've alluded to this earlier, that an early draft of the declaration actually had an argument-- - But blaming George III for slavery. - My understanding of the passage was, basically, he's saying, "Look, you are trying... "You're now, as part of your shenanigans, "trying to stoke a slave revolt."

- That certainly goes back to the Virginia governor, in November of 1775, issues a proclamation offering freedom to any slave who will escape from his plantation and come to the crown. He's sitting on a ship in Chesapeake Bay. Hannah-Jones, in collaboration with another historian, has made a lot of this. This is what really creates the revolution in Virginia. This is November of '75. The reason that governor is sitting on a ship in Chesapeake Bay is because the patriots have taken over the government completely.

The revolution is over in that sense, in Virginia. So this is not the stirring it up. 300 slaves do run to the crown, they don't get quite what they expected. Some of them end up, I think, being sold to the West Indies. But nonetheless, there are 300 who come. But that's not the... That's hardly the cause of the revolution. Britain wasn't planning to free the slaves. On the contrary, it's Americans, with the Declaration of Independence, with this independence, that free the slaves in the northern states.

Every northern state immediately begins moving against slavery, including Virginia, even though Virginia has a real problem 'cause 40% of its population is enslaved. Now in the Northern States, there's nothing like that. Maybe 12% in New York... 14% I think in New York City. I think my own state of Rhode Island had maybe even as many as 12%. But Massachusetts had three percent, tiny amounts. But nonetheless, it's a legally established institution in all these states and they all move against it under the impact of the revolution.

We have to understand that thousands of years, slavery existed in the world without substantial criticism. None. In fact, even in the 18th century, you have voices here and there. There was Samuel Sewall in 1700, he voiced... A puritan. There's some Quakers. But there's no movement, there's no development. The revolution, the American Revolution, for the first time in history, history, makes slavery a problem for Western culture.

- This is so important for the generations to come to understand, based on what's happening in our culture today because to lose this is to lose something so fundamental about what I believe is the miracle of the country. So I wanna really parse this and understand it. Again, I am not a historian. I have Google though, which should mean... Which means that more people should know these things than they do because we all have Google in our pocket.

- Think of it.

If slavery's always existed, all of a sudden, here's... Eight states abolish it. Now, by 1804... It takes some years 'cause some places, it was a fight. But even in Virginia, Jefferson introduces a bill, even before the revolution, 1767, to abolish slavery in Virginia. So he is the Enlightenment personified. He wants to do everything that's enlightened. I mean, this is why he has... He draws up bills having to do with criminal punishment.

He does... His religion... His bill for religious freedom, 1779, is extraordinary. I mean, nothing like it in the history of the world. Separation of church and state? There's no state in the world that's even thinking like that. "We're gonna have no state involvement with religion." If religion is important, then the state must be involved in it, right? I mean, that's the way it goes. And so, for Jefferson to make this bill separating them, this was...

Nobody else was doing that. I mean, even the other states were abolishing the Church of England, but they weren't necessarily saying you shouldn't have religion being supported by public money. Jefferson's cutting off all support. There's nowhere in Europe that that's happening. So you have to understand how radical these things are. Look, the first anti-slave convention in the history of the world occurred in Philadelphia in 1775. It's not coincidental that it came with a revolution.

The revolution is about enacting the Enlightenment, what enlightened people want the world to be like, and they have a chance to do this with this revolution and that's Jefferson in particular. Now, he's complicated character because he's holding slaves. - Why didn't he just set them free? Why doesn't he just walk the walk? - 'Cause financially, he couldn't. He just is unable. Washington is much more serious about it, and Washington works to free his slaves, and does before he dies.

He puts them in... He frees them. But it's complicated because he... But he provides for their education. He's not just gonna throw them out in the world with un... So they have to remain

trained in some craft. Jefferson doesn't have the wealth. Washington's wealthy enough. Jefferson is so deeply in debt. I mean, here's a guy who's writing John Adams and saying, "Look, you're raising money "from the Dutch for us," in the 1780s, "could you raise some money for me?"

"I need to buy some books." He's borrowing money to buy books, and what kind of a... He's just... - It doesn't absolve him, but--

- [Prof. Wood] No, it doesn't. - And I say that not because I'm modern, but just because he clearly understood that this is a problem.

- He knew it was wrong. But one point to realize is that almost every one of these leaders realizes that slavery is wrong. Patrick Henry voices it. He says, "I know it's wrong, I shouldn't..."

this is 17--

- Why? Why does this group of people come together in this country?

- because they know... The right people are telling them that slavery's one of those things that has to be eliminated. Like, you have to reform

criminal punishment, you have to get rid of

established churches. They're being told these... We know what that is. When people come in and tell you "what's the enlightened thing to do?" That's what they're being told. And so, Henry knows that, and he says, "I know

I should do something, "I just can't live without 'em.

"I need 'em." He comes to that kind of... It's kind of sad.

- It's sad. - There are people, of course, in South Carolina and Georgia who are saying... Even the leaders, who are saying, "No, we're gonna keep it. "We need it." I mean, they know the

source of their wealth. And then of course there

are ordinary people who are saying, "Hey, don't cut it out "just before we haven't had "a chance to get slaves yet."

There's a large numbers of people at the second, third levels who want to keep slavery, but we're talking about the Enlightened elite, almost uniformly, with exception of the Deep South, are willing to try it. In Virginia, you have a lot of man... They pass a new manumissions law, making it easier to free slaves. There's a kind of hopefulness that runs through the period that gets killed, you can almost date it, from the outbreak of the Haitian Rebellion in 1790s.

- You wrote in your book, 'The Creation of the American Republic,' quote, "The Constitution was a compromise "on the issue of slavery, "recognizing its existence, "but also laying out the groundwork "for its eventual abolition." You've made the case that the revolution and Declaration set America to lead the world on this track.

- Exactly, and the promise of ending international slave trade, we're the first to do that too. The Brits come very

close, but we were first.

And the promise is there, and the southern states say, "Oh, give us 20 years more." Otherwise, we would've done it right away, abolish this international slave... See, the Virginians don't need slaves. That's one of the reasons why Virginia is willing to take the lead on this. - Which area was more wealthy? The north or the South? - The North. When Tocqueville comes and he goes to the Ohio River, and he compares Ohio with Kentucky, which has slavery, there's no...

It's clear that Ohio is a flourishing place. And Jefferson knows this too. His daughter marries a New Englander, and goes up there and she writes him, "What a place this is." And he knows something. He's been to New England briefly. He knows, he has a kind of New England complex. That's why he talks about the ward system. He loved those little towns. And he just wishes, he just wishes, he yearns that Virginia could be like New England, without slaves, with these flourishing villages.

There's just no doubt of it that the north is really booming. And there's just no doubt when the war occurred, the north was going to win. But you can see, the north is definitely well... In terms of wealth and there's no comparison. - When I was going to film school, this movie came out with these young hot shots of Holly... Who would soon be titans of Hollywood. It was called "Good Will Hunting." And in this movie, a young Turk, sort of a brilliant guy...

- Matt Damon's character.

- Matt Damon's character. He talks about, "Oh yeah,

I read Gordon Wood," and then he references Howard Zinn as the contra to Gordon Wood. - Zinn was a friend of the family. - Of your family?

- No. - Oh, of his family.

- of Damon's family. Yeah, yeah, they grew up near each other. And so, he makes Zinn the ultimate hero. Yeah, no, that's--

- I've heard folks who are very, I'd say, right of center politically but are also really into the Constitution, who demonize Zinn and his 'People's History of the United States.'

I am always leery of these sorts of things when I don't understand it, but help me understand. What is... We were just talking about history-- - Zinn's an old fashioned Marxist and he simply... His history became quite popular and used in high schools, I guess, all over the country.

- 'The People's History.' - 'The People's History.' And he referenced every kind of revolt from below, every strike, everything, and it was always an economic exploitation being persisted.

- Was it good history? - I can't confess that I've read the book. I dipped into it, I know it. And it's not wrong in

the sense that each one of those episodes occurred. It's a question of, "Well, is that the story, "the full story? "That we've just been a bunch of..." If you're, I suppose, a devout Marxist, then capitalism is a series of evils that have occurred, but I don't think that's a full story. You come away with thinking America must be a terrible place, all this exploitation.

And you've gotta see the whole, and I don't think that he does. - I'm navigating the world as a citizen, and I am told a story, a historical story. What should my starting point be? - It's hard to know. At some point, you're gonna have... If you really want to know, you have to read enough history so that you get a more balanced view. That's the only solution I could think of. But it's very difficult, especially in the modern world with the media.

All kinds of stories will fly around. The main thing is you wanna understand how did we... You start with a very different world, a foreign country back there, different, "how did they get to be us?" And that's the movement, that's the theme you want to have. And it involves a lot of things, including a civil war that was fought on the issue of slavery. It's a very... We have an extraordinary rich history. - We're in very difficult times, it feels like, but I feel like everybody's had difficult times, you know?

And yet, I think that there's something happening right now, and we were talking about it before the camera started to roll, just about the institutions. We have this constitution that has set up these institutions, and I worry about how these will persist. And can the America that works continue to work inside of this framework that the founding documents have set up for? How do you think about this?

As we come up on the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, how much optimism do you have that we've got another 250 in us? - Well, we've had difficult times in the past, including a civil war. What's different, which really scares me, is the lack of confidence in the country's future among elites. They don't seem confident. I mean, that just is new. Americans went through the Civil War, they went through all kinds of changes that took place in, in...

100 years ago, there was this tremendous crisis over immigration, but there was an underlying confidence that the country would be great. We could handle it. It just... That's what's lacking, I think, this confidence, and that's not easily reversed. You just hope that somehow people come to realize that you're living in the country, why not feel good about it and do something... If you don't like it, then make changes. But for all those reformers in the past, the progressive generation, they didn't lose confidence.

Charles Beard was this great historian who wrote the book that changed our attitude towards the Constitution, he admired the founders, He was confident that America was great, but the present critics don't feel that way. - There is this thing that seems to... There's a thing that has... I have observed it change, which is in my adult life, I'm 45 years old, and so I've had a couple decades of being a functional adult. And I have seen the change from, if you claimed that the other side of the political aisle wasn't patriotic, or didn't love

the country, or was anti-American, that was repudiated by the charged.

So if Republicans said, "Democrats hate America, "they're not patriotic," or vice versa, the other side was quick to say, "I love this country." And the people that would be running for office, that would be the first go-to. "How dare you say such a thing? "I love this country. "That's why I'm fighting for my beliefs, "cause I think they'll make the country better." I'm not straw manning when I say I do believe we have crossed some threshold now where at least, maybe not politicians, although some, the most radical sounding, they're willing to say, "No, the country's rotten.

"The country needs to be reconstructed "from the bottom up "because it's so deeply rotten." And that is different. That feels different to me. - Yeah, no, I think that's true. As someone mentioned earlier about politicians accusing each other of lying, that's a really different thing from saying, "I disagree with your opinion. "Your opinion's wrong, "and you're wrongheaded, and you're..." But to say you're lying, that's a more serious charge 'cause it means that you're going at the motive of the person.

He's not really telling the truth because he wants to distort the truth. It's kind of a symptom of the decay of our politics. - For the young people who, hopefully, get a chance to watch this, maybe with their dad, maybe forced by their dad but that's a sign of a good dad if they're forced to watch this conversation, what's your message to my son's generation? To this up and coming generation, Gen Z or Zoomers, the coming Alphas, about America? - Well, you know, if you had to get some perspective on it and say, "What's the most important event "that's occurred in the last 400 years?"

It has to be the creation of the United States. Now, for good or for ill, it's a great saga. Think of it. Starting with a little colony in 1607 of a dozen people, 20, 30 people. And from that, you grow to be the greatest, most powerful nation ever in the history of the world. If you don't like the story, okay, but think about it as a saga, as a story. It makes the rise and fall of Rome seem tame by comparison, or the rise of the British Empire, the Ottoman Empire.

Nothing compared to the story of the United States over the last 400 years. It's just incredible. And think of it in those terms as historian, it becomes a fantastic story. Now you can emphasize different things, a lot happened in it. We are the most diverse country the world has ever known. There were empires that were diverse, the Ottoman Empire, or the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, but as a nation, the whole world is here and they all want to come here.

So we can't be all that bad if so many people wanna come. So what is it that attracts those people and has

attracted them? In the 19th century, 35 million people from Europe came here. I mean, we had no visa requirements. They just came because, "I heard this place, "I could make some money." Some of them came and went back home, but they came 'cause there were opportunities here that they didn't have in their home country.

It seems to me, when you look at this just in the terms of the magnitude of the events, compared to anything that's happened in the history of the whole world, you have to be impressed by it. And whether you like it or dislike it, you have to confront it and come to terms with it. If you wanna know what's going on in the world, you gotta understand that massive event. I just think it's extraordinary story. I can't think of any more important event in the last 400 years.

- It's such a great reminder, it's so simple to just look at who's knocking at your door as a sign. It is really hard to... I feel like it's a hard thing to refute. How bad could the country be if people are getting in boats, and knocking down doors, and climbing over half-built walls to come into the country?

- It is impressive. We do have the whole world here. I can't think of any country that doesn't have some representation here in the country.

- How do you see your role, and the role perhaps of historians in general but especially your role, as a historian in the American story? - Oh, I have a little piece of it that I tell and that's all I can do. I mean, that's my craft, that's my vocation. I just tell my little part of that story. Although, I like focusing on the Revolution, 'cause it's by far the most important event in this story because it legally created the United States and infused into our culture everything we value, our highest noble ideals; equality, liberty.

So my little part is a very important part of that story, but I only have a section of it, a little part of it. - Gordon Wood, thank you for being on Dad Saves America. I've learned a lot in this conversation. It really has been incredible. - Well, I've enjoyed it. Thanks a lot. - I hope you enjoyed my conversation with Gordon Wood. We'll put links to his numerous books down below. And thank you to our friends at Liberty Fund who made this interview possible.

My key takeaway from this conversation was the importance of exploring our history with an open mind, but not an axe to grind. Our country's history is complex and deeply compromised by the legacy of slavery. It's a sin whose scars are still with us to this day. But it's also a story of humanity's greatest ideals: Life, liberty, universal human dignity, being made manifest for the first time on a massive scale. If we wanna preserve our freedoms and improve our society, we need to understand our history and work hard to see it without the biases of politically tinted glasses.

If you enjoyed this video, please share it with your friends and family. And be sure to like, subscribe, and hit that notification bell. At Dad Saves America, we believe that dads are heroes that play an essential role in overcoming the challenges we all face together. And now, we leave you with a dad win of historic proportions. - (indistinct)