Washington, Madison, and the Constitution's First Year

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MR. MEACHAM: Thank you. Sean has made a critical mistake, which is never set that up attacking my age when I have the microphone next. I actually am not 40 years old. I have Reverse Progeria Disease. I´m actually -- I´ve been old for a long time and have been very lucky, as Sean said, to work in great places that have allowed me to do a lot of things that I am still surprised people pay me to do. And it´s, I don´t want to say that too loudly, because I do have to feed the children, but it´s a great pleasure.

The act of ecumenical grace that you all are undertaking to have a biographer of Andrew Jackson, who, to say is a little different than James Madison, I guess might risk understatement. Calm deliberation was never a big thing in Andrew Jackson´s world. But their hearts in the end were together, Madison's and Jackson´s, and I have read a good deal about President Madison. I am chiefly interested in Mrs. Madison, who is so wonderful and just absolutely terrific and if we can just find some of those secret duels that Madison fought and maybe some sort of marital scandal, we´ll be well on our way.

I want to talk tonight about the first year of the Constitution, which I´m defining really as the spring of 1789 to the spring of 1790. And my sense, as you´ll see, is that Madison in his relationship with Washington played an absolutely essential role in being an architect of everything that we, in whose shadow, still stand and without him in the House of Representatives, we would be living in a very different kind of republic. One came quietly and the other with fanfare. James Madison arrived in Philadelphia for the Constitutional Convention on Saturday, May 5, 1787 and took up his usual lodging at Mrs. House´s Boarding House at 5th and Market. Eight days later, on Sunday the thirteenth, Washington entered the city and Madison, already taking notes -- thank God he took notes about the important things -- wrote that Washington was greeted by, quote, "the acclamations of the people as well as more sober marks of the affection and veneration which continues to be felt for his character."

In the ensuing months, the two Virginians -- one known for his height, the other not -- would help to shape the document that Madison would later, with characteristic modesty say, was the product "of many heads and many hands." But the American experiment was in peril at the risk of proving Machiavelli right when he wrote in his history of Florence that in human affairs nothing is perpetual or quiet. Barely a decade after the beginning of the Revolutionary War, it looked as the though the United States, itself never quiet, was surely not going to be perpetual. The weakness of the Articles of Confederation, the unruliness of the states and finally the violence of Shay's Rebellion had convinced enough leaders that something had to be done. The terror was quite real. As Washington wrote of the rebellion and the coming convention, "I would wish" to see "anything and everything essayed to prevent the effusion of blood and to avert the humiliating contemptible figure we are about to make in the annals of mankind." It was an existential crisis. Madison framed the issue clearly saying, "I hope the danger will rouse all real friends to the revolution to exert themselves to perpetuate the union and redeem the honor of the Republican name." This was brilliant, for Madison's formulation put Washington's great legacy -- the success of the Revolutionary War -- in the dock. As enigmatic as Washington could be, one thing was surely clear. He valued his reputation, his fame, above all else. [He was] not being snarky. In 18th century terms, one standing in the eyes of others and of history was a consuming concern, and Washington was very much a man of that time and that place.

The drafting of the Constitution then took on an enormous importance that was fully recognized by the drafters themselves, and once the document went out to the states for ratification, Washington said, at no risk of being accused of understatement, that "a greater drama is now acting on this theater than has heretofore been brought on the American stage or any other in the world. We exhibit at present the novel and astonishing spectacle of a whole people deliberating calmly on what form of government will be most conducive to their happiness." A novel and astonishing spectacle -- that it was and still is all these years distant.

I'd like to speak this evening briefly in general terms about one part of that novel and noble spectacle. The crucial year that elapsed between the adoption of the constitution and Washington's inauguration, the spring of 1789 to the spring of 1790, and about how two men who are too little linked in the public imagination, Washington and Madison, together played a defining role in the forging of the republic. They were, to borrow Dean Acheson's phrase, "more than present at the creation." In many senses, they were the architects of the creation.

Recovering their achievements in this period is more than an exercise in nostalgia or in ancestor worship -- though I approve of ancestor worship as a southerner. It's actually part of what we have to do. It's like -- it's like eating fried food. At this distance, the founding era can seem a kind of political arcadia -- a sylvan age of great men thinking great thoughts and doing great things. They were supposed to have been, in our imagination, unencumbered by the passions of partisanship or the jealousies of rival men and factions. The founders themselves can, as we know, appear Olympian. Even those of us who spend a lot of time reading about the era, can, in our own contentious age, use the founding as a sort of historical antidepressant, reimagining the past as brighter and more cheerful than it really was. In the chaos and incivility of the present --

please no one yell "You lie." I love South Carolina. If we didn't have it, we'd have to invent it. More on that in a moment. -- In the chaos and incivility of the present, one sometimes cannot help but be lulled into thinking of the past as pristine and golden, as though Stuart and Trumbull and Peele had left us oil images of an American Eden. But there is, as the author of Ecclesiastes told us a long time ago, "no thing new under the sun." As tempting as it is to venerate the past at the expense of the present, it is a temptation well worth resisting for ultimately, we learn more from men and events with which we can identify than from unapproachable legends. If Washington and Madison and Jefferson and Adams and all the company of the Founding Fathers could overcome their epic human flaws, their sins, their weaknesses, their prejudices and their rivalries in order to create a more perfect union, then perhaps we in our own time, facing our own obstacles, both intrinsic and circumstantial, can redeem our own hour upon the stage.

My argument is straightforward and necessarily drawn in the broadest of strokes. I am a biographer and thus believe that the actions of individual men and women doing what they can amid what George Eliot called the "dim lights and tangled circumstance" of the world, determine our course. Impersonal forces, broad economic and demographic trends, for example, or the clash of ideologies through time are, of course, vital. But I believe that particular human actions, particular human beings, are in the end the truly determinative force in the affairs of the world. For our purposes then, it's my contention that the Constitution of the United States should be understood as something more than the literal words of the document itself. It is, in my view, to the Government of the United States what the Bible is to Christianity and Judaism: central, inescapable, crucial -- but not definitive. For definitions of behavior or theology or law are arrived at by acts of interpretation by human authorities who by nature must judge the meaning of words through the prism of their own experience. In my own religious tradition, I am an heir to the faith of my fathers -- a kind of high and dry, unemotional Episcopalianism. That, I suppose, is redundant. We are God's frozen people and we -- we struggle. There are nine of us left actually, and we all hate each other. But again we can talk about that later. This [is] a variant of religion that Madison would know well. In Anglicanism, we historically rely on three pillars -- scripture, reason and tradition. Not just scripture -- but reason and tradition. And we believe that the creator, who gave us life and liberty, as Jefferson put it, gave us minds and intended us to use them. I believe (that's the un-Joe Wilson), I believe the founders did essentially the same thing -- leaving us with text and with traditions and with the expectation, in Jefferson's case, the exhortation, to use reason to make sense of an unfolding world.

The Constitution, like the rest of America and like the rest of us, is a work in progress, ever subject to amendment, interpretation and re-interpretation -- world without end. Madison reflected on these things in what I consider a piece of secular American scripture -- Federalist 51. I suggested reading this at our wedding. One of the first of many fights I lost. Madison said, "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature. If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government

would be necessary." No angels. Many men. What I take from Federalist 51 is an affirmation of the proposition that we could do worse -- and often do -- than think of the Constitution not only as a document, as the document we see, but as our habits of being in relation to one another in the context of political society and to see how our habits of being have been formed.

We may profitably return to the beginning of the republic when Washington and Madison were, in the aftermath of Philadelphia and of ratification, turning attention to two essential matters whose roots lie in the Constitution's first year: the role of the Presidency and the articulation in defense of individual rights, chief among them, I believe, [was] liberty of conscience. I do not need to tell you that Madison is unjustly overlooked. No man better represented the spirit of calm deliberation and the making of the America we know than James Madison. Underrated by history, obscure in the popular mind, seemingly best known for being consort to that remarkable woman, Dolley, he is a sometimes invisible Founding Father. But he is an architect of the way we live now. He was indispensable to the man who has come down to us as the indispensable man. Madison played key roles in encouraging Washington to come to the Constitutional Convention and was on intimate terms with the great general when it became clear in the early months of 1789 that Washington was to be the first President of the United States. Madison himself was to serve in the House from which he would counsel the new chief executive in these formative months.

In a way, Madison's contribution to the presidency began even before Charles Thompson, Secretary of the Congress, made his way to Mount Vernon to inform Washington of his unanimous election as President. An early draft of Washington's inaugural address ran some 73 pages long. It was, as Madison put it, a strange production. In correspondence between Mount Vernon and Montpelier, Madison appears to have helped Washington toward a more perfect or at least, more manageable address. The reading of 73 pages on Inauguration Day might have understandably led to the abolition of the Presidential office that afternoon -- or that evening, because they wouldn't have been done in time. There were face-to-face conversations as well. On Sunday, February 22, 1789 (Washington's birthday) Madison arrived at Mount Vernon from Montpelier. We do not know what precise role Madison played in the final inaugural [address], but there is a Madisonian note of common sense in Washington's flattery of his audience, of Congressmen and Senators. Referring to the great constitutional charter under which you are assembled, Washington paid tribute to the talents, the rectitude and the patriotism which adorn the characters of the new government. In a remark somewhat reminiscent of Dr. Johnson's observation that second marriages represent "the triumph of hope over experience", Washington added that he was certain that "no local prejudices or attachments, no separate views nor party animosities" would rival what he called "this great assemblage of communities and interests" -- ah-- high hopes. Washington knew, and made clear to Madison, that everything the new president did would set a precedent. On questions of advice and consent, Madison tended to argue for a stronger, not weaker, presidential office. He said, "If the Constitution has invested all executive power in the President, I venture to assert that the legislature has no right to diminish or modify his executive authority." In particular, he defended Washington's power to remove Executive Branch officials without the explicit consent of

Congress. And it was Madison who stood strong against the grand or, depending on your point of view, grandiose Adams-inspired presidential titles. But the presidency emerged from its first year as strong, but not suffocating in the life of the Government, and the nation has much to do with the collaboration of Madison and Washington.

Establishing the rhythms of the presidency was one achievement. The Bill of Rights was another. Washington alluded to the matter in his inaugural and Madison introduced the language that became the Bill of Rights in September 1789. There had been, as you well know, objections that by enumerating rights, one could infer that unenumerated rights did not exist. But one of the prices of ratification was a more explicit listing and Madison and Washington were at heart practical men. They were also quite pragmatic and, I think, farseeing on what is one of the great insights of the founding: that religious liberty is key to a stable, just and prosperous society. Appalled by the conflicts and bloodshed over matters of faith and power in the old world, many in the founding era -- chiefly Madison and Jefferson -- drew on European thinking and examples of American figures such as Roger Williams to argue for liberty of conscience. As Washington put it in his letter to the Hebrew congregation at Newport, "It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for happily the Government of the United States . . . gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance. . . "

That Americans should enjoy religious liberty as opposed to toleration, liberty being perpetual and inviolate, something from above and is beyond either the hand of a king or the hands of a mob, was first enshrined in American governance in Virginia in an effort led by a very young man from Orange County, James Madison. The first amendment to the Constitution represented, in that 1789-90 period, a capstone to decades of work in the cause of liberty of conscience. It is said that Madison's devotion to this particular issue began when he heard the cries of Baptist preachers being tortured as the established church of Virginia tried to suppress dissent in his youth. When they fell out in the 1790s over political matters and the Jay Treaty, Washington and Madison inadvertently came to represent yet something else in politics, the vicissitudes of power -- and the vicissitudes of saying vicissitude (I'm just a boy from Chattanooga. It's very hard. That's a lot of syllables for us) -- and the fragility of even the most seemingly strong political bond.

As the Constitution's first year ended, all the great and perennial forces of union and disunion, of grace and division, of civility and surliness were evident in American politics. Newspapers showcased particular ideologies in the same way certain cable news networks do now, three centuries later. By the time Thomas Jefferson was in the White House, allegations of sexual misconduct on the part of politicians would be partisan fodder and we would be fighting what we now think of as culture wars. In 1796, you may remember New England newspapers declared that you could have Adams and God or Jefferson and no God, to which it is alleged that a Jefferson supporter said, Adams doesn't think there's a distinction. I just made that up. But I'm a supporter of Jefferson. Madison understood that part of a constitutional system as we have defined it here, which is to say, a system in which the Constitution and its general principles

governs us. And the specifics, well, the specifics are there, but in essence a way of being politically, he knew that system was beyond the reach of civility and reason because human beings are often beyond the reach of civility and reason. Madison's constitution always assumed to the active presence of un-angelic political actors and then offered a carefully constructed ethos in which power was sufficiently diffuse, that cooler passion stood a chance of prevailing over the heat of the moment. Viewed in this light, Madison is perhaps the most resonant of the founders, for he explicitly set out to create a constitutional order and a political one in which partisan fury might shape us without strangling us.

And what of Washington? Can the Rushmorian father of his country tell us anything about ourselves and our own problems? I think he can, and it's interesting to note that Madison believed Washington's style of governance was important enough to put down in his detached memoranda, memoranda which are sadly, for our sake, too damned detached. Here's how Madison described Washington, "Although not idolizing public opinion, no man could be more attentive to the means of ascertaining it. . . On . . . important questions to be decided by him, he spared no pains to gain information from all quarters; freely asking from all whom he held in esteem, and who were intimate with him, a free communication of their sentiments; receiving with great attention" the different "arguments and opinions offered to him; and making up his own judgment with all the leisure that was permitted." That is an excellent guide for leadership no matter what the era.

To conclude, if Wordsworth were right that the child is the father of the man, then the beginning is the father of what follows. What Madison and Washington's work in the first year of the Constitution show us is that flawed men can do great things and if they can, then one hopes we can, too. The monumental nature of the forging of the Constitution and the founding of the Republic is not a rebuke to the present, but a clear and noble example of what we can do when we answer the call of history. And that is all the easier for us because of the wondrous work of Madison and Washington and that gathering of worthies in whose shadow we live. I'd like to end where we began with James Madison in the quiet, but never far from the center of things. Late in life at Montpelier, as his hands were crippled with pain and he warmed himself with a cap and mittens and brandy, he left us a final bit of counsel. "The advice nearest to my heart and deepest in my conviction is that the union of the states be cherished and perpetuated, but the open enemy to it be regarded as a Pandora with her box opened and the disguised one as the serpent creeping with his deadly wiles into paradise." Those are sound words for his time and for ours. Thank you all very much. Thank you.

QUESTION & ANSWER

SPEAKER: Mr. Meacham has agreed to take some questions from the audience. There's a microphone over at the end of that aisle and of this aisle and if you'll make your way down and ask a question and be forewarned that there's probably a lot people who want to ask questions, so please get straight to the question for the speaker. [If] anyone wants to come down.

MR. MEACHAM: Journalists should never take questions. It always turns out badly.

SPEAKER: I wonder if you could discuss for a moment the relationship of Madison and Washington with Madison's great collaborator in the Federalist Papers, Alexander Hamilton.

MR. MEACHAM: Yes. Didn't turn out well, did it? That's like a -- I use this analogy in trying to describe the relationship of Roosevelt and Churchill after Stalin actually came into the picture in Tehran in November of 1943. It was as though Roosevelt and Churchill had been going steady for a couple of years and a cool new girl came in and caught Roosevelt's eye. I like to think it's the first time Joseph Stalin had been called a cool new girl (and probably the last). The splits of the 1790s to which you elude are absolutely essential, I think, to understanding what's going on -- is it there -- wherever it is -- wherever the capital is. It's a perennial argument and Madison and Jefferson, as you all well know, came to represent the lower case "R" republican point of view, more of a states rights view. Hamilton and Washington came to (certainly in Hamilton's case) a high Federalist view. Washington you can argue a bit here and there. Gordon Wood has a marvelous essay about this. "Is there a James Madison Problem?" Are there two James Madisons? Is there a James Madison of the Virginia Plan? That initial constitutional provision which was quite centralized and, in fact, gave the Congress a veto over the state legislatures. That was not a hugely popular thing with the states. And the -- so you have a central -- the centralizing Madison of the 1780s and then the Republican Madison really of the 1790s forward, all the way until he comes sort of back 'round again on nullification. Watching James Madison try to explain how the Kentucky and Virginia resolutions didn't -- were not pro nullification is like watching a cat on a hot tin roof. It's absolutely fascinating. I think the best we can say about that is that Jefferson and Madison were so consumed at that point with stopping the Alien and Sedition Acts, that they went a little too far. But, I think both in the terms of the personal relationships and the Jefferson and Madison -- I'm sorry -- the Jefferson and Hamilton splits were more dramatic. That was more "The Guiding Light" version, where they turned on each other, wrote letters to Daddy about he's been mean to me in the Cabinet. They're absolutely -- if you haven't read these, they're absolutely fascinating to read -- Jefferson and Hamilton's letters to Washington about one another. It really is. It's just, to stick with my academic metaphor, it's like passing notes in study hall, you know, finking on the other guy. But that's another reason I think Madison is so important -- he was part of the ideological division that we overly simplify into Hamilton versus Jefferson that again, I think, certainly defined American politics through the Civil War. And I would argue it in broad form does even now.

SPEAKER: Jon, thank you for your remarks. Very much appreciated. I wonder if you could -- along the same lines -- compare and contrast the views of Madison and Jackson --

MR. MEACHAM: Ha, ha.

SPEAKER: -- in so far as religious liberty is concerned -- church state separation and related matters.

MR. MEACHAM: Absolutely. Jackson was not -- how to put it -- was not always on the right side of things on moral questions. He was an unrepentant slave holder, an active foe of abolition. He wasn't even neutral about it. He tried to thwart it. On church-state matters, however, he was quite good. In 1827, a minister that John Quincy Adams has later referred to as "a busybody . . . clergyman of Philadelphia." I always loved that -- busybody clergyman of Philadelphia. It sounds like a play. Katherine Hepburn would have a role. Bing Crosby would wear the collar, you know. Ezra Stiles Ely wrote -- delivered a sermon on the Fourth of July, 1827 calling for -- the title of the sermon was "The Duty of Christian Freeman to Elect Christian Rulers." And he had it published and sent it to Jackson with the expectation that Jackson would sign up to be part of this. Jackson wrote back this amazingly good letter, because he could for all his -- to me Jackson's great skill was if he wanted to look like a wild man, he could do it. And while you were distracted by that, he was cutting a deal over here that made all the problems go away. Once during the Bank War, a delegation from New York (I think including Rufus King) came and appealed for help. And Jackson started ranting and raving and foaming at the mouth and knocking stuff over and they scurried out. And the moment the door shut, Jackson returned to normal and said "Didn't I manage them well?" So he was fully capable of that. The letter he wrote to Ely about church and state was that he was an avowed friend of Christianity, but believed that all these matters were left, and he used the phrase "liberty of conscience" to the individual and that he believed that we would all unite in realms above ultimately.

It became an issue in the 1832 presidential campaign, which is a wonderful campaign. Henry Clay, who -- I hesitate to make (draw lines) too sharply, but -- Henry Clay's puzzlement that Andrew Jackson was in the White House is rather like Al Gore and John Kerry's puzzlement that George Bush was in the White House. Does that make sense? It was this kind of how did this happen? You could just see the thought bubble -- on their part. I'm not, believe me, I'm not saying, in fact, I think George W. Bush has a great deal of that Jacksonian characteristic. I think he is a much shrewder and more complicated politician than people realize right now. But, Clay just couldn't believe this had happened. So, there was a terrible Cholera epidemic killing thousands of people. And Clay took the radical position that he was against Cholera and -- he's the great compromiser, that guy -- and put a motion to have a day of prayer and fasting and all that. And Jackson wrote a veto message. It didn't get to him in the end, but Jackson was willing to come out in favor of Cholera because he was so concerned. He did not believe the Federal Government should do anything in matters of religion. He read the Constitution very explicitly that way. State governments were a different matter. He said let them fight it out. But he was very good on this and I don't know whether (I should, I apologize) he explicitly knew Madison [or] the debt he owed Madison in that. I should -- I'll find that out. It's a source of some sadness to me that the two didn't have some kind of relationship because I think they might have liked each other a little bit, given Madison's affection for Jefferson. He liked rascals, you know. He was sort of the ballast, wasn't he? I love this idea of Madison as sort of the Bruce Lindsay of the Jefferson years, where Jefferson could pop off and Madison would decide whether to keep

the letter or burn it or whatever. If Haldeman had been better about that with Nixon, it would have been a whole different thing. Sir?

SPEAKER: Could you speak about Madison's role as the kind of Axelrod of Jefferson's presidential campaign in 1800?

MR. MEACHAM: Yes. Well, you just put it very well. My sense is, for a man whom you would not think had terrific political instincts, he did. His presidency -- we were just commenting on this earlier -- his presidency is so shrouded in just fog. I mean it's just people don't know it at all and should. But I think he, without question, understood how to build coalitions. What Axelrod did for Senator and now President Obama is he saw something that the rest of us didn't see, which is that you could get to 52-53 percent with new voters and voters a generation behind me frankly, for whom the American dilemma of race was not as central. And that's the same way Madison was always building legislative coalitions, both in the House and Philadelphia. He was arguably the only effective -- and this is damning with faint praise -- he was effective in the Congress in 1780s. But, that's like saying you're the best restaurant in a hospital. I think there's a noble tradition here, sort of Harry Hopkins-like. Politics is not a dirty word. It's not a dirty thing. It's how all this actually happens. And the idea that there's one place where you think big policy thoughts and do a lot of chin stroking and then somebody else handles politics seems to me is wrong. I mean you can think all the big thoughts you want, but if you can't put them into action, you're not as effective a political actor as you should be.

SPEAKER: I was hoping we could go back and talk a little bit more about the two Madisons --

MR. MEACHAM: Sure.

SPEAKER: -- that you referred to. You have a guy that comes from the backwaters of Virginia that has the brainchild, that -- the Virginia Plan. And then, through the Federalist Papers and that first administration -- where was it in the first administration or later where he went so hard back over to states rights, that sort of dichotomy?

MR. MEACHAM: The bank. The bank in 1790. Do you all agree with that? There are experts here who know far more. Do you agree? Don't nod all at once. I think it was the bank. And he was part of (I think he -- it's always hard to say people felt guilty) the great compromise of 1790. If you think about the three great compromises that kept the Civil War out where it ended up happening with the assumption of debts, the bank and in exchange for the capital here, we wouldn't be here right now if Madison and Jefferson and Hamilton hadn't cut that deal. I think that he -- [by] my reading of the history, and I'm not a Madison expert by any means -- but my reading is that the establishment of the bank and the slow, but steady, rise of Hamilton in the Cabinet began to put him in -- where'd he go? Oh, there you are. Sorry -- began to worry him and push him again sort of away from the Virginia Plan-Madison and more toward the fellow who was writing -- remember there's a whole separate Federalist Papers. You know, he was a columnist for the Constitution and then he wrote all these pieces arguing for the

Republican point of view. While he [Madison] was in the House, Jefferson was supporting a newspaper that was publishing articles taking on the administration of which he was the Secretary of State. It would be like what? If Roger Ailes were in the Cabinet -- never mind. I can't -- I can't -- I can't work all that out. But, it was very quick. It was very quick, and I think he struggled with it. But, it's -- Gordon, again Professor Wood has a wonderful line about trying to find consistency in a politician who had a long career and a time of great moment is hard -- if not impossible. I struggled with this with Winston Churchill for a long time. You know, how did -- as you all remember, he was a Tory, and then he was a Liberal and then he was a Tory in which he said anyone can rat, but it takes character to re-rat. And so I think sometimes Churchill, and Madison to some extent, certainly the founders as a whole are so. I find that quoting them -- there's Shakespeare's line about the devil can quote scripture to his purpose -- quoting them out of context is one of the great dangers that can happen. And Churchill is like that. You can find anything you want to support. Jefferson's probably the worst. But my sense is -- this is my final pet point -- when people press for consistency in politicians, I think they forget that (I'm talking about 18th century, 19th century politicians) politician's letters were like our phone calls or emails now. How would you like every phone call you [make] – "Hey, here's an idea . . ." -- to be, you know, for somebody like me to come along and pick apart, centuries later. They had to try out ideas. And, I think, Jefferson -- again who was always wildly influenced by the last book he read or the last person he talked to -- which is fine. I mean that's part of being human and its part of being curious. But you can't hold him to the strict meaning of that. That's part of my point about the Constitution as the Bible. If (at least in my tradition) you do not take scripture literally, and you use reason and tradition to interpret it, apply it to the problems of the moment and press on, which seems, to me, is another way of thinking about the great debate about original intent versus the living Constitution.

SPEAKER: In fact I was about to ask about the whole original intent interpretation -- so perfect timing.

MR. MEACHAM: Yeah.

SPEAKER: Is there anything you can give us on Madison's thoughts? Did he ever put clearly in writing any guidance to future generations? If so, how accurate has that been? What balance would he have between looking at the original intent behind the amendments and knowing that society will change -- technology and society and such?

MR. MEACHAM: Yeah. I think Madison and Washington, in particular, were actually quite far seeing on these matters. I think that Madison did have a tendency, and I say this with great respect, to write with the flair of an actuary. He -- sorry Board of Trustees -- but they're complicated sentences, you know. Jefferson, unencumbered by detail, wrote wonderful sentences. But again, Madison was the guy who actually had to, make it happen. So, I think he would agree with what I'm saying because it is of a piece with, I think, an honest, intellectual engagement with the problems of the present where the only ideology is how do you create the freest possible, the most inclusive possible civil society where -- to use an image from the

religious liberty debates in Virginia, as John Leland, the great Baptist said -- it doesn't matter to me whether my neighbor believes in no God, one God or 20 Gods. It neither breaks my leg nor picks my pocket. As long as nothing breaks my leg or picks my pocket, I'm all, you know -- go for it. And I think ultimately that was the Madisonian vision is, how do you bring -- and this is as old as the oldest question, but it goes back to Hobbes in a way and know how do you put up guardrail that creates enough order, keeps chaos at bay, that you can have that kind of culture of liberty? And it was Madison's sense of the mechanics of human nature and the mechanics of power that created that system for us. It is remarkable, when you think about it, that a document written in a hot summer, by flawed men has endured as well as it has. And when it was tested most bloodily and violently, it survived. It's funny, I took the train down from New York this afternoon and walked by the East Front and I was thinking, it's sort of fashionable now, when you think about presidential inaugurations, to say why do they always use the East Front? Why didn't they do what Reagan did forever? But you look up there and you think about the words that were spoken from those steps -- we have nothing to fear but fear itself, with malice toward none, charity for all. Jackson -- I'm sure you all can quote his second inaugural -- said great is the stake placed upon us. Great is the responsibility that has been thrust upon the people of the United States -- a very modern idea. And the fact that, that capital is there, and that we're here, is in large measure because this five-foot-four guy, who got turned down by one woman -- had his heart broken -- and yet who stayed in the arena and fought, *stayed in the arena and fought*. I mean if he hadn't done that -- one of the tests of a great man theory of history, of which I am hugely guilty perhaps to a fault, is could someone else have done it? So, for instance, the great example is in December 1932 -- remember both Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill almost died. Remember this? The December 1932 -- there was an assassination attempt against FDR in Miami. It killed the Mayor of Chicago who was next to him. Churchill was run over on 5th Avenue by a taxicab because he looked the wrong way. It's unclear to what extent the Johnny Walker Red -- what role that played, but it made him very loose as he went. If in that period, Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill had died, would the history of 1940 forward be the same? I don't think so. And that's not just because I didn't want to write a book called Clement and Wendell -- but that would be reason enough it seems to me. So, step back. Let's say Madison, who always thought he was going to die and lived (like all great people who he thought he was going to die) he lived to be, what 106? -- whatever he was. You could count the rings on the guy. I love, don't you love that there's a photograph of Dolley Madison with James Buchanan. Isn't that amazing? It reminds you of both the length of American history and its brevity. I don't see who could have maneuvered Washington into attending the convention, who could have, again, done what I talked about earlier -- could have helped him, because to help Washington, required a complete sublimation of one's own ego, a tending of his without his knowing you were doing it and a kind of -- again in the role he played in Jefferson's life is a whole other topic. His is hugely important. So, could someone else have done all that? I don't know of anyone. Patrick Henry? God help us. George Mason? No. There just aren't -- John Jay? No. Hamilton? No. So to answer a counter-factual question, you have to say well, you know what? X would have stepped in and I just don't see who could have played the role Madison played. One more?

SPEAKER: I join others in thanking you for your presentation. You have made a convincing case that Washington and Madison collaborated to determine, to discern what was in the public interest and to create a framework in which the public interest could be revealed and put into play as a governing force. You ended your formal presentation with a statement to the effect that the Constitution is designed to deal with flawed people. I suggest that we're flawed in the sense that we want not so much our -- not so much the public interest to prevail, but our respective personal interests to prevail. One could certainly illustrate that with the current political world. The question is, what skills does the Constitution require of our politicians and what forces, what powers does the Constitution create or restrain that would enable us as a free people to focus on what is in our common public interest as distinguished from our respective individual interest?

MR. MEACHAM: Well, I'm glad you asked a simple question, sir. People over here were nicer. It's a fascinating question, and you just put my argument better, so, thank you. You just asked the core question. There are two core questions in American life, aren't there? One is what do we mean now by, in what Jefferson referred to as, men? If all men are created equal, who do we now include in that definition? There's a perennial struggle. My argument is we have become ever stronger the wider we've opened our arms. The second is, as you just said, to what extent -- the interplay, the competition between public interest and private interest -- to what extent does one sacrifice one's own time, treasure, rights for a larger good? And, is one man's larger good the other man's road to socialism? -- just to pick an image at random. And then, I don't think -- if I knew the answer to that, I would be a very wise person and, remember I'm just wise on a weekly basis. I just have to get to Sunday. I guess what I would say is having struggled with that, again in a less articulate way than you put it, the founders and what I would argue their wisest heirs -- Jackson insofar as he represented the thinking of Edward Livingston and Daniel Webster and to some extent John Quincy Adams, Lincoln, TR, FDR, maybe President Reagan, too -- all understood that politics was essentially a limited enterprise and at what point did politics end and culture begin? And that's one of those lines that we'll be forever chasing, but I've been thinking [and] I've been talking a lot about Franklin Roosevelt for some reason tonight. But his last inaugural is all about this. It's a speech no one remembers. It's about 750 words. Go home and Google it. I don't think it will crash the server. Sherwood wrote it, but he talked about the imperfect nature of the work of 1787 and that even as we were on the cusp of victory now, the imperfect nature of American society that was about to become this global force. And what he said was, and what I think Madison and certainly Jefferson would have agreed with -- certainly Adams, was that the work of politics, the work of the balancing act you're talking about is simply never done. So the idea that we can reach some perfect equilibrium is probably a fool's errand. I don't see how exactly you do that. And one of the problems -- and as a journalist, I struggle with this -- is in the hurly-burly of the present, everything seems, I sometimes call it, "superlativitis." Everything is the most this or the worst that or the best. No. I mean it's all relative and it's all important because it's the challenges and problems of our time. But, to use the live example of what's in the news at the moment, the President has, certainly not for lack of trying now, I think, not defined that larger public good in a way that's so clear that you can even have the conversation that you're suggesting. So I would

argue, finally, that it's the people and it's the case one makes. It's the nature of a democratic -- lower case "D" -- republic that there has to be a connection between the leader and the followers and that when we have done best, particularly in the 20th Century, when we've done -- when the better angels of our nature have won out, it's been when there have been great leaders, great democratic leaders -- again lower case "D". Whatever you agree with them or disagree with them, Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, Ronald Reagan were great democratic leaders. They had people who would walk through fire for them and they created -- they changed the world and the world was one way before they were President and another way afterward. And the Constitution made that possible. And so I think it is ultimately -- again to be reductionist -- ultimately about the people.

Here endeth the lesson. Thank you all very much.

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