

Author Jon Meacham Discusses 'The Soul of America'

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By Kate Karstens

Marvin Kalb (left) asks Jon Meacham about his motivations behind writing *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels*. Image by Kate Karstens. United States, 2018.

Marvin Kalb (left) asks Jon Meacham about his motivations behind writing *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels*. Image by Kate Karstens. United States, 2018.

“I read your book. I have some questions.”

This was the message author and historian Jon Meacham received from Pulitzer Center Senior Adviser Marvin Kalb a month following the release of Meacham’s book, *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels*. On Wednesday, June 20, an audience composed of staff from the Pulitzer Center and the Institute for Current World Affairs engaged Meacham about how the Trump presidency aligns within America’s historical framework.

The Soul of America invites readers to inspect turbulent eras in America—spanning from the Civil War well into the 21st century—in order to evaluate current events with perspective.

“We’ve been through difficult moments in the past. We should figure out how we got through them and apply those lessons now,” Meacham said. “I’m also fundamentally optimistic. I’m kind of a Whig, in terms of the American story.”

Kalb led the discussion, expressing his difficulty in agreeing with the book’s hopeful conclusion. In Kalb’s view, President Donald Trump is

altering the composition of democracy, “moving stones along the way that could change the soul of America,” to which Meacham replied: “The nature of the American experiment is that it is an experiment. Maybe fascism is at hand, but I don’t think so. I would have a different view if he had won the popular vote. He is president because of a Madisonian, 18th century quirk.”

The audience asked Meacham to look at other institutions seemingly shaken by Trump’s era, spanning from the composition of the Supreme Court, to the journalistic struggle to appear unbiased, to the education and apathy of America’s citizenry.

“My whole argument is that the moments we want to emulate and tend to commemorate are the moments where the powerless have ultimately attracted the attention of the powerful,” Meacham said. “I just think it’s a historical fact that we’ve become stronger the more widely we’ve opened up our arms.”

In his work, Meacham laid out a number of moments in the past two centuries when the future of America appeared to hang in the balance of current events but was actually following a historical precedence of action and reaction.

Although not included in the book, Meacham discussed the similarities between Richard Nixon and Trump. Nixon’s resignation took 26 months, and only took place after Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater urged him to step down. Meacham gives advice to senators who question when to oppose Trump, pointing to Goldwater’s last-second appeal as a standard for politicians to follow. Intern Alyssa Sperrazza questioned the procrastination evident in the Nixon case, asking Meacham if this precedent is the best one to follow.

“I don’t know. It seems to me that one of the virtues of historical sensibility is it tempers your expectations,” Meacham said. “My view of political life, based on journalism and history, is that politicians are far more often mirrors of who we are than they are molders. If the anti-Trump forces truly organize, truly emphasize their views, then I think they will prevail.”

Looking broadly at the foundations of democracy, Meacham spoke about a Constitution written for times of turbulence and institutions built to be resilient. Throughout his book and the discussion, Meacham maintained the importance of conscientious concern as a foundation for conversation.

“I’m not suggesting the kingdom of heaven will come after Donald Trump by any means,” Meacham said. “The Trump election is a last grasp at white male supremacy. My argument is ... whether it’s emancipation, or economic opportunity, or suffrage, or fighting Jim Crow, the story of the country can be seen as the hard-fought story of these victories.”

A Battle for the ‘Soul of America’? It’s as Old as America, One Historian Notes

At the close of his First Inaugural Address, President Abraham Lincoln entreated the seceding slaveholders to “swell the chorus of the Union” until the nation was touched “by the better angels of our nature.” It is among the most eloquent sentences by our most eloquent president, and subsequent speechwriters and pundits have quoted it nearly to death. But as Lincoln knew well, eloquence is not necessarily the same as efficacy. Five weeks after his inauguration, the secessionists fired on Fort Sumter and the slaughter of the Civil War began.

Jon Meacham is the latest writer to cite Lincoln’s plea, which helps suggest why his new book, “The Soul of America,” is at once so engaging and troubling. Appalled by the ascendancy of Donald J. Trump, and shaken by the deadly white nationalist rallies in Charlottesville in 2017, Meacham returns to other moments in our history when fear and division seemed rampant. He wants to remind us that the current political turmoil is not unprecedented, that as a nation we have survived times worse than this. And initially this sounds a little too reassuring.

But Meacham quickly adds that America’s survival has never been automatic. Covering the century that stretched from the abolition of slavery to the civil-rights victories of the mid-1960s, he explains how the nation has required activist liberal presidents — above all Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman and Lyndon B. Johnson — to replace fear with hope and then to reverse injustice and expand equality. Our better angels, Meacham implies, reside in that part of the American soul that inspired the Square Deal, the New Deal and the Great Society.

At a time when liberalism is besieged by populisms of both the right and the left, these portions of Meacham's book offer a strong if unfashionable reminder of all that progressive American government has achieved. His book even recalls the kinds of confident histories written 50 years ago by the likes of Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Eric Goldman, in which the nation was delivered from the forces of complacency and reaction, and achieved great political and social reforms. Meacham widens the field of historical influence to include activists and intellectuals usually deemed outside the mainstream, above all W. E. B. Du Bois.

Meacham commends a particular liberal disposition that once dominated our politics but whose influence has long since waned. It is a public philosophy akin to what Schlesinger described as the politics of "the vital center," devoted to egalitarian reform but disbelieving in human perfection, fierce in its advocacy but humble in the face of human folly. Above all, it is pragmatic, its idealism tempered not by timidity or cupidity or corporate fealty but by a respect for its own limits. This is also, of course, the view of James Madison, and it undergirds the Constitution. By its very nature, it is anti-Trump, whose narcissism is only the beginning of his antithesis to the American political tradition. Yet it is also at odds with the strident purism so evident today from many quarters that insists on turning politics into a kind of crusading hysteria.

Those are the engaging parts of "The Soul of America." What's troubling is the continuing history, amply if less fully documented in the book, of another abiding element of the American "soul," an authoritarian politics that is absolutist, oligarchic, anti-egalitarian, demagogic and almost always racist. This political strain emerged before Meacham fully begins his story, flowering in the Confederate States of America, the modern world's first experiment in building a

nation founded explicitly on racial supremacy. Although defeated in 1865, this dark strain was never destroyed; indeed, if the Confederacy lost the Civil War, Meacham remarks, in important ways it won the peace following the white South's fitful overthrow of Reconstruction.

Thereafter, he shows, the authoritarian strain mutated into numerous deplorable appeals and movements that incited white racism, demonized immigrants and promoted plutocracy. For adherents — as he observes of the original racist neo-Confederates during Reconstruction — the rejection of federal rule was “a holy cause.”

Although these antidemocratic impulses have sometimes infected conventional partisan politics, for the most part national parties and politicians have kept them at bay. Under President Trump, however, they have become not just ascendant in the White House but entrenched in what was long ago Lincoln's Republican Party. In response, Meacham tries to summon the better angels by looking back at when America truly has been great.

He is effective as ever at writing history for a broad readership. A journalist and presidential biographer who won a Pulitzer for his life of Andrew Jackson, he has seen how American politics works close up, as most academic historians have not, yet he has remained uncynical. He is an adroit and appealing storyteller. While interested in providing a usable history with lessons for the present, he tries to judge the past on its own terms, resisting the easy moralizing that smugly elevates the right-thinking living above the thoroughly unenlightened dead. Yet he does not on that account pardon his heroes' serious shortcomings, whether it be Theodore Roosevelt's Anglo-Saxon imperialism or Franklin D. Roosevelt's wartime order to intern Japanese-Americans.

Some of the book's most surprising passages describe how political leaders well outside Meacham's pantheon stood up to racists and right-

wing demagogues. When the second Ku Klux Klan arose in the 1920s, President Warren G. Harding, in a speech in Birmingham, Ala., bravely and pointedly (if less than ardently) defended blacks' civil rights. His successor, Calvin Coolidge, called the guarantee of equal rights for blacks a constitutional imperative that was fundamental "to the traditions and ... the principles of the Republican Party." Thirty years later, Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's fate was sealed when Senate Republicans, including Ralph Flanders and Prescott Bush, denounced him. Meacham leaves it to his readers to draw the connections — or the stunning lack thereof — between the better angels then and the dark side now.

Unfortunately, the book's historical narrative ends with a rousing account of the collaboration between Lyndon Johnson and Martin Luther King Jr. in achieving the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Vietnam War, the explosion of white backlash and ghetto violence, and the fitful collapse of the New Deal coalition receive extremely short shrift. Suddenly, we are thrust back into the present, with little understanding of how we got here from there. Specifically, there is virtually nothing about how the well-documented right-wing radicalization of the Republican Party paved the way for Donald Trump — from Richard Nixon's Southern strategy to Ronald Reagan's dog-whistle appeals to states' rights racism, to Newt Gingrich's systematic smear tactics and the devolution of the G.O.P. into what the political scientists Norman J. Ornstein and Thomas E. Mann have called an "insurgent outlier — ideologically extreme." Perhaps Meacham understands the last half century of American politics differently, which would be interesting to consider. Absent that central explanation, though, his book cannot adequately address and

measure what's gone so wrong with the American soul and what we can do to right it.

The book concludes with some worthy injunctions about getting active in politics, rejecting tribalism and respecting facts. But these fail to convey the profound depth of the crisis. Not since 1861 has the authoritarian part of the American soul so damaged and endangered our democracy and the rule of law. It will not be overcome easily. And so it makes sense to recall, as Meacham does, Lincoln's invocation of our better angels in his First Inaugural, but only if we understand that history brought not an "easier triumph," as Lincoln reflected in his Second Inaugural, but a fearsome fight for the survival of the nation's ideals, one that required more than angels.

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