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3 SPEAKERS

Hannah McCarthy

Heather Cox Richardson

Speaker3

START OF TRANSCRIPT

**[00:00:01] Hannah McCarthy**

A few years ago, Nick and I were at an event in the same town where we record and produce Civics 101 that's Concord, New Hampshire. We were in front of this crowd of very civically engaged citizens, and someone says, hey, you should have Heather Cox Richardson on the podcast. And we both said, and I am a smidge embarrassed to admit this. Heather who? Now there's a pretty good chance you already know Heather, who by the next day I had subscribed to Heather's unparalleled newsletter, letters from an American, and realized that I had just gained access to the historical context for the goings on of American government, of my dreams. We tried to get Heather on the podcast at the time, but it turns out she was pretty busy. Now, one of the things that made her so very busy is exactly what you are about to hear about today. Because I did eventually get the chance to interview Heather Cox Richardson about her brand new book, Democracy Awakening Notes on the State of America. Now, I blazed through this book in two sittings. You may get through it in just one. You are about to hear my conversation with Heather about her book and the state of America. We sat down to talk at the Music Hall in Portsmouth, New Hampshire for their event series, writers on a New England Stage, in September of 2023. Now, fun fact Heather Cox Richardson was a little delayed for our interview because she was coming from New York City, which had just been hit by intense rains and flooding. Heather hopped off her delayed plane, got into a car, drove to New Hampshire, and walked on stage. So yeah, this is someone who can pivot just that quickly to a serious and wonderful and generous conversation about what is going on in this nation. You're listening to Civics 101. I am Hannah McCarthy and Heather Cox Richardson. She's an historian and professor at Boston College. She's written seven books. Democracy awakening is just her most recent. So without further ado, please enjoy this conversation with Heather Cox Richardson for writers on a New England stage.

**[00:02:35] Heather Cox Richardson**

Hi, Heather.

**[00:02:36] Heather Cox Richardson**

How are you?

**[00:02:37] Hannah McCarthy**

I'm doing fine. How are you doing? Is the more important question.

**[00:02:41] Heather Cox Richardson**

Taking things easy?

**[00:02:42] Hannah McCarthy**

Yeah, just taking it slow. Just sort of.

**[00:02:44] Heather Cox Richardson**

Hey, listen, actually, I want to start by thanking you all for staying here. I, I it has been a long day, and I do want to emphasize that we really did not bear the brunt of this storm. We were at the airport before it really hit. We got a little bit wet, but we saw the pictures and thought, oh my God, so so you shouldn't feel that sorry for us. I do want to want to thank my phenomenal friend and agent Lisa, who got that plane into the air all by herself. And and I also want to say that what has been fun about this tour and everything about the book, is that it's always been about friends and family, not just the work and my life, but events like this. And I do, in fact, have at least two very dear old friends in the audience tonight that I went to school with from the time I was in second grade. And hi, Susan and Rick, thanks for being here. And. And I have family here too. My stepson is here and I will not embarrass him by calling him out by name, but I'm really happy to have them here as symbols of this much larger movement, really. So thanks for being here.

**[00:04:06] Hannah McCarthy**

So that's really interesting that you say that, Heather, that it's always been about friends and family. So I have been a subscriber to your newsletter for years now, and every single time I open my inbox and see that newsletter there, I feel as though I've got this friend who is saying, no, I've got it. Don't worry, I've covered it. I know you're confused, but I can help you every time. What is it? Oh, look at that. Yes, exactly. I think there are some people here who might know what I'm talking about. Yeah, it is my job, my daily job to understand what's going on in this country. And you help me a lot. What motivated you to start releasing this sometimes daily newsletter to an ever growing audience?

**[00:04:52] Heather Cox Richardson**

I never set out to write a newsletter. I set out really quite by accident on September 15th, 2019 to explain to people what the world liked looked like to me that day, because for many years I'd been writing a weekly essay on Facebook that looked at art or something, just was something I wanted to write, and I hadn't done it for a while, and people were worried about me because I have had in the past the tendency to get into trouble with some people that you don't want to get into trouble with, and they wondered if I was okay. So I wrote this letter and and the questions just started pouring in about. At the time, there was a we knew that there had been a letter written by the chair of the House Intelligence Committee, Adam Schiff, a representative from California, telling the then acting director of National Intelligence that he knew there had been a whistleblower, and by law, he had to give the whistleblower complaint to the House of Representatives. And he hadn't done it. It was very clear that the legislative branch was accusing the executive branch of breaking a specific law. But that's actually really complicated. So people kept throwing in questions, and a couple of days later I thought, well, maybe I should answer this. I felt like I was kind of flooding the airwaves. So I wrote again on September 17th, 2019, and I have posted every night since. And tonight's letter is already almost done.

**[00:06:25] Hannah McCarthy**

That leads perfectly to my next question, which is how? And I ask that because like I said, this is this is what I do on a daily basis. I do become fatigued and I am not doing as much work as you are doing by any stretch. What keeps you motivated?

**[00:06:48] Heather Cox Richardson**

I mean, so so it is a conversation that is going on, and I have access to the skills and some of the voices that people want to know what's happening. So it's not a difficult thing for me to do that I'm really good at research. I don't I don't know, everyone's like, how do you know all this stuff? I'm like, Poor Lisa was in the car with me and I'm like, what the expletive did, did the the house just try to pass? Was it the continuing resolution from the Senate? Did they write their own. And and we're both like looking trying to figure out what it was. We did figure it out. I just know where to look. So it seems a little bit churlish not to use those skills to answer questions for people who don't have those skills. And and I will also say that what I do is very much like being an athlete. If you're a runner, you don't just say, oh, I don't feel like doing it today. I mean, there's that muscle memory of, you have to get out there and do it again the next day. And so, so I just write every day.

**[00:07:43] Hannah McCarthy**

And how do you choose what actually makes it in what it seems like it's necessary for your audience in that moment to best understand?

**[00:07:50] Heather Cox Richardson**

That's the fun question. The fun question is when everything is coming at you, what are the stories that you need to note? And I have likened it in the past to watching the cement come out of a cement truck when you pour foundation. If you've seen that, it's kind of mesmerizing because it just keeps coming down the chute and there's like, like it's all gray and there's slag in it and you're kind of not paying attention. But then there might be a really big stone and you think, oh, that's going to be a problem, right? But for me, I literally think of it as if you're watching that gray come out and it's just going by, and then all of a sudden there's a child's toy, you're like, that doesn't belong. That's unusual. Or my other example is a leaping carp. You know, you're like, that doesn't belong that we need to take note of. And what I think about is, if I were a graduate student in 150 years, and I wanted to know what happened on September 29th, 2023, which I think is today, what stories matter, what are the stories that matter today and what what can be put off? So, for example, today was the speech that Mark Milley gave the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for his retirement after after 44.5 years in the service. It's important. It's an important speech, but it can wait until the weekend. There are things that happen today that can't wait until the weekend because a historian who looks at that is going to say, oh, I need to know the timing of that. And so Mark Milley is got put off, and you will see him probably tomorrow night.

**[00:09:27] Hannah McCarthy**

Now, I'd love to talk about your book. I devoured this book. I have I have read a lot of books over the course of my role in this job, but this one was truly a pleasure. I already knew. I would like your writing, but this was really enjoyable, and something that actually made me exclaim out loud was a vocab distinction between conservatism and movement conservatism. And I will confess to this whole audience that I have been using the term conservatism, I believe, to mean movement conservatism probably my entire life. Certainly for as long as I have been talking about politics here in America. Can you define for us the difference? I can.

**[00:10:14] Heather Cox Richardson**

But I'm laughing a little bit because you just made this book sound so boring. No?

**[00:10:20] Hannah McCarthy**

Okay. Fair enough. I am not into the same things that everyone else is into. I will own that. This book is really fun and really easy to read and you'll blaze through it. I'm into fun things too, I promise.

**[00:10:32] Heather Cox Richardson**

So. So what she's referring to is that the book starts with an important distinction, and that is, it makes me crazy when people call the current day Republican Party members conservatives because they are not. They are radical extremists. And if you read me, you will note that I don't call them conservatives, because we do have both a world history of conservatism and also a proud American history of conservatism. And those are not what is happening in the current day Republican Party. So the conservatism grew out of the reaction to the French Revolution. And I'm not going to do the whole the whole spiel on it. But but it's important because Edmund Burke, who was the thinker who really began to articulate conservatism, had actually supported the American Revolution. But he was really nervous about the French Revolution because he said, you know, there's a little problem of an opening gap between people's necks and their heads, and this is not a good thing for a government to do. I mean, it's really a problem, right? Like, should a government do that? Old governments did that. Should a democratic government do that? Well, well maybe not. So why not? What should a government do? And what he says is a government should not try to impose an ideology on a people, because very quickly it starts to be loyal to the ideology and not the people, and it tries to make the people fit the ideology rather than the other way around. Which strikes me as sounding familiar. But the what a government should do is to try and create stability.

**[00:12:12] Heather Cox Richardson**

So in order to create stability, it should promote the the elements of a social system that establish stability families, churches, in his case, the aristocracy. You know, he had this whole list of things that you should try and support in order to promote stability. And there's a number of reasons he wanted stability. That's conservatism. You don't have to agree with it or not. But that's that's what it was when he when he wrote it. Movement conservatives, the people who call themselves conservatives nowadays rise in the and the. I'll go back to what the history of conservatism in the United States is. But movement conservatives rose in the United States in really taking their form in 1937, but certainly after World War two. And what they were saying is we are conservatives because we want to get rid of the New Deal government. We want to get rid of a government that regulates business and protects the social safety net and promotes infrastructure and protects civil rights. We want to get go before that. We want to get rid of that. And so we are conservatives, and even at the time when they begin to articulate this, people are like you. People are total radicals because this system is a system that works. And conservatism would say, don't abandon a system that works. So they they become known. They start to call themselves conservatives to sound like they're doing something that is that is like Burke suggested, but they're not. They're trying to overturn this government. So they become known as movement conservatives.

**[00:13:41] Heather Cox Richardson**

When people recognize they are simply a political movement with their own ideology, that happens later, but they are specific ideology that they are trying to impose on the United States. Now, what the trick that's at the front of the book that I really kind of like is that there was somebody who called himself a conservative in the United States and the modern day movement conservatives try to try to claim him, and I'm claiming him back, because Abraham Lincoln was originally called a radical because he believed in ending human enslavement. And there's a longer story behind it than that. But he said, wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute. People like me are trying to honor the Declaration of Independence, which was our first national document. So doesn't that make us the conservatives and you people, the radicals, because you're trying to make enslavement national and ultimately international. And so he begins calling himself a conservative because he is trying to defend the principles of the Declaration of Independence, that we should all be created equal, treat treated equally before the law, and have a right to have a say in our government. And I'm very proud to say on on a podcast just this week, somebody said, someone said, you're a conservative, are you? And I said, absolutely, absolutely. I'm a conservative. I believe in equality before the law and a right to have a say in your government. And I stand absolutely firm on those things. And that is not what today's Republican Party stands for. So. So there you go.

**[00:15:16] Hannah McCarthy**

We're about to take a quick break when we return. More of my conversation with Heather Cox Richardson. And just a reminder, before we break, we two have a newsletter. It's called Extra Credit. It comes out every other week, and it's where we do our own deep dives into what has fascinated, frustrated, or just plain Harrison stitches that week. You can subscribe at our website [civics101podcast.org](https://civics101podcast.org). We're back. You're listening to me. Hannah McCarthy in conversation with writer and historian Heather Cox Richardson for her book Democracy, Awakening Notes on the State of America for writers on a New England Stage at the Music Hall in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Now, the structure of this book is really interesting to me. You sandwich a deep dive into what happened under the Trump presidency between two histories. We start with a many decades series of machinations by the Republican Party to sort of lay the groundwork for what became the Trump authoritarian experiment, as you call it. And then we take a look at what led to the Progressive ERA, which we'll get to. I am curious when we're talking about what led to the Trump presidency, you're discussing Republicans who were laying the groundwork for perhaps oligarchy, and yet it was fertile soil for authoritarianism. Was there a fatal flaw in the plan, or was was the world just waiting for someone who was just right to step in and use that foundation to do what Donald Trump did? Did anyone see this coming?

**[00:17:23] Heather Cox Richardson**

Do you mean in the plan for the United States or the. Yes.

**[00:17:26] Hannah McCarthy**

In terms of the Republican Party. Oh, was was there any intention here or was this a big whoopsie? Basically, is my question.

**[00:17:34] Heather Cox Richardson**

That's actually a really interesting question, because there's a big debate that goes on about whether Trump was an aberration or whether he was a continuation. And I'm a Libra. So I always say both, because what you get in the first chunk of the book, and it's interesting because you're the fourth person now to say it's an interesting, although you're being much more polite than they were. Structure the book. And honestly, it never occurred to me to write it any other, any other way because the book is how we got here, where here is and how we get out. And literally that's the one piece of the book that I never had any doubts about. I mean, I didn't even think to question it until other people did. But the way it's set up is the Republican Party. I'm sorry. No. Erase that part. Because this faction of movement conservatives was very, very small coming out of World War Two. Members of both political parties and vast majorities of members of both political parties believed in what we know as the liberal consensus. What I just described, a government that was active in those four major fields. Now, they disagreed about the aspects of it, and they could fight tooth and nail about whether we should have tariffs that were this high or that high and or what we should do for welfare legislation. Should we do this or should we do that? That was all part of this push and pull between the parties over this concept of the liberal consensus.

**[00:18:56] Heather Cox Richardson**

How should the government accomplish those four things? There's a very small group of people who don't want it to do those things. They want to go back to the 1920s. They want to get rid of business regulation more than anything else. What's interesting about this period in the 1950s, especially, is that the people who are embracing movement conservatism are really not talking about taxes, which in the Eisenhower administration, the top, top tax bracket in the Eisenhower administration is does anyone know 91%? Yeah, 91 to 92%. And they're not talking about that because in those days we believed in or the the country believed that you had to pay down the war debt. So this is not really you don't hear a lot about that, but you hear about business regulation all the time. Get out of my face. I want to run my business the way I want to run my business. But you also see them teaming up with those members at the time, the Democratic Party, who lived in the American South and were virulent racists and wanted to make sure that the principles that were embedded in the New Deal, for example, or in Truman's administration when he begins to desegregate the military or in Eisenhower's administration, that we don't get the racial categories erased from the American legal system.

**[00:20:11] Heather Cox Richardson**

So you get them, and then you also get religious conservatives who don't like the idea of women working outside the home. They like the idea of patriarchy, really not a very big group of people, and they don't manage to get much traction until you get Brown versus Board of Education. In 1954, the Supreme Court decision that says that segregation in public schools is unconstitutional. With that, those people begin to argue that this powerful government that's doing all these things, that people really, really like the Eisenhower Interstate system, for example, that that is simply a way for the government to transfer wealth from largely white people, people of property, to those without property. So it's a redistribution of wealth. That is, it is socialism. And this is the 1940s and the 1950s, and China falls to communism in 1949. So this is a really big deal. So they begin to really push this idea that people who are backing the liberal consensus are akin to socialism, to socialism, and they begin to talk about liberals with a capital L, as if it is like communists with a capital L, right, like Chinese communists. And that idea begins to drive a wedge through the liberal consensus. Now, now, as you keep on going into this whole period, the marker is really the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. And when he takes office in 1981, he's embracing this language.

**[00:21:38] Heather Cox Richardson**

He doesn't actually govern based on it, but he is embracing that language. But within his term, once he starts, especially with the first sets of tax cuts, but also with the the welfare cuts that he enacts very quickly, and then his attack on the striking air traffic controllers. People recognize that this system is not actually the one they wanted. And the national debt starts to triples during Reagan's years, and they start to turn against this idea. And by 1986, when they're trying to protect the second set of tax codes, Reagan's people begin to talk about ballot integrity. But they're private memos say that they are expecting that this will cut black Americans out of the vote in the places where they're talking about it. So by 1986, you have both this idea that we better start picking our voters. And you also have the. The idea that that they've got to get more people to the polls. So who do they turn to? But the evangelical Christians and that really it starts before 1980, but it really takes off in 86 around those tax cuts. And with that, with those two things, you're going to see the Republican Party continually insist that they're that their opponents are anti American. Even Republicans are rhinos in name only, which was always surprising to me because of course, the people that were in the Republican Party, like George H.W. Bush, was a traditional Republican.



**[00:23:04] Heather Cox Richardson**

He was being cast out by these new people. And as that that that language went forward. Increasingly, you saw the Republicans becoming less and less popular, needing to choose their voters and really needing to ramp up their language. So still, by 1918, I'm sorry, I'm what, century I'm in 2020. 15. Still, there is that sense that this language is really designed to win office, to keep taxes low and to bubble along that way. But what it does do is it hollows out the middle class and creates a group of people who are ripe for a strong man to come in and say, hey, you feel like you're not economically important anymore, or culturally important or religiously important or socially important anymore. I can fix that. And that's when that a move toward oligarchy, which looked very much like other periods in our history, the 20s, the 1890s, the 1850s suddenly became, uh oh. Now we've got ourselves a strong man. But Trump didn't step into the office as a strong man. He really changes dramatically after the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville. And at that point, when he sides with the the radical right extremists, at that point, he is starting to build a movement. And from then on, that's the summer of 2017. From then on, you're going to see that oligarchical thread switch to become a movement. And so. So I'm sorry. It's continuity and change. I'm a historian.

**[00:24:51] Hannah McCarthy**

I do want to talk about this radical voter base, because there was certainly a lot of within the media questioning as to, well, where did this base come from? Who are these individuals? And you do reference in the book, a previously apathetic group of people who were sort of stirred to movement, and some look at it and say, well, these were essentially sleepers who just needed the right person to step up and wake them up and say everything you're feeling deep down inside. Bring that to the surface and let's use it. Does that ring true to you of that group? I mean, was this something just simmering underneath the surface that simply needed the right person to awaken it?

**[00:25:36] Heather Cox Richardson**

Well, there's a wonderful book that's written in 1951, in which a guy who's a longshoreman in San Francisco, a guy named Eric Hoffer, says, you know, let's stop wondering where we got Hitler and Mussolini, because everyone's writing these books about Hitler and Mussolini. And you know what? Who cares? Because every generation has a gazillion Hitler's and Mussolini's in it, waiting to rise. And the trick is not where they came from. The trick is why people follow them. So let's study the people who are following those those individuals. And he argued, I think persuasively that what you need to have a strong man rise is a disaffected group of people who feel like they have been left behind in some way. And you need to create those people first, because you can't take people who are, you know, have great jobs and their kids are getting good educations, and there's plenty of food on the table, and they have nice cars, and they're not going to say, oh, yeah, let's tear it all down. So you get those people and you say, I can take you back to when you were important. And the way that I'm going to do that, because that past was so great, is by putting forth these laws that have been written either by God or by the universe that my enemies are refusing to honor. And it's easy, but I'm the only one who can do it. And if you can do that, if you can tap into those people, and if you can make them be part of the process, they don't always expect to get anything from it. They expect to have a heroic experience. They expect to be the ones who can, oh, I don't know, recreate a nation.

**[00:27:17] Heather Cox Richardson**

They're the ones who can bring us back to 1776. I mean, that was so significant. When they're in the the US Capitol talking about 1776. It's very much part of this. Let's go back to that, that beautiful old world. But that being said, I think that sounds personally to me, that sounds a little bit too easy. And I always like to remind people that in 2016, Donald Trump was the most moderate Republican running for office that year, because we now remember the stuff that really came to the fore in in after 2017, after the Unite the Right rally, the sexism and the racism and the violence and all of that that was hidden in the early months of his presidency, at least. And we could talk about that. But when he was on the stage running for office in 2016, he called for better and cheaper health care. He called for ending the tax loopholes that meant rich people weren't paying taxes. He called for promoting infrastructure. He called for bringing manufacturing back. He called for taking all those people who had had their lives hollowed out by the past 40 years of industrial and financial policy and saying, I can fix these things. And his solutions are actually not that different than the Democrats are putting forward now. He just didn't do them. In the end. He went for the tax cuts instead. But for those people who signed on for those things, it was not, I think, necessarily that big a switch then to become willing to accept the other things. And then when they recognize they weren't getting anything that they thought they were signing up for, for many of them, they signed up for the rest as well.

**[00:28:58] Hannah McCarthy**

Well, let's talk about the rest. Let's talk about the sexism and the racism, these things that were hidden. At what point? Sure. At what point?

**[00:29:11] Heather Cox Richardson**

Ignorable, if you are so inclined to ignore them. Not hidden.

**[00:29:15] Hannah McCarthy**

When do you lean in as the president? As any leader? When do you decide this is actually great for me? If I shout this from the rooftops, people are going to, you know, lift me above their shoulders. I mean, what what leads to that decision?

**[00:29:32] Heather Cox Richardson**

Well, I've never been in that position myself, so I'm going to just suggest what one could see. One of the things that interests me about, well, I study politics, so that's not unreasonable a question. One of the things that always interested me about Trump and still interests me a lot about Trump. And if I ever wrote about him, which I never will. It's not that interesting is he's not a politician, right? He's never been a politician. He's he's I can't say that word. He's really bad at politics. Infrastructure week anybody. But he is a phenomenal mirror of people in front of him. So I found him fascinating because he's a salesman. You know, I think if you plunked him down in another country, he would sell whatever that country wanted to sell. He's a salesman. And so he looked at that population that had been dispossessed over the previous 40 years and said, this is what they want. I can sell it to them. And so he did, and he has done that. And he is constantly selling to the people who support him. The speech he gave today is was fascinating, just fascinating. You know that. And it shows where those people are going. So I don't think you can look at him the way you can look at some much more political people who are less inclined, I think, to say, I don't care where this takes me. I just want to be popular and are more willing to say, I think this would be a good thing to do, and therefore I have to figure out a way to bring along a coalition that will enable me to do that, because that's a lot of work, and it's work that I don't think that that Trump has ever been able to do.

**[00:31:14] Heather Cox Richardson**

But but watching that's what's really interesting is watching. I mean, I'm going to pick on Eisenhower here. There's this image of Eisenhower as being sort of this Elmer Fudd, which we should get into because he was whip smart, but he gives this press conference and somebody asks him a really straightforward question, and it's a really loaded question about some military stuff that's going on. And he's like, he gives this rambling answer and he's all over the place. And the reporters are like, but sir. And he's like, well, and, you know, Indo-China, Germany, you know, and and at the end of it, he it's been complete word salad. And he walks out and he starts giggling and he says to one of his aides, really got him, didn't I? Like he never gave an answer because he knew he couldn't give an answer. But it was deliberate and and doing that sort of thing. These people who say, I'll move this piece here because then I can move that piece there and that piece there, and that piece there, and that piece is over there. And then finally, Nancy Pelosi. There you go. Nancy Pelosi could, could sell, sell water on the coast of Maine. But but you know, look at Kevin McCarthy. He can't he couldn't sell water in a desert.

**[00:32:28] Hannah McCarthy**

You know, you regularly and it's so casual in the book. And I actually kind of appreciate that you, you know, make note of something that Donald Trump might have said or did and how that echoes, if not directly imitates, the actions of former fascist leaders in the world. And, you know, there are those who would say, oh, that's just fear mongering or you're being extraordinarily Partisan. Et cetera. What would you say to that assessment of your assessment?

**[00:32:59] Heather Cox Richardson**

So so I want to be a little bit careful about fascism, because I'm one of those really annoying people who always says, well, it's not quite fascism, because when the fascists did this, they did this. And so what I do make comparisons between specific things that the Trump administration did and fascist governments did or fascist individuals did. But one of the points that I was trying to make in the book is that I really don't like the concept of comparing things to fascism, simply because fascism really is articulated, articulated in the 1920s by Benito Mussolini. And it's actually a really interesting theory. It's an abhorrent theory, but it's actually quite interesting how he got to it and all that. But it presupposes that there wasn't anything like it before the 1920s, when in fact, ultimately what fascism says is that some people are better than others, and therefore, logically, they'll be one person who's better than everybody else. Because if every if everybody is of different levels, there's going to be one person who's better than everybody else, and that person and his minions should rule over everyone else. That is a way of thinking about the world that says some people are better than others and have the right to rule. It's called fascism in the 1920s, and it's got its own little pieces of what happens with with business and women and all kinds of stuff. But that idea that some people are better than others and have the right to rule is so deeply embedded in American history, which is the only one that I can talk about that I wanted to make sure people understood that you can't stop in the 1920s because, of course, when Hitler imposes fascism on Germany, he actually uses United States laws about Indigenous Americans and Black Americans to write his own laws.

**[00:34:45] Heather Cox Richardson**

So to sort of say, oh, the person is like Hitler. It's like, wait a minute, Hitler was like us. And then you go a step before that. Of course, our black laws came out of the laws from before the Civil War, which were also about some people being better than others and having the right to rule. And of course, that comes, and I can keep on going back. But that idea stands against the idea that everybody should be treated equally before the law and have a right to a say in their own government. So what I was trying to do was to say, this is a long strand in our history, and it's we can't sell it to Germany. Like like Germany. Every country in the world has had people like this because people are just people. But there's this other strand as well, and that is also run through our history. So if people said that I was, I will say I found I don't know if you found this. I when I reread the book, I thought the second section was horrific. Didn't you find it then?

**[00:35:40] Hannah McCarthy**

What do you mean when you say horrific?

**[00:35:42] Heather Cox Richardson**

It was terrifying.

**[00:35:43] Hannah McCarthy**

Terrifying? Yes, yes, I thought you meant your own writing. I thought, well, don't say that about yourself.

**[00:35:50] Heather Cox Richardson**

No, but you read it and you think it couldn't have been. It couldn't literally. You think it couldn't possibly have been that bad. And so I'm checking my footnotes again and again going, really? Was that bad?

**[00:36:00] Hannah McCarthy**

I had forgotten, I really had forgotten until I read that second.

**[00:36:04] Heather Cox Richardson**

And it's actually a concern of mine that people won't make it to the third section, because that second section is really terrifying. So I guess I would say I got nothing because I'm not. I actually don't like the fascist comparison, but but it happened. And the stuff that we are learning now that happened that we didn't know is even worse. So I think that was what really shocked me about that section is if you strip out the noise, he got fired. They had this fight, there was this speech, all this stuff. What you see is these really stark steps toward authoritarianism and how freaking close we came. Because if you think on January 6th, think how close Mitt Romney came to the mob. And they were one of the people he was he was one of the people they were hunting. Because he had voted in favor of Trump's first impeachment conviction. What would have happened if they had gotten Romney or Chuck Grassley was in that building. Nancy Pelosi was in that building. Mike Pence was in the building. That's the three top people in the United States government after the president, who was not in the building. When I think about what might have happened had any of those people been injured and what the government might have done to say, hey, we got an insurrection on our hands, we better take care of it. I it keeps me up at night.

**[00:37:36] Hannah McCarthy**

I genuinely don't know the answer to this question. What does the US government do when they do have an insurrection on their hands?

**[00:37:44] Heather Cox Richardson**

Well, it's only happened well twice now, and so far, I have to say, hasn't gone real well either time has it? So in 1861, when or in 1860, when the South seceded, most people forget that James Buchanan, a Democrat, was in office. And and can I just say, and I hope none of his relatives are here. What a freaking weenie, you know? So so he goes, he's sitting there and he's like, well, they can't do that. But I have no power to stop them. So poor is up there in Illinois going, dude, my country that I just got it's tearing in half here. And he's like, bummer, ain't it? You know, and and I paraphrase slightly, but one wonders if there had been a heavier hand from the government before Lincoln took office months after the South seceded, if it would have gone where it did. And we could talk more about that, because that's an interesting question. But similarly, you know, I don't think it's something that a democracy is prepared to handle. I think it's I think it's something we have to figure out how to handle.

**[00:38:56] Hannah McCarthy**

I suppose I wanted to know what what this government, this current government, or at least that one so fresh on the trail of Donald Trump would have done. I mean, do you do you have any guesses?



**[00:39:09] Heather Cox Richardson**

Oh, but remember, on January 6th, Donald Trump was still in office. That's what's got me terrified, because we know that he was eager to put in place the Insurrection Act, an old law saying that the government could call out troops in the face of an insurrection. And you know how we know that that was a real concern is that on January 3rd, 2020, all ten living defense secretaries, we've lost one since then, quite tragically, put an op ed in the Washington Post saying to the troops and to military leaders, don't do it. You know, whatever you're thinking of doing, don't do it, because we will make sure that you end up in real legal trouble for doing this. Okay? It's Christmas time, New Year's, and they all ten of them get together and write an op ed that was not, hey, we have nothing to do with our time. Let's all ten of us write an op ed. It's never happened before. Right? So I'm. My concern is, is that the former president would have invoked the Insurrection Act. And how many of us would have said, hey, you shouldn't do that. They just injured, God willing, it wouldn't have been worse than that. One of our leaders. And it doesn't matter what party they're from. I mean, you don't do that.

**[00:40:26] Hannah McCarthy**

Ostensibly. Yeah, yeah. I do want to take a moment here. We have a number of questions.

**[00:40:31] Heather Cox Richardson**

Kind of crazy that we we did this. Isn't it? I mean, do you ever wake up and be like, I was just reading what Trump was saying today, and I'm like, really? Like, are we really living through this? I mean, sometimes you just want to kind of push the needle off the record and say, come on, really?

**[00:41:00] Hannah McCarthy**

I do want to know what everyone out here thinks, and we have a lot of questions from the audience a lot, and I will get to as many as I can. I wanted to take a minute here before we go on with our conversation to fit some of these in, because I think that the civic dialog is one of the most important country saving things that we can do. And I love this question. Whoever asked this, Heather, does it ever happen that current events change how you understand history?

**[00:41:27] Heather Cox Richardson**

150,000%? I am not a mathematician, and that's the you know what? That's the real shocker is you learn something new and you think crap that changes everything. I thought about that before and this actually, and I'm happy to talk more about that. But I do want to throw out the idea here. One thing that I find fascinating is the idea that the present changes the past, and people are always like, oh, come on. No, that's not the way it works. How can you go back and change the past? But how many times has something happened to you and you think, oh, now I understand why she said that three years ago or three months ago or whatever. And so many things that happen now, you hear about them and you think, oh, that's why that was going on. So one of the big things for me is I knew absolutely nothing about Ukraine when I started doing these letters. Like, I'm not entirely convinced I could have. Excuse me, found it on a map. And the more I learned about Ukraine and the more I learned about Paul Manafort and who had directed Trump's campaign and the things that he had done in Ukraine. And then the more I learned about who he had worked with, and then the more I learned about how many things they had done in the Republican Party. And then I learned about who was involved in that. And then I learned about some of the methods they used. And then I learned about what Kissinger and Nixon had done in Chile. And I'm like, Holy crap, how did I go through my life not knowing all this stuff? But it's changed the whole way. I think about that. And that happens if not every day, at least every week.

**[00:42:59] Hannah McCarthy**

I think that's one of the greatest pleasures of my own job, is prior to the many dives into American history I have taken now over the past seven years, I don't think I had really changed my mind very much. And now I change it weekly and it's I think that's very valuable. Uh, let's see.

**[00:43:20] Heather Cox Richardson**

I had a I had a there's a thing about writers, you know, it's very hard to let a book go. And I had a wonderful colleague who said to me once, you know what you need to do, you can't go back and rewrite the book, because by definition, at the end of the book, you're smarter than you were when you started. And so if you go back and rewrite it again to make your meet your standards at the end, then you'll the same thing will happen. You'll get to the end and you'll think, oh my God, that person who started that book was an idiot. And he said, you know what you need to do? You need to forgive that poor benighted woman who started that book, close the cover and write a new one. And I thought, it's given me such permission to say, okay, I did the best I could. I wish I'd written it differently, but now I'll write it the next one better.

**[00:44:03] Hannah McCarthy**

You're only ready to write it once it's done.

**[00:44:05] Heather Cox Richardson**

I just love the poor benighted woman. It's like, oh, I'm that idiot, you know?

**[00:44:13] Hannah McCarthy**

We're going to take another quick break. When we return. More of my conversation with Heather Cox Richardson. We're back. You're listening to me. Hannah McCarthy in conversation with Heather Cox Richardson, the author of Democracy Awakening Notes on the State of America. Heather and I spoke together live on stage at the Music Hall in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and we're going to start right back in with a question from a member of the audience. Wow. So I think this is an interesting question. Which is the bigger threat to democracy, Donald Trump or the movement? He has created.

**[00:45:02] Heather Cox Richardson**

The movement, the movement, because it's not about Trump anymore. And this is something fascinating that I watch all. So let me and I'm happy to explain more about him. Think of the NRA. So I heard someone saying the other day, oh, the NRA, we got to get the NRA from from stopping buying politicians and changing our laws so that we can have gun safety laws, which are enormously popular across this country, by the way, amongst Democrats and Republicans both, they all want gun safety regulations. So why don't we have them? Right. And someone said it's the NRA. And I was like, really? Is it the NRA is out of money. The head of it's in all kinds of legal trouble. When is the last time you heard the NRA working with any politicians? When was the last time you saw somebody with an NRA guy with a politician? And I thought, is it the NRA, or is it the movement that the NRA created that now the Republicans are afraid of? And I don't know the answer to that, but I think my vote is for the latter, not the former.

**[00:46:00] Heather Cox Richardson**

And so so you think about where we are now, and you look at the project 2025, which is an 1000 page document that that a group of people who are supporting Trump right now or a Trump like candidate that's in there are calling for. And what they want to do is get rid of the nonpartisan civil service, weaponize the Department of Justice, weaponize the Department of Defense. You know, it's 1000 pages. And the the obvious answer is Donald Trump is an old man. He is not seemingly at his psychological best currently. And and he's not going to live forever. You know, somebody eventually is going to is going to step into his place. And the real question for for a strong man is will somebody. Will people be willing to not be apathetic and to switch their loyalties to someone else? So far, we have not seen that happen. I have a thought that there is at least one person that could step into those shoes. I won't say that name, but so far we have not seen it happen.

**[00:47:00] Hannah McCarthy**

Well, someone does ask, you know. What do you think will happen to our country and democracy if Donald Trump himself is elected in this upcoming election?

**[00:47:13] Heather Cox Richardson**

Again? There is there is no doubt. And, you know, people ask this, is there a reason you're booing? What should I have done?

**[00:47:25] Speaker3**

No.

**[00:47:27] Heather Cox Richardson**

Oh no no no no. That's no, no. Sorry. There are some things you don't want to make. Self-fulfilling prophecies. You you think about it, you could figure out who it is. What the heck was the question? I'm sorry it's been such a long day. It was a good question to.

**[00:47:45] Hannah McCarthy**

Happen if Donald.

**[00:47:45] Heather Cox Richardson**

Trump. So so this is so this goes back to your point about am I over am I exaggerating the dangers that we're in? And I would say listen to what they are saying. You know, I am not making this up. I promise you, I have no I'm a historian. We want to study the facts that we know how to think about the way societies change. You don't want to distort that because then you won't come up with the right answer. Literally, he is saying he is going to go after his enemies and throw them in jail. And he talked about. Accusing. I want to get my words right here. Accusing the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. That is the person in charge of the strongest military in the world, an extraordinarily well educated man, by the way, as I say, has served the country for 44.5 years. He served in active duty all around the world. He is in charge of our military. What is the fundamental goal of government is to protect us. And he is said he should be accused of treason and that in the past such an act would be punishable by death. You know, is this like I'm not making that up? And he said it repeatedly. He doubled down on it again today.

**[00:49:02] Heather Cox Richardson**

And the idea and again, there are literally people working on what is called schedule F, and schedule F is designed to get rid of the nonpartisan civil service, which we've had since 1883, and turn it into loyalists. And this was something that he put in place at the end of his first year. It's one of the very first things Joe Biden did is he got rid of schedule F, which was getting rid of all the nonpartisan civil servants and making them partizan civil servants. And think about what that does to a democracy. If you get rid of all that ballast, the people who are just doing your paperwork and don't care who's president, they're just showing up for, for, for their jobs. If you get rid of them and make them loyalists. Well, what you do is you create the kind of world that you see in Hungary, for example, under Viktor Orban or Russia under Vladimir Putin. And and they're not being secret about it. So, so I think a vote for Donald Trump or an election of Donald Trump or a Trump like character is the end of American democracy. For now. I don't think it would leave forever, but it would leave for my lifetime, which might be very short if that happens, actually. Sorry.

**[00:50:20] Hannah McCarthy**

So let me ask you this. You know, you write in your book, we're pivoting now to the third part, to the good stuff, to the good stuff. You write, you know, are the principles on which this nation was founded viable? That is a question. What do you think? Are they.

**[00:50:37] Heather Cox Richardson**

Yes. And this is people always say, why do I have faith? And I have faith because I believe that fundamentally humans want above all else, human self-determination. It is a humanist value as well as an American value. But that's not the point. The idea of being able to control our own destinies is, I think, the highest aspiration of humanity. And if that's the case, I do not believe that Americans who tend to do the right thing, as they say after they've tried everything else, are going to give that away in favor of a poor copy of. What we have been in the past and what we can be again in the future.

**[00:51:25] Hannah McCarthy**

So let me ask you then, what is it within individualism, not focusing on the community, the greater good that does triumph on occasion, because to me it is the commitment to the community. It is working as a whole, and commitment to democratic principles that results in the continuation of America's democracy. What what makes people choose the individual over the group?

**[00:51:58] Heather Cox Richardson**

So that's a really interesting and important question, because you are correct that our best moments and American history has really been about community. I mean, the idea that we've got these lone Rangers out there, you know, doing whatever they do on their own is completely a myth and has always been a myth. But it's an attractive myth, and it's a myth that runs very deep, I think, in the United States history, but also in a lot of our literature from around the world, but especially Western literature, the idea of the individual guy out there taking on Goliath, right? Taking on the Empire, taking on this, this, this outsized struggle, whether it's a government, whether it's a nature, whether it is a bear, you know, that there's this, this individual assertion of of strength and that image that that myth has been weaponized in American politics on two major occasions. One is in the period immediately after the Civil War, when Southern Democrats, who didn't like the idea that the federal government was protecting the rights of Black Americans, started to call that socialism, which I think we've talked about here tonight. And instead they offered a vision of a different kind of great American. And that was the cowboy. And the cowboy, of course, is our really major symbol of reconstruction. People forget that. But the cowboy rises in 1866 and he's operative until about 18.

**[00:53:19] Heather Cox Richardson**

1887. And that image of the cowboy as a white guy who wants nothing but to work hard and take care of his own, is is, first of all, mythological. A third of the cowboys were people of color, men of color, and and the cowboys were entirely dependent on the federal government, as was the West, more than any other region in the country. But that embedded in that was this idea that the the white guy is out there being the hero all by himself. Now, again, we know historically that you could not survive in the West unless you had kinship networks. And so Kit Carson, for example, is a great a great vision of this, this individualism was married to a woman who gave him, she was Hispanic, who gave him entry into this whole network of Hispanic kinship areas that enabled him to sell furs and all the sorts of things that one did to be Kit Carson. But that image that. The Cowboys stood against the Socialist government that was redistributing wealth to black people, translated beautifully to American society after Brown versus Board of Education. So we get there. Actually, no Westerns, at least no major movie westerns filmed during World War two, when people are focusing on buddy movies and community movies and war movies where everybody helps each other out. We get the rise of Westerns again after Brown versus board, primarily, and we get all the TV westerns.

**[00:54:44] Heather Cox Richardson**

Bonanza. The first thing ever filmed in color. I'm sorry. The first TV show ever filmed in color. Lone Ranger Rawhide. There are nine of them on TV in the 1950s. If I recall correctly, that image of the individual lone guy stands against this idea of the government imposing socialism to help black Americans and brown Americans in that period, and that idea is very deliberately picked up by the movement conservatives. I mean, you get Barry Goldwater out there with his cowboy hat and his cowboy boots saying, you know, my family did it all on our own. His family did it with government contracts, I mean, quite literally. And he had a chauffeur when he was growing up. And he, he he was he was an air right. But in his mind, he was this individual. And you see Reagan picking it up with his switch from riding an English riding style, was a very good horseman to riding cowboy style. You know, that was all part of let's pick up this idea that we're going to get rid of that government that supports the the regulation of business and all that because we're individuals. But the reality is that that hollowed out society, it's never been real. It's always been a myth.

**[00:55:53] Hannah McCarthy**

And you do describe in this last third of your book how I don't know if you want to describe them, the, the downtrodden, the the subjugated minorities, the underclass, what have you set a path toward progressivism? And it it did succeed. Do you see in America today a similar way to another era of progressivism, like the New Deal, like the Great Society? Is there a pathway? Are people sufficiently motivated and organized to get us there?

**[00:56:35] Heather Cox Richardson**

Absolutely. But but I do want to make one, one, one adjustment there. And that's that. One of the things that really concerns me is in when we talk about the Florida curriculum, for example, or the Texas curriculum or the Oklahoma curriculum that are stripping out of our K through 12 institutions, the idea of minority history, for example, that actually worries me less than something else that people aren't talking about in that curricula, and that is that what is really being stripped out in Florida, for example, which was not a history curriculum. It was it was a social studies curriculum. So it included the law. It included economics. It included there were five aspects of it is they strip out agency. So there are black people in that curriculum. They're just not doing anything except supporting the status quo. Even those who are taking on the status quo are doing it in a in a really, we agree with the guys on top kind of way. And the, the thing that's important about American history is that people who were not included in our democracy women, people of color, Indigenous Americans, Black Americans have always said, hey, wait just a minute here. If everybody's created equal, what about me? And they have kept that in front of us constantly, so that over the years they have, in fact expanded that to include women, among other things, which the framers would have thought you were including Martians, right? There's no way they thought women should be included.

**[00:58:15] Heather Cox Richardson**

So that constant expansion has been because of those people who have previously been excluded, and they have done so even at times when they did not have the vote. I mean, the Progressive ERA is a great example of this because as Black Americans and certainly women are excluded from the vote, they managed to demonstrate in other ways their embrace of the concepts of citizenship without having the vote. And to really push that envelope by saying, hey, wait a minute here, you're going to you're going to give that guy the vote and not me. And one of the things that the book tries to do is set out the different ways in which that expansion has happened. But but the piece that I always feel like we're kind of missing these days is that we're all, most of us, unhappy about many things, but these periods when we have extraordinary unrest. Are also periods of extraordinary opportunity. True opportunity. So if you thought about America in 1853, you'd thought, well, the enslavers are taking it all over and they've got they've got the national government. Black Americans. Well, they're out of luck, right? Nothing's ever going to change here. And by. That's 1853. By 1854, the North has come together to say, wait a minute.

**[00:59:36] Heather Cox Richardson**

We're not going to put up with enslavement. By 1856, they formed a new political party that says, hey, we don't might not agree on anything about finances or immigration, but by God, we can agree on democracy. By 1859, Abraham Lincoln has articulated a new vision of of government. By 1861, he has signed the Emancipation Proclamation, and by November of 1863 he gives the Gettysburg Gettysburg Address, saying, we are dedicating this nation to a new birth of freedom less than a decade. We go from we're handing it all over to the elite and slavers to we're taking it back for ourselves, and we're writing it into our primary law. I mean, that's it's amazing. And in the Progressive ERA is another period when you have these periods of great instability and extremes of wealth and different people stepping up and new voices stepping up, there are times of extraordinary excitement. You know, the music and the writing and the sculpture and the the new inventions and the new ways to do business and the new housing arrangements and the new family arrangements and who's allowed in and who's who's not allowed in, and all that stuff changes. And it's a period. One of the reasons I love the 1890s is because it's so exciting. You get new writing and new art movements and, and I look at the press and everyone's like, well, the world sucks.

**[01:00:55] Heather Cox Richardson**

And I'm like, have you looked at the music? Have you looked at the art? Have you looked at all these brand new voices? My God, the the impeachment hearing last night I was killing myself at some of these younger people who were so freaking funny. They were funny in Congress. And I'm like, we got a new era going on here, you know? And so I do think we are not only have the possibility for that, I think we should embrace the extraordinary celebration and excitement of that. But I would also like to say we're in it because look at what's happening in Michigan with the labor movement and all around the people in Starbucks and all the places and Amazon, all the places that are organizing. Look at the fact that the FTC has just taken on Amazon and an antitrust case. Look at the fact that young people are turning out in droves to see Kamala Harris like she's Beyonce, you know, and she's I'm a huge Harris fan, but she's a vice president, like, who goes to see the vice president, you know, and, and their movements all over the place. I mean, it is like I don't know what our o'clock on a Friday night and you're listening to a historian which is like, you know, so I think we're actually in a movement.

**[01:02:22] Hannah McCarthy**

On that note, Heather, impossibly, that little red light right there, which I don't know if you all can see, but it's staring at me, tells me that our time is up. I am, I know, I agree, I am unbelievably grateful to you for being here, for getting here, and for having this conversation. Thank you so much.

**[01:02:45] Heather Cox Richardson**

Thank you.

**[01:03:32] Hannah McCarthy**

This has been my conversation with Heather Cox Richardson for her book Democracy Awakening for Writers on a New England Stage at the Music Hall in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. This episode was produced by me, Hannah McCarthy and Sara Plourde. Nick Capodice is my co-host. Christina Phillips is our senior producer, Rebecca Lavoie is our executive producer. And special thanks to the crew at the music Hall. Executive Director Tina Sawtell, New Hampshire Public Radio president and CEO Jim Schachter, the Music Hall live sound and recording engineer Liv Hobbs, the musical production manager Zhana Morris, the music hall literary producer Brittany Wasson, and of course, musical director and band Bob Lord and Dreadnaught. This has been Civics 101 from NHPR, New Hampshire Public Radio.

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