You Might Be Right - Teaching American History - Transcript

Jon Meacham: My view of the country, which is very similar to my view of human nature, is that it is a remarkable thing that just enough of us have done the right thing at just the right time to continue an experiment that's worth defending. And I think that the American story is a perennial battle between our worst instincts and our better angels. And sometimes the better angels win and sometimes the worst instincts do, as they did after Reconstruction.

Robert Woodson: If you're going to teach history, talk about the good, the bad, and the ugly, but tell it all and tell it completely and not just have it fit your own narrow ideological bias.

Marianne Wanamaker: Welcome to "You Might Be Right," a place for civil conversations about tough topics, brought to you by the Baker Center for Public Policy at the University of Tennessee. In this episode, our hosts, former Tennessee Governors Bill Haslam and Phil Bredesen and their guests, turn to the history books. From American exceptionalism to race and inequality, the teaching of United States history has become fraught with controversy. Why can't we agree on the narrative of our country's past and where might we look to find common ground on our own national story?

Bill Haslam: Governor, good to be back together.

Phil Bredesen: Likewise, yeah.

Bill Haslam: So history has all of a sudden become a controversial topic. I was an American history major in college, I don't remember there being many school board meetings about history at that point. But we've found ourselves in a little bit of a different world now.

Phil Bredesen: Yeah, I found, like maybe you did when you were mayor, that everybody wants to use the public school system to advance a point of view, and I think that's happening to a very large extent right now, and it's worth exploring what we really owe our students.

Bill Haslam: Obviously, teaching our history is critically important and it's not a perfect history, so how do we talk about that in light of who we've been and who we want to be in the future in a way that gets beyond just our own biases and really helps prepare students for what we think they need to be?

Phil Bredesen: I think, I mean, there's always people on extreme sides of these issues that don't want to find some middle ground, but I think most people are really looking for what's the reasonable approach? "I've got a kid in school, what do I want them to know? I don't want to conceal things, but I don't want focus them on the wrong or negative things." I'm hoping our guests today can help us sort through that.

Bill Haslam: Let's dive right in. We have two great guests.

Phil Bredesen: Well, I'm excited about our first guest here, someone I've known a long time, Jon Meacham. If I went through all of his accomplishments, we wouldn't have time for our podcast here. But I think most of you know him, he's a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, New York Times bestselling author, a Chattanoogan, born in Chattanooga and educated at the University of the South in Sewanee, has served in a number of positions in the world of literature and journalism. An editor at Random House, the editor of Newsweek, recipient of a number of awards and accolades. His Pulitzer Prize was for his biography of Andrew Jackson, "American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House," somebody who stayed very active in the public sector and were honored to have on today, Jon.

Jon Meacham: Thank you, Governor. I appreciate it. I'm here for you, Haslam is a little iffy.

Bill Haslam: I wanted to say up upfront, since we're talking about history, we have a physics major from Harvard, an English major from Sewanee. Since this is history, as the history major from Emory, I think I should get final word, if the listeners are wondering whose words really matter here.

Okay, Jon, quick question. The teaching of history has gotten to be very controversial recently. Are you surprised by that? Is there any historical precedent? Have we've been here before to where school board meetings are filled with the topics of what's in the history book?

Jon Meacham: It is a fairly recent phenomenon in terms of the recognizable manifestations you're talking about. The importance of history as a political, both device to unify or to divide, is perennial. George Orwell wrote quite brilliantly, I think, in "1984," that "he who controls the past, controls the future." And in the Orwellian sense, if the Party, uppercase P, meaning whatever autocratic force is unfolding in a dystopian imagination, if you control the narrative of the past, you're able to affect how people see the world, how they act. It's in some ways like religion, to use something you and I have talked about a lot, there is, and I'm speaking in sociological terms here, not idolatrous ones, to be clear, and I know you doubt that because Presbyterians distrust Episcopalians.

Bill Haslam: Both of you.

Jon Meacham: We will try to keep this–

Bill Haslam: Both of you.

Jon Meacham: How? That's not bad for you, Haslam. Hanging out with Bredesen has lifted your game.

Bill Haslam: So true.

Jon Meacham: So to speak. But Abraham Lincoln in 1839 in his first major speech talked about America's political religion. And what he meant was there was a sacred text, the Declaration of Independence, that gave us both a guide and a goal that we were to tend toward the realization of the promise of human equality and the pursuit of happiness. There were apostles, prophets and martyrs, the founders whom we refer to as men of iron. And if you think about it, what I just said is not necessarily only a historical set of points. They could also be political, they could be partisan, I should say, which is why three of us are talking about this, because that is a political vision of the country. It's that there is a central organizing goal and that goal is the realization of a promise made. And if you dissent, if you have a slightly different view about what the purpose of the country is or what it means to realize that promise, then it's not surprising that you would challenge the fundamental narrative.

Phil Bredesen: Jon, one of the things, though, that it seems to me is that any successful society, stable society has to have its myths, has to have its stories. The myths are not always completely true to history, but I think they're an important part of the way that people view the society that they're living in. Is that really consistent with– I mean, first of all, do you agree with that, and second of all, is that inconsistent with the idea of just sort of exposing everything in almost an academic like look at history?

Jon Meacham: Well, in the American context, Governor, the good news is you can have both, because for our purposes in this conversation, the most mythic, the most grand narrative, if you will, of American history is that we are a distant nation from the world's leading empire that coalesced around the idea of human liberty and individual autonomy of liberty under law. We built a remarkably durable republic, which has managed to create enough wealth and enough opportunity that we have, on more than one occasion, projected power around the world in the service of stability and the advancement of those ideas of liberty. Would you agree that that's a pretty good myth?

Phil Bredesen: It's a pretty good myth, yes. Yeah. Yes.

Jon Meacham: Okay. Well, I agree with almost all of that, but I'm also, both as a very bad Christian and as a student of history, I am also keenly aware of the fallen, frail and fallible nature of human beings, and a democracy is the fullest manifestation of all of us. And so how could the democracy not also be fallen, frail and fallible? And that radical thing I just said, that a lot of folks in a lot of red counties might disagree with, was the view held by the founders of the American Republic. It was the view held by Ronald Reagan. And the remarkable thing about America is that we've gotten as much right as we have, and I think that's a historically defensible and important, if I may, way of framing the national story. And I don't see it as an either/or, that somehow or another the country is only 1619, it's only about slavery, or it's all 1776, it's all about fife and drums and liberty. It's both.

Bill Haslam: Several years ago, Vanderbilt University had a periodic lapse in judgment and let Meacham and I teach a class together, which students are still suffering. I think they might have

lost their accreditation briefly over this. But, we're teaching a class of very smart students and one of the very first classes, and I'm shortening a long story, but there was a pretty serious questioning of whether is the constitution a valid document because it was written only by white men under a context where slavery was going to be continued. So given what you just said about our country, and like us as people, we're a combination of great failures and great success stories, how would you answer that question? Well, our history is too scarred with the remnants of it was only white men that got to choose, for it truly to be the foundation of a great nation.

Jon Meacham: Far be it from me to correct you. This is the happiest I'm going to be all week. So that story is really important, and I tell this story a lot out in the world. Here's what happened in that class. I was giving a fairly straightforward argument that I make all the time, which is that the American Revolution, and this is directly on point with Phil's question, the American Revolution was the fullest political manifestation of the most important shift in Western life over the past thousand years. That what had happened with Gutenberg and the invention of moveable type, which democratized information, the Protestant reformations, the translation of sacred scripture into the vernacular, the scientific revolution, the European Enlightenment, the Scottish Moral Enlightenment, the rise of the bourgeoisie. An entire understanding of human identity and power had moved from being seen as vertical, where at the top there were a few who controlled everything, to being seen as more horizontal, that in fact, we were all born with the capacity to determine our own destinies. And that what Jefferson rendered in the Declaration of Independence was the fullest political distillation of that.

And a remarkable young student, who now of course is in law school, raised her hand and what you're remembering Bill, is she said, "I disagree that the Declaration was an enlightenment document because it did not include women, it did not include Blacks, it did not include Native Americans." Perhaps the only good pedagogical moment I've ever had – I said, "Okay, here's what we're going to do." I assigned them at that point, the 1876 speech that Frederick Douglass gave at the Freedmans Monument in Washington, which is the most important meditation on the issues we're talking about that I've ever encountered. It's essentially Abraham Lincoln was not preeminently the Black man's president, he was preeminently the white man's president, but that was because of the opinions of the nation that he as a statesman was bound to consult. And that even if from the abolitionist ground, he was cold, tardy and indifferent – marvelous phrase, cold, tardy and indifferent – we found that our hour of liberation had met in this man and this moment, and so therefore this monument must be here to remind us of what is possible.

You don't really need to have anything else in this conversation except that. That's Frederick Douglass's view of all the questions we're talking about. And I don't know if you remember this Bill, but they came back and basically they'd all turned into Brookings interns. They were all kind of centrists, because I criticized Jefferson for buying Louisiana in an extra constitutional way and how hypocritical that was. If Hamilton had done it, Jefferson would've gone crazy. And the same student raised her hand and said, "I think you're being too hard on him. Politicians have to deal with the world as you find it." And I remember saying in the class, "That's it, I'm done, if nothing

else. Yeah, you've got that."

Now, you used a phrase a second ago that I think is important, which is – I hate this term, but for our purposes – is the more left leaning view that the history of the country is too scarred to have created a great nation. No, there's no such thing as too scarred, I think. Is the American story scarred? Of course it is, that's part of what makes it interesting for God's sake.

Phil Bredesen: We're talking a lot about history here, and your knowledge is obviously enormous, Jon. The two of us that lived in a practical world of committees of people who put together curricula and the like. If one of us were governor today and had called you and said, "Look, we're looking at revising the curriculum for American history, just taking a fresh look at everything and in the light of all the changes that have happened in society in the last couple of decades." From the top down, I mean, what's the one paragraph view or the view of what would you like to accomplish in the students, what do students need to take out of their understanding of American history as they go out into the world? What would that be?

Jon Meacham: It's a great question, sir. If we don't get this right, our reflexive divisions, which I think is part of what has brought you two together in this forum, are only going to get worse. What Lincoln said about the Declaration of Independence I think is true of the American story, which is that it should be done right, what Lincoln said of the Declaration, was it could be a revolutionary point that would be a stumbling block to the ever reappearing forces of tyranny and oppression. I would want a story told about dreams deferred and dreams fulfilled and dreams still to be realized. And the dream, you don't have to go any farther than this figurative conversation, which is – and this is where I'd start the whole class – is there is nothing more American than the fact that Thomas Jefferson and Martin Luther King now stare at each other in perpetuity across the tidal basin in Washington DC.

That's where the two monuments are, and over that body of water have been our battles that we celebrate and we commemorate and the battles that we cringe that had to be fought, cringe and cry that had to be fought.

Phil Bredesen: I guess you're saying that you would like them to understand the myth, as it were, is not that here's all the good things we have done and I'm going to repress the discussion of all the bad things in order to keep the myth alive, but that the country, the strength of the country, has been its ability to deal with these very divisive and disparate views of the world and has done so successfully over two and a half, pushing on two and a half centuries.

Jon Meacham: My basic view of history, and by the way, this is why I don't have a big army behind me because the left thinks it's too soft and the right thinks it's too harsh. My view of the country, which is very similar to my view of human nature, is that it is a remarkable thing that just enough of us have done the right thing at just the right time to continue an experiment that's worth defending. And I think we are a 51-49 people. It doesn't surprise me at all that we're 51-49 when elections unfold. And I think that the American story is a perennial battle between our

worst instincts and our better angels. And sometimes the better angels win and sometimes the worst instincts do, as they did after Reconstruction. And there are exceptions and those exceptions have to be celebrated and commemorated.

Bill Haslam: The question always going forward is, "But can that hold?" You said just enough of us have done just enough of the right, I can't remember the exact quote, to keep us to moving to where we are. Do you have confidence that that will continue to be so? I'm always saying, "Well, the world's not the same as it was during Reconstruction." It's a very different world than I first ran for. Your last year as Governor was 2010, Governor Bredesen, the year of the Tea Party rising, that's when I'm– I mean, social media, there wasn't a retweet button on Twitter until 2014. I guess my question is we would everybody say that all along, oh, the world's changing too fast to judge, that it's going to stay the same as it was or not?

Jon Meacham: Let's go back a hundred years. Let's say we were talking in 1923. What would be unfolding in the United States? What would be unfolding in Tennessee? Tennessee's a vital part of this. So we would've just finished the Great War, cataclysmic, one of the largest events of human history. Empire's fall, monarchies fall, trading markets change fundamentally, creates an enormous wave of immigration, which creates an immediate backlash in the United States. The shifting demography is in 1920, the federal census found that more Americans lived in cities than on farms for the first time in American history.

Until 1923, if you were a Tennessee homeowner, you basically controlled all the information that came into your house. You decided which papers to subscribe to. You decided what periodicals, what books to buy. Suddenly you buy a radio, which went on the market commercially in 1923, and, wow, now there are these voices in your parlor of people you don't know who are presenting these potentially different views.

The Ku Klux Klan was refounded at Stone Mountain, Georgia, two hours from Chattanooga, on the Saturday after Thanksgiving in 1915, probably six million Americans joined it. There were 10 senators, 30 members of the House and five governors were members of the Klan a hundred years ago. The governor of Georgia, the governor of Texas, the governor of Indiana, the governor of Colorado, and the governor of Oregon were members of the Klan. The 1924 Democratic National Convention went to 103 ballots because there were 347 Klan delegates at Madison Square Garden who would not vote for Al Smith, the governor of New York, to be the Democratic nominee because he was an Irish Catholic. And Roman Catholicism in the kinds of counties that you guys had to carry and represented, thought was like Sharia law. And in 1925, Rhea County gave America the first mass media culture war event, the Scopes trial, which was broadcast virtually live from Dayton on this newfangled thing.

It was the OJ chase of the culture wars in the 1920s. I'm not saying therefore, "Yeah, everything's going to be fine" because we managed to move then, but my argument would be that what I just ran through I think is a pretty good class to have for Tennessee school children or anywhere. And say, all right, what were the forces? What were the issues? Do you think it

was right? There is a moral component here. History's not value free because human beings aren't value free. This isn't like teaching biology. Let me put it this way, Governor Bredesen has no problems with me in the business or physics world. I'm not coming after him, but I have immense sympathy for policy makers in this.

Let me stipulate. I'm a privileged guy, I mean, I was entirely educated on I-24, but at private institutions, my kids have all gone to private institutions. I understand that what the large majority of my fellow Tennesseans and my fellow Americans encounter is not exactly what I encounter. But I also know that without an understanding that it's been terrible before, one can tend toward despair. The reason I'm fundamentally hopeful is that, as Winston Churchill said, "The future's unknowable, but the past, because we survived it, should give us hope."

Phil Bredesen: Jon, as we come to the end here, the genesis of this was Howard Baker's statement, the other fellow, basically the other fellow might be right and arguing for exactly what you have described. So a question I have for you at the end is can you give me an experience in your own life and intellectual development where an open mind to the fact that some alternative view of the world might be the correct one, has caused you to change your mind on some fundamental issue?

Jon Meacham: Oh Lord, you don't have enough time.

Bill Haslam: Extra credit if it's a time one of the two hosts, you found out to be right.

Jon Meacham: Bredesen was always right, and so I'm trying to think if Haslam ever–

Bill Haslam: No serious question.

Jon Meacham: Let me get back to you on that one. This is a more existential one, but something I've been thinking about recently for other reasons. I was a journalist for a long time, started at the Chattanooga Times when I was 18 years old. Was at the Times, went to the Washington Monthly, went to Newsweek. I spent a long time, 20 years I guess, captive to the journalistic culture of, I must be right because I'm saying it. My friend Evan Thomas and I have a very small group of recovering journalists. We were trained and rewarded for a kind of glib journalistic certainty that the people in power, people like you, presidents, lawmakers, were always just a little less smart than we were. And if only you all, in my case, really understood what Franklin Roosevelt had done, then maybe you would not be as benighted as we thought you were.

And cable TV has exacerbated this tendency. Twitter's made it horrible, horrible. And what I found, and I came to it really through the books, was public responsibility is mind-numbingly difficult. You have so many competing things to deal with. I mean, just in this conversation, I mean, you all would represent a state where you had somebody like me yammering on about Frederick Douglass and you had somebody in Polk County who had absolute legitimate

concerns, who thought I might as well be from the moon. And it fell to you to govern a state with both those kinds of folks, and I admire that extravagantly now, and I didn't admire it extravagantly when I was younger. I had a kind of self-regarding certitude that God knows I'm still prone to it, but it's a lot better than it used to be. I salute you all for this because your quotation from Senator Baker captures that shift that I work on in my own life, which is I think there are moments where what I think is right and what the other person thinks is wrong, and I know you do, too.

I mean, you're talking about they might be right. So it's not about civility as kind of a, "Oh, hey, everybody has an equal claim to truth." That's not true. There was a right path on slavery. There was a right path on civil rights. There was a right path on the Cold War, I believe. There was a right path on Hitler, but those are pretty few and far between. And so on a lot of things we should give ourselves the space, the oxygen, the grace to let the other person have their standing, have their dignity, have their place in the arena. To bring this full circle, I want the constitutional conversation, as I think of it, to endure because that constitutional conversation, more or less by hook and by crook, has produced a more perfect union, and that's what I want to see continue.

Bill Haslam: Well, we agree and that's why we're doing this and we really do appreciate your time in all seriousness. We like to go back and forth, but we're grateful for your insight and for taking time on this with us.

Phil Bredesen: Thanks, Jon.

Jon Meacham: Well, thank you all for what you all do.

Phil Bredesen: I don't know, Bill, I always feel so inadequate after talking with Jon.

Bill Haslam: I always tell people in a conversation with Jon's like playing tennis with somebody that's a lot better than you are. As soon as you get the ball back, it's coming back over the net right back at you.

Phil Bredesen: That's right. No, he obviously has, I think, a good sense of what the reality in America has been over the years and his notion that we've been here before, I mean, he certainly has been saying that for a long time, but I think it's important to remember.

Bill Haslam: I do and I hope it's true. There's a big part of me, to be honest with you, that just says the world has changed in some pretty significant ways. He makes a great argument about 1923 and everything that was happening then, but I just think he talks about, well, the radio came into your house and all of a sudden there was outside voices, but now there's a hundred radios in your house, but you get to pick the one you want and if it's telling you something way right and if you're way right, you listed or way left, you can pick that information and this confirmation bias that we all have to be told what we want, I think is now on steroids because of

that.

Phil Bredesen: Well, I think certainly the idea, his idea of teaching American history as the success of the system of government we have in dealing with some good things and some terrible things in our past, it's a sensible place to be. I'm not sure if there's you and I and I and maybe four other people, I don't know, but that seems very reasonable.

Bill Haslam: I actually agree. I mean, the reality, his point about is people we're all broken and imperfect, so therefore our union, our democracy is the exact same way, rings true.

I'm really looking forward to our next guest who has a long history of being involved in civil rights issues and thinking about racial issues, and like I said, I'm looking forward to hearing his perspective as well.

Phil Bredesen: Let's get on with it.

Bill Haslam: We're really thrilled to have Bob Woodson together. He's the founder and president of the Woodson Center, 1776 Unites, and Voices of Black Mothers United. He's been an influential leader on issues of poverty alleviation and empowering disadvantaged communities. He's from Philadelphia, served in the Air Force, but his social activism began in the '60s, when he developed and coordinated national programs for several organizations, including the NAACP. He served as the director of the National Urban League back in the early '70s and then was a fellow with the AEI from '74 to '81. He founded the Center for Neighborhood Enterprises to promote self-help solutions to low-income neighborhoods, and in February of '20, he launched the Center's 1776 Unites Campaign. So we're thrilled to have him. He also was the author of the newly released number one bestseller, "Red, White and Black: Rescuing American History from Revisionists and Race Hustlers."

We're really glad to have you with us today. Thank you for joining.

Phil Bredesen: Maybe we should just have you read your book and we'll make an audiobook out of that.

I want to start, Bob, and just ask you the general question. I mean, I think an awful lot of reasonable people are trying to figure out what they want schools to do in terms of teaching history to their kids. They don't want to sugarcoat things, but at the same time, they don't want to focus on the negative. We've always lived in a hierarchical society of some sort. There'll be various people who are in charge and not in charge at various times in history. What do you think about that? I mean, what really do we owe our kids in terms of an understanding of American history?

Robert Woodson: We owe our children candor, truth and honesty and an objective presentation of what happened in the past, and not some revised version of it to fit our own

ideological bias. That's the challenge.

Bill Haslam: Yeah, so let me jump right in there. Can you teach history without your own ideological bias?

Robert Woodson: Yeah, I mean, you can teach facts. Either somebody did something or didn't. Why they did it is a matter of discussion, but at least you ought to be accurate to say, "This is what happened." And this is where we challenged. When we developed 1776 Unites, we didn't want to offer a debate with 1619. In other words, what their premise is that because America had slavery and that's its birth defect, that America should be forever defined by that, but how many of us want to be defined by the worst we've ever done? And so at some point, common sense has to come into the picture. And America is a country of redemption. If you're going to teach history, talk about the good, the bad and the ugly, but tell it all and tell it completely and not just have it fit your own narrow ideological bias.

I'm a veteran of the civil rights movement, and I believe what Dr. King said, "We must be judged by the content of our character," but we also are a country and he taught redemption, and America is a country of redemption. And so what we do in our essays is to say to students, "Yes, Blacks were oppressed, but it never fully defined our history here." What we do in our essays, we talk about not just oppression, but what was the response to oppression? We were able to build railroads after slavery. And so we list all of the things using the instruments of our free enterprise systems, there were 20 Blacks who we're born slaves and died millionaires. Our children ought to know that. They ought to know that why and how we were able to achieve in the face of opposition, and that's the true American story.

Phil Bredesen: I was with a group of academics a couple weeks ago and this subject came up, and the feeling of, I mean, someone who certainly is from a liberal point of view, but an intelligent person I respect, I mean, basically said, "Look, unless you fully acknowledge exactly what went on with slavery and racism and the extent to which America was built on the backs of slaves, you really can't have an intelligent conversation about where we go from here." And so this person thought that that acknowledgement was really, really important as the beginning point of, I think, what you're describing. Why is that wrong?

Robert Woodson: The question is where do you go after you've had that discussion? What does it do for Black Americans to be told that you are forever victims class, that you have no personal agency because of the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. And so I'm saying, yes, be accurate. In the past, we have minimized the slavery, now that we have acknowledged it, talk about the Blacks who achieved in the face of slavery. Talk about how in Chicago in 1929, even in the face of Jim Crow, that in the Bronzeville section of Chicago there were 731 Black-owned businesses. We have a hundred million in real estate assets. When we were denied access to hotels, every major city had a major hotel that was built and financed by Blacks. We built over a hundred colleges and schools and universities.

If you're going to tell the story of the American story, then tell the complete story, not just that we were a villains and victims. So we should be solution oriented. We should ask ourselves, "How can we use the good, the bad, and the ugly of the past, but how can we take it and construct a better future?" Instead of just sitting back whining about what happened and why it happened, let's talk about the future.

Bill Haslam: You've rather famously said, "Solutions lie in the same zip code as their problems." Give us some examples of how you've seen that work out.

Robert Woodson: I'll give you an example. There was a public housing project in Washington, DC, in the mid '80s, Kenilworth Parkside. It was drug-infested, crime ridden, but the residents there, with our help, decided they were tied of being victimized by other Blacks. They established a resident management association, the residents came together, they drove the drug dealers out of the community. There was a woman named Ms. Kimmy Gray that had five children at age 29, married, divorced. She sent all five kids to college. She organized those residents to begin to implement discipline, and in 12 years they sent 600 kids from that one public housing development to colleges all over this country, eliminating teen pregnancy in that community.

Phil Bredesen: When I was governor, and I'm sure Bill's had exactly the same experience, I went to some of these communities and certainly we have them in Tennessee and Memphis and Nashville and really in all the major cities. I mean, you talk about this sense of hopefulness and so on, but these communities are just really beaten down and discouraged. I mean, they are– people living in them just have this sense of there is no place for me to go. If you go into one of them with people who are that discouraged, that beaten down, that sense that their future is totally outside of their control, what do you say to them beyond just "Rah, rah" and, "You can do it?"

Robert Woodson: Well, first of all, let's just take, if you say that 70% of the people living there are in households, the children are dropping out of school and drugs and whatnot, it means 30% are not. No one ever goes into the homes of the 30% that are thriving in the midst of these to find out what coping mechanisms have they adopted. And so what we do at the Woodson Center, we go into the 30% of the households and we find that there are what I call social entrepreneurs, people have found a way to cope. We raise money and they take the leadership from that 30% and spread it to the 70%. In other words, the principles of the market economy apply. Only 3% of the people in a market economy generate 70% of the jobs. It only takes a small number. Well, the same in the social economy. It only takes a small number of positively-oriented people with moral authority and influence in the community, if they're given the proper resources and the incentives, they can be the catalyst for changing an entire community.

Bill Haslam: Where do we go from here, where we've become even more div divided as a nation on our views on so many issues, whether it be how we teach history or our ideas about

the economic system? You've reached a good age in your 80s somewhere, give us some wisdom. Where do we go from here as a country that seems more and more divided?

Robert Woodson: Well, one of the ways I think people can come together is if we come around on common ground, and that is the welfare of our children. Our children are growing up, from all different classes and races, are growing up in crisis and killing themselves because they feel that life is not worth living. If you do not value your life, you will take yours or take someone else's. So what we did and are doing at the Woodson Center, we brought together the mothers of these children from those three different groups and we formed a common bond. We call them the Mother's Consortium. So we need to bring together people around a common problem, but we can't do that if we have to look at each other through the prism of race. So I think bringing together families that have lost children to violence or homicide or drugs, that would be one way for us to work together to address that hollowness in the hearts of our children. That's just one strategy that we can employ that will help move the country in a different direction.

Phil Bredesen: The underlying idea of these podcasts that we're doing and the interviews is really build on Howard Baker's notion of remembering to keep an open mind because the other fellow might just be right. And we've tried to find places where our own views had changed by keeping an open mind. You have a lifetime of rich experience in this field. Can you think of a time when you had some particular point of view and you were open about listening and you really changed your mind, that the other fellow really was right, and you were able to accept that and improve?

Robert Woodson: Oh yes. One was a whole issue of forced busting for integration. I was a civil rights leader at the time, and I opposed it, not because I am for segregation, but because I believe that the opposite of segregation is desegregation, not integration. Integration is an individual measure. If you argue separate is inherently unequal, it means anything that's all Black is all bad and that's wrong.

The other turning point in my life is when after we led demonstrations outside of a pharmaceutical company, when they hired line Black PhD chemist, and when we asked them to join our movement, they got their jobs because they were qualified. And so I realized that the big issue was class and not education. The civil rights movement benefited people like me who are well-educated at the expense of low income people. So I left and began to work, in the late '60s, on behalf of all low income people, so that was a major turning point.

Phil Bredesen: You said something, if I can, earlier, that I have never heard before and I'd like you to just expand on it a little bit, and that was that the Civil rights movement benefited the wealthier and the better educated at the expense of lower income, less educated people. What do you mean by that?

Robert Woodson: What I mean by that is in my writings and our essays, the Black community up until 1965, 85% of all Black families had a man and a woman raising children, but that all

went– we fell off the cliff with the War on Poverty. The government spent $22 trillion on the War on Poverty and Black civil rights leaders became Black elected officials and they went in to run these cities and they were the ones who ministered this $22 trillion. Well, my analysis of it, 70 cents of every one of those dollars did not go to the poor and went to those who serve the poor. They asked which problems are fundable, not which ones are solvable.

So we created a commodity out of poor people where there's perverse incentives to maintain people in poverty. So the biggest income gap is not between whites and Blacks, it's lower income Blacks and upper income Blacks. If racism were the sole culprit, why are not all Blacks suffering equally? But you see that these kinds of things people don't want to discuss, but I think we must discuss them. I believe that witnesses are more powerful than an advocate and that experience will always trump an argument. So what I offer is proof of what I'm saying and that's the history that we need to teach, accurate history.

Bill Haslam: Bob, thank you. We're very grateful for your time. We're grateful for your work through the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, and thank you so much for joining us today.

Robert Woodson: Well, thank you.

Phil Bredesen: I really appreciate it as well. It's been great.

Robert Woodson: All right, thanks.

Phil Bredesen: Well, that was an interesting pair. I mean, we had the professor and a real activist and true believer, somebody who really is acting out these things in the real world, and I learned a lot from it. I don't think they were that far apart on some of the things that they really believed in. Both argued for a sensible approach to history and not dwelling on all the negatives, just like I wouldn't want everybody to dwell on all my negatives, but that you can't just sweep them under the rug. You got to recognize they're part of history. The thing that I really took out of it was the notion that we've managed to invent a government 200 odd plus years ago, that really has been quite successful in working through some very, very difficult issues in the country, and we ought to be proud of that.

Bill Haslam: I think so, and I thought Meacham going back to the kind of when Frederick Douglass talked about Lincoln and admitted, "Hey, this guy really was the white men's president," but that's what he was looking at. But look at, even with that, look at what he did, and I kind of feel like that's a good approach to how we look at our history. Like it is imperfect at best, but with that, we've put together a union that's striving to be more perfect.

Phil Bredesen: Well, I think one of the things that is a lesson I think for today here is that I'm not sure in today's political environment where people who don't agree with you are not only people who disagree with you, they're also bad people. If Frederick Douglass had had that view of Lincoln, he would not have said that, it would not have been successful. I think the willingness

to accept others with their imperfections in your mind as to how they are, but try to find some way to move forward toward common goals is very much in the spirit of Howard Baker and what this country needs.

Bill Haslam: Which I think was kind of Bob Woodson's point, right, was let's talk about critical race theory and let's do that, but the point is now what are we going to do to actually make the situation better?

Phil Bredesen: Yeah. I thought his focus on the past is the past and you have to learn about it, but I don't want to dwell there, I want to talk about how we move forward from here was really important. And it's one of the things I see in talking to people that people are just hung up on. They want to just keep revisiting the past instead of talking about tomorrow.

Marianne Wanamaker: Thanks for listening to "You Might Be Right." Be sure to follow on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite shows. And please help spread the word by sharing, rating and reviewing the show.

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