

Stephen Scherr: Welcome to Talks at GS. I'm thrilled to be joined today by Thomas Ricks. Tom is a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist covering the military and national security for decades and an author of a number of critically acclaimed books. That includes his latest, which is *First Principles: What America's Founders Learned from the Greeks and Romans and How that Shaped Our Country*. Tom, thanks so much for joining us this afternoon.

Thomas Ricks: You're welcome. Glad to be here.

Stephen Scherr: So let's start as to why you wrote the book and, equally, when you started to write the book because I think it's of great relevance obviously to where we are literally right now.

Thomas Ricks: Sure. A lot of books are kind of hazy in their origins. This one I can tell you exactly where and when it came. It was in the house I'm sitting in, the house in Maine. And it was the Wednesday after the presidential election back in 2016. I woke up. And I thought, "I don't understand what just happened to this country, and clearly I don't understand what a lot of people think this country is about." And I had been taught in college that if you've got a fundamental problem like that, go back to first principles. Go back to the fundamentals.

And so I went downstairs to my library, and I took down my old college copy of Aristotle's *Politics*. And I began reading it in the light of the election of Donald Trump to be president. And the first thing that leapt out at me was Aristotle's observation on the side that oligarchies are the least stable form of government in comparison to monarchies and democracies. At one point -- I was trying to find this the other day -- he said an oligarchy that is ruled by the rich is most dangerous when the oligarchy makes an alliance with the mob. And I didn't write that in the book because it really didn't become as pertinent until January 6th of this year in which the oligarchy makes alliance publicly with the violent mob.

So that reading of Aristotle led me into other ancient political philosophy and to ancient history and eventually over to the Romans partly because I was reading in commentary that the American founders were more influenced by the Romans than by the Greeks.

Stephen Scherr: But you know what's interesting, you have at the front of your book a chronology. And in the chronology I

took note of the fact that these four -- Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison -- were all born inside of 20 years. Each educated a little bit differently than the next. Was there a common thread of thinking among them?

Thomas Ricks: So they're all taught by their tutors, most of them Scottish, that two things brought down the Roman Republic -- corruption and factionalism. And so these are the things they are taught you must avoid in public life -- corruption and factionalism. And that's one reason, if you understand that, why John Adams was so terrified by the rise of political parties in the 1790s. To him, that meant treason. That meant factionalism. That was an attack on the very republic. And so he winds up saying it is illegal to criticize the president, and he puts newspaper editors in jail simply for saying that he was a bad president.

So they really have this huge commonality of thinking about the world in these Roman terms, what they value. Even George Washington, an uneducated man, is very influenced by Cato. His favorite play is about Cato, the ancient Roman statesman. And in fact, since writing the book I've come to think that how we conceive of the American presidency is very much shaped by Cato. Cato is frugal, reserved, prudent, wise, and above politics. He holds himself up as a man of virtue. That's what we expect from our presidents. And that's really what Washington, though uneducated, brings to the presidency.

Stephen Scherr: If you take kind of the premise of what the influence was of the founders, where they were educated, what their concerns were, kind of fast forward even to the last several days or last several months and obviously, you know, Biden's inauguration came, you know, after an incredibly politically tense and still divided government. Is this what the founders were worried about? Or did they anticipate that this would happen?

Thomas Ricks: Okay. Begin with the Articles of Confederation government. From the time of the Revolution until the drafting and the ratification of the US Constitution, this country was governed by the Articles of Confederation. You had a one-house congress and a very weak executive branch. That's basically what we've had for the last four years in this country, especially the last year. We had an Articles of Confederation government.

Why was this a problem? Well, during the Articles of

Confederation, you have Shays' Rebellion in Western Massachusetts. Revolutionary soldiers come home and find that they're going to lose their land because they can't pay their taxes. They can't pay their taxes because congress can't raise the money to pay them their back wages. And these guys are understandably upset. They shut down the court system of Western Massachusetts.

The State of Massachusetts calls out the militia, and half the militia joins the rebels. The State of Massachusetts asks the Articles of Confederation, the central government, for help. It promises help but can't produce it because nobody will give the central government any money. James Madison is watching this horrified, and he says this is living proof that we need a new fundamental law of this land. And he uses Shays' Rebellion to gather steam and to get support for a Constitutional Convention.

So this emergence of a mob, of a rebellion is a direct spur to the writing of the Constitution. And in fact, there's one phrase in it that the part of the role of the central government, the federal government is to ensure domestic tranquility. That's a shout out to Shays' Rebellion. So these people had seen the mob, and what they wanted was a stronger central government than they had to ensure domestic tranquility but also to ensure written out explicitly the rights of people.

Stephen Scherr: When you look at the current political landscape and you look at the state of political parties and the extent to which the far right and the far left have been more dominant influences than has the center, kind of what's the future of the parties as you see it? And are we viewing something that's unusual in the long arc of political history in the country?

Thomas Ricks: Well, the funny thing is the American people are centrists. The American people have voted for a very centrist president. The problem is our system is not really democratic right now. It's a democratic oligarchy. Money speaks louder than votes do, and a lot of money has been poured into the extreme right. Also on the left and the right, the way you win a primary is by being in the extremes.

But if we had a more democratic country in which we had one-man, one-vote more, I think you would see a swing back to the center. Right now, money is short circuiting the political system in so many different ways.

Stephen Scherr: But let me ask you this question. Was the Electoral College an anticipatory move to that, among other reasons, for its motivation?

Thomas Ricks: What it is -- and a lot of other things are in the Constitution -- is a shock absorber. Things that kind of separate the people from direct political controls. It actually grows directly out of the Ancient Greek confederacies. And Madison spent years studying how these confederacies worked, how their constitutions worked. So when the question came up of whether the big states and small states should have the same number of senators -- and that directly affects the number of electoral votes -- Madison says, "Well, I've got the answer here." You know, what was -- it wasn't the League of Dominion League [sp?]. It was one of the leagues. It said, "This is how we'll work it."

But I think you could change the Constitution. They would actually fault us for not changing it more. They designed it to be amended, to be changed. So I think there are a lot of changes you could make. I'm of two minds, though. If you're going to change the Constitution, be careful. There are interesting shock absorbers there that we may not recognize.

It wasn't until recently, the last ten weeks or so, that it struck me how interesting it is that the Constitution says the states will run federal elections. It's almost illogical. Shouldn't the federal government run the election? Well, actually, each of the 50 states has to certify its own results. And imagine if Donald Trump had been able to certify it by himself as the president? He wouldn't have. He would have said, "This is a phony election. I'm throwing it out."

There's a lot of subtle wisdom built into the Constitution. So while the Electoral College seems kind of anachronism, yes, I think we should change the Constitution, but be careful of getting rid of shock absorbers.

Stephen Scherr: I can't help but think, as I'm listening to some of what we're talking about, about the role of social media at the moment. So you look at social media broadly, just think about what played with Twitter and the like. And what would the founders of thought, what would they have done differently had they had the foresight of the level and nature of communication that was capable of happening?

Thomas Ricks: In the 1790s, political parties are beginning to

emerge. They don't have a political vocabulary for it. They don't know how to talk about the opposition. Actually, the phrase, the British phrase, "the loyal opposition," doesn't emerge until the 1820s. And so they have this new thing. Political parties are coming up, and the Federalists, the conservatives like Adams, have learned that political parties are anathema and they're nearly treasonous. And you have newspapers emerging as the vehicle of political parties. The political newspaper is abounding in the 1790s. And Adams is horrified, and he starts putting newspaper editors in jail simply for criticizing him. Jefferson is supporting this.

This was disruptive media of its day. I would say probably more disruptive to American life than social media have been these days. In ten years -- political parties emerge, and in ten years one of those political parties -- Jefferson's and Madison's -- wins the presidency.

Stephen Scherr: So when you look forward to the first 100, now 99, first 99 days of the Biden administration, where is the biggest national security risk? Is it domestic terrorism? Is it domestic issues more than it is, you know, in adversary, you know, on a global scale?

Thomas Ricks: I would think so. My biggest worry is the combination of sort of domestic political terrorism combined with people willing to take advantage of it. North Korea is very good at taking advantage of momentary vulnerabilities. And Putin is very good at playing a weak end well. He plays, you know, he sold it two-twos [sp?] and he still meanings to beat the Americans.

There are things we still don't know about what's been going on. I think you'll see Putin testing this new administration, doing things like pushing the country of Georgia around. You'll see him also stepping on toes in Europe and seeing how the Americans react to that. We're going to need a strong signal to NATO that we are with you. Forget all the stuff that Trump said about you. We kind of need to prove our worth again to NATO. And I'm a big believer in NATO.

Stephen Scherr: So let me turn to the topic of racial equity. And, you know, you've written and you wrote in this book that the republic had been built into a fatal contradiction. It was founded on faith in freedom, yet on the fact of slavery. And I'm curious the reconciliation of those two and kind of what has been the influence of that on the

forward.

Thomas Ricks: The fundamental fact of the Constitution is that they wrote slavery into it. Slavery is part of the law of the land. It is not a stain on the American fabric; it is woven into the American fabric. We are still pulling those strands out. There are still people in this country who believe the Black people are not first-class citizens. Some of the people who believe that wear police uniforms.

The older I get, the more I really am persuaded that there are - racism is so fundamental to the way this country operates in so many ways. It's much more pervasive than I thought when I was younger. And I think a lot of what the riots were about are the assertion of white privilege. These were not economic riots. These were people angry at losing the privilege of old white men in American society.

So when we look at the people who wrote the Constitution, we know why they compromised with slavery because Georgia and South Carolina said, "If you have a whiff of abolition in the Constitution, we will walk and become independent states." And once you have independent states then the foreign powers are going to come back in because Georgia and South Carolina could not exist Tranon their own. Spain or France or England would have intervened there. And you're back into having European pirates running around the continent. So they compromised in order to hold the Union together.

Stephen Scherr: So while it remains pervasive -- and it no doubt does -- is there any optimism to be had on the fact that, you know, Barack Obama was the president or even that a Black man has been elected senator from the state of Georgia?

Thomas Ricks: There's no question in my mind that this country has made huge progress. The number of Black girls yesterday who watched Kamala Harris sworn in with grins on their faces I think is amazing. So we are making progress. As I look at this, though, we've had wave after wave of white backlash. In the 1960s, I think under Reagan more subtly in the 1980s, and under Trump more explicitly again. There is a strong white supremacist element in this country that deeply resents losing a privileged position in society simply based on the color of their skin and their gender.

Stephen Scherr: So Tom, we're out of time. This has been a really interesting conversation, and your book is an

extraordinarily interesting one. I would encourage many of us to read it. And we thank you very much for your time in joining us on this program.

Thomas Ricks: Thank you for having me. Great show.

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