THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
***Democracy in Question* podcast**

"The most profound line in the Declaration of Independence"

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Episode Summary:

On this episode of *Democracy in Question*, host Katie Dunn Tenpas speaks with Lindsay Chervinsky, executive director of the George Washington Presidential Library at Mount Vernon, about the Declaration's most consequential closing phrase. From the founders' dual loyalties to the erosion of "sacred honor," they illuminate what mutually pledging their "Lives, Fortunes, and sacred Honor" demanded in 1776 and what it asks of Americans now.

READER 1: *We, therefore, the representatives of the United States of America, in general Congress assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of*

[music]

the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do in the name and by authority of the good people of these colonies solemnly publish and declare that these united colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states.

READER 2: *That they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as free and independent states, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do.*

READER 3: *And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.*

TENPAS: Hi, I'm Katie Dunn Tenpas, a visiting fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution and director of the Initiative on Improving Interbranch Relations and Government. And this is season three of *Democracy in Question*. This season, we're doing something a little unusual for a policy podcast. We're going back, 250 years back, to when a document was written that every American is familiar with most can quote from, but very few have actually reckoned with seriously: the Declaration of Independence, which outlined exactly why the United States of America came to exist in the first place.

Over almost eight episodes, we've explored the Declaration of Independence phrase by phrase. I'm asking my guests what key lines meant in 1776, what history has done to them since, and most importantly, what they actually mean for how we practice democracy today.

On this episode, I'm excited to welcome back the one and only Lindsay Chervinsky. Lindsay is the executive director of the George Washington Presidential Library at Mount Vernon. She's a presidential historian and the author of award-winning books to prove it, *Making the Presidency*, *The Cabinet*, and *Mourning the Presidents*.

Lindsay, I'm happy to have you back on the podcast to dive into the lesser known phrase, "we mutually pledge to each other, our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

CHERVINSKY: Well, thank you so much for having me back.

[2:53]

TENPAS: So I'm eager to hear how you came to write an article solely on the last two paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence. It's definitely a unique angle and I'd love to hear the story behind it.

[3:05]

CHERVINSKY: Well, the National Constitution Center was basically creating this project that was like an annotated copy of the Declaration of Independence, and it had different scholars writing different articles about different sections. So about the first paragraph, the second paragraph, the grievances, and I was asked to write about the last two, and I loved that challenge because I think they're really overlooked.

We so often focus on that famous first phrase, and we sometimes focus on the grievances when we're thinking about what were the rights that came out of them, especially the Bill of Rights. But those last two paragraphs are basically the conclusion they're what people are left with and they're really important.

[3:44]

TENPAS: Yeah. I think everybody is most familiar with the preamble. And you would think, you know, as writers and and people who study these things, that that actually you want most emphasis to be on those final paragraphs so that readers remember them. So we kind of have it backwards. We're focused on the beginning and we actually should be focused on the end.

But what I think you really draw to attention that that had escaped me before I read your article was the incredible ties that bound the colonists to Britain. And such that their words truly represented a break. I think it's hard for Americans today to sort of think about the magnitude of what they were doing.

So can you bring us back in time and tell us about these links and these ties? You write one sentence about how there were so many different celebrations that celebrated their country, their homeland.

[4:32]

CHERVINSKY: Yeah, absolutely. Well, you're right. It's hard for us to understand how Americans saw themselves in 1775 or 1776. For most of the 1770s, the people we think of as patriots actually saw themselves as the most loyal British citizens. They were incredibly proud of the British system. Many of them had supported the British Empire during the Seven Years War. George Washington is a great example. He, of course, was the head of the Virginia Regiment, and so he was actually fighting for the British Empire.

And the shift happened fairly dramatically and fairly quickly to cause many Americans to think that the system was no longer working for them. But it was very rapid and it was very ... I shouldn't say that it was very rapid. It happened

very gradually and then all at once. But the gradual resistance was never designed initially to be for independence.

So when people like George Washington and John Adams were protesting things like this Stamp Act or the tea tax, they weren't doing so to declare independence. They were trying to improve the system that they already had.

And they all saw themselves operating within a world that was connected to London—their center for intellectual thought, their center for education, for the economy, for culture, for politics. It was all orchestrated vis-a-vis their colony and London.

And my favorite fact that demonstrates this is in 1774 when the delegates gathered for the first Continental Congress in Philadelphia, more delegates had been to London than had been to Philadelphia. And if we think about what travel looked like at that point, it took usually between four to eight weeks to get from, say, Philadelphia to London via ship. So they're talking about a potentially four month round trip, and more of them had done that then had gone to Philadelphia.

TENPAS: Wow. That's astonishing.

CHERVINSKY: It blows my mind. That's why I say this fact every time I can, because it is just so powerful a demonstration of what they cared about at the time.

[6:42]

TENPAS: And were there any delegates in particular who voiced this kind of emotion that that their signature on the Declaration was really a difficult decision and obviously shows their commitment to the United States?

[6:55]

CHERVINSKY: Many did. Many had really talked about the incredible value of what was called the British Common Law System. They saw the British Empire as the most democratic system in the world at the time. They thought that British common law was superior to all other forms. And so that was why so many of their resistance movements were really what they saw as reform movements. They were trying to improve this thing that was already really great. And so much of the resistance, so many of the loyalists who opposed independence did so on the grounds that they were leaving a system that wasn't that bad, that was this very powerful navy, this very powerful economy, and a legal system that was really pretty good. And so why would you want to walk away from that?

And so people like John Adams maybe departed from that idea earlier, but those who were late to buy into independence, their resistance came from this deep attachment to the British system.

[7:52]

TENPAS: Wow, that's really astonishing as well. I think that most Americans don't appreciate that they were really struggling with these dual loyalties, nor do we really appreciate the fact that they tried to make gradual reforms to improve the relationship.

[8:08]

CHERVINSKY: Well, and I think it's so important for us to not read history backwards because we of course know how it turned out. But there hadn't been successful revolutions, there hadn't been successful independence movements. And so it's one thing to say, yes, you're gonna fight a war if you have a guarantee of independence, if you have a guarantee that you're gonna create a new nation.

They had no such guarantee. They were talking about leaving a system that many had cherished with no idea about what was gonna come next. And if they lost, they were probably gonna be hung as traitors. And so the cost was enormous. And so I think it is really important for us to think about that.

TENPAS: Yeah. And the phrase itself, "we mutually pledge to each other our lives are fortunes and our sacred honor."

[8:54]

CHERVINSKY: Well, and that is so important because they didn't have those ties between them. They often referred to themselves as Virginians or Pennsylvanians, and that was what they thought of as their home country. And so they were forming a very uneasy alliance among people who did not have much in common against a common foe. And so this pledge is an essential one to try and bring everyone onto the same cause

TENPAS: And almost aspirational. Right?

CHERVINSKY: One hundred percent. One hundred percent. Because they understood that they were gonna disagree about so many different things. They had different cultures, they had different religions, they had different agricultural practices, they had different ways of self-government. Their local governments were really different. And so they knew they were setting themselves up to disagree about a whole heck of a lot. And so they were sort of hoping that it would become this united force.

[9:49]

TENPAS: And then let's fast forward maybe 40, 50 years. Were there any subsequent events that brought this phrase to light again? Or how did its meaning evolve?

[10:00]

CHERVINSKY: Well, it came up again and again and again because the union was not really something they thought of as a singular. The union was really a confederation. It was a loose affiliation of states that understood that they were kind of stronger together, but they didn't think of the United States as singular. That was not really a concept that emerged until the Civil War.

And so, the idea of pledging their lives and fortunes to this singular entity was one that they had to remind themselves of the value of again and again and again, especially when it came to the big things that a a national government is responsible for: foreign policy, national defense, the economy. These are things that you can't trust 13 or 16 states to manage. You have to have one voice. But it was uncomfortable for them because they didn't want to give up any of their own authority or their own personal freedoms to make that one entity more powerful.

[11:00]

TENPAS: And when did that shift such that now we always say the United States, and what was the point? Was it after the Civil War or...

[11:07]

CHERVINSKY: Yeah, the Civil War is really the turning point where you see grammatically the change happen from the United States "are" to the United States "is." And that was largely because the concept of union was litigated through fire and blood, that you cannot actually walk away from it.

And that had been a real question. The Civil War was not the first secession movement. There were conversations about states' rights to nullify laws as early as 1798. But then again in 1804 in Jefferson's administration, and again in 1814, during the war of 1812, and again in Jackson's presidency.

And so the the concept that the confederation was optional or that you could leave was one that was very much still up for debate until the Civil War. And then it was answered resoundingly through the Union victory that, no, the union is permanent and the union is singular and is much more important than any one entity.

[12:06]

TENPAS: And tell me a little bit about the shift in American attitudes towards the British. I mean, obviously at the time of the signing people were really torn. But what about going into the 1800s and early 1900? What happened in successive generations?

[12:20]

CHERVINSKY: Well, initially it was messy because there were a lot of people who still had a lot of resentment against the British from the Revolutionary War, and yet there was also an understanding that there were a lot of cultural

similarities, things like shared language. Few other nations shared that language, so that was going to be powerful.

Great Britain remained the United States' largest trading partner all the way through the 19th century. So even when we were just coming out of the war, or coming out of the War of 1812, Great Britain was so essential.

The War of 1812 was talked about then and now as the second war for independence. It was, I think, kind of the exclamation point on whether or not we were going to be an independent nation. And there were a lot of resentments that led up to that war. Since the Treaty of Ghent in 1814, which ended that war and established peace, we've been at peace with Great Britain. And that, I think, ended the concept, certainly, that we would reenter the British Empire.

But it set up the relationship to be a positive one. Much of our growth in the 19th century we were able to accomplish because we did so in the wake of the British Navy. We benefited greatly from them keeping the seas relatively safe. Things like the Monroe Doctrine that proclaimed that the United States was going to basically be the supreme power in the Western Hemisphere—we didn't have the power to enforce that. And the only reason that that was enforced is because it suited the British to do so. So that relationship was very beneficial.

And I would say starting in the 1870s, 1880s, we started to think about having a very special relationship. And we actually talked about it as a special relationship where we had this shared history, this shared culture, this shared set of laws. So many of the United States' laws are built on British common law. But it wasn't until we had kind of removed ourselves from the memories of war that we were actually able to embrace it wholeheartedly like we do today.

[14:17]

TENPAS: And what about the other side of the coin? One might think that Britain would sort of resent the Revolution and how they were treated. But it does, it seems as though they were supportive.

[14:25]

CHERVINSKY: Yeah. Well, initially I think there were a lot of Britons that did resent how that the United States were leaving the British Empire. I think pretty quickly many British officials at least recognized that it freed up the empire to focus on, frankly, more lucrative colonies in the Caribbean and in India. And so there was a sense of, well, we've retained these states and this nation as incredible trade partners. They are really valuable suppliers of goods and and various manufactures that we need. There are an amazing market for us to sell our things to. We don't have to worry much about keeping them on side or keeping them as allies. And instead we're free to kind of focus elsewhere.

So I think very quickly, a what we would consider to be sort of a *realpolitik* approach to this relationship emerged. And I think for the most part for the 20th century, that was how Britons viewed the United States too.

TENPAS: Really interesting. It sounds like economics drove a lot of it.

CHERVINSKY: Yes, absolutely.

[15:24]

TENPAS: Wondering if you know of any moment in U.S. history where the country came closest to living up to this mutual pledge, where the sacrifice was shared across race, class, and background?

[15:35]

CHERVINSKY: I think in moments of crisis we have gotten perhaps closest to this promise. So certainly during the Civil War, that was obviously not an entire nation coming together to fight this cause. But among the states that did fight the cause, there were incredible contributions by people of color, by women, by men of all classes and states, and obviously an enormous centralization of goods and resources to make it happen.

I would say the same is true for World War II. That was what we would consider to be a total war effort where the total economy, the total power of the nation was harnessed to try and fight this enemy. Of course there are people who are excluded from that: Japanese internment during World War II is is a good example of people who were not included in this story and who were very much kept separate. But women worked in factories, many men served in many different capacities.

And so I think moments of crisis is where the concept of mutually pledging ourselves to one another comes to fruition.

[16:38]

TENPAS: And then do you think in the periods in between there's this movement towards American individualism? And then there's a crisis brings us together and then we kind of move apart again. Is there a cycle to it?

[16:48]

CHERVINSKY: Yes, absolutely. I mean, I think by and large, the United States has always been a very individualistic society. That was true in the founding generation. And sometimes that individualism is actually individuals and sometimes it's states or communities out for their own interests as opposed to the national interests.

We as a nation, I think, are generally at our best and at our most congenial with each other when we have an external enemy to focus on. Whether it's the Cold War and we're talking about the Soviet Union or World War II, when left to our own devices, we tend to be more quarrelsome and we tend to

bicker amongst ourselves and find internal enemies to focus on, and therefore are less focused on the common or communal good.

[17:33]

TENPAS: Yeah. So maybe most recently, 9/11 would've been the moment that brought Americans together?

[17:38]

CHERVINSKY: Yeah, I think so. I think the the moments of national tragedy. We had a brief moment with that, with the pandemic where we all kind of pulled together. But, if we don't have that driving force, it's hard for us sometimes to focus that way.

[17:49]

TENPAS: Yeah. And one key, actually two words in that phrase that we're focusing on today, "sacred honor," seems to me that may be the most challenging part of this phrase to translate to modern times. We enter an era that seems to challenge our morals again and again. Does sacred honor still exist today?

[18:10]

CHERVINSKY: Well, it's hard because I think if you had asked all of the people who voted for the Declaration of Independence what that meant, you probably would get different definitions from all of them in 1776. And I think you would get different definitions today, because "sacred" of course, has a religious connotation, but their experience of religion or providence is very different than ours. And so we can't really draw one to one comparison.

And honor is a concept that was essential in the 18th and the first half of the 19th century, but we struggle with what honor actually meant. In the 18th century, a man's honor was essentially his CV, his Social Security number, his credit score, and his reputation all rolled into one. Your ability to get married, to be a part of the community, to purchase property, to enter into a business arrangement all depended on your personal honor.

That is not something that we have today. We we cannot really understand the full scope of what that meant. And so sacred honor is really hard for us to wrap our minds around.

I think the closest maybe we could come is our our national reputation, but even then that is not nearly as powerful as it needs to be for us to understand what those words mean.

[19:29]

TENPAS: Yeah. I'm also wondering how recent policy changes in the past two years or so, things like the the federal workforce reductions. The elimination of various agencies and organizations. The incredible influence of

billionaires in our society now. It seems to me that that all of those have sort of weakened this mutual pledge in various ways.

[19:53]

CHERVINSKY: Yeah. I think there's, I think there's a lot that has weakened those pledges. Certainly things I think like social media and the internet have made it harder for us to think in communal ways, which is not to say that that hasn't happened before. Whenever we have a shift in technology, whether it's the proliferation of newspapers, whether it's the rise of the telegraph or radio or television, it changes how we think about who we are as an individual, what our community is, and what our nation is.

And we're undergoing that shift right now. It's much harder for us to think in local community terms when many of the people that we're talking to on a regular basis on our phones are really far away. And so we're absolutely shifting our our concept of a communal identity and an individual identity.

I also think there is a a sense of national pride and patriotism that is required with this concept of sacred honor or mutual pledge. You know, I think about the billionaires in the age of old and, like, Carnegie built all these libraries as a way to give back to the community and to serve as a community hub. The Rockefeller Foundation is because Rockefeller gave all this money to try and support things like the arts and sciences. And in some ways I think we've lost that, that we have to have pride in this thing, even if it's really imperfect in order to care to be a part of it.

[21:18]

TENPAS: Yeah. Tell me one takeaway you have from the Declaration's relevance today that maybe emerges from your intense study on the final portion of the Declaration of Independence.

[21:31]

CHERVINSKY: Well, I think the main takeaway from the last two paragraphs is that the delegates were really focused on what does it actually mean to be a nation and what does it mean to separate oneself from Great Britain. And they were outlining all of the responsibilities of a nation. They were outlining the use of military force, and the ability to represent oneself on the world stage, and the power over the local economy. These are things that we still think about today, but we have almost taken for granted that that is a choice.

And so my big takeaway is that the Declaration of Independence is choosing to take on those responsibilities on behalf of the American people and to expect that they will be held accountable in return. And that is still what we expect of our representatives today, that we've given them power to represent us and in return they are supposed to care what we think.

And the delegates were keenly aware of how much public opinion mattered. And today I think that is something that we can all maybe embrace as an important part of this equation.

[22:37]

TENPAS: Right. And if nothing else, these multiple celebrations of the 250th anniversary of this document might help people think about these core issues more frequently.

[22:47]

CHERVINSKY: I certainly hope so. I think this anniversary is a great opportunity to be reminded of this history, but also to remember that for them, this was the starting point. You know, from 1776 to 1787 is an 11-year period in which they declared independence, fought the war, signed the treaty that ended it, created the Articles of Confederation, threw that out, and then created the new Constitution. So what if this is the starting point for us to have a civic decade or a civic 11 years in which we can have a renaissance of those ideas?

TENPAS: Yeah. That's a terrific way to end. Thank you so much for your time.

CHERVINSKY: Thank you for being here.

TENPAS: Yeah.

If you enjoy this conversation as much as I did, make sure to check out episode three where Lindsay expertly unpacked the Declaration's more well known phrase, "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." On our next and final episode of the season, we'll discuss the Declaration's important role in upholding American democracy today, just in time for the 250th anniversary of American independence from Britain this July 4th. Stay tuned.

Democracy in Question is a production of the Brookings Podcast Network. Thank you for listening, and thank you to my guests for sharing their time and expertise on this episode.

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I’m Katie Dunn Tenpas. Thank you for listening..