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

"Heather Cox Richardson on defending the Declaration's democratic ideals"

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Guest:

Heather Cox Richardson
Professor, History Department
Boston College

Host:

Kathryn Dunn Tenpas
Visiting Fellow, Governance Studies
Director, The Initiative on Improving Interbranch Relations and Government
The Brookings Institution

Episode Summary:

On the final episode of Democracy in Question's third season, host Katie Dunn Tenpas speaks with historian Heather Cox Richardson about the Declaration of Independence as a whole and its relevance today. The Declaration can be understood as an unfinished promise that depends on Americans' capacity to defend, expand, and reinvent its ideals.

READER: *The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.*

[music]

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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 the final episode of season three of *Democracy in Question*. This season, we've been doing something a little unusual for a policy podcast. We've gone back, 250 years back, to the birth of the Declaration of Independence, the document that outlined exactly why the United States of America came to exist in the first place.

Two days from now, on July 4th, Americans will mark the anniversary of this document that was, at its core, a policy argument written by a small group of men who spent years thinking and writing about philosophies of self-governance as they strove to establish a new polity separate from the mighty British Empire and risking their own lives in the process.

In this season's seven previous episodes, my guests have reflected on U.S. governance today through the lens of the founders in 1776. So today, for the season finale, we're wrapping up with an in-depth conversation about the Declaration as a whole and its relevance today. The discussions occurring in Congress, the White House, in courts about executive authority, the size and reach of government and agencies, global trade, and judicial independence, to name a few, are not new. It seems as though we continue to debate issues that were central to the struggle for independence 250 years ago.

After last episode's fascinating discussion about the significance of the Declaration's concluding paragraphs, and the founders' powerful devotion to their nation and to one another, I'm delighted to round out the season with historian Heather Cox Richardson. She teaches history at Boston College, is the author of numerous works, including How the South Won the Civil War, and To Make Men Free: A History of the Republican Party. And she also writes the widely read nightly newsletter, "Letters from an American."

Heather, welcome to the show. It's a pleasure to have you on this last episode dedicated to the Declaration of Independence.

RICHARDSON: And it's a pleasure to be here. Thanks for having me.

[3:01]

TENPAS: Great. Well, let's go back 250 years when Thomas Jefferson and the Committee of Five drafted the Declaration of Independence. It clearly served multiple purposes: clarifying the rationale for independence to the British and other countries,

as well as the colonists themselves. Other parts of the Declaration, however, are more philosophical and communicate a vision for democracy. I'm wondering if you think we have fulfilled their vision, or is it a work in progress?

[3:28]

RICHARDSON: I think one of the most amazing things about the Declaration of Independence is that it articulates a vision of human society that was extraordinary in their era, and that laid out a set of principles from which they excluded most of the people in the colonies. And yet it created a vision that people in the United States of America ever since have been able to use to argue for their own inclusion in that new philosophy of government.

So have we achieved it? No. But I think part of the point of American democracy is that it's never achieved. It is always a work in progress because we are always, to borrow a phrase from a different American document, we are always trying to create a more perfect union.

So I think the Declaration stands, but it stands as a way of thinking about what it means to construct a government in which people can participate and have their rights protected.

[4:30]

TENPAS: And when you think about the progress we've made, if you had to break it down into periods of time in this country, have there been periods where we've made strides forward? Are there periods where we've stepped backwards? Does anything jump out to you as a period of time in which we've done quite well in working towards achieving these goals, and other times where we haven't done as well?

[4:51]

RICHARDSON: Well, "working toward" are the operative words there rather than "achieving," because sure, I mean, in the 1850s, you get the attempt of a small group of elite enslavers in the American South to get rid of the Declaration of Independence altogether. Now, quite literally, in March of 1861, when he talks about the basis for the new Confederacy, the former senator from Georgia, Alexander Stephens, who soon will be the vice president of the Confederacy, literally says the founders of the country got it wrong by suggesting that all people were created equal. In fact, he says they're not, and our new nation, the Confederacy, will be founded on the cornerstone that is human enslavement.

And of course, there's a backlash to that, and Americans say, No, in fact, we do want to stand on the Declaration of Independence. Abraham Lincoln says, If you start to say some portions of the Declaration hold and others don't, basically, don't you have to throw out the entire thing? And Americans say, No, we actually are quite fond of the Declaration of Independence. And on the heels of the American Civil War, we get the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, which are accurately called a second founding.

So you see these sorts of ebbs and flows that is, of course, the 1850s. We could do the same thing periodically throughout our history.

But I think you can think about the Declaration and how important it has been by looking at how many literally hundreds, if not thousands, of groups that have been excluded from the rights that are set out in the Declaration have issued their own declarations based on the Declaration of Independence to demand their own inclusion in the values that it sets out.

So yeah, we've moved forward and we've moved backward, but always we have been able to point to the Declaration as a set of principles for those people who have been excluded from our polity to get access to it.

[6:41]

TENPAS: Yeah, and that's clearly something we should be celebrating, I think.

So I want to talk more specifically about Congress. The Declaration both asserts rights and assigns responsibilities, saying that governments are instituted specifically to secure rights.

What does that assertion actually require of a legislative branch today, and by what standard might the founders have measured whether the current Congress was meeting it?

[7:03]

RICHARDSON: Well, I'm gonna go all historical on you here—

TENPAS: —I love it. That's what we want—

RICHARDSON: —and point out that, when the founders wrote the Declaration of Independence, they were the colonies of what we would now call a superpower. And what they are really trying to do in that declaration is to explain to other nations around the world why they're not simply a band of rebels who should all be, you know, executed.

And so they are literally laying out a set of principles for a new kind of human governance. And in your introduction, you talked about how they spend a lot of time thinking about human governance. And that's something that modern-day Americans don't really do a lot, because we have this model in front of us that has worked for almost 250 years, and we don't think a lot about the philosophies of governance so much as about policies.

But when they are laying this out, they're not thinking about policies. They're thinking about that central issue of how do human beings govern themselves. And, you know, they've been thinking about it for a long time, and this is one of the reasons that Thomas Paine's Common Sense, when it comes out in January of 1776, is so enormously important. Because he says, you know, Basically, we don't need a king at all, which is something that a number of colonists had not been willing to go into because it was just sort of the way things were done.

So they write this declaration, which draws from Enlightenment theories at the time, saying, This is why human beings need to have governments and how those governments should work, and they should not work based on, you know, a hereditary monarchy or on religion or on national boundaries. They should work on these governing philosophies.

And then the document sets that out really quite beautifully. And then it goes into a list for other nations of why they feel it's okay to throw off their king. Because, you know, a lot of kingdoms are not gonna be happy with the idea of colonists throwing off a king, and they say, He has done this. He has done this. He has done this. He has done this. And there's that laundry list of the ways in which the king has broken the bonds between them and him as far as they're concerned.

And then they go on to say to people in Britain, people who are their relatives and friends, We tried, to tell you guys that we were upset, and no matter what we did, you treated us like we were not part of the government and not part of the polity. And so we, really feel like we've got no choice.

And then they go on to that incredibly passionate final ending where they say, with the recognition that having signed this document, they have signed their own death warrants if they fail, they say, "We pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

[9:48]

It's a document designed to set out a set of principles. But it is not a document designed actually to create that government. And of course, what they are operating on in that period and going forward into the construction of the U.S. Constitution is going to be the Articles of Confederation, which is a government that ends up not being powerful enough to do what it needs to do. But they're not even thinking really yet about how we can put together a system to make this happen. That's not what the Declaration does. That's what the Articles of Confederation do, imperfectly as it turns out, and that's what the Constitution does. And they're really extraordinarily different documents. One is a set of principles, one is the mechanics to make those principles come to life.

And then, you know, we're really not done even then with the Constitution because they've created this, what a a later poet will call a machine that will go of itself. But they didn't really figure out how to marry the idea of a republic, or a democratic republic, to that machine that would go of itself.

And we're gonna get the injection by the early 1800s of political parties to tie people to that system. So how the founders would have thought we have done with the Declaration through our mechanics of government, I'm not sure they would have given it any thought at all.

And of course now we really could grapple with the places we have failed the Constitution or the Constitution has failed us. But the Declaration is really not a system of policies or machinery, it's a system of principles.

[11:22]

TENPAS: But they do sort of assert that governments are instituted specifically to secure rights, so they're speaking more broadly about the government itself. And I'm curious from your perspective, it seems at least from a political scientist point of view that we're at a point now where Congress is dysfunctional, and it raises the question of how capable we are today to secure rights. Any thoughts?

[11:42]

RICHARDSON: Well, we are certainly capable of doing it. We have done so in the past, and we can do so in the future. It sounds like you're asking about the dysfunction of the current American government, and I'm a hundred percent behind that.

But where we are right now with that dysfunction is not only a reflection of the rise of Donald Trump in 2015 and the takeover of the American system, first by the Republican Party and then what has become the personalized MAGA party of Donald Trump.

The falling apart of the system of checks and balances, really, I think you can push... I mean, personally, I would push it all the way back, I'm so sorry, but I would push it all the way back to 1800 when, in fact, Thomas Jefferson recognizes that he would've won the presidency in 1796 if the electoral votes of Virginia, which were heavily weighted toward Virginia in that first iteration before the redoing of the electoral ballots in the first census. He recognized that if Virginia's electoral votes had been winner-take-all, he would've won the presidency.

So he really pushes in 1800 for Virginia to manage its electoral votes as a winner-take-all system. He gets it through. Horrifies James Madison, by the way, who wants to amend the Constitution to say, No, that's not what we intended. They were supposed to be representational. And after that, most states follow suit within the next 20 years to make sure that, actually, their guys will have a chance in a winner-take-all system.

[13:04]

That's been a huge problem since 1800 for the American system. But you could also move that up into the 20th century when we get the capping of the House of Representatives in 1929 because of the realization among members of Congress that voters in the cities who are largely immigrants are getting more power than voters in the countryside, and they're concerned about that. So they cap the size of the House of Representatives.

But then I think you can really look forward to the period after 1974 in '74 when the Republican senators go to Nixon after Watergate and say, You gotta resign because we will in fact convict you after the House of Representatives passes articles of impeachment.

What you see in the system beginning really in the 1980s is the rise of a political party that puts the party over the country. And with that, we have seen the breakdown of the Supreme Court, we have seen the breakdown of the Senate, and

now we've seen the breakdown of the House of Representatives and of course the presidency.

And that breaking of our system of checks and balances by the loyalty of the members of a certain party to that party rather than to the government itself, rather than to the United States of America itself, is really complicated, I think, why that happened. But I think what we are looking at now is the desperate need of Americans who care about our system, who care about our system of checks and balances, our Constitution and so on, to work together regardless of party to take that system back.

[14:33]

TENPAS: And earlier in the conversation, you mentioned the laundry list of grievances. I want to quote from one and then ask a question about it. Starting with a quote now, "He has refused his assent to the laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good."

I think today a a similar debate exists around the modern presidency and its tremendous power relative to the other two branches, and you alluded to that in the prior response. Are there key moments in history where this grievance was particularly relevant? I mean, you mentioned Watergate as one example. So wondering about that. And then also I'm curious, what modern policy debate might the founders have the most to say about today?

[15:10]

RICHARDSON: Well, I think when you think about where we are in the moment we're in today, the Declaration stands as vital because of those principles. The idea that we have a right to be treated equally before the law, we have a right to have a say in our government, and as Lincoln is gonna expand on later, we have a right to equal access to resources. I mean, that's really what the Declaration lays out.

But what we're looking at in the moment we're in today is a reflection not only about that, I think, but also about the Constitution, because the current administration is operating as if there isn't a Constitution. That's something different than breaking laws or of challenging constitutional principles. That is simply acting extra-constitutionally, and what I mean by that is by doing things like ignoring the Emoluments Clause, or impounding funds that Congress has appropriated for certain specific things in a way that not only violates the Constitution, but also violates the Impoundment Act that was put in place by Congress after Nixon tried to do something similar.

So they're acting as if that doesn't even exist. And that's a challenge to the entire framework of our legal system and the ways, as I said, in which the American people are supposed to be part of this machinery through which we govern ourselves.

That is something that reflects, of course, on the moments in which presidents have broken laws. I will point out that presidents tried not to break laws in the past, and the Supreme Court's decision in Donald Trump vs. the United States has given that presidency something that absolutely violates the principles in the Declaration of

Independence, and that's that we are all equal before the law. What that decision said is that no, in fact, the president is not equal to the rest of us, and that, you know, I was one of those people whose hair was on fire over that particular decision.

[17:01]

But in terms of what the framers would have thought now and what some of the issues they would have talked about now, and again, that's hard because, of course, they're operating from their own position in which they would have said that Black Americans and brown Americans and Indigenous Americans and women were not equal. Their ability to declare equality depended on their belief that the majority of people who lived in this country were not equal. They didn't have to be considered in that equation.

But if you take at face value their declaration of equality, I think the thing that really we would be talking about now is the assault on the 14th Amendment through decisions like the Louisiana v. Callais decision and the Supreme Court's revision of that, essentially to say that the government cannot take into consideration systems for guaranteeing that everybody has a right to representation that will reflect their interests.

So that issue of who can vote and how the government should guarantee the vitality of those votes is central to that principle in the Declaration that we all have a right to consent to our government.

TENPAS: Yeah, those are really thoughtful and interesting issues.

[18:13]

RICHARDSON: What do you think?

[18:14]

TENPAS: I think since the document, primarily consisted of the grievances, so you sort of take that out, subtract that, because really what they're projecting is this vision about self-governance. And so I think their response to what's occurring today would be mostly about how that ability to self-govern has been inhibited or is being inhibited by office holders, I think.

And I think most people who think about the Declaration are really thinking about the principles, the preamble. They're not thinking about all the different grievances. And so I think most people think in terms of, those kinds of rights that it sort of projects.

My colleague Vanessa Williamson was on one of the episodes and makes the really interesting point that this document at the time was really seen as more of a treaty and was not really seen as something that would become this founding document. But then immediately after, you know, 1789, groups that wanted to have rights, the abolitionist movement seized on the Declaration because of that preamble, and because of this projection of democracy that it, stated and the ideas of self-governance that it generated.

And so I think that's where their response would mostly sort of fall today.

[19:17]

RICHARDSON: I love that, and I think you're right. I think a really great way to think about it, the idea of self-governance. and I will point out that it's a truism in history, American history, that if you have rights, you stand on the Constitution, and if you don't have rights, you stand on the Declaration.

But I wonder what the, framers, founders, I'll, I'll give even the founders, would have said about that breakdown in self-governance simply because of the extraordinary size now of this country, something else they couldn't see. And we've got Federalist Number 10, of course, when, they argue that in fact it's gonna be possible to have a democracy over a huge territory.

But when you think about places like California, where the size of each congressional district is well over a half a million people, I think, which at the time would have been simply unthinkable, I wonder what they would have said about the ability of people to govern themselves over such an extraordinary space. What do you think?

[20:13]

TENPAS: Yeah, I think it's problematic. And I think you have to also consider the stark contrast between California and states like Montana and Wyoming, where they're in a sense over-represented, and in a sense have, like, less diverse economies because of the size and because of the nature of their natural resources and things like that.

So it there's a lot of things obviously they could never anticipate. And, England at the time or the Crown at the time was really trying to limit the westward expansion so that they could have more control over the colonists. And so at the time it, you know, it was probably the farthest thing from their mind that we would have this incredibly large country that was so sort of economically diverse and so populous.

[20:47]

RICHARDSON: And one of the things when we got the state of Montana, for example, and also Idaho and Wyoming and North Dakota and South Dakota, in fact, at the time, this is 1889 to 1890, they did say, If you let these states in, you're destroying the principle of equal representation, because literally they have fewer people in them than one district in New York City.

So they knew that was the case, and that was a moment when, in that case, the Republican Party, again, although the Democrats have done stuff on their watch on occasion as well, they said, We don't care. We just want to make sure we can continue to control the Senate. That backfired years when the, you get the rise of the alliances and the populists that switch over to the Democrats.

But they were still talking in that era, even during the era of the robber barons, about representation and about how you construct this government. And I do find it astonishing in the moment in which we're living, you see members of parties being

willing to completely throw overboard those central principles of self-governance if it means their guy gets into office.

And that worries me a lot. One of the reasons I do what I do is to make sure people understand this is not just about your team getting to hold all the baseballs. It's about whether or not we continue to have a game at all.

[22:06]

TENPAS: Yeah, it's politics over principle in almost every single case. To switch gears a little bit, I wanted to tell you that it's so impressive that you've built this newsletter, this must-read history newsletter every single night, and you have a huge readership. I'm wondering, for the policy buffs that might be listening, what has that daily discipline taught you about U.S. government? Are there any larger themes that you could draw from based on those nightly efforts? And I think one way to think about it is, given that you're writing every single night, do you see policy shifts as occurring every day in these highly publicized acts of decisionmaking? Or do you think that changes occur more slowly over time?

It seems to me, in your case, you're looking at all the trees, and I'm thinking about the forest. So if you could stand back and look at the forest, all these writings, all these different essays that you've created, what does it tell us about U.S. government more broadly?

[22:58]

RICHARDSON: So what I'm really interested in looking at is ideology, where ideology meets policy. I always think about it as where the rubber meets the road. And one of the things, there're many things that jump out about this moment, because we are in a moment of transition in both political parties and in the nation at large. I'm convinced of that. And that's something I would know, because that's really what I've studied throughout American history.

But what really has jumped out to me recently is that normally when you study a period of American history, you can see a linear change in policies and ideology. And I don't mean, like, literally step by step, but there seems to be sort of a flow in a certain direction. And there are within that flow moments in which one thing or another becomes a really big deal. and this is gonna sound stupid, but, like, a declaration of war or a speech or something Congress is doing or the the rise or the death of somebody important.

There are ways in which you feel as if you are not exactly watching a movie, but there is a sense, things flow in a certain way. That's just sort of a truism, whether you're studying a political party or you're studying a series of laws or an ideology or the development of a region of a country. You know, things happen, and they seem to be moving in a certain kind of direction.

And one of the things that really jumps out to me about the Trump administration is there is not that sort of one directional flow. That is, it really looks to me as if the people who are controlling the Trump administration have at least four different

ideologies, many of which work together, but many of which do not. And there is that story.

There is the story of how the country is being affected by decisions that are being made by these four different groups, and that is really halting and, you know, it's almost like a backwash. So you watch, for example, recent stories of the re-arrival of screw worm in the United States. Well, you know, that's sort of a jump back to a period from 60 years ago. And similarly, the lack of pasteurization of milk, again, a jump back for decades.

So it just sort of feels like it's really difficult to find a through line because in addition to what Trump is doing, you're also watching the Democrats change, and that may be more of a clear through line as they are starting to articulate different ways and different ideologies about looking at this modern moment.

But it's a really, really hard era to study because you can't just say, Oh, today I'm gonna take a look at the Department of Agriculture, because what the Department of Agriculture is doing is a branch of this larger ideology. Instead, you've got, Oh my Lord, what's the Department of Agriculture doing today, and how is it completely different from what Commerce is doing because they are literally on opposite sides of a certain issue.

[25:55]

So when I think about the larger picture of what I do, what really jumps out is how different this moment is from I would say any, except maybe the Depression under Herbert Hoover when there was, a lot of different things pushing in different directions. Or maybe the 1890s in the great crash of, the '90s, 1890s.

But the other larger theme that I think I see is that since the 1980s, and even pushing back into the 1930s, 1937, and the arrival of the conservative manifesto, it's again almost a truism that those people who are trying to destroy the American government have a really easy task, because all they gotta do is say no, and to grandstand in front of the cameras, and to take a baseball bat to stuff.

But those people who are trying to preserve the liberal consensus and are trying to move the ball forward have a really difficult job because they've gotta create coalitions, and they have to tweak things, and they have to make change, and they have to advertise it, and they have to... It's a really heavy, heavy lift. it's carving the Pieta versus taking a baseball bat to it.

And those people tend to be people of real goodwill, and they're really trying to go do a good job. But the way that our system is set up now and the way we have the media feedback we do, it's really hard for them to get traction. And when I look at that and when I look at where we are in this country, it's really easy to get out in front of the TV cameras and lie. It's much harder to create a new policy for the American people that is gonna be good for them and get traction for that, because it's not gonna make everybody happy, and, you know, there's gonna be compromises and so on.

And when I think about where we are and the difficulties of our democracy in this moment, That strikes me as being a really big thing we must grapple with that really is not currently on the table.

[27:56]

TENPAS: Yeah, I didn't really think about that. But if you look at the history of the parties, the various parties and how they've evolved over time, right now there really isn't sort of a predictable ideology or a consistent one. There is, as you pointed out, four streams or more of different approaches to governing that are all occurring at once, making it really difficult to understand or to predict.

[28:15]

RICHARDSON: And that's just on the Republican side. I mean, the Democrats as well have different strands. They at least are all moving in the same, stream. But the Republicans aren't moving in the same stream right now. and worse for me, there's no one who seems to be trying to come up with a new ideology of conservatism. I mean, the MAGA people have really jumped the shark and have gone straight into fascism and, the really far right stuff. We know what that looks like.

But somebody's gonna have to rebuild a center-right party in the United States, and right now I'm just not seeing that. And that's a, real problem. Regardless of where you stand on the political spectrum, you do need to have an ideology that comes from that place that can grapple with the modern world. And right now just saying, No, we're gonna kill everything, is not actually a governing ideology.

[29:08]

TENPAS: Yeah. Well, today is July 2nd, the day John Adams believed we would be celebrating America's independence, and two days before the Continental Congress adopted the text. What aspects of our history will you be celebrating on July second or July fourth?

[29:23]

RICHARDSON: Oh, that's easy. American agency. One of the things we have lost in the last several decades is the understanding that what creates change in the United States of America is its people. Every time we have managed to innovate or to create or to preserve or to expand our polity to include more people, it has come from the agency of everyday Americans stepping up to the plate to change society.

And when we do that, what we create is extraordinary. And one of the things that always jumps out to me in the moment we're in is that, you know, the rise of authoritarianism is kind of textbook. I mean, you and I could sit down and we could write the book because it's been done before. We know exactly what it looks like.

But where the real creativity in a society comes from are the people who push back against that through new languages and new music and new clothing and new speeches and new ways to communicate and new coalitions. And you have no idea what those are gonna look like.

And so when I think about celebrating the 250th year of independence, which of course the founders never would have seen coming, I mean, they really did not know if they were gonna make it through the next week, and they certainly didn't know that they were gonna make it through the Revolutionary War. When I think about celebrating that moment, it's all about the American people.

[30:47]

TENPAS: That's very uplifting. So I typically ask every guest that I have on the show the same question, and so I'd like to share that question with you, and that is, what is a key takeaway about the Declaration that you consider to be most important?

[31:00]

RICHARDSON: Well, for me, to be honest, it kind of depends on the day. I do believe what is central to it is what I outlined before, the right to be treated equally before the law, to have a say in your government, and have equal access to resources.

But the part of the Declaration that gets me every time is the fact that while we talk about those things, and while Jefferson and the way the text was edited made that the centerpiece, it also made it feel sort of done. Like, it's a mathematical formula. Right? We declare these to be self-evident, you know?

What really gets me in the Declaration is at the very end of it, when these guys who have been, you know, trying to deal with the breaking conflict with the country that has established these colonies, they're trying to deal with all these extraordinary things. And they write this document, and they argue about the document, and some people are gonna sign it, some people aren't gonna sign it. they're in there trying to hash this out.

And then at the very end of it, they write that paragraph saying, you know, We are appealing to the supreme judge of the world , for the rectitude of our intentions, to declare that we should be free and independent.

They recognize just how extraordinary what they are doing is, and then at the very end of it, that line, "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."

[32:43]

That's the one that does it for me, because they are basically saying, We're gonna throw everything behind this. Our lives and our money for sure, which is, I think, a reflection of what people like Fannie Lou Hamer are gonna do in the 1960s, or that, you know, these people who have put their lives on the line for the American vision of human society.

They outline that in the Declaration, but then they added, "Our sacred honor," which is about not just what they were doing in that life, but how they would be remembered in history.

So when I think about the Declaration of Independence, what I take away from that is that the principles that it promulgates require us to throw our lives and our fortunes behind it, but also to recognize that the choices we make in so doing will be reflected in the way that we are remembered for eternity. And when you think about it that way, it feels like we don't have a lot of choice about where we take our stand.

TENPAS: Yeah. It doesn't get more profound than that, and I love that you've memorized those lines from the Declaration of Independence. We all probably should memorize that particular set of lines to realize the incredible sacrifice that they took.

Thank you so much for concluding this season, and on such a powerful note. We so appreciate your time, and your insights were truly fascinating. Thanks so much.

RICHARDSON: Well, thank you for having me.

TENPAS: And thank you for listening. We've come together to understand where we are by understanding where we've been. And thanks to conversations like this, the effort continues. That's season three of Democracy in Question, America at 250.

[music]

Democracy in Question is a production of the Brookings Podcast Network.

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You can find episodes of *Democracy in Question* and learn more about the show on our website at Brookings dot edu slash DemocracyInQuestion, all one word.

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