

In this episode of *George Washington Slept Here*, we're joined by special guest Dr. Rogers Smith. A distinguished professor of political science and founding director of the Andrea Mitchell Center for the Study of Democracy at the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Smith is known for his engagement in politics and deep passion for studying political philosophy. Our discussion delves into the concept of peoplehood and how a sense of belonging is created. Dr. Smith shares insights about political communities striving for human well-being, emphasizing the significance of acknowledging diverse identities and fostering unity while avoiding division.

Quotes

"Building successful political communities involves building trust and value among people by focusing on shared qualities instead of creating more divisions."- Rogers Smith

"Release the constraints of tribal identities and embrace the journey towards enhancing the well-being of everyone"- Rogers Smith

"Real leadership grows through building trust, not fear, and offering protection and unity against adversities."- Rogers Smith

Featured Guest

Dr. Rogers Smith

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Chapters:

01:09 - Introduction.

05:30 - Keith Whittington's Insightful Biographical Sketch

06:38 - Leading the Local Teenage Republican Club

08:32 - Political Awakening and Academic Exploration

12:06 - Nurturing Political Passion: From Business to Politics

15:35 - A Scholar's Choice: Pivoting from Law to Political Science

18:15 - Intellectual Challenges and Triumphs at Yale

20:38 - Unearthing Forgotten Narratives of American Citizenship

26:39 - The Power of Friendships in Courtroom Clashes

33:33 - Embracing Liberty: A Call to Responsibility and Community

38:28 - Progress in American History: Advancing Toward Greater Freedom.

43:13 - Navigating the Challenge of Cultivating a Shared Identity.

48:38 - Redefining Identity: Exploring Peoplehood Beyond Tribal Views

51:34 - Nurturing Trust and Emphasizing Commonalities.

57:48 - Journey from Political Activism to Intellectual Curiosity

59:09 - Conclusion

Transcript:

Transcript:**Jason Raia:**

Hello, and welcome to *George Washington Slept Here*, a new civic education podcast from Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge where we explore American history, civic education, and the idea of liberty through conversations with some of our favorite thinkers, writers, and leaders. I'm Jason Raia, Chief Operating Officer at Freedoms Foundation, and this week's host of *George Washington Slept Here*. In this new civic and history education podcast, the format is simple, a long-form conversation with a friend of Freedoms Foundation, where we can learn something new. Before we go any further, a little housekeeping, we encourage everyone to subscribe to *George Washington Slept Here* wherever you listen to podcasts and make sure you get every new episode as soon as it comes out. And we love hearing from listeners, so please email us at gwshpodcast@gmail.com with your comments, questions, suggestions and hit us up at Freedoms Foundation's social media @FFVF on Twitter and on Facebook and Instagram @FreedomsFoundation. Today's interview is with Constitutional Scholar and former Freedoms Foundation Board Member, Dr. Rogers Smith. Hello, Rogers.

Rogers Smith:

Hello.

Jason Raia:

Welcome. We're so glad to have you here. Our conversation today is going to be structured as it always is and a way to keep us on track. We wanna explore your origin story. How did you become the person sitting before us? Your current work, what is taking up the bulk of your time? And then I want to delve into the Constitution and specifically the idea of citizenship that has been such a part of your work as a scholar. And finally, we will end with a quiz, which hopefully will allow listeners to learn something new about you. So, Rogers, where were you born and raised?

Rogers Smith:

I was born in Spartanburg, South Carolina, but I was raised in Springfield, Illinois. My parents moved north just a few months after I was born because my father wanted to start his own business.

Jason Raia:

Okay. And so do you remember South Carolina at all or your memories are all from Illinois from Springfield?

Rogers Smith:

I definitely consider myself a Midwesterner, a son of Springfield, but my family visited South Carolina every summer while I was growing up. And so I had a vivid sense of being part of a Southern family, even though I was Midwesterner, and that was significant for my development because I grew up during the era of the civil rights struggles of the 1950's and 60's. And I was living in the hometown of Abraham Lincoln, but going back to South Carolina, The state that had been the first to secede from the union, and so it made issues of civil rights, very vivid to me.

Jason Raia:

And I would guess in some ways a unique perspective, you know, from a lot of people who would have experienced the civil rights movement from one place or the other from the north or the south or the midwest, but you were experiencing it in some ways from these two very different places in America with very different, views on the civil rights movement.

Rogers Smith:

Absolutely! And it did make vivid for me the fact that America contained these very different and conflicting perspectives on some very fundamental issues. And yet, there were some deep agreements and shared values in the different parts of the country as well.

Jason Raia:

That's interesting. We're gonna have to come back to that because I wonder if that experience, you know, has an outsized influence on the work that you end up doing. But I wanna ask you about your early influences. I'm always fascinated by who are the people that influence, you know, someone and maybe sent them on a particular trajectory. So anyone particular in your early life that you remember and, affected the decisions that you would make later on?

Rogers Smith:

When my parents were the greatest influences on me, my father was a conservative businessman with a strong sense of independence. I don't know if he would have put it this way, but he sort of embraced the Jeffersonian yeoman ideal of being a self-supporting family man. He didn't do it on a farm. He did it by having his own business. But my mother, who had trained to be a teacher, had a passion for learning, and she also had a strong religiously inspired moral conscience, and that was a big influence on me as well. It also mattered tremendously that I was living in a state capital that simultaneously tried Abraham Lincoln, and it made -- issues of politics, a very, very vibrant part of my growing up.

Jason Raia:

And you have siblings. Where do you fall in the order of your siblings?

Rogers Smith:

I have three brothers. No sisters. I am the second of the four brothers. And it is certainly true that my interactions with my older brother, always trying to be like him, always trying to compete with him, help shape a lot of my personality.

Jason Raia:

Absolutely. So and I wanna state now I'm indebted to your former student and friend of Freedoms Foundation, Keith Whittington, for a really wonderful biographical sketch of you that he wrote on the I think it's the Cambridge University. Press It's a piece that he did that was just, full of detail, particularly about your career as a political scientist. And so if I'm accidentally quoting him, I'm gonna give him credit now. Keith is a wonderful First Amendment free speech scholar at Princeton, and we hope to have on the show in the future. But, he talked about how you were from an early age involved in politics in Illinois to the point that it, you know, it influences you to study, you know, politics philosophy, you know, in your undergraduate. And, you know, so you end up at James Madison College of Michigan State University what was in the decision to go there and to study, you know, politics?

Rogers Smith:

Even though I admired my father and saw the pleasure he had in running his own business. And I knew he wanted all of his sons to go into the business. I was always more fascinated by politics. My brothers went into the business, but I got involved in politics at an early age as a conservative Republican in Illinois in the 1960's. Living in Springfield, I thought that meant that we were for two things: we were definitely pro business and in favor of the capitalist system against its communist rival, but we were also a party of civil rights and that was part of the Abraham Lincoln legacy. And so I got involved early on when I was thirteen. I was elected vice president of the local teenage Republican Club. I became president of the club the next year, and eventually, I became the state chairman of the Illinois teenage Republicans. By the time I was sixteen, because I was active in the local Republican party, I had worked for all three branches of the Illinois state government. But that was a period in the late 1960's in which there was a transition going on in the Republican party. Illinois Senator Everett Dirksen had been instrumental in the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. But I did discover as I went through the ranks of the teenage Republicans and did a lot of work on campaigns and in the state government that there was a strong movement to retreat from civil rights. And Richard Nixon whom I strongly supported, he had run in 1960 on the strongest civil rights platform in the history of the Republican Party. In 1968, when I was head of teens for Nixon in Illinois, he began adopting a southern strategy that did involve this retreat from civil rights that I found disturbing. Working in Illinois politics can be a disillusioning experience for anyone on either party. There's simply a lot of corruption in Illinois politics. There are five governors of Illinois, of both parties, that have been indicted and imprisoned during my lifetime. So as I got more involved in politics, I saw two things. There was a level of corruption in Illinois politics that I found deeply disturbing, and I did see my party moving away from some of the positions that were most important to me.

And as a result, I began questioning a lot of my beliefs and commitments. I discovered when I was looking into colleges that James Madison College at Michigan State was a new program that was, that had hired a faculty focused on teaching in small classes where they were debating questions of political philosophy and questions of political purpose. And I felt that was the atmosphere I needed at that point in my life in order to address the questions that had arisen from my active political involvement and involvement in state government.

Jason Raia:

That's really interesting that that experience led you to wanna explore it, in a different way that you were in, you know, really for a teenager, you're in retail politics and instead said, okay. I wanna look at the ideas and the philosophical underpinning behind this. You mentioned the corruption in Illinois. You know, if I remember correctly, was Chicago that gets John Kennedy elected, at least according to, you know, rumor that Joe Kennedy –

Rogers Smith:

We certainly believe that.

Jason Raia:

Yes.

Rogers Smith:

The Republicans in Illinois. And it was an example. Richard Nixon is obviously a deeply flawed character, but it is true that he was under heavy pressure to challenge the election results both in Illinois and in Texas, which probably had, there was some vote fraud. But Nixon chose not to do it saying that it would be too dangerous to the country to challenge the election. And, obviously, that's not a model that has always been emulated.

Jason Raia:

I was just gonna say that's a very different viewpoint from the one that we see from candidates all over the spectrum, you know, local, state, national, you know, whose idea is a challenge until you can challenge no more and regardless of what that may do to the system itself. But so you're studying political philosophy at James Madison. You decide after you graduate there to go to Harvard to explore a Ph.D. that seems to have been a little bit out of line with the kinds of things you're doing. You were interested in Constitutional law. You were in the political science department, but you sort of fashioned this exploration, the study of what you were most interested in.

Rogers Smith:

Yes. While I was an undergraduate, I made a shocking discovery, which was a deflating one in many ways instead of seeing myself as someone who was going to be, you know, very active and influential in politics, I realized that I actually loved studying ideas, learning, and trying to find answers to big questions. And so I realized I was more of a nerdy academic than I was, someone who should pursue a career in politics. And even more importantly, while my undergraduate experience was enormously valuable, it still left me with a kind of quest to find a sense of the political principles and purposes I could embrace. And so I went on to graduate school and did begin studying American Constitutionalism as well as political philosophy because I saw in constitutional decisions a practical effort to debate and decide on fundamental American principles in a context where you actually had to indicate what those principles implied for the real problems that the country was facing and it was that kind of connection that appealed to me. I was an undergraduate, or I was a teaching assistant as a graduate student in an undergraduate course, taught by Archibald Cox who, of course, had been the Watergate special prosecutor. While I was GA-ing for him, he was preparing to argue the Bakke case and we had weekly meetings with the teaching assistants. And, I was very engaged in discussing the issues that the course raised and that his brief preparation raised, but Professor Cox didn't always want to hear about my efforts to try and connect broader questions of political philosophy with constitutional disputes. He would say to me, oh, Mr. Smith, I'm a case man. And that actually spurred me to write a dissertation in which I tried to show that evolving debates in American intellectual history, over issues of political philosophy, were tied to changing constitutional doctrines and understandings over time, and I wrote a dissertation called *Liberalism and American Constitutional Law* that became my first book. In the course of writing that book, I also did come at last to a sense of what I thought American constitutional purposes in our broader public philosophy should be. And I also discovered in the course of writing that I love teaching. And so I was very fortunate to find that I ended up with the perfect career for myself.

Jason Raia:

Was there ever a thought to follow in Archbold Cox's footsteps and going full lawyer, you know, before the Supreme Court? Was that ever a draw to you, or was it really the underpinning of the ideas behind the law that really grabbed you immediately?

Rogers Smith:

Perhaps surprisingly, it was not at all a draw to me. I had debated as an undergraduate, whether I was going to law school, which was my original plan, or going to graduate school. And I chose not to pursue a law career for reasons that were only reinforced over time. As a lawyer, your task is to make the strongest argument for the understanding of the law and the Constitution that will help win the case that you're trying to win. The model of legal scholarship is the advocacy brief in one form or another, and very smart people do very thoughtful work in making these kinds of briefs, but my concern was not to make a Constitutional legal brief for my positions, but really to try and figure out what I thought the right answers were for good or ill

about American Constitutionalism and to understand the courts as governing institutions in America's political system, not so much as, entities that are above and beyond politics a view that, currently almost everyone shares. Everyone now sees the courts as embroiled in politics, but, if you're a lawyer, not supposed to think that way, and I couldn't think any other way. So that was - pursuing political science was the right direction for me.

Jason Raia:

So you finish your Ph.D. at Harvard. You wind up your first job after that momentous feat is at Yale as an assistant professor in 1980, becoming co-director of the Center for Study of Race Inequality and Politics. And this is one of the threads that run throughout your scholarship and your writing is, you know, is this idea of race and its influence on politics and what and policy, which is, you know, it seems like you never lose that connection to, you know, the two - to politics, not just philosophy and law, but, you know, this idea of public policy affects people and in a and in effect. So I'm curious just, your time at Yale. What was, you know, you spent 20 years there before you were poached by Penn? And, what was that? What was Yale like for you?

Rogers Smith:

Well, Yale was wonderful for me. Now I have to say it was a lot more wonderful after tenure than before because it definitely was publish or perish kind of environment. And I was doing things that weren't fashionable in the discipline of political science. So there were a lot of anxieties associated with it in the early years. but it was an enormously intellectually stimulating environment. Now the Center on Race Inequality and Politics, which I started along with Cathy Cohen, who's now in Chicago, actually came late in my Yale years. The last six of the twenty-one years I spent there. And the truth is that in writing my dissertation and my early scholarship, I was definitely focused on the relationship of American principles to public policy issues, but I wasn't focused on racial issues. They had been very important to me, and I'd been involved in civil rights activism, some as a teenager, but I did think that the nation had made progress and would continue to make progress, toward racial justice. And so the constitutional issues in my first book are mostly things like free speech, right to privacy, civil liberties issues. I then got interested in a second major project, a debate over how we understand American citizenship. Should we understand it primarily in terms of civic Republican traditions of civic virtue and sacrifice and public service or should we understand it as embracing a more privateistic understanding of citizenship in which we create citizenship so people can follow their diverse pursuits of happiness whichever way they may go, which might include starting your own business or pursuing your religious faith or artistic expression or intellectual pursuits or any of a number of things? Is it really about freedom for diverse pursuits of happiness? Most of them are private pursuits of happiness. And that was a lively debate in political theory in the early 1980's. And I thought, well if we study the history of American citizenship laws, we can see in different periods what the dominant conceptions of citizenship were that were officially adopted and authorized. And so I began doing that project. And in the course of doing it, I studied that to a far, I found that to a far greater extent than I had realized to be the case, there were lots of

American leading figures including judges and local, state, national office holders, who argued quite explicitly that America was supposed to be a white man's nation, a white Christian man's nation, and these racial notions of American citizenship had been fought over from the start, waxed and waned in domination - they have been central dimensions of American civic development. And that was in many ways disparaging to me, but it also resonated with my youthful and teenage experiences where I'd seen the contestation over who is really an American and what America really stood for going between Illinois and South Carolina seeing the debates within the Republican Party in Illinois. And so I became much more concerned that issues of race were unresolved in modern America and remained a central source of division and often injustice. And I decided that I had a responsibility to devote a lot of my scholarship in teaching to those issues, which I have done ever since, and that also included creating the center that you referred to.

Jason Raia:

Part of the freedom of tenure that allowed you to, as you made this discovery and in the pursuit of the scholarship that got you to tenure sort in some ways changes your direction. You're still doing Constitution. You're still within political science. But now you've made this discovery and it sort of forces you to explore it further.

Rogers Smith:

That's true. And I was also conscious of the fact that once I had tenure, I was in a position to assist my younger nontenured colleague, Cathy Cohen, who's an African American woman who was pursuing racial justice issues in her scholarship. Some of my senior colleagues regarded her as suspect because of that. You know, how could she be objective about issues of racial justice? And so they tended to not be very supportive. And a lot of Black people in the academy have this experience. They have a strong sense that they have a responsibility to their communities to try to further racial justice in America, but that can be viewed as a liability or an activist, not a scholar, by many of the faculty. So Cathy really had the idea for this center, but she needed a senior, tenured colleague to help her. And because I both admired her and her scholarship, and because I thought our institution and our discipline needed to address these issues more, I partnered with her, and I have to say, Cathy said, you know, our center is gonna train the next generation of scholars on race and ethnicity in America. And I said, well, that's not very realistic. But the American Political Science Association gives out an award for the best book on racial and ethnic politics, and it has gone a number of times to scholars that were trained in that center.

Jason Raia:

Well, that's an impressive track record. So 2001 Penn, University of Pennsylvania, reached out and made you an offer. You can't refuse. You come here to Philadelphia as Christopher H. Browne Distinguished Professor of Political Science, you become the founding director of what is now known as the Andrea Mitchell Center for the Study of Democracy. You spend 21 years

there. So you're 21 years at Yale, 21 you just split that career perfectly in half, because you just retired in 2022 after being Dean, and you were also the president of the American Political Science Association from 2018 to 2019 and inducted. This is my favorite just because I have such an affinity for the American Philosophical Society. You were inducted as a member in 2016 and generously invited me to come to the ceremony where I believe was the one where Supreme Just- Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan was also inducted and spoke. And one of my favorites, you know, lots of people know about the relationship between Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. But Elena Kagan shared some wonderful memories of sitting at the end of the table from the Chief Justice with Scalia next to her whispering at her and getting her in trouble, essentially, with the Chief Justice. Again, you know, two people who we would assume, you know, are, you know, because they are on opposite sides of many of the votes cast in that chamber, that they would have an antipathy toward one another personally, and they didn't and for me, that's one of the that was one of my just favorite experiences.

Rogers Smith:

It was a great experience, and it does underline a reality about the Supreme Court that isn't often understood, even though no case gets to the Supreme Court unless there are powerful arguments on both sides. They don't take the case unless there's a real controversy to address. It's nonetheless true that surprisingly, a high percentage of Supreme Court decisions are unanimous or very close to unanimous. We perceive the court as deeply divided and that's not false by any means. Different members of the court do embrace different visions of the Constitution, but those visions do have significant overlap on many important issues, and it's also true that they've all been through similar kinds of socialization processes as professional experiences growing up. So there are folks that have a lot in common, and they are mostly deeply concerned to try to get the law right, even though they have different understandings of the law and to have the institution function effectively, even though often in the eyes of others, it's making highly controversial decisions. So, yes, they can really work together and they can really be friends despite what are very important differences.

Jason Raia:

Which leads me to this question since you've brought up civic education. And I know one of your accomplishments while you were at Penn was the Philadelphia Teacher Institute. You and I wonder how much of that is connected to your mother being a teacher that the, you know, you understood the importance of teachers and the role they play and then connect that to civic education and your study of the Constitution, but I wonder if you have thoughts on, then how do I wanna say this? The results of that turn away from civic education and whether it towards STEM or you would have you know, and how much of that is affecting the climate that we see today is related to the fact that for too long, we weren't, you know, focused on civic education?

Rogers Smith:

I can't claim to provide social scientific evidence that the neglect of civic education is responsible for any specific set, much less all of the major difficulties, but setting the American political system today. I do think that in some ways, a more significant factor as many have stressed has been the rise of social media and echo chambers in which people have their viewpoints reinforced and often pushed to greater extremes by hearing only from people who are on the side that they are leaning toward, but I definitely think it's the case that that phenomenon is much worse than it might have been if people had had a good solid base of knowledge of the American political system, American history, the different understandings and contests over American values and principles that have defined us as a people. I think they would be less likely to buy into extremist accounts, on either side of the political spectrum, if they simply knew more about the realities of the American experience.

Jason Raia:

So one of our one of the producers of this podcast used to work in a State Senator's office. And we were just talking yesterday, and she would occasionally get phone calls, you know, podcaster X said that you can do Y. And she, you know, and they wanted to know why the Senator wasn't doing, you know, this thing that this podcaster had said, and she's like, he can't do that. And it was just exactly what you're talking about that not knowing more meant that you know, this person in good faith had heard this thing on a podcast and thought, well, that's what you know, my Senators should be doing, and it's just not possible. And, you know, we can, you know, education becomes a bull work against that kind of influence if people know more about themselves.

Rogers Smith:

Absolutely. And so I have spent a fair amount of time in recent years trying to assist efforts to re-energize civic education, including those that the Freedoms Foundation is doing extremely well. It is at this point an uphill battle, though, both because there is a general distrust of expertise in general so people don't necessarily believe what they're being taught if it runs against their preconceptions. And teaching has been highly politicized again from both sides of the political spectrum in ways that sometimes are barriers to effectively communicating the kinds of shared knowledge about the realities of our experience that, again, we need.

Jason Raia:

Absolutely. And that, I wanna jump into just I wanna go through your books, not in any great detail because I wanted to get to the sort of big ideas that have influenced your scholarship. But as you mentioned, you start with *Liberalism and American Constitutional Law* with this idea of rational liberty that Keith describes, but recog- it's reconciling of individual liberty and collective self-government, that that is, in some ways, a fundamental tension, for this country from the beginning, that it's one of the things we talk about with students. How do you balance individual liberty and collective security? It's the individual and the community and both are important and

both are legitimate. And so, you know, based on what we do, you know, find that, that connection and that balance?

Rogers Smith:

Yes. The phrase rational liberty is one that I moved away from overtime because many people in the academy think that notions of rationality have been loaded toward the perspectives of property by men. And while I think reason is a more universal characteristic I didn't always want to debate that topic. But what I was trying to emphasize there is that the United States was the first nation to dedicate itself to promoting liberty for all, not a religious mission, not a mission of military glory, but liberty for all, that raised the question though of what are the boundaries of liberty? And they argued that it isn't really freedom if it's either self-destructive or hostile to the good of the community. That isn't liberty. That's vicious or licentious behavior. And they were therefore saying that the pursuit of liberty inherently involves this effort to combine a quest for individual fulfillment with recognition of the needs and responsibilities of the community we all share. And so that did help, for me, define a sense of shared public purposes and constitutional purposes. Yes liberty for all, but with the ongoing quest, to make sure that that liberty was being exercised in ways that contributed to genuine human flourishing, both individually and collectively. There are no easy answers to that, but that is a view of the shared American political project that I think is historically well-founded and morally quite compelling.

Jason Raia:

And the fair to say still a central tension today, whether it's in Supreme Court cases or, you know, this idea of my individual right to do something versus what is good for the larger community.

Rogers Smith:

If anything, the tension is heightened today because well, from the outset, there were Americans that were committed to creating a system that would permit diverse pursuits of happiness. People were entitled to a large extent to discover and define for themselves what would lead to happiness, and there would be a wide variety of pursuits. That concept was there from the start. But over time, as we have had more diverse religious and non-religious perspectives as there have been there have been intellectual evolutions in a variety of different directions. The number of claims that can be made as diverse forms of human happiness has multiplied. There were much narrower conceptions of what really counted as legitimate forms of a pursuit. People were all supposed to be, you know, married in heterosexual families, engaged in child rearing, mostly pursuing religious and productive market activities - that vision set out our boundaries as to what pursuits of happiness were permissible. There's been pushback against that on behalf of a whole variety of causes. Different religious viewpoints, different views on gender roles and identities, different views on how the economic system should relate to the environment much, much more. And when you accept that a wider variety of pursuits of happiness may be legitimate you sharpen the tension between those pursuits and what we

define as our common goods and objectives that require us to engage in some self-restraint and some self-sacrifices so that those common goods can be achieved. I think those challenges are greater in some ways now than ever before, but it's important to remember that in part because the original American quest to expand freedom and opportunities for all has progressed to a significant extent in the course of our history.

Jason Raia:

Right. One of the things that I always, for me, the most important in teaching young people about our history is that it is one where more and more people have been brought into freedom. It's not to say that, you know, we've even achieved, you know, you know, things perfectly today. But if we look back and we do this great little experiment with the students, our Spirit of America program where at some point during the Freedom Summit, you know, where they're learning about the Declaration and the Constitution, we ask them to stand, we tell them they're all 18 for the, you know, the purposes of this experiment. And then we start asking them to sit if they meet certain qualifications. So if you are, you know, non-white sit down. If you are a woman, sit down, if you are not Protestant sit down, if you are, you know, if you don't own property and not a mortgage, but actually own it. Sit down. What you end up with is, you know, 3, you know, usually older white chaperones men and the professor says, this is who could vote in the first election. And now look around and see if you were all eighteen, as we said, who can vote today? And, you know, and it's just this encapsulation of whatever criticisms we may have of where things are today there is no question that more people have been brought into our system of government and thereby, you know, granted some modicum of freedom and individual liberty, then would have had it 250 years ago.

Rogers Smith:

Well, that's a really dramatic and moving, instantiation of the progress that we've made. Again, that very progress means that the challenging challenge of combining individual freedom with successful collective pursuits is in some ways more challenging than ever, even though many difficult issues of the past have been resolved. But at the same time, it does affirm that progress can be achieved and why can progress be achieved? I don't think it's because deep down. All of us know the right answers. I think that contestation over how to find the best way to combine individual freedom with collective flourishing - that is inherent in the project, not any particular set of right answers, but I do think it is testimony to the fact that while human beings are driven by many things and are capable of many great evils, the truth is that most people, most of the time, would like to find successfully shared answers, and that's really been an engine of progress throughout American history.

Jason Raia:

I have to say I agree that that's this idea that, you know, people are not inherently, opposed so much as I think there are, you know, out outside influences, whether that's social media or media, you know, what whatever that is, you know, that, you know, and you see that in

individual, you know, the individuals, you know, can be very, very different and develop wonderful relationships. It's when we get into groups. And that's one of the things that you have looked at, you know, you've written in last couple of books, *Stories of Peoplehood*, *The Politics and Morals of Political Membership*, and *Political Peoplehood: The Roles of Values and Identities*. You really I want you to talk about what is *Peoplehood* and what is it you're you were examining because I think this you know, gets to the heart of identity and how we have so many identities you know, it's the multitude of venn diagrams and how I'm wondering if that is, is there something positive? Is there something negative? Is this part of, you know, those split identities as part of what's driving the political polarization that we see today?

Rogers Smith:

Yes. I began writing about *Peoplehood* because having done an extensive study of the development of American citizenship up through the progressive era, I was struck by the power of these racial stories of American identity more powerful in our past than I had wanted to accept. And I wondered why they had that power. And in reflecting on that I came to focus on the reality that all modern forms of political community, in fact, all forms of political community through recorded history are not simply natural. They didn't spring up spontaneously, they were all a result of historical efforts to create a shared census of the community and institutions for that community that could help that group flourish. And then I got interested in the question, well, what are the political challenges, the political dynamics involved in trying to foster a sense of shared identity of community or peoplehood. And didn't take a lot of reflection to recognize that those political processes are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, if we're gonna motivate people to work cooperatively with each other to achieve common goals, we want to foster a strong sense that they do share an identity and a valuable identity that should motivate their actions. But the very process of defining sense of shared identity and why this community is special can involve a dynamic of saying and by the way, other people and other forms of community, they're not so special.

Jason Raia:

It's exclusionary.

Rogers Smith:

Right. It's inherently exclusionary and when you have different people competing for leadership, they can say, well, some of my potential constituents I know they don't like this other group, and so I'm going to offer a vision of a community in which that other group is not part of it or worse fit for economic exploitation by our people, and it is built into the politics of creating senses of community or political peoples that they are both necessary if we are to achieve forms of community and institutions that can contribute to human flourishing. And they are always in danger of taking invidiously exclusionary or exploitative forms. And it is a challenge fundamental to politics to try to, err on the side of being contributing more to flourishing and less to stigmatizing and damaging other groups. It's not something that we ever achieve completely. I

have suggested, as you indicated, that it would be beneficial if we recognize that we in fact all have multiple identities that all have some legitimate claim on us. This both indicates that while we have different identities from other people in one regard, we might have shared identities in another, and that might help us find common ground. And it also works against any one form of identity being treated as solely authoritative and sovereign over others so that it's my country's right or wrong as Stephen Decatur said, well, sometimes your country may be wrong in the way it's treating religious minorities, racial minorities, and it's harshness in its foreign policy. And you shouldn't think it's illegitimate to say I'm going to challenge that. You shouldn't be told that no tour allegiance to your nation has to be 100% and you can't question it. But you can see why there's always an incentive for political leaders to impose those demands on people and to be repressive of their different identities and values that might lead them to challenge them.

Jason Raia:

So we hear a lot about tribalism and is this sort of a different interpretation that are you, you know, is *Peoplehood* something fundamentally different than and I certainly, probably more specific as tribalism gets thrown around and has probably lost all meaning. But this idea that you know, you know, people are faithful first and foremost to a group of people who are like them in some way whether that is ethnic identity or political identity or, you know, anything.

Rogers Smith:

In some ways, the notion of *Peoplehood* is a challenge to tribalist understandings of the same human phenomenon. The human phenomenon is that we do exist in communities and associations of various sorts. That tribalist accounts, present those as in some way natural and inescapable in ways that can elevate their claims to authority. You are in this tribe because God put you in this tribe. You're in this tribe because it's in your genes. You're in this tribe because you -- share a history that defines who you are and that you cannot alter in any fundamental way. The account of *Peoplehood* is to say that no, none of these identities is century simply natural. They're not genetically encoded. Whether or not they are divinely ordained is an interpretation that can be legitimately disputed. What we have the most evidence of is that they are human creations and creations that we can alter in. We're not simply predetermined by our histories. So the emphasis is that our tribes shouldn't be seen to have absolute sovereign authority over us and be unalterable, that we should rather understand our political communities in particular, as the creation of human beings, hopefully, to advance human well-being and we have both the opportunity and the responsibility to, carry forward those communities in ways that really do contribute to human well-being and seeing their choices as determined by some pre-existing tribal identities militates against that, and so that's why I argue against tribalism.

Jason Raia:

Absolutely. So along with choice, it seems there's a corollary idea that comes into play which is trust. You know, the idea that we choose our associations and those in part form our identity as political beings, but then the trust of other people's choices and associations and then the

institutions, you know, the trust of government institutions. And so I'm just curious how you see those fitting together. And the role of trust in a democracy in a republic seems key.

Rogers Smith:

Yes. And in *Stories of Peoplehood*, I argued that successful forms of political peoplehood, and political community, require establishing widespread senses of both trust and worth. You have to think that this form of political community is actually achieving good things for you. It has to have worth, but you can't ever know for sure and so you have to have an element of trust in your fellow citizens and in your leaders that they are actually trying to achieve the good things that they promise, the things that you value because of the senses of identity and commitment and concern that you've grown up with, well, how do you inspire those senses of trust? You do have to convince people that you have things in common with them. And this, again, is a double-edged sword. The things in common might be we share the same race or the same religion, and that has the potential to be invidiously exclusionary. But it is also possible to emphasize that in other ways, we share many of the same values. We share many of the same problems. We share some of the same sense of the solution to those problems. And so there are better and worse ways, I think of developing a senses of trust. You're right that it is absolutely necessary to do so if societies are to work together effectively. And it's also true that there's always a challenge to build trust on the basis of things that deserve to be a grounds for trust rather than taking an easy route and offering appeals that end up dividing us more than helping us move forward.

Jason Raia:

And I think that's for, that's one of the things I see when we talk about how we find common ground. And, you know, that part of it is, you know, related to trust. It's, you know, we have to you know, and over the last 6, 8, 10 years, it feels like the decline of trust in the ramping up of fear. Fear is probably the wrong word - of deep concern about the choices that other people are making and the associations that other people are making, you know, seem to be, in some ways, a part of, you know, the problem we have, you know, right now.

Rogers Smith:

Well, actually, I think fear is a very good word. One way to inspire trust in yourself is by inspiring fear of others and promising to protect and assist you against those others. And we do see this kind of fear-mongering and scapegoating throughout the political spectrum if people have a policy on religious education that I disagree with - let's call them fascists. If people are seeking to get greater demographic diversity that I'm comfortable with let's say let's claim that they are trying to replace true Americans with dangerous foreigners. We see this kind of fear mongering and scapegoating, and it does reinforces senses of trust within sections of the community but it also makes trust impossible across the community.

Jason Raia:

Right. Well, we will wrap it up there. Thank you. We could talk for hours and hours more, but we do have our quiz to get to so—

Rogers Smith:

Okay.

Jason Raia:

We will start with excluding Washington and Lincoln. Who's your favorite president?

Rogers Smith:

I have to say that it's now FDR. I wasn't, you know, I've been a capitalist all my life, son of a businessman, and I initially shared the deep skepticism about FDR that my father had, and I still am skepticism- skeptical of him on many grounds, but I do see him as dedicated to the project of restructuring American economic institutions so that they would be more broadly beneficial, and that's a project that I think we need in this time.

Jason Raia:

If you had not become a political scientist, what would you be today?

Rogers Smith:

I would probably be a lawyer wondering why I had decided to become a lawyer.

Jason Raia:

I love it. Pet peeve annoys you the most. Every episode I talk about one that I have. And, the one I've been thinking about and, when people misuse those or use the wrong one in the wrong place. It's one of those things that just, like, nails on a chalkboard.

Rogers Smith:

I'm sorry to say I have a lot of pet peeves of that sort, but one that I inherited well, the one that bothers me most in academic life is when people open their talk by spending five minutes saying that they will be brief, and then they run over their time.

Jason Raia:

Yes. Yes! Absolutely. Just start. Favorite movie show or opera?

Rogers Smith:

I think that the modern TV show I admire the most is *The Wire*.

Jason Raia:

Yes. That was tremendous. One of my favorites. One thing about you would most people be surprised to learn?

Rogers Smith:

Well, my students used to be surprised to learn I was a former teenage Republican president because they saw me as much more liberal. But, I think that, today, people will because, you know, I've had this career in academia, people tend to assume that I have a highly intellectual interest, but the truth is that my favorite hobbies are still the same as what they were when I was eight years old. I like to watch baseball and read comic books.

Jason Raia:

Excellent. I love it. If you could meet just one historical person, who would it be?

Rogers Smith:

Oh, I'm afraid it would be my hometown hero, Abraham Lincoln.

Jason Raia:

Absolutely. And then the final question, bourbon or scotch?

Rogers Smith:

I drink caffeine-free diet.

Jason Raia:

Rogers, I can't thank you enough for coming on and spending so much time with us. I've never not had a conversation with you where I've learned a lot. So thank you for sharing that with our listeners.

Rogers Smith:

Well, thank you so much for having me, Jason, and thank you for the work that you and everyone else are doing here at the Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge. It's a beautiful location and it also does beautiful work.

Jason Raia:

Well, thank you. Thank you very much. And you've been part of that in multiple ways, and we thank you. I wanna thank our producers, Lara Kennedy and Sarah Rasmussen, and a special shout out to a friend of the pod Bill Franz for his art design on the logo. And most of all, I want to thank all of our listeners. Please subscribe, follow, rate, review, *George Washington Slept Here* wherever you listen to podcasts and tell your friends, to learn more about Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, check out our website at www.freedomsfoundation.org That's Freedoms with an "S". Follow us on social media on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, or email us at gwshpodcast@gmail.com with comments, questions or suggestions. Thank you, and we'll see you next time.