

In this episode of *George Washington Slept Here*, host Jason L. S. Raia welcomes Victoria Coates, a former member of the U.S. Department of Energy and the National Security Council, who now serves as the [V.P. of the Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy](#) at the Heritage Foundation. The conversation explores Coates' professional journey, her works on art and art history, and America today.

Topics include:

- The political landscape in academia.
- American democracy as it relates to the Roman Republic.
- The relationships between history, freedom, and art.
- A discussion on Victoria's book, [David's Sling](#), which "places into context ten canonical works of art executed to commemorate the successes of free societies that exerted political and economic influence far beyond what might have been expected of them."

Tune in for thought-provoking conversations on American history, civics, and liberty now!

Quotes

"We are losing sight of everybody's common humanity and that's where the study of history, I think, is instructive."- Victoria Coates

"Leverage historic security relationships with countries like Saudi Arabia. They can buy all the market-valued oil they want, but remember, we control the Fifth Fleet in the Gulf."- Victoria Coates

"We must cherish and appreciate liberty, not take it for granted, as it is not our natural state; it is a precious gift."- Victoria Coates

Featured Guest

Victoria Coates

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Transcript

Intro:

We the people of the United States. A House divided against itself cannot stand. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Jason Raia:

Hello, and welcome to *George Washington Slept Here*, the civic education podcast from Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, where we explore American history, civics, 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 host of *George Washington Slept Here*. The format is simple, a long-form conversation with a friend of Freedoms Foundation where everyone 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 is out. We love hearing from our listeners, so feel free to email us at gwshpodcast@gmail.com with your comments, questions, and suggestions, and hit us up at Freedoms Foundation, social media [@ffvf](#) on Twitter and on Facebook and Instagram [@FreedomsFoundation](#). Today's interview is with Victoria Coates, who is formerly of the U.S. Department of Energy and National Security Council and is currently at the Heritage Foundation. Our conversation today is going to be structured in a way to keep us on track. We want to explore your origin story. How did you become the person sitting here before us? We want to talk about your current work, including your books on art and art history. Then I want to talk about America today. Finally, we end with a quiz which hopefully will allow our listeners to learn something about you that they did not know. So let's start. Where were you born and raised?

Victoria Coates:

I was born and raised in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and I think being a Pennsylvanian is very much determinative of my identity. On my mother's side, I'm descended from Andrew Gregg Curtin, who was the Governor of Pennsylvania during the Civil War. He's my great great-great-uncle from Belfont, Pennsylvania. And on my father's side, I'm a direct descendant of Hans Herr, who founded Lanster County in the 17th Century. So the roots are deep. Now

raise my kids in Philadelphia and are very deeply committed Phillies, Eagles, Flyers, Sixers fans.

Jason Raia:

Excellent.

Victoria Coates:

Also determinative of my identity. We'll be spending the weekend at the ballpark, so that's really where my roots are.

Jason Raia:

So you have obviously this connection to history, and particularly here in Pennsylvania, the Civil War, the founding of Lancaster County. Who were some of the influential people that really were formative for you when you were growing up?

Victoria Coates:

I think obviously starts with my parents, both of whom are lifelong committed. Neither of them served in government, but are very committed to their communities and to volunteering, giving back. And so they obviously were a bedrock, I think, about John Jarvis, who was the headmaster of the Lancaster Country Day School for many, many years and formed my early education out there. And then my sibling, my brother, who has taken a radically different career path. He's in the financial services business, but his character and morals have always been a guiding light for me.

Jason Raia:

It's amazing how important those lessons from our childhood, particularly when they're around volunteering or voting and participating in our system of government, that those lifelong lessons are so important. And when they're missing from a person's life, there are consequences to that.

Victoria Coates:

Oh, absolutely. And I think that's something we as a society are really grappling with is the breakdown of the nuclear family. And we all want to be very modern and think that maybe that's something of the past. But as we are looking at some of the crises that we're facing, particularly with young people and their lack of personal identity and sense of self-worth and what that is doing to the generation, particularly those who particularly suffered under COVID. I think we're due for a really serious reassessment of how we are supporting and encouraging thriving families to create a more grounded populace.

Jason Raia:

Absolutely. So you grew up in Lancaster Country Day, and then you decide you're going to go to Trinity College in Connecticut and study art history. And I'm curious about how you came to that place and why art history and why Connecticut.

Victoria Coates:

Trinity I chose because I wanted a small liberal arts college, and I had a good friends who went there and were having a wonderful experience. And so that's what I hit on. Was determined to be a political science major in my freshman year - did a lot of work on that major - and my father, who had gone to Harvard in the 50's, had actually wanted to be an art history major. He had studied 17th-century Dutch art with Seymour Slive and was trying to sort of basically trick me into taking art history. So I remember he said to me one day, it's good for crossword puzzles. So, that lured me in. And what I found was that discipline plays into the way my mind works. I have a trick memory for name, states, and images, and I associate those very naturally. And we actually had a very bad situation that fell at Trinity. The wonderful tenured professor who usually taught the first half of our survey was on sabbatical, and they had a truly awful replacement professor. And I think I went to class three times, but was mesmerized by the textbook and did extremely well. So by the time we got to the second semester and I had the professor who became my advisor, we were off to the races. And then I went to Rome that fall with Trinity's program, and it was all over.

Jason Raia:

Yeah, I completely get it. I took an art history class early on, and our professor was also a curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and much of the classical department had his name on it, things that he had been on - digs he discovered - and then donated to the collection. And his passion for the subject, but also the fact that he was not just an academic but was actually in a field in a museum as a curator, I learned so much about and learned that, oh, these are things I need to know more about. And part of it is that connection to Western civilization, what we understand as this shared history that plays out. And so you not only studied art history, you went on to get your master's degree and then your Ph.D. and you came back to Penn for your PhD in art history, but you've also got this political science and the idea. So tell me how once you had your PhD, I know you end up with Donald Rumsfeld and doing research for him. Talk to us a little bit about that and how you got there.

Victoria Coates:

Yeah, it all makes perfect sense. You know, with art history, you can't really do much without a PhD back in the day, you could probably do some curatorial work or master, but more and more the PhD is just required. So I knew that's what I wanted. So I did it straight out of college and was sort of on my way to doing a fairly standard academic career. When we had our children, I was an adjunct at Penn, which was a great gig to be able to keep teaching. I had a lot of support

from the university and raised the children in a somewhat normal fashion and was getting into a project regarding the reception of Pompeii, of all things, which grew from a small show at Penn to a much larger show out at Getty Villa with an extensive catalog and sort of felt like I was establishing myself and thinking it was time to look for a tenure-track job. In post-9/11 academia, things became increasingly sort of politically toxic. And where pre-9/11, pre-2000 election, there was always a liberal majority, but it was not so dominant that conservative voices were seen as isolated and deeply suspect. And when you're hiring for a tenure track position, you're hiring for 20 years. You're going to have this person around the faculty lounge. You do look at personalities and you want people who you think are agreeable and interesting and have similar views. And so you wind up with a situation where the views of the tenured faculty are increasingly homogeneous and there is no room for dissent. And I think that's how we've gotten where we are in academia now, where there's kind of one monolithic view, and anybody who disagrees causes massive outrage. So I think for me, as I was going through that period of time, I was a little bit uncomfortable with the culture in academia, but it's what I had always wanted. So when Rumsfeld retired, I had a connection through some of his speechwriters to his office, and they reached out and said, do you know any academics who could help him with this book? He's got a lot of archival material. I did not know then the extent of it. I probably would have run screaming had I known what a pack rat that man was. I remember going up to my husband's office and saying, this is so unfortunate that no one I know will help him with this project. And George looked at me and said, well, why don't you do it? I said I can't. You know, I'm teaching in the fall. And he was like, yeah, you're teaching at Penn. Your first book is coming out in a couple of months from the Getty. Is this the next 20 years? And I said I don't think it is. He said it isn't. Call him back. It then happened very quickly, not in a particularly orderly fashion after that. So that was how the swerve was made.

Jason Raia:

So I want to put a pin in the college faculty because I think that's going to lead us to this conversation because I think that's emblematic of much of what's going on in America today. But I want to know more. Donald and Mrs. Rumsfeld were supporters of the Freedoms Foundation. We never got to have them here. We were working on it when he passed. But just tell us a little bit about that interaction, because you were there at the end of his career. He's been Secretary of Defense. He's been intimately involved in several administrations, a world of experience that very few have anything similar. And you're there helping him assemble his memoir.

Victoria Coates:

No, it was really the honor of a lifetime and such an incredible American story, which he was very conscious of, of what he had lived. And he would frequently say, I've lived a third of America's history over the course of my life, and I refer to it as my second PhD working for him for four years in a primary source environment. Certainly very humbling as a scholar, to be able to consult with your principal and have all of these documents. And he was really very visionary about it. We digitized the entire archive, most of which is deposited at the Library of Congress on loan, which he started doing in the 70's after he was Secretary for the first time. But then

there are other deposits of papers. He had some personal papers, although he got those over to the libraries in a very orderly fashion. So actually, I know a lot about the current document scandals, about how these things are actually managed. But there are papers at the Pentagon, obviously, there are things at the National Archives. They're both classified and unclassified. So a very complex archive, but a wonderfully rich one that allowed us to go back to his career in Congress. And one thing he did, which I actually inform all of my friends in Congress that they should do, is after he voted on something, he would come out and dictate into a dictaphone why he had voted as he did.

Jason Raia:

So he's recording that for posterity as it's happening.

Victoria Coates:

And for his own records, because there was a situation where he voted against funding for the Library of Congress because in that funding bill they also included funding for a new parking garage for the Congress, a new swimming pool for the Congress, and a whole bunch of fat pork for the Congress.

Jason Raia:

The famous paperclip that the Simpsons episode talks about.

Victoria Coates:

And also interesting for the debates we're going to have this year on funding for various things that get attached to must-pass. And he then got attacked in his next election for voting against the Library of Congress. Why do you hate books, Congressman Rumsfeld? And he said, I don't hate books, but I hate pork. And he had that right. So that was amazing. When he was Chief of Staff to Gerald Ford, he kept similar kinds of running memos throughout the day, which he actually used to communicate with his deputy, who was Dick Cheney. So it'll be a line of do this, do that, and then Dick in capital letters, right? And I was showing one to Mr. Cheney one day, and he was just almost shaking. He said, those things used to land on my desk like a ton of bricks. And then the very famous snowflakes from 2001 to 2006, which he used to communicate both with his immediate staff, but then more broadly across the Bush administration. I had somebody ask me the other day if I knew what was behind a particular snowflake. I said no. I don't know.

Jason Raia:

Explain what the snowflake is for those who don't know.

Victoria Coates:

It's just a small short memo on something that's on his mind.

Jason Raia:

So out of nowhere, this might come.

Victoria Coates:

Yeah, like, we need to do something about North Korea. And then this was a signal to Doug to initiate a process on North Korea policy, but then he'd follow up and follow up and remind you that you had not yet responded. So it was a way to both create a work stream and then measure its progress.

Jason Raia:

Okay, okay, so I just remember and we do not need to rehearse the pros and cons of Iraq and what happened there. But I do remember Secretary Rumsfeld having that nighttime satellite photo of North Korea and talking about the Korean peninsula. But you've got just one spot of light in Pyongyang in the North, and then you've got just the entire southern peninsula in South Korea. And he contextualized that this is what the Korean War resulted in, this great opportunity, and it took 40 years or more to happen in South Korea, but this is what the American military and the United Nations gave to the people of South Korea. And he felt like we had the opportunity to do something similar in Iraq, and it hasn't necessarily worked out maybe that way, but we also don't know because it's a very slow process. But I just remember that I'd never thought of it in those terms before. And it's just so very stark when you see that satellite photo.

Victoria Coates:

It is, and the picture is in the book and the contrast between the darkness and the oppression of the North and the just bright light and opportunity, as you say, in the South. It's literally a line. And I think it's instructive for what we're confronting in 2023 because there's a proposal being floated to do something similar in Ukraine to create a frozen conflict. And that's okay for the people on the south of the border, but bear in mind, in North Korea, exactly the same people, the same DNA on the north of the border are living under just hideous oppression and terrible, terrible, unnecessary conditions. And I'd hate to see something like that happen to the people of Eastern Ukraine. So I think that's a cautionary tale as well.

Jason Raia:

I absolutely think you're right. So from Rumsfeld, how do you wind up in the White House doing national security work?

Victoria Coates:

Well, I blame Ted Cruz. So post-Rumsfeld, I thought I would just go back to academia. Got working on my book on *David's Sling*. My husband was doing a lot of work and traveling, so I got to play wife and mother for a period of time, which I quite enjoyed. Worked a little bit as a consultant for Governor Perry on his 2012 presidential campaign and remained active in his office after that and sort of thought that was what the future held for me. And a friend of mine got elected to the Senate somewhat unexpectedly in 2012 and named as his first Chief of Staff a guy named Chip Roy, who I had worked with in Governor Perry's office. And Chip called me one day on January 13 and said, will you come down and help us with the Hagel and Kerry nominations for DOD and State? Because Senator Cruz, a brand new Senator Cruz was not intending to do a ton on national security policy, needed somebody to just manage these nominations. And I said, sure, I'll come down for two weeks and take a bite out of John Kerry. I don't mind doing that. And we just had an incredible time. And Ted was off to the races from day one in the Senate and just in the middle of all the most interesting and exciting fights and became deeply interested in national security policy. At that point we were on Armed Services, he's now on Foreign Relations, playing a really outside role. But we had a really interesting time during those years sort of crafting a new national security policy that was neither purely Libertarian nor Republican establishment. So if you think about John McCain and Rand Paul the two sort of polar figures—

Jason Raia:

And in Rand Paul/Libertarians, you have the isolationist withdrawal, and in McCain, you've got sort of the world's policeman.

Victoria Coates:

Exactly.

Jason Raia:

And so those are the two poles. And so then it's a matter of now, is there a way to navigate a middle path?

Victoria Coates:

Somewhere there is and I kind of resist the middle of the road because one of Rumsfeld's sayings was the only thing you're going to find in the middle of the road are double lines and dead squirrels. So I tend to think of this more as another point on the triangle that this is a position that Ted and I thought about very seriously. And when he and then President-elect Trump decided to make peace with each other and he offered whatever staff he could, I wound up in that deal but had no trouble in terms of policy working for President Trump because a lot of the policies were very similar to what Senator Cruz had worked on. As a matter of fact, I remember John Bolton actually making fun of me at one point because he said every time we

do something with legislation Cruz is the lead sponsor. So there wasn't much of a policy difference there. So it was very easy to make the shift to the Trump administration.

Jason Raia:

So when were working - when you had shifted to the Trump administration working on the National Security Council, John Bolton was, was he the National Security Advisor at that point?

Victoria Coates:

I actually worked for all four of them. Mike Flynn hired me because we had known General Flynn when he was the head of the Defense and Intelligence Agency and he would brief Senator Cruz and me. And so Mike was the original point of contact. He was in office for, I think, 28 days. We got to go through another transition to General McMaster, who was in the position for about a year and remains a very dear friend. And then Ambassador Bolton came in for a little over a year, and then moved on.

Jason Raia:

So eventually you're, if I have my notes right, Deputy National Security Advisor for Middle East and North African Affairs. So let's talk about the Middle East and North Africa and give us a quick primer on what we need to know. I know one of the things that just historically, and you are a trained historian, the Middle East, you have to go back to at least the end of World War I because it transforms the Middle East and draws boundaries that never existed historically and we continue to reap the whirlwind today, more than a century later.

Victoria Coates:

No, I think you're 100% accurate there. It's a fascinating part of the world where you have both abject grinding poverty, enormous wealth, some very extreme weather conditions, either it's desert or its jungle, and then just enormous natural resources which are what generates a lot of the wealth. And it's kind of a nexus point between East and West. Massive amounts of the world's shipping go through the region. You'll have choke points like the Suez Canal, Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz, which become hugely strategic. You have the introduction of Israel after World War II, the modern state of Israel, and all that. The conflict that has caused, but now, in 2023, the opportunities it is creating, which are quite extraordinary. So, historically speaking, it is one of the most interesting places in the world. The United States has been very engaged in the Middle East over the last century with various degrees of success, which has created some fatigue in certain areas of the U.S. population who want to sort of stay out of Middle East wars, which I certainly agree with, but we can't pivot away from it. That is a popular refrain that we need to pay attention to. China strongly agrees with that. We do. But guess who's active in the Middle East? China. China is importing vast amounts of energy, particularly from the Gulf. And we are no longer an energy importer like the United States. We can be an exporter, and we're the world's largest energy producer. So we're in a very different

place with the Middle East than we were in, say, the 1980's, where we were very dependent on it. But again, that doesn't mean we should turn away from it. Because if we want to compete with China, we should leverage our historic security relationships with countries like Saudi Arabia in order to make clear to China that you know we're fine with you buying as much market-valued oil as you would like from Saudi Arabia but guess who has the Fifth Fleet in the Gulf? We do. And so I think that is a very powerful sort of point of leverage for us to potentially encourage better behavior out of the PRC.

Jason Raia:

Abraham Accords. You had a hand in those. You were part of that. It is historic, truly. And quite frankly, for whatever criticisms I may have of President Trump, I think one of his great accomplishments was to pull off this historic agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Victoria Coates:

Well, UAE.

Jason Raia:

Yes, sorry. Thank you.

Victoria Coates:

Saudi, we're hopeful.

Jason Raia:

Yes. Tell us about how that came about and what you speak of as hopeful. Is that a template for the future for the rest of the region?

Victoria Coates:

It's really a wonderful episode in terms of encouraging flexible thinking if you will. I had been working with Jason Greenblatt and Jared Kushner on what the President originally wanted to do, which was to broker a peace deal between the Israelis and the Palestinians, which he referred to as the deal of the century. And we did a labor that mightily for a year and came up with actually a pretty reasonable plan, which would be enormous to the benefit of the Palestinian people. Unfortunately, their leadership, for various reasons, simply would not engage in it. And at some point, it became pretty clear over the course of the summer of 2019 that UAE and Bahrain in particular, were sort of over the whole thing, the Palestinian issue. They had tried so hard to be constructive partners to the Palestinians who just insisted on having a veto over any engagement with the Israelis. And finally, and this great credit to both the Crown Prince of Bahrain and the then Crown Prince of UAE, Mohamed bin Zayed, that they

said, enough, and we're going to do this. And the Israelis kind of made the first offer, which was basically, let's pledge to not attack each other.

Jason Raia:

That's a good place to start.

Victoria Coates:

It's a start. But they weren't planning on attacking each other. And so then it sort of became, well, what else can we do? And establishing close economic ties and some other points of contact was developed over the course of 2020 then. And I was living in Abu Dhabi, it was COVID year and I was actually supposed to be the Secretary of Energy's regional envoy, but it was very hard to move around. But I managed to get myself to Abu Dhabi for seven weeks and work on energy issues and support the progress on the Accords and then got to go to Riyadh for seven weeks in the fall of that year. So it was a little different than the planned experience, but an incredible experience at the same time.

Jason Raia:

So at this point, you've spent significant time in government and doing policy, I guess to a lesser extent politics. But there's always political hackery.

Victoria Coates:

Yeah.

Jason Raia:

But you never lose sight of art history. And so I want to talk about *David's Sling* because it is so right up my alley. And the subtitle is "A history of democracy in ten works of art." And I just got my copy and have started reading it.

Victoria Coates:

There'll be a quiz.

Jason Raia:

I love it. But I want you to tell the story of Brutus. I think it's the first piece you start with—

Victoria Coates:

The Parthenon is actually the first.

Jason Raia:

– the Parthenon. That's right. I skipped the Parthenon and went right to Brutus because the story of Brutus is the story of the Roman Republic. And for our founders, the story of the Roman Republic is just fundamental to what they did here during the American Revolution and at the Philadelphia Convention. So tell us the story of Brutus.

Victoria Coates:

It really is. And the structure of *David's Sling* is that there are these ten works of art going from the Parthenon to Picasso's "Guernica, each of which was created and understood to be a commemoration of a free system. Obviously, the democracy in Athens, the republic in Rome, and then we go through Venice and Florence and Holland and France turns up twice because they struggled, they had a hard time, Great Britain and the United States. So a really interesting exercise in letting a single work of art kind of lead you through the history of democracy. And the argument certainly is not that only democracies produce great art. In many ways, it's remarkable that democracies produce anything at all. And the Church and Empire traditionally are the sources of great patronage of works of art. But that these ten pieces were really understood by those who created them to be celebrations of human freedom. And in terms of the Brutus. Remember, they're two Bruti. There's the first, Lucius Junius Brutus. And then the second, who stabs Julius Caesar. They're separated by several hundred years, but part of the same family. And the first Brutus was instrumental in founding the Roman Republic in kicking out the kings of Rome, and establishing a republic. And he did it at just tremendous personal cost, both in terms of fighting the battles to rid Rome of despots but then –

Jason Raia:

And they wanted him to be–

Victoria Coates:

Wanted him to be the king.

Jason Raia:

Right. So was he always thinking he wanted something other than a kingdom?

Victoria Coates:

The short answer there is I don't know. But he seems to have been, at least as he's portrayed in history, committed to a free state for Rome.

Jason Raia:

And of course, this eventually costs him his sons.

Victoria Coates:

This is the great act of sacrifice on which the Roman Republic is truly founded, in that, Brutus' sons start to collude with the descendants of the kings who are their cousins, to bring the monarchy back. And this is uncovered. And Brutus has to order their execution, which he does. And history tells us there's this dramatic moment after the execution when the people of Rome are trying to celebrate his heroic action. And he says, no, I'm just a bereaved father and I'm going home to mourn and wait for the bodies of my sons. And this powerful, just example of self-sacrifice for the greater good becomes the founding myth, really, of the Roman Republic. And at some point during the early republican period, this bronze portrait is cast, that is known as the Brutus portrait and it was really invented by the Romans. It didn't exist in terms of recording an individual portraiture in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Mesopotamia, is all very highly idealized and regularized. Everyone kind of looks the same. But the Romans decided for the first time, they wanted to record individual features, which is in many ways an instructive topic for us in our selfie world. They did not develop self-portraiture. That was the Renaissance, which is another issue. But they did develop the individual portrait and this bronze of Brutus, which is now in the Capitoline Museum in Rome. It's like a roadmap of self-sacrifice. You look at this very gaunt, weathered face, intense expression, and concentration, and just get a real sense of the psychology of the individual, of the sitter. And that, for Brutus, recording his features as they were is his badge of honor. Rather than trying to idealize him or airbrush him, we might say.

Jason Raia:

And this was one of the pieces of art that Napoleon Bonaparte specifically wants from the Pope. When is it, Sixtus? Who he defeats before he becomes emperor. But he brings—

Victoria Coates:

On his way.

Jason Raia:

Yes, on his way, on the road. They still are nominally a republic in France, but I would say they're not. But this is a piece, this Brutus' bust, he brings to Paris.

Victoria Coates:

He does. And Napoleon turns up, I think, six times in "David's Sling," he's like an evil pixie. He is always showing up and stealing works of art. He's deeply interested in art and understanding its value. And when he conquers Italy, one of the things he does is take back just massive amounts

of art from Rome, Venice, and Florence and put it all in the Louvre and create this kind of mega museum. And he had an artist in his retinue named David who had actually been a great part of the Revolution but then became Napoleon's state artist. He was flexible.

Jason Raia:

Right. Those who have been to Versailles have seen he does the crowning when Napoleon is crowning himself. And it's just massive work. I remember seeing that at 16 years old and thinking, this is you know, I've never seen such a large painting.

Victoria Coates:

He's incredible - David as an artist. But David, in his early years in Rome, had painted an image of Brutus, of Brutus waiting for the bodies of his sons, and used the Capitoline Brutus, which had been recovered in the 16th century, actually, on the Capitoline Hill when Michelangelo was doing his intervention architecturally there. And then they become this celebrity object, and Napoleon brings it back and then talks to David about it. And they use it for various things, but it's actually kept in Napoleon's personal apartment. So it's something he felt very powerful about.

Jason Raia:

And as they were waiting for it, I think the quote that you have of Napoleon, he says to David, he goes, we will soon see whether your copy is as good as the original.

Victoria Coates:

Exactly.

Jason Raia:

Yeah. So you have a couple of quotes from the introduction that really caught me because I think they speak to what the Freedoms Foundation is about and what we do. And you talked about the synergy between liberty and creativity and that liberty inspires ingenuity. And so liberty is at the heart of everything we do. It's in our title. And whether it's teacher programs like we have, like we're in the midst of this summer, or our student programs, we're always trying to show them what it means to live in a place where liberty is the rule and not the exception. And the need to appreciate that, the need to defend that, the need to pass it on to the next generation. I'm really curious about what you see as and what *David's Sling* talks about as this connection between liberty and creativity and ingenuity and what that means.

Victoria Coates:

Well, it really goes to the title of the book because the central chapter is about Michelangelo's David, which most people don't know about Michelangelo, but he was a highly politicized individual, deeply interested in the Florentine Republic. Like David, had some flexibility, and also worked for the Medici family, which eventually undermined the Florentine Republic, but was a committed Florentine patriot. And the David is actually commissioned by the reconstituted Republic after the Medici had been kicked out in the 1490's. And the contract is signed the same week they unveil their new constitution. There's a very clear connection between the establishment of that republic and the creation of the statue as its figurative defender. And as I was working on the book and trying to think of a title, it occurred to me to look at David and focus on the right hand, the sort of outsized hand, which is seen as an allegory for the hand of Michelangelo the creator. But it occurred to me that biblical hero David, if he hadn't had the sling, would have lost that battle. The sling, the artificial thing which maximizes his power, which allows him to stun Goliath, and then chop his head off, that the sling is what does it. And for humans, freedom has been that sling, has allowed us to kind of catapult ourselves into something bigger than what we are. And I think as Americans, it has really been defining to us, and it's something that we continue to debate hotly today. And I think that's so important, that we don't take liberty for granted. We don't assume it is our natural state. It is not given. If we just sort of leave ourselves to our own natural devices, we will very quickly, I think, descend into tyranny, because tyranny is easy. It's easier to give somebody else control, to not have to exercise free will, to not have to make decisions, to not be held responsible for your actions. So the fact that we've been able to maintain our liberty and enhance our liberty over the course of now getting on for 250 years is enormously important. And I think that's why the work that you do out here, I think, very appropriately at Valley Forge is so critical to both remind us of that legacy, but then continue the fight going forward and, as I said, take it for granted.

Jason Raia:

You quote what is one of my all-time favorite quotes from Churchill about democracy and where it ranks in systems of the government.

Victoria Coates:

The worst except for all the others that have been tried. And Churchill was obviously someone who tangled very directly with democracy and felt both its benefits and its punishments. And I think he understood very clearly from a British perspective what the transition from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy had meant for the British people. And so the object I use for the Brits is actually the Elgin Marbles, which was fairly controversial since they were originally part of the Parthenon. But as they were brought back to the UK in the early 19th century by Lord Elgin and then installed in the British museum, they are now a profoundly British object. If they ship them back and stick them back on the Parthenon or put them in the Parthenon Museum, whatever they do, that will no longer be the case. But as they stand right now, they're really a monument to what Churchill fought so valiantly for in World War II.

Jason Raia:

This idea of the inefficiencies of democracy is one of the things that comes up again and again in polls of younger people, millennials, and Gen Z—

Victoria Coates:

I have two of them.

Jason Raia:

—under 40, there there is this willingness to allow for what we would call authoritarian government if it gives them the policies that they think they want. And yet I think people like you and I know that you might get that in this policy, but you are likely to not appreciate these policies over here and it all comes as a package deal.

Victoria Coates:

No, I think that's very true. And again, it's why your work is so important to contribute to the education of young people, so they do understand the gifts that they're being given. And working in government, particularly in international affairs, there is a great deal of frustration around the globe about the habit the United States has of changing administrations every four to eight years, you know, there's always intense curiosity about what an incoming administration might do or not do, concerns that things are being reversed. And what I tell them is that the constant presence, the thing you can always depend on is Congress that's always going to be there. And so if you want to create some kind of lasting deal with an administration, you have to go through the Congress, you're going to have to pass that thing as a treaty and then it will be binding on successive presidents. But if you don't do that, yes, that can be changed in four or eight years time. And it's very hard for some to wrap their heads around. But it's also a great strength that prevents us from being hugely predictable. It allows us flexibility going forward. And so I do think it is beholden on us to open the eyes of these younger generations to the gift of freedom and to what that then poses or presents to them as opportunities. That they can choose to live in their mother's basement and stay in their pajamas or they can choose to go fund rather Tesla and SpaceX. And that's the opportunity that will be given to them.

Jason Raia:

I think that leads us nicely to explore what is an occupational concern for all of us here at the Freedoms Foundation, which is what we talk about, political polarization, the inability of Americans to agree on much. It seems everything is like the Senate split on the narrowest of majorities if there is a majority at all. And so I'm curious, as someone who has both looked at history and the history of liberty through art, but also been in policy and politics, how do we begin to find ways to at least address one another and find our way to— my biggest concern is that if you don't agree with me, then we're enemies.

Victoria Coates:

Right, there's kind of a moral judgment that's crept into it, which I find deeply troubling. That disagreement can't happen in good faith right now. You're not just mistaken, you're evil. And I think we are losing sight of everybody's common humanity and that's where the study of history, I think, is instructive. But then also getting to know people like Secretary Rumsfeld or Senator Cruz, these are individual humans with their faults and foibles like everybody else but have managed to rise above many of their own personal challenges to achieve some fairly extraordinary things. And that's what you look at in the past that figures from Brutus to Michelangelo to Churchill – not that they were superhuman or somehow greater than we are, they weren't, but that they were able to face their own challenges and do something bigger than themselves. And we all have that in us and we all have good and evil in us, but that the good outweighs it. And trying to find that in individuals is something that I don't think enough people are doing now and that there is a very dramatic kind of rush to judgment that if you don't do X and you find it, on environmental issues all the time. If you're not pursuing net zero by 2050, regardless of its costs to humanity, you are a bad, evil person. And that trying to reverse in my work that sort of debate or that construct and say, wait, no, we can talk about we can all agree that we want to get to a better environment. Everybody thinks that. I don't know anybody who wants a dirtier environment, but there are different ways to get there. And asking those questions and presenting alternative views does not make you the underminer of humanity. It can make you the champion of humanity. So I just try to take the heat out of these debates. I don't want to yell at people. I don't thrive on conflict or friction. And just try to ask why you think this. What's the data, what's the evidence that leads you to this conclusion? And have you thought about this? And just try to take maybe what you'd call a more Socratic method, get back to the ancient Greece.

Jason Raia:

I think you're exactly right. I want to come back to the point you were making earlier about academia and the monolith that has and I thought it was interesting that you sort of date it at 9/11 as that there's something that fundamentally changes, and maybe that's part and parcel with Iraq and Afghanistan and now what has seemed to be a splintering of any kind of agreement. And so academia, I think there are more and more monoliths and it's part of what you're talking about, that it's like you either agree with me fully or we can't agree on anything and there's less and less coalition building and I would say compromise. What was maybe the greatest achievement of the Founding Fathers was their ability to compromise. And sometimes they were awful compromises, but they were for the greater good. And that seems to be less and less possible today.

Victoria Coates:

I think what happened as we start to gain some sort of historical perspective on the turn of the millennium, the 2000 election, we forget how incredibly bitter that was, and–

Jason Aria

It requires the Supreme Court to come in and settle it in Gore v. Bush.

Victoria Coates:

I remember those brutal months, or weeks rather, in between the election and the final, you know, half the country. This sort of has interesting echoes for our own time, and was firmly convinced the election was stolen. And I don't know what would have happened, but we had 9/11 and you had that half of the country, as we all did, came together because we had been attacked. And they decided they would support George W. Bush and did. And then I think that group felt very betrayed by what happened, particularly with the war in Iraq. And then when you feel betrayed, you feel like you've done this generous thing by coming to support this president that you had virulently opposed and thought was illegitimate. And then he turned around and did this thing you really disagreed with. And I think that's where the sort of current crop of polarization started to fester. And in many ways, President Trump came along and poured gasoline on it and set it on fire, as is his special gift. But it is a very difficult position to find ourselves in now. I don't know that what's going to happen in '24 is going to heal it, but I have great confidence that we will get to that national healing.

Jason Raia:

I'm always happy to meet someone who is an optimist because I like to be an optimist, but periodically I just have these moments like, are we Rome? Are we on the decline? And I'm not convinced there's enough evidence that says we are. But there are just some moments where it's like, okay, this just means the work we're doing with young people is even more important and maybe more important than it's ever been.

Victoria Coates:

Oh, I absolutely think that is true. And bear in mind, Rome did go on for 500 years as a republic and then went on a lot longer as an empire. But their problem was they kept going on foreign adventures and gathering more territory, which became uncomfortable with their original construct. And I don't think we're doing that. So I think we're good there. And also, again, history can be enormously instructive. The American chapter in the book actually focuses on the Civil War, and I had originally thought I was going to use Washington Crossing the Delaware and focus on that painting, which does play a very large role in the chapter, but wound up—

Jason Raia:

I'm actually, in a couple of weeks, my Godsons are coming to visit from Texas, and I'm taking them to New York, and we're going to go see that painting.

Victoria Coates:

Well, they're going to have to read the chapter because the Bierstadt's, which is the focus of the chapter, hangs in that gallery, and the gallery is important and does play a role in the chapter. But if you think about what we went through in the Civil War, talk about division and just ghastly bloodshed, and this great-great-great uncle of mine was governor during Gettysburg and walked the fields afterward. And I think there are still areas in Gettysburg that are like the zone rouge in France that you couldn't farm today because of what happened there. And if we could survive that, if we could survive two world wars, you think about just the ghastly events of the 1960's and 70's, and assassinations, Vietnam, just terrible social divisions, terrible economic troubles for the nation, and come out of that and win the Cold War. This should give us tremendous hope that maybe things aren't so bad right now. They've been worse before. We've made it. We can do this. We just need to keep focusing on what we have in the positive column.

Jason Raia:

And that's one of the things I was talking with someone last week on this podcast, and we were talking about Andrew Jackson. And when you look at the 1824 election and the 1828 election, and then you look at 2000 or 2016 and you go, yeah, things are bad, but things used to be but there's almost this sense of it's always been bad and we've always made it to the other side. And that's cause for hope.

Victoria Coates:

It is. And if you think now, to bring this back to George Washington, to the great leap of faith that was made when he not just agreed to, but facilitated the peaceful transfer of power at the end of his presidency. When I saw the musical Hamilton, it was actually interesting. In the summer of 2016, we were going into this very divisive presidential race. The moment that got the biggest standing ovation was Washington's departure. And everybody just stood up and cheered. And, you know, I think the resonance of that and what he chose to do, as I said, a great leap of faith, the much more conservative, you would say, thing to do would be to stay in power and keep things going well.

Jason Raia:

And it's the Brutus moment for America because they would have continued to elect him for as long as he lived.

Victoria Coates:

I mean, rightly so right?

Jason Raia:

And if he had said, yeah, we don't need to have any more elections, they would have said, that's fine. And instead, he makes the same decision that Brutus does, which is, I'm not going to be king. There's going to be a transition of power. And it sets the tone for the next 250 years. And as much as we have struggled in these last, still what has happened recently has not come to define what America is.

Victoria Coates:

Yes.

Jason Raia:

Because George Washington did that. And so I do want to ask one, before we get to our quiz. I want to ask one question, and it's because the title of your book just struck me as really interesting. There is, as I'm sure you know, this constant debate over republic and democracy and because you use the word democracy. And yet, I know—

Victoria Coates:

We are a republic.

Jason Raia:

We are a republic, you know that, obviously. The great Ben Franklin - what kind of government have you given us Mr. Franklin? A republic if you can keep it. But talk to us about the difference and why you chose democracy and I'm hoping, I'm expecting, from knowing you that you have this understanding of the relationship between democracy and republic - that they're not - they do not stand opposed to one another.

Victoria Coates:

No and I mean democracy you can use sort of colloquially to get back to its etymological roots as government by the people. And pure democracy as practiced by the Athenians is an extremely unwieldy system because you vote on everything. The people opine on decisions great and small. What executive there is, is literally hamstrung and unable to do much in terms, in terms of setting policy and for the Athenians it proved completely unwieldy and collapsed.

Jason Raia:

And they were tiny.

Victoria Coates:

Yeah and it was a little city. So if you tried to do that with a country the size of the United States, even as the original 13 colonies, I think it just simply would be unworkable and you need the structures to go into a Republic where you do elect, directly, your officials but then they are the ones who actually govern. And so I think you know the Republican system as developed by the Romans, and that's what it was about - about the Florentines and the Dutch and then eventually the British and the French – that is the best way we found to harness democracy into an effective sort of civics structure.

Jason Raia:

Let's do our quiz.

Victoria Coates:

Okay.

Jason Raia:

No homework necessary. I'll just ask a few questions. Excluding Washington and Lincoln, who's your favorite president?

Victoria Coates:

Probably Calvin Coolidge. I think he is little appreciated for the tremendous rigor and discipline he brought to being president. Just very staunchly conservative in his principles and then that guided all his decisions. He wasn't flashy, famously silent Cal. But I think he should be a real model for President.

Jason Raia:

Last summer we had Amity Schlaes - his biographer - here speaking with teachers and I'm hoping to get her on the podcast.

Victoria Coates:

Amity is wonderful.

Jason Raia:

If you had not chosen art history, and what would your career be?

Victoria Coates:

You know I've pondered this. It's such a privilege to be able to serve in government and be trusted with, you know, positions of some responsibility and make some decisions. Government is certainly a calling but you know if I had my druthers and could do anything, I'd probably go into sports management.

Jason Raia:

Oh, interesting.

Victoria Coates:

I'd love to do government relations for the Phillies. I've told them that repeatedly and they haven't taken me up on that.

Jason Raia:

I was going to say they could probably use someone but right now probably the Sixers need more because there's the stadium.

Victoria Coates:

There's the Flyers and then there's the stadium. But the reason I say that, is these sports go back to time and memorial and are such a great source of joy for people.

Jason Raia:

Back to the Greeks.

Victoria Coates:

It's back to the Greeks. Horse races in Rome, but it's a wonderful sense of civic, coming together, community, common cause. So that would be a great deal of fun.

Jason Raia:

What pet peeve annoys you the most? I have this question because I have a million of them. One of them happened this morning on my way in - is somebody driving on 422 with their hazards on. I think because they were driving slightly slowly but it's one of the things, I don't know when this tradition started, I see it in rain storms—

Victoria Coates:

Yeah, they do, do that.

Jason Raia:

—that people put on their hazards while they're driving. And for me a hazard means that you're stopped. And so it's just one of those things that annoys me.

Victoria Coates:

I'm a grammar stickler.

Jason Raia:

We have a lot of those on this show.

Victoria Coates:

Yeah I'm shocked - shocked to learn this. My grammar isn't perfect but I do try. One thing that is concerning to me is how poorly most young people write at this point. It's so hard to hire somebody who can string a couple of sentences together. And the resumes you get that are loaded with errors.

Jason Raia:

I throw them out.

Victoria Coates:

It's very hard to recover from that. And I know it makes you sound old-fashioned and like a stick in the mud, but this is your opportunity to present yourself. And if you do it in a slovenly fashion, people aren't going to take you seriously. So, I would say poor grammar.

Jason Raia:

I agree, wholeheartedly. What's your favorite movie?

Victoria Coates:

There are a couple. One of my favorites is *Tom Jones* with Albert Finney and Susanna York, which is one of my father's favorite movies. Just a wonderful late '60's adaptation of the Fielding novel, and that's the kind of movie I like which is both historical in its subject matter but very much of its own time. And I would say along those lines *Clueless* with Alicia Silverstone which is a play on *Emma*. Which is just so brilliantly and cleverly done. And you can enjoy the movie if you've never read *Emma* but if you know *Emma* well the movie is genius.

Jason Raia:

Yeah. It's those kinds of transliterations of classic works into these modern, modern movies. When they are done well, they are incredible. What is one thing people would be surprised to learn about you?

Victoria Coates:

I feel like I'm an open book. I think maybe the degree of my commitment to improving our environment. I think as a Republican and conservative everybody assumes you are just drill, baby, drill and don't care. But as a conservative, the word conservation is in our title. And I think getting back to maybe, Teddy Roosevelt kind of approach towards Republicans being deeply interested in the environment and protective of it is- might be surprising to some.

Jason Raia:

There is that Teddy Roosevelt string. Two more. If you could meet just one historical person, who would it be?

Victoria Coates:

Well, I mean the name that springs to mind that's pretty obvious is Jesus.

Jason Raia:

Sure.

Victoria Coates:

I'm hopeful that that will happen to me in good time. I think George Washington would be the non-biblical character. Without him it doesn't happen. And I would really value the opportunity to know him as an individual.

Jason Raia:

I'm always interested in the historic individuals where something changes because of them, this one person becomes this truly historic figure known throughout the world. Particularly when it's for something positive as opposed to the other. Final question that we ask everybody. Bourbon or scotch?

Victoria Coates:

Bourbon.

Jason Raia:

Excellent. Thanks to our guest Victoria Coates who is the new V.P. of the Davis Institute for National Security at the Heritage Foundation. We can't wait to have you back.

Victoria Coates:

This was a great pleasure. Best part of my day.

Jason Raia:

Excellent. I also want to thank our producers Lara Kennedy and Sarah Rasmussen. And a special shout out to friend of the pod, Bill Franz, for his art design of the logo. Special thanks to longtime Freedoms Foundation historic interpreter Bob Gleason for his contributions to the intro, and most of all I want to thank you - our listeners. Please subscribe, follow, write and 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 and follow us on social media. Or email us at gwshpodcast@gmail.com with comments, questions or suggestions. Thanks and we'll talk to you soon.