

Alan Taylor: If you look at the period before the Civil War, it's not a relentless success story. And if you read the record of what leaders are saying during the early 19th century, there's a lot of anxiety about whether this union's going to hang together.

[MUSIC INTRO]

Tim O'Neill: Hi everyone and welcome to Talks at GS. I'm Tim O'Neill, Senior Counselor in the Executive Office. It's my honor to be joined today by Alan Taylor. Alan is a two time Pulitzer Prize winning historian and a professor at the University of Virginia. His latest book is called *American Republics: A Continental History of the United States, 1783 to 1850*. We're going to discuss the important history he chronicles in his book about the fragile state of the United States as it expanded following the revolution, the lead up to the Civil War, and the continuing questions around race that confronted us then and continue to confront us today.

Professor Taylor, thank you for joining us.

Alan Taylor: Thank you, it's a pleasure to be here.

Tim O'Neill: So, the book *American Republics* covers the period between 1783 when the American Revolution ended and 1850, just before the start of the Civil War. The opening frame of the book is that our nation was built on an unstable foundation of rival regions and an ambiguous Constitution. It was not the United States at all, but was, instead, a collection, as you call it, American republics. Can you describe for us why the country was so fragmented?

Alan Taylor: Well, there had been no unity among these 13 colonies before the revolution. And so, it's kind of a shotgun marriage during the revolution. They have to unite to fight the British. So, there isn't this reservoir of identity, common identity, as Americans. And people still identified primarily with their state or with their regions. So, they thought of themselves as New Englanders or Virginians or Carolinians. And they had long traditions of rivalries, resentments, even hatreds between these different states. So, to construct a nation out of this was a pretty tall order. And it took quite a while. It didn't all happen in this one generation.

Tim O'Neill: Well, with the state identity so strong, Alan, and also you had the other fundamental problem of federalism

versus state rights, was it a mistake to form a union?

Alan Taylor: No, they absolutely needed to form a union. And they understood that. They needed to form a union, first to fight this war against the British. Because if they didn't hang together, they would hang separately, as they often said. They also needed a union so that they could impress foreign powers, especially France, because France is not going to enter into separate alliances with 13 different states. France made it quite clear, if you want our military assistance, you've got to get your act together and create something that looks like a nation.

And then finally, they were very concerned about what happens on the other end if we win independence and we're 13 separate states. They could look at Europe and see the long, bloody history of European wars between relatively small states for a balance of power. And they thought, certainly, that they would replicate that history unless they formed some union. So, another scholar quite aptly called the American Constitution and the union that comes out of it, a peace pact between these states.

Tim O'Neill: So, let's move to what is one of the more significant moments early in the chronology, is when Thomas Jefferson becomes president in 1800. This, of course, was a radical shift from the philosophy of federalism of Adams and Washington and Hamilton to democracy. And as you point out in your book, our founding fathers, as iconic as they are today, they played hard ball politics in their time. So, can you describe the chaos of that presidential election of 1800 for us?

Alan Taylor: Sure. I mean, often people will say to me, "Well, our politics have never been so polarized as they are today." Well, they're plenty polarized, sure. But they were also quite polarized back in the 1790s. So, the Federalists, who were the governing party at that time with John Adams, who had succeeded Washington. And then the Jeffersonian Republicans. And neither party accepted the legitimacy of the other. So, it was a very heated election.

And it ends up being something of a tie. Because under the original Constitution, each elector for the presidency casts two votes, not one, but two, for the top two gentlemen that he, and all the electors were hes, thought could serve as president. And so, the two democratic Republican candidates, Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr finished in a tie, which was awkward. And then

it's an opportunity for the Federalists to make trouble by flirting with Burr, and apparently working behind the scenes, to see if he would work with them to frustrate Jefferson coming into power. Most of the Federalists were playing that game.

And so, there's this long deadlock in the House of Representatives, which is where an election goes if there's not a clear majority. A long deadlock. Until certain Federalist leaders, led by Alexander Hamilton, said, "No, this is the wrong path to take. As bad as Jefferson is in our eyes, Burr is unprincipled. And therefore, we should just recuse ourselves and let Jefferson become president."

Now, Hamilton and others thought that Jefferson would be a one-term president. And they turned out to be wrong as Jefferson ends up initiating a sea change in American politics that will keep the Federalists from ever coming back into national power.

Tim O'Neill: So, that's a point I want to extend on. So, Jefferson obviously believed in limiting federal government and in favoring states' rights. But yet, he launches on this territorial expansion, wanting to build an empire of liberty. Do you find that ironic?

Alan Taylor: Oh, of course. We have a long tradition of presidents who will, when they run for office, they will espouse a certain ideology. And it turns out it's very hard for them to be consistent. And so, Jefferson is presented with an opportunity to buy the entire Louisiana territory. This was, in a sense, inconvenient because Jefferson was on record saying, "President and Congress don't have any power, unless it's explicitly stated in the Constitution." Well, nowhere in the Constitution does it say the United States has the power to buy foreign territory. And more savvy members of his party, Jefferson is probably savvy, but people who were more pragmatic than Jefferson's first instinct was, like, James Madison said, "Just forget about your constitutional scruples. Just overlook it. Just send it without comment to the Senate and let the Senate ratify it." Which, of course, the Senate overwhelmingly did.

Jefferson, at the end of the day, is very pragmatic. So, here he is. He's dramatically expanded the powers of the federal government through his action, despite his alleged principles. And then he'll do something even greater, which is an embargo. Can you imagine a president today that would say, "I'm shutting down all the airports, all the ports, and we will have no trade

with any foreign power, nothing going in, nothing coming out"? What an astonishing stretch of executive power.

Now, of course, he had the authorization of Congress to do that. But he sought that authorization. And that turned out pretty badly. But it shows that Jefferson would say in principle that he was a states' rights guy, dispersing power, limiting the power of the presidency. And the reality is, he did several things that greatly expanded federal power.

Tim O'Neill: Yeah. So, let's move forward to the War of 1812. Now, I want to start off by admitting here that everyone, including myself, at one time or another is asked the question, "When was the War of 1812?" And thankfully, you've decisively answered that question. The War of 1812 was in the 1810s. Why is that, Alan?

Alan Taylor: Well, the War of 1812, per se, begins in 1812 and ends in 1815 when the peace treaty is ratified. I argue that it's part of a bigger set of conflicts that includes American takeover of west Florida. And invasion of east Florida. Conflicts with native peoples, including the Battle at Tippecanoe in 1811. And that all of these episodes are an effort by the United States to shatter Indian alliances with foreign empires, the British in Canada and the Spanish in Florida.

So, I say let's talk about the war of the 1810s because I see this continuing after the war of 1812 with further American invasions of Florida in 1816, and then in 1818. And then in 1819, a treaty is negotiated where Spain just gives up because they know that they can't defend Florida. And so, they agree that they will sell it to the United States.

Tim O'Neill: Well, the war, as you pointed out, actually does formally start by President Madison declaring war against Great Britain. And then he proceeds to invade Canada, which they thought would just be a simple matter. But as all my friends from Canada constantly remind me, the War of 1812 was won by Canada. How did that happen?

Alan Taylor: So, the United States is trying to wage this war on the cheap. They don't want to build a navy, which you'd have to do if you'd really want to contend with Britain. Britain was the number one naval power. And so, rather than do that, they said, "We'll just invade Canada. That should be easy because Canada has a small population. It's right next door. A lot of the people were recent migrants. They're from the United States.

Or they're French speakers and surely the French speakers don't like the British." Well, that's true. The French speakers didn't like the British. But they liked the Americans even less. So, it turns out just enough Canadians would help the British. And then all sorts of native people's were based in Canada going no way we want the Americans to come and replace the British because the Americans are bad news for us.

So, it turns out the United States will lose most of the battles. And, ultimately, will make no headway in conquering Canada. And this is a source of endless David versus Goliath pride in Canada.

But then the British counterattack in 1814, start to invade the United States which is the whole business about capturing Washington, burning the White House, burning the Capitol, move on, attack Baltimore. That's the "Star Spangled Banner" story. Then they will attack New Orleans. That's the Andrew Jackson story. And so, the British counterattacks, the British don't succeed. They suffered defeats. And then both sides decide, "Well, let's just call it over and we'll restore the pre-war boundaries." And so that creates an ambiguity in which Americans can say, "We won the War of 1812 because we defeated the British." And the Canadians can say, "No, we won the war because you tried to invade us, and you lost."

Tim O'Neill: Let's now move further with the territorial expansion out West and the war with Mexico. So, as you point out in the book, by the 1830s/1840s, Mexican instability mirrored the US instability. They had 50 coups. The infamous Santa Anna of Alamo had been running the country 11 different times. Was the war with Mexico inevitable in terms of this territorial expansion imperative of the US?

Alan Taylor: Well, certainly Mexico is extremely unstable. And far more unstable than the United States at the same time. So, it makes the United States look like a pillar of stability. There aren't any military coups. There are some heated elections. And they have a lot of talk about succession and civil war. But doesn't happen until we get to the 1860s. In Mexico, it happens. These 50 coups and this Generalissimo Santa Anna is at the center of most of them. So, the United States regards Mexico as a very weak country. They do not have any kind of solidarity with it as a fellow republic. And there are American leaders who are looking for an opportunity to expand there.

But I wouldn't call it inevitable because there are other American leaders who worry about expansion in that direction. Because expansion in that direction will help the South. Texas is a place already plantations are being set up with enslaved people. Under Mexican rule, these people are in defiance of the Mexican Constitution and laws which had barred slavery. But Mexico can't do anything about it. They will have a revolt. Part of the whole Alamo story. And then the "remember the Alamo" and defeating Santa Anna. And they achieve independence as a Republic of Texas. So, Texas is an independent country for a while.

It wants to become part of the United States. But for a period of years, it's kept on the outside looking in because presidents, even Jackson, who's a big expansionist says, "No, this will just cause too much trouble within the United States. Because the northern states will be alienated if we take in Texas."

But ultimately, some presidents playing political hard ball, John Tyler and then James Polk, will bring in Texas with the promise that they'll balance it off by grabbing the Oregon territory away from Britain in order to keep the union together. And then Polk engineers a war in which he will expand upon Texas and take American claims all the way to the Pacific, not just in the northwest, but also in New Mexico, Arizona, and California.

So, it's not inevitable. And it required a lot of machinations by certain politicians in the 1840s to overcome a lot of anxiety that this is going to be really terrible for the union if we expand in that direction. And it turns out those anxieties were correct because it's those conquered territories from Mexico that will become the great bone of contention that will divide the union and lead to the civil war of the 1860s.

Tim O'Neill: Alan, thank you so much again for joining us. And congratulations on this book, which as the *The New York Times* review recently said, "Succeeds admirably." Thank you everyone for joining. And to you, Alan, stay safe and all the best.

Alan Taylor: Well, thank you, Tim.

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