



Library podcast

Historian Rick Atkinson reads from "The British Are Coming"

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[00:00:35] Hello. Welcome to Seattle Public Library. My name is Linda Johns and I'm a librarian here at the Central Library. As we begin this evening, I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered together on the ancestral land of the Coast Salish people. We honor their elders past and present and thank them for stewardship of this land. We'd also like to thank the Seattle Public Library Foundation and a grant from Gary Kunis for making our authors series possible. It's thanks to the foundation and our wonderful partners at Elliott Bay Book Company that we were able to keep events like this absolutely free and open to all. Tonight's event will include a presentation, time for questions and answers and then a book signing. And now I'd like to introduce Rick Simonson from Elliott Bay Book Company. Thank you.

[00:01:23] Thank you, thank you, Linda. And thank you very much for being here. I understand, not only, I know we have had the heat. But there's a lot of crazy traffic obstacles going on today there. The train broke down and other things. So we're really glad you're here. Thirty years ago, it was 30 years ago that Rick Atkinson became a presence in the book world with the publication of his first book, *The Long Gray Line*. And prior to that, he'd been notable, noteworthy journalist. I think *The Washington Post* primarily. But *The Long Gray Line* was a book that did signal the arrival of a serious and extraordinary narrative historian. That book tracing a group of West Point graduates who from 1966 who all went and served in Vietnam and what happened to them and with them. That book in the ensuing 30 years has been followed by a number of others, most notably an award winning Pulitzer Prize winning trilogy called the *Liberation Trilogy*, which looks especially at the Europe and North Africa in World War Two. And what what was done there for that war to be fought and to be won. Those books have had an enduring readership. And as I say, won. The Pulitzer Prize was among the honors that they received. He's here for tonight for a book which steps back in time, a book that is also the beginning of a trilogy of this book. *The British are Coming* is the beginning of a revolution

trilogy, meaning that our revolution starting really in 1775. There's a prologue that takes you farther back in this book and takes us up to the winter of 1776 in 1777.

[00:03:10] In doing this book, which is a superbly written book, the reviews already are chiming ardent praise. He has drawn on all sorts of sources and papers. This country's, you know, archival papers, but also in Britain. And we're not commenting. This book acknowledges Queen Elizabeth because there was permission granted for him to get into King George the Third's papers and to see what the British were making and doing with doing with what was happening over here in that time. So it's it's a very beautifully evocative written book. And you'll get to hear from it tonight and you will get to ask questions when he's done talking. And at the end of that. As Linda said, he'll sign copies of the book. We have copies of that and the trilogy. We did have copies. One of the other things that Rick Atkinson in his long and distinguished career has up do is point the way to other books. And he edited and organized The Longest Day of duo of books that Library of America published. And we had copies as those of already been picked up here. So. But that's something else to look for. So again. And the other part of this, I guess, as an editor is we hopefully be seeing more of Rick Atkinson because his family is in the process of moving here to Seattle. So there'll be more visits and appearances down the road, I think. And certainly with two more books to come in this trilogy. Again, we thank you for being here tonight from the Seattle Public Library, from Elliott Bay Book Company. And now please join in welcoming the remarkable historian Rick Atkinson as.

[00:05:02] Thank you, Rick. Thank you, Linda. Well, I appreciate you coming out on this beautiful summer's evening in your wonderful town. As you mentioned, I was last. I was first at an Elliott Bay event thirty years ago this year to talk about The Long Gray Line. And I've been back a number of times since then.

[00:05:24] And I do plan to come back to Seattle often because my daughter, who is finishing her post residency fellowship in colorectal surgery in Toronto, moves here in three weeks because she'll be an attendant at the University of Washington Medical Center and she will join her husband, my son in law, who's here somewhere. Where are you, J.P.? There he is. He's a laryngologist at UW. So we're very much looking forward to having Seattle is a bigger part of our lives.

[00:05:53] I also know that there is a competing event this evening. I wouldn't mention it otherwise, except I know you're gonna get a hockey team soon. Game 7 of the Stanley Cup finals. And I guarantee you, when Seattle is playing game seven, we're not going to come here to talk about books. So the last time I was in Seattle to talk about a book was May 2013 when I came to talk about The Guns at Last Light, which is the third and final volume of the Liberation trilogy. It's a project that took me 15 years about the American role in the liberation of Europe

and World War 2. And even then in 2013, I was pondering what to do next. The obvious thing would have been to pivot to the Pacific and to do for that theater what I had done for the Mediterranean and Western Europe. But that would have required me to start World War Two all over again at Pearl Harbor or even earlier.

[00:06:45] That didn't have much appeal. And besides, I couldn't shake a personal fascination that I've had with an earlier war, an earlier century.

[00:06:55] I've had that fascination since I was a kid. And so I've now completed the first volume of what I hope will be another trilogy. Knock on wood *The British Are Coming* opens with an extended prologue and seventeen seventy three when King George the Third travels to Portsmouth on the southern coast of England for a four day review of the Royal Navy. In a fantastic, proud display of military muscle precisely a decade after the creation of the first British Empire, with Britain's victory over France and Spain at the end of the Seven Years War, we call it the French and Indian War 1773 is the year the phrase the sun never sets on the British Empire was coined. And this book ends with the two battles in Trenton and the subsequent battle in Princeton and early 1777, which together resuscitated American hopes that it seemed all but extinguished in late 1776.

[00:07:54] Let me concede that there is a lot to dislike about the founding fathers and the war they waged for American independence. The stirring assertion that all men are created equal did not, of course, apply to 500000 black slaves, one in five of all souls occupying the 13 colonies when those fine words were written in the summer of 1776.

[00:08:18] Nor were they valid for Native Americans, women, indigents for the eight year duration of the American Revolution. Those who remain loyal to the British crown or even fence straddlers who were unsure of the wisdom of armed insurrection against the King's authority, were subject to dreadful treatment. Public shaming, disenfranchisement, confiscation of their property, beatings, torture, exile and worse. Some were imprisoned on Hudson River, scowls anchored below Albany, or were lowered by windless into an abandoned Connecticut copper mine 70 feet below ground into rock walled cells known simply as hell. Partisan belligerence metastasized into civil war. John Adams said, I would have hanged my own brother had he taken part with our enemies in the contest. Conformity, censorship and zealotry flourished in a defensive war waged for liberty and to secure basic rights. The Americans promptly invaded Canada. Sorry, J.P. is a Canadian in an attempt to win by force of arms what they could not win by blandishments. Negotiation. A 14th colony. This was the first but hardly the last invasion by an amount by Americans of another land on the pretext of bettering life for the invaded. The enduring image of a yeoman farmer leaving his plow in the furrow to pick up his musket on behalf of freedom is mostly mythical.

[00:10:07] During the revolution, General George Washington's army rarely ever exceeded twenty thousand soldiers and sometimes was as small as 3000. This in a country of two and a half million people, and particularly after the initial Marshall enthusiasms aroused it. Lexington, Concord and Bunker Hill faded in 1775. Relatively few American men volunteered for military service, especially if it involved enlisting for the duration in the badly armed, badly fed, badly clothed and often badly led American Continental Army. And yet who would deny that the creation story of our founding remains valid, vivid and often thrilling? Even in 2019, at a moment when national unity is elusive. when our partisan rancor seems ever more toxic, when the simple concept of truth is assailed. That story informs who we are, where we came from, what our forebears believed, and perhaps the most profound question that any people can ask themselves what they were willing to die for. Indeed, at least twenty five thousand Americans and perhaps many more died for the cause, it's a larger portion of our population to die in any of our wars other than the civil war.

[00:11:38] So what can we learn from that ancient quarrel? Well, first, that this was a nation born bickering. Disputation is in the national geno. Second, that there were foundational truths that not only are indeed true, but as the Declaration of Independence asserts, are self-evident. Third, that leader is worthy of our enduring admiration. Rise to the occasion with a grit, wisdom, grace. And fourth, that whatever trials beset us today, we have overcome greater perils, much greater perils in the past. We're the beneficiaries of an enlightened political heritage handed down to us from that revolutionary generation. After many subsequent struggles, it includes strictures on how to divide power and to keep it from concentrating in the hands of people who think primarily of themselves. We cannot permit that to be taken away. We cannot be we cannot allow that heritage to slip away.

[00:12:50] We cannot be oblivious to this priceless gift for the hundreds of thousands who have given their lives in the intervening. Two hundred and forty years to affirm and sustain it. Now, the American Revolution was not a war between regimes or dynasties fought for territory or the usual commercial advantages, but rather an improvised struggle between two peoples of a common heritage who had been gradually sundered by divergent values and conflicting visions of what the future could be. The Americans eventually won by embracing fewer strategic misconceptions than the British did. Certainly the rebels. Let's say us could be wrong headed in believing that they had greater economic leverage over the mother country than they actually did, for example, or in caricaturing George the Third who sat on his throne for 60 years and was shrewder, more complex and more admirable than the overbearing ninny who dominates our imaginations and even tonight is mincing across some stage in Hamilton somewhere. George and his ministers made three critical miscalculations. One that most colonists remained loyal to the Crown, notwithstanding troublemakers in New England capable of rousing a rabble. To that firmness, including military firepower, if necessary, would

eventually unstick the newly created American empire. It would intimidate the obstreperous and would restore harmony in the colonies. And three. And to me, the most interesting of the misconceptions that failure to resist or assert London's authority in America would indeed unstick this newly created British Empire.

[00:14:57] Encouraging insurrections in Ireland. Canada. The Sugar Islands. And the West Indies. India. It's an 18th century version of the domino theory that would propel us eventually into Vietnam almost two centuries later. Britain also underestimated the difficulty of waging war across three thousand miles of open ocean. In the age of sail for eight years, as it turned out. Expeditionary warfare, where they're waged in North America in the 18th century or waged in Central Asia in the 21st century is among the most difficult of all Marshall Enterprises. The British army in the revolution, unable to gather food and forage from the American countryside without being ambushed, relied largely on provisions shipped from English and Irish ports. But 40 transport vessels dispatched across the Atlantic in the winter of 1775, 76, only eight of those 40 ships reached the king's forces in Boston directly. The rest were blown by gales back to Britain or blown to the West Indies or intercepted by rebel marauders of 550 Lincolnshire sheep. Carried aboard ships that actually made it to Boston, that breed was deemed the fittest to undergo the rigors of trans-Atlantic travel. Only 40 of those 550 sheep arrived alive, of 290 hogs shipped, just 74 survived the trip. Most of the 50 200 barrels of flour in one shipment arrive rancid and useless. When the British moved to New York in the summer of 1776 and requested nine hundred and fifty horses to pull their artillery carriages and their supply wagons so they could go somewhere.

[00:16:54] Of those nine hundred and fifty horses that were indeed shipped from Britain, 412 died at sea during the voyage across the Atlantic. Many others were ruined beyond use, even though they arrived alive in America. Similar difficulties plagued the British for years. Logistics is always hard. In war, I've personally seen just how difficult in Somalia, Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, even when the American rebels were fighting on their home turf. They faced enormous difficulties of seventy five official letters that General Washington wrote in January and February of 1776. More than half mentioned munitions shortages, often in pleading fretful terms, especially gunpowder shortages. He referred to gunpowder is just the thing. It's difficult to make musket balls without lead. By the summer of 1776, the Americans were desperately short of this stuff. In New York, more than 100 tons of lead weights from fishing nets, clocks, window sash cords were collected to make bullets, along with lead from down spouts and window glass caves and pewter dishes. Without salt, armies and navies couldn't stockpile the meat and fish needed to move anywhere, two bushels of salt. It's more than 100 pounds were needed to cure a thousand pounds of pork. Beef needed even more.

[00:18:32] Before the war, the Americans had imported 15 million bushels a year, half from the West Indies and half from Britain and southern Europe. But the British trade embargo imposed

when the shooting started. strangled two thirds of that of those assault imports, profiteers and hoarders drove up the price from two shillings a bushel to eventually in 1777. Seventy five shillings a bushel. And to encourage salt works along the Atlantic Seaboard, pamphlets were published with recipes printed on how to make salt. John Adams wrote All the Old Women and Children and gone down to the Jersey Shore to make salt. But four hundred gallons of seawater were needed. You could do it here on Puget Sound, but it would be really hard. Four hundred gallons of seawater needed to boil off a single bushel of salt. That requires enormous stacks of firewood. Virginia spent more than six thousand pounds, a huge sum at the time to build evaporation ponds along the Chesapeake Bay, and they collected a total of 50 bushels, probably the most expensive salt in the history of salt. Yet those problems, substantial as they were, hardly matched Britain's problems. The thousand tons of bread required each month to feed British soldiers in New York often arrive from depots in Cork in Ireland, moldy and infested with Irish rats. There's no rat as nasty as an Irish rat.

[00:20:11] And those rats soon infested British storehouses on Staten Island for the winter of 1776, 77, the British needed Sixty four thousand cords of firewood, 70 tons of candles. The daily allowance of a gill of rum for each redcoat. Gill was five ounces. That's about a gallon a month for each British soldier. Which gives you an idea of the problems with drunkenness in the British ranks that gill of rum for each soldier required enormous amounts of shipping space. The British Navy board needed 400 transports and victualling ships to move and supply the large force in New York. It is triple the tonnage used at the peak of the Seven Years War, which was a global war. Well, let me talk for a minute about George are our last king. He's an intriguing adversary. Queen Elizabeth the Second, as Rick mentioned, only recently opened up to outside scrutiny the Georgian papers, which she owns as part of a project to catalog and digitize the papers from all four Georgians who became king in the 18th and 19th centuries. There are three hundred and fifty thousand pages, most of them from the reign of George the Third and most of them previously unpublished. I was among the first allowed in to take a look for a whole month in April 2016 at Windsor Castle, where the papers are kept. And every morning I would show my badge at the Henry the Eighth Gate and show it again at the Norman Gate, and then climb one hundred and two stone steps and twenty one wooden stairs to the garret of the round tower begun by William the Conqueror in the 11th century.

[00:21:56] And there are the papers in gorgeous oversized red binders. George was his own secretary until late in life when he began to go blind, and he wrote not only most of his correspondence himself, but he he also made the copies as you paw through these pages. They don't make you wear gloves. There's a a tactile sense of being in his presence. Among other things, he's a great list maker. Lists of British garrisons abroad from 1760 4 to 1775. of Royal Navy vessels under construction in various shipyards of all his regiments in America with the number of officers, musicians and rank and file tallied and his arithmetic scratchings in the margin as he does his sums. George copied out his own recipes for cough syrup. Rosemary rice vinegar. Brown sugar all boiled in silver. And a recipe for insecticide. Good

thing the king you would think the king had his own exterminator, but his recipe for insecticide, wormwood, vinegar, lime, swines' fat, quicksilver. He was interested in everything from music and astronomy to horology, the study of time, the use of manures in agronomy.

[00:23:25] They called him Farmer George. He'd married an obscure, drab German princess Charlotte. As in Charlotte, North Carolina, Charlottesville, Virginia. He learned to play God Save the King on the harpsichord during the this the travel by ship to England from Germany. They married six hours after they met. He had the marriage bedroom decorated with 700 yards of blue damask and large basins of goldfish. Because nothing says I love you like a bowl of goldfish. Happy Union proved fertile. She produced children with lunar regularity eventually to number 15, and we see in his personal correspondence that George is invested in the rearing of his kids. He is a caring father and through all this, he's trying to figure out the proper course for the British Empire, for the monarchy and for his people. He's easy enough to dislike, but impossible, I find, to detest or simply dismiss as a reactionary autocrat. The war he chooses to wage and he is driving the train. Is brutal, bloody and often savage. Unlike modern war, killing is usually intimate in the 18th century at very close range. Face to face, often with a bayonet. And that's because 18th century muskets were mostly an accurate beyond 50 yards and pretty much hopeless beyond 100 yards. Scholars have calculated that in the fights at Lexington, Concord and the British retreat to Boston on the first day of the war, April 19, 1775, the Americans fired about seventy five thousand rounds, but only one in every three hundred actually hit a redcoat.

[00:25:25] The shot heard round the world. Probably missed. Battlefield wisdom held that it took a man's weight in bullets to kill him. And in the American Revolution, that's not far wrong. On the other hand, masked musket fire by clusters of men firing and volleys, sending swarms of one ounce lead slugs flying down range at perhaps 1000 feet a second. That could be devastating. A man 5 feet, 8 inches tall, a couple inches shorter than I am. Had an exterior surface of two thousand five hundred and fifty square inches, of which a thousand square inches were exposed to gunfire. When he's facing an enemy frontally at close range. And given the primitive inadequacy of 18th century medicine, which is hardly worthy of the name, if you're hit in the torso, you have less than a 50 percent chance of survival if you're hit in the head. Your chances of dying or even worse. By the way, later studies by the British army demonstrated that soldiers wearing conspicuous red uniforms were more than twice as likely to be shot in combat as those in muted blues and grays. De. American marksmen, particularly those few with rifles. Which were more accurate than muskets, but harder to load. They could not carry a bayonet.

[00:26:53] Those marksmen learned to target the brightest of the red coats, those that were almost Vermillion and Hue because they were usually worn by officers who could afford the more expensive dyes that made those coats pop. It was like having a sign on him said,

shoot me. In the Battle of Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775, the British captured roughly a square mile of American held territory at a cost of over a thousand casualties, including two hundred and twenty six British dead. Now, the British are coming is not something that Paul Revere called out on galloping through the Middlesex countryside in the very early morning of April 19th, 1775. That wouldn't have made sense to people who still thought of themselves at that time as British. What he's quoted as shouting over and over again is the regulars are coming out. The regulars, meaning the regular British army. But I used the phrase the British are coming. as a title because it's a metaphor. Well, for what these first couple years of the war are about, the British are coming relentlessly. With most of their ferocious professional army, with nearly half of the greatest navy the world has ever seen, with thirty thousand German mercenaries, and they're coming to kill your men, to rape your women, to plunder your homes and in some cases to burn your town to ashes.

[00:28:30] It's a dire thing.

[00:28:33] Well, those are some of the nuts and bolts of 18th century warfare. But but what are the emotional guts of the revolution? That's what still moves us, stirs our pride, makes us feel that those men and women of a dozen generations ago have something to say to us. Why is that? Certainly that revolutionary generation can seem so distant from us as to be almost a foreign people if irony and skepticism are the twin lenses of modern consciousness. The revolutionaries often seem archaic. They're much less ironic and skeptical than their 21st century descendants. They speak English, of course, but they have their own argot idiom, their own slang, for example, passing counterfeit money. Widely practiced in the 18th century was known as shoving the queer. Someone who died took heaven, by the way. British soldiers in Boston, by the way, sometimes referred to Americans derisively as Jonathan's. But those are minor differences, we rightly admire those Americans for their endurance. Pretty nasty and sacrifice not only displayed by men serving in the ranks, but by others swept up in the fraught events of those times. So we have Lois Peters of Connecticut. You hadn't seen her husband, Captain Nathan Peters, in months because he's part of the army that's investing the British in Boston. When she wrote to him, pray, come home as soon as possible. A visit from you at any time would be agreeable. Meanwhile, she would harvest the corn, sell their oxen for enough cash to try to keep the family's saddle re solvent.

[00:30:25] So in a shirt and take great pleasure doing it. she told him and keep faith with the future. She signed her letters, your loving wife, until death.

[00:30:38] General Nathanael Greene, Quaker anchor monger from Rhode Island, makes one of the worst operational decisions of the entire war by leaving 3000 American troops exposed and vulnerable at Fort Washington on Manhattan Island. We're in the space of eight hours on

November 16, 1776. They're trapped and killed or captured. This is during a period when American generalship is often characterized by miscalculation, misfortune, imprudence and deficient military skills. But Greene picks himself up, takes a deep breath and writes to his wife, Katie. The virtue of the Americans is put to a trial. I'm hardy and well, despite all the fatigues and hardships.

[00:31:31] Be of good courage. Don't be distressed. All things will turn out for the best. Be of good courage.

[00:31:42] He's speaking to us. To you and you, he's certainly speaking to me. The sheer drama of the revolution keeps it compelling and often thrilling from the bloodletting at Bunker Hill, where one of every eight British officers killed during the long war would die in four hours to the skin of the teeth escaped by Washington and his army in the fog across the East River. In August 1776, after a terrible drubbing on Long Island. Beyond the the battlefield, the theatrical power. And pathos of the conflict surely outrun any dramatist's imagination. The abrupt arrival of the septuagenarian Benjamin Franklin in Paris in December 1776 to woo the French absolute monarchy into an alliance with radical Republicans. One hundred thousand smallpox deaths in North America from 1775 to 1780 to those white men sitting in Philadelphia in the summer of 1776, lashing at horse flies with their handkerchiefs while carving up Thomas Jefferson's draft declaration to make it shorter and much better. The many American families, Ben Franklin's among them, ripped apart by irreconcilable political differences. The central figures in our creation story have frequently been embalmed in reverence. They nonetheless remain beguiling. They're worthy of our perpetual scrutiny and often of emulation. Washington is a case in point. Yes, he owned more than 300 slaves upon his death in Mount Vernon in 1799. You cannot square that circle.

[00:33:34] Morally. It demonstrated shortcomings as a tactical commander at Long and Long Island, Fort Mifflin and other places. The man who proverbially could never tell a lie, Shaw could prevaricate. Washington's carping about his. Troops, his officers and his lot in life. In 1776, he grumbles. I distrust everything. Transforms the demi God into a sometimes petulant mortal. Yet great responsibility enlarges and we can't ask for more from our national leaders. He rightly embodies the sacrifice of personal interests to a greater good as well as other Republican virtues. Small R probity, dignity, moral stamina and corrupt ability traits that should remain true. Nor for every citizen today. Traits that we should demand of our national leaders at all times. Well, lesser personalities largely lost to history. Speak to Americans in the 21st century of constancy and an antique patriotism. Heaven only knows what may be my fate, Captain John MacPherson wrote in a last letter to his father before being killed at Quebec in 1776. I experienced no reluctance in this cause to venture a life which I consider is only lent to be used when my country demands it. Likewise, the Samuel Cooper wrote his wife. The

dangers we were to encounter. I know not, but it shall never be said to my children. Your father was a coward.

[00:35:25] He, too, died at Quebec.

[00:35:28] Even Benedict Arnold, perhaps the finest battle captain on either side in the first couple years of the war before his subsequent issues wrote after being shot in the leg in Canada. I am in the way of duty and I know no fear. Some years ago, the distinguished historian John Shy, who taught at the University of Michigan for decades, wrote that the civil war. Like every other major event in American history, including the Second World War as a tragic human, two sided quality that the revolution seems to lack. The whole complex of revolutionary events takes on a smooth, self-contained character that makes getting the right emotional grip on the subject very difficult. My premise is that tragedy is the bedrock of every war, because every war is about young men and women dying young. My ambition has been define the emotional grip, as Professor Shy put it, to revive the tragic human multi sided quality that saturates the American saga from 1775 to 1783. So we see Lieutenant Edward Hall. A young Scottish officer in the Forty Third Regiment of foot. Shot at Northbridge in Concord, then shot again during the British retreat to Boston, captured by the Americans in agony from three bullet wounds sucking on an orange donated by a passionate rebel. He lingers for nearly two weeks in a twilight of pain and remorse. And then he, too, takes heaven, by the way. Or we see Mary Pierce, the widow of a private killed at Bunker Hill while fighting with a Massachusetts militia, as she petitions the Commonwealth for precisely five pounds and 12 shillings in compensation for her husband's lost coat, trousers, stockings, shoes, buckles, silk handkerchief, pocket knife and tobacco box. Or General Richard Montgomery in the assault on Quebec, hit by grape, shot through both thighs and mortally through the face. Two days after his death is effects are auctioned off to his officers. Item by item. Two volumes of plebeians Johnson's Dictionary of the English language, a buffalo skin and close brush bought by Captain Aaron Burr. And a wardrobe, including ruffled shirts. Holland waistcoats and a pair of tea tongues all bought by Benedict Arnold.

[00:38:13] Or we see it all on the wall. The island of nuts.

[00:38:18] It's a couple hundred acres in the Richelieu River, just above the New York border, where thousands of American soldiers retreating from Canada after the disaster in June 1776 jammed a malarial hell, half of them suffering from smallpox, dysentery, typhus or some other godawful malady infested with lice and maggots. One doctor wrote, We had nothing to give them. It broke my heart and I wept until I had not more power to weep. And we see Matthew Peyton of Bedford, New Hampshire, whose son, John, had survived a gunshot wound to the arm at Bunker Hill but did not survive alone while. Mr. Payton wrote simply in his diary. I got an

account of my John's death of the smallpox at Canada. He was twenty four years and 31 days old. Historian Bruce Keeton. Consider the American Civil War a redemptive tragedy. And surely the same can be said of the American Revolution. It embodied the enduring aspirations of an idealistic people. It brought forth a nation abounding with a sense of destiny. No wonder the world was a GOC. The cause of America, the essayist Thomas Paine wrote, is the cause of all mankind. Even now, the war for independence offers clues to our national temperament. It remains a bright mirror in which we see traits that fashion the American character from resilience and ingenuity to brutality and pug necessity. We've come far in almost two and a half centuries in power, diversity, tolerance and sheer scale. But in some respects, those ancestors remain nearer than we know. Their existential struggle churned up issues that perplex us to this day, including individual liberty versus collective security.

[00:40:33] The proper limits on executive power. the obligations of citizenship. and the elusive quest for a more equitable society. The tacit primal question of 1776 persists in 2019. Who do we want to be? Democracy is never a thing done. The poet and librarian of Congress, Archibald MacLeish, told us years ago democracy is always something that a nation must be doing. Even Jefferson's declaration, our foundational secular scripture, we hold these truths to be self-evident. It's dynamic. Never a thing done something that a nation must be doing. The great Yale historian Edmund Morgan. Wrote that the creed of equality did not give men and women equality, but invited them to claim it. Invited them not to know their place and keep it, but to see and demand a better place. The American Revolution lasted three thousand and eighty nine days and the result was ethical and enduring. The creation of the American republic, surely one of mankind's greatest achievements. Nearly ninety thousand more days have elapsed since those horse fly swatting men. Asserted a human birthright of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Keeping faith with those who fought, suffered and died for the principles we profess to still cherish. Requires more than a nodding acquaintance with more than a perfunctory acknowledgement of their struggles. For better and for worse, their story is our story. Their fight remains our fight. Thanks again for having me here this evening. Thanks very much. Thank you. So she has a microphone, there are microphones here. If you have questions or comments or brickbats have at it. But please wait for the microphone so everybody can hear you.

[00:42:57] Thank you for that. I was thinking as you were speaking about when I read An Army at Dawn, how the transition from locals who joined National Guards and then get subsumed into a larger U.S. Army. And then now we've got this militia narrative that we've all been hearing since we were little. What about the research you've been doing in this series as kind of informed the. The ad hoc nature of our citizens soldier. Concept or the way we think about who we are when we fight wars.

[00:43:31] Yeah, well, it's evolved over time, obviously. Washington had very little use for militias unfairly. I think he's constantly disparaging militias. Militias are local troop units that are called out for short periods of time, usually to fight locally or to provide military services locally. And he found, much to his chagrin, much to his dismay, that they were badly trained, they were unreliable, that they would go home when the fields needed plowing or the crops needed harvesting, that they were undisciplined even more than the continental regulars were. He underestimated the extent to which they provided a very meaningful role in a number of roles. Actually, they helped to provide security for the army. They helped to enforce. No terror really, in some cases against loyalists in their communities. They acted as intelligence agents. They acted as guides because they knew the local roads and whatnot. So and not least when Washington was strapped for troops. It was the militia who often bailed them out. They provided thousands of troops that he needed when he was down to under 3000 to cross the Delaware famously on Christmas night, 1776. So those are the origins of our of our two pronged military system. We've got a continental army, which is in theory, professional, which is a professional standing army.

[00:45:16] That's a very fraught subject. In the 18th century, Americans, particularly in Congress, were very aware of the history of Oliver Cromwell and Britain's loss of control to a man on horseback. Not that long before in British history. And they were wary of it with respect to Washington particularly. But.

[00:45:41] Powerful are powerful military men generally. So a standing army was something that Congress resisted and we have resisted for a good part of our history. And so the militias, the citizen soldiers who are called up in some cases are drafted beginning in the civil war, have been an important part of how we have put together our armies. Now, today, we don't do that and we haven't done a draft since the early 1970s. I know of virtually no military professional who wants to go back to a draft.

[00:46:18] Now, be that as it may, you know, we have a country now. Three hundred and twenty four million people.

[00:46:24] We have far less than 1 percent serving in the military and both active duty and Guard and Reserve combined. The burden on them is tremendous. Multiple deployments overseas to nasty places. They don't want a draft army because they don't want soldiers who don't want to be in the army.

[00:46:46] And the army we've got today is much better in fundamental ways than even that great army of sixteen point one million in uniform in World War two, sixteen point one million in

uniform in a country of a hundred and thirty million. The army today, the army and the other services, you know. More physically fit. By far better educated, by far better led. by far better, better trained. By far better equipped weight by far. So almost nobody wants to go back to the idea of a draft. Nevertheless, you know, it seems to me it seems a lot of people that some. Form of national service would not be a bad thing. It's politically very difficult and probably impossible. And it doesn't have to be national service in a military uniform, but it's a way of helping to unite the country. I think if it could be pulled off. But, you know, we're gonna live with the system we've got now until some catastrophe. And I'm talking about war with China. Some real catastrophe requires substantially enlarging the armed forces. Until that happens, we're going to live with what we got.

[00:48:04] I grew up around Boston. I still go back there frequently. I can hear it in your voice.

[00:48:11] If anybody here has not been to Lexington. They should do it like Justin Green looks today like it did 200 years ago. Go there. Stand there. Imagine those guys on that day, April 19th, 1775, willing to go toe to toe with the greatest army in the world. So I appreciate the stories you tell about the personal lives of the guys who did this, because it's phenomenal. If you go there and stand there. Yeah. I mean, I swear it'll make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. So I don't just have a speech, though. What became of Colonel Parker? Did he actually say if they mean have war, let it begin here? Didn't he? But you really say that would happen? Probably not.

[00:49:09] There are a lot of things that are quoted that are fictions and there is not really good historical grounding. And in that quote from him, if they mean to have war, let it begin here. Nevertheless, he is an extraordinary figure. I mean, his name is there when the first shots are fired, their shots are probably missed. They did not miss on the British side because, again, masked volley fire. There were eight men killed on Lexington Green. There were ten others wounded. It was not a battle. It was not a skirmish. It was an execution. And you know, they had gathered initially because they had been worn by Revere and others that the regulars were coming out and they gathered it on the the early morning, 1:00 or two in the morning on April 19th. And then nothing happened. And they're kind of looking down the road toward Boston. And they sent out scouts. And the scout comes back and says, I don't see any. There's nothing nobody coming. And so they're dismissed. Colonel Parker lets them go and he says, listen for the alarm bell. If they're coming, we'll reassemble here.

[00:50:27] Some of them went home. Some of them went into Buckman Tavern, which is adjacent to the green, had a mug of flip. And then another scout comes back and says, were there a mile outside town? And they're coming on hard. And there's a lot of them, about 900. So when they are reassembled on Lexington Green, now it's dawn. It's just after 6:00 a.m. and

it's a beautiful spring morning. It's unusually warm and the numbers that gather are less than half that had been there originally got maybe 80 men gathered on Lexington Green facing the vanguard of this large force of 900 men and the British commander on the scene. First of all, they go around the meeting house. They have a two pronged envelopment of Lexington Green. And you're right, it's very much today as it was in 1775. Some of the houses that were there in 1775 are still around the green and the British officers are yelling. Throw down your weapons, you rebels or disperse you rebels, and they begin to disperse. They are ordered to disperse.

[00:51:48] Their commander listens to this and says and sees the odds are really against him. And so as they turn and begin to filter off of the green, a shot is fired. Nobody knows who fired it, whether it was British or American, whether it was a sniper. Over near Buckman Tavern, as some have postulated, whether it was an accidental triggering musket said they were very finicky. At any rate, a shot was fired and then the British lost control and they began then. Then the massacre sets in and the British officers for about 10 minutes are unable to control their men. And finally, one of the senior officers, Colonel Smith, comes riding in and he has the drum beat a parlay and the men finally get control of themselves.

[00:52:36] Meanwhile, there, eight dead and ten wounded. Most of those who are shot dead have been shot in the back because they had turned and were leaving Lexington green. The British gather together. Their commanders allow them a cheer, huzzah, and then they turn and head for Concord, which is six miles away.

[00:53:03] Concord is ready for.

[00:53:05] The delays at Lexington have given Concord enough time to prepare, and not only the Concord militia and the Minutemen who are a subset of the militia. They're men who are supposed to carry their muskets at all times. Not only the Concord militia there, but militia units from all over Middlesex are congregating in Concord.

[00:53:30] And then we're going to have quite a different skirmish at Northbridge to start with, where the British definitely fired the first shots. There they are outnumbered at Northbridge on the outskirts of Concord. The Americans fired back. They immediately kill or wound. Four of the eight British officers are there. Again, there's a lack of leadership on the British part. And the British at that point realize they're looking around and they're seeing first of all, there's a thousand men on that hill. And right here we've got a couple of hundred and they're more coming all from all directions around them.

[00:54:09] So that by the end of the day and the British the British commander, Colonel Smith, realizes there's no profit in sticking around here. And so he orders the column to head back to Boston, which is 17 or 18 miles away. It's a long hike back to Boston on a warm spring day. And at all the time that the British are going back on the one road back through Lexington, back through Cambridge, the American numbers are increasing and increasing and increasing.

[00:54:41] So there are about 4000 by the end of the day. The only thing that saves the British from annihilation. That 900 man column that came out initially was that as they get back almost to Lexington, as they're retreating and by this time they've had heavy casualties. They've got a lot of wounded like the young lieutenant. Lieutenant Hall, I described he's been shot three times. The only thing that prevents them from utter obliteration is that a relief column has been sent out from Boston. And as they come close to Lexington, they look and see there's a thousand of their comrades. More than a thousand. It's about fifteen hundred or so. And they are there and they have cannons. And that is enough to, first of all, to enfold this bloody retreating remnant of the column that has gone out in the morning and enough to keep this angry masked mob that is encircling them. Hit and run tactics firing from behind walls from behind. Behind the corners of houses. From is of trees. And that's the only thing that allows them to get back to Boston.

[00:55:56] Once that happens. You know, once the bloodshed begins, then the hopes for any kind of a negotiated settlement are really remote. Because if you're a soldier, you've seen the soldier on your left badly wounded. You've seen your buddy on your right. shot through the face. And you want vengeance. It is. And it's been this way since the days that these cities and the body politic in America really has. It's blown up at this point. So there's not much hope that there's going to be any settlement of the dispute except by force of arms. So that's a long winded answer to your short. Good question. OK. Over here. Yes, sir.

[00:56:42] So as somebody who's actually spent 26 years in the Guard and the Reserves fought overseas four times since 2003, I would definitely say we are better than we once were. Yeah. But with that in your research, we know wars are fought by individuals on the front line. Considering a professional army that had officers that you had to pay for your commission, what did you find out in terms of how vested the frontline British soldier was in the endeavor fighting against the rebels? First of all, we did not have officers buying commissions in the Continental Army or the British.

[00:57:24] I see. So the. Yeah. The the British system was that officers generally bought their commissions and they bought the higher rank. And this the British system was set up. It seems

like an odd way to do things, doesn't it? They're very expensive to become a lieutenant colonel. I can't remember how much it was, but a couple of thousand pounds, which is a fortune in those days. And the British had the feeling that this was a way of ensuring that the proper kind of people or are commanding the army, that they are drawn from the upper ranks socially, and that they will be loyal to the crown, they will be loyal to parliament.

[00:58:02] It actually works. The British rank and file is quite different. You enlist for life now during the revolution because they were having trouble getting people to enlist for life. People who wanted to go 3000 miles across the Atlantic to be shot at for years and years. They changed the rules that you can enlist for the duration. They require. They. They leaned heavily on Irish and Scotsman for cannon fodder, really? They know your question of how invested were they? They're good soldiers. There's no doubt about it. They're quite disciplined. Now they've got discipline issues. I mentioned the drinking. They have a big desertion problem. The Royal Navy has thousands and thousands and thousands of sailors deserting during the course of the revolution.

[00:59:06] One of the reasons that they go out and hire 30000 Germans, we call them Hessians. But they weren't all from Hesse is because they could not get enough troops in the relatively small British army was about a third. The size of the French army, for example, could not enlist enough men to do what needed to be done in America. So they did what had been done repeatedly in the 18th century and was quite common among European armies, and that is to hire mercenaries.

[00:59:36] The Germans in this case, that had its own perils, because as soon as the Americans realize that the British are bringing Germans here to kill your men, rape your women, pillage your homes, burn your towns. That is inflammatory, needless to say.

[00:59:58] And also, they had problems with the Germans deserting the number of Germans who actually go back to Germany is quite small, partly because there are large German communities in Pennsylvania, New York, Delaware and so on.

[01:00:14] The Pennsylvania Dutch. It's a perversion of Deutsche and a lot of German troops who come to America, some of whom are captured and are sent to prison camps in these Pennsylvania communities.

[01:00:28] They think, well, this ain't bad. There's a lot better than going back and being a peasant in Mecklenburg. So that's a big problem for the British. The average British soldier,

you know, to the extent you can you can generalize about them, is loyal to the crown. He's pretty disciplined.

[01:00:51] He is fighting for he's not fighting for money because they're paid terribly. I mean, they're basically being paid a pittance and they're they're fighting. You know, because they have some belief in the larger cause. They have a political indoctrination that I think is, you know, it's imperfect, but it it works reasonably well. There was desertion would've been a lot worse than it was. So they're a formidable force both militarily and and in terms of their morale. When do you think it could have gone the other way and the Brits think they actually gonna win? Do I think it could have gone the other way? Sure. I mean, all wars can go the other way. They never go the way you think they're gonna go. And they start now. They're British. They want a quick, short, decisive war. This starts with Georgia 3rd, and it's all the way through his cabinet, all the way down members of Parliament, they went a short, quick, decisive war, partly because they are strapped for money. The seven years war had been very expensive. The British government is flirting with bankruptcy at one point and more important than that. They know that there is nobody who wants them to fail more than the French.

[01:02:17] The French, since their disastrous defeat in 1763 at the end of the seven years war in which they lost Canada, they lost a good part of their half billion fertile acres west of the Appalachians. They've lost certain sugar islands. They've lost parts of India. The French are living for revenge. It starts with Louis the 16th. It goes through his foreign minister, Virgin, all the way down through the French government. And they realize early on that the best way to stick it to the British is to have the British caught in a quagmire in North America fighting the Americans.

[01:02:57] And that's why they secretly at first began providing munitions and money and uniforms and other help. And then after the Battle of Saratoga and the fall of 1777, they very overtly do it. They come in on our on our side. So the British know the French and the Spanish who are allied with the French are just watching and waiting for their opportunity. They want the war to end quickly. It doesn't end quickly, in part because there are opportunities that General Howe, who is the British commander at the time, has to obliterate Washington's army and it doesn't happen. Washington escapes. I mentioned the escape across the East River. There are other escapes. Had they had they caught Washington, you know, at Long Island before he got across the East River and captured him and hanged him. Which is very possible is what they did to Scottish rebels in the seventeen forties. Their heads were still displayed on pikes in London as a reminder to rebels of what happens to them. Washington's had been on a pike. There's no obvious successor to Washington as a commander in chief. The army is destroyed. Who knows what happens? My feeling is that generally. I mean, there's there's one factor and I'll leave it at this. The American population is two and a half million in 1775. Five hundred thousand of those are black slaves. It is doubling every twenty five years. It's a rate of

growth that has never been seen in European history. It's four times the rate of growth of Britain itself. It's explosive. And we know that this country is going to be big, bad and powerful. Pretty soon. And the idea that Britain is going to keep us under their thumb with their mercantile empire and their imperial ways in perpetuity. That's probably not going to happen. So the war could have turned out differently, but the ultimate disposition of the colonies as an independent entity, that's probably inevitable. I think.

[01:05:12] Sir, I have to say, your books are fantastic about stories about the people that are actually involved in these endeavors. All your World War 2 trilogy was fantastic. This one so far is fantastic. Thank you. Thank you. Reading. Yeah. One of the sections in this book that I thought was really fascinating was about the Virginia governor. Dozens more. Lord Dunmore. Lord Dunmore. Yeah. And he flirted with emancipating the slaves. And allowing them to come into the war on the side of Britain. Yes. And it was considered a stupid decision and a big failure. I'm interested in knowing why that is. That to me, that seems a source of manpower and I guess, arms that could easily turn the world over others.

[01:06:10] Yeah, he's the royal governor of Virginia. He's a Scot and he does more than flirt with it.

[01:06:16] He announces that he will emancipate the slaves of any rebel, not any loyalists, but rebels, the slaves of any rebels who flee their masters and come within the lines of the British army that they and will fight for them. And they'll provide them with fire locks and some rudimentary training and then give them their freedom. Thousands, thousands of slaves respond to this. This is in 1776. It backfires in a couple of ways. First of all, there is nothing the British could have done to more enrage plantation owners like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, then announcing the emancipation of slaves, because now it's not just a war about basic rights and theoretical freedoms and so on. Now it's a war that attacks the very basis, the very foundation of your economic system. Washington's comments about Dunmore when this happens are totally intemperate. I mean, he wants to find the guy and kill him. And he's pretty blunt about it. So this unites the southern colonies in particular. And there are quite a few northerners who are sympathetic to the southern plight. And he's got all these thousands of slaves showing up. They're not trained as military men. Of course, most of them have never held a musket in their lives. Of course, they're wracked with disease.

[01:07:55] They show up. Dunmore is forced out of the capital in Norfolk, where he's had his head, is in Williamsburg, is forced out of Williamsburg, and he takes refuge in Norfolk. Norfolk is burned first by the British and then the American rebels finish the job. They burn most of Norfolk because it's seen as a Tory town. And Dunmore is a little pest, the lentil spit of land near Norfolk. With all these slaves coming in and they are just decimated by dysentery, typhus,


smallpox in particular. And this is gonna happen through the rest of the time that he's trying to effect this new policy. The British government, first of all, has not approved this. He's done this on his own. There's been talk about doing it. Questions of whether it's good policy. Will it work? He goes ahead and does it on his own. And it turns out to be kind of a catastrophe. Yeah. So theoretically, here's a source of manpower. Here's a way to undercut the economic stability of the southern colonies in particular. But in reality, it doesn't work out that way. There will be other occasions where there are slaves fleeing all through the war in New York. When the British finally evacuate New York in 1783, there's a you know, there are many, many blacks who have found their way to New York within the protective onclave of the British army there. And they will leave with the British in some cases, along with the loyalists who leave. In some cases, they go to Nova Scotia or they might go to Britain and they go to other places to begin new lives. And there is a list of these blacks called the Book of Negroes. It's really quite extraordinary.

[01:09:51] So this issue of slavery and how you treat slavery and how slaves play into it, the Americans, the last thing I'll mention about it. Washington, because he so strapped for manpower, eventually permits blacks to come into the army. For the most part, they don't want slaves in the army. Some do come in.

[01:10:12] Some come in. There is a black unit formed in Rhode Island and there are quite a few black Americans who will serve on the American side in the army there. There is no deal offered similar to the deal that's been offered by Lord Dunmore. You come and fight for us and we'll give you your freedom. That's never part of the bargain. All right, one more. You got it, sir. Right here. Last question.

[01:10:41] I've been doing some research on a new type of revolution instead of business. Or instead of military, basically, do it on the business side. I speak a high level counsel for Microsoft for dealing with antitrust and all this. And sure, the idea that. You know, you might go through kind of where we've been going through a little bit. First, while privatization, the next step would be militarization. Where you sure getting the structure, a leadership and a followership, kind of like the union and the Confederacy. And as you do that, eventually on a global scale, it will mature into commercialization. If you have commercialization, you'll be able to globally. But in this, you'll be able to have sort of national revolutions going on at the same time too, militarily. So this is kind of entirely new. But it sort of leads to always have these with civil war, whether it's revolutions. It's always been sort of the leadership and the worker bees.

[01:11:48] Yeah, I'm not quite sure I follow that. But yes, their leadership. Leadership. And they're worker bees. I have to say that the American military is much more egalitarian. In general, there are worker bees who become leaders and is set up that way. The officers are



generally elected. They don't buy their way into officer commissions. They are often elected, particularly at the lower officer ranks. And there are guys like Nathanael Greene, who is a private in the Rhode Island militia. He runs for lieutenant, loses that election, partly because he's got an odd gate. He's got a bit of a limp. He's big, burly guy because he's an anchor Smith. And yet the Rhode Island Provincial Assembly, you know, he can't become a lieutenant, but they make him a general. It's the fastest promotion in the history of the United States Army. And it turns out to be an absolute genius. He's one of the greatest figures in American military history.

[01:12:51] He will be critically important in the last several years of the war, which are almost exclusively, exclusively fought in the south. So there is a worker bee who has sense and there are many other examples like that. Henry Knox. Twenty five year old overweight Boston bookseller. He's got a knack for gunnery. You know something about engineering. Washington has a good eye for subordinate talent, says that guy, the fat guy.

[01:13:18] I see something in him. He becomes the father of American artilleries, one of the great figures in American military history. There is a worker bee that has ascended on his merits. So that's what I'd say about. OK. We're going to call it there. Thanks so much. Thank you again.

[01:13:45] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.

