

Anthony Comegna ([00:45](#)):

Hello, again, everyone. It's another New Books episode here on Ideas in Progress, and we have a really excellent one for you at that. Dennis Rasmussen teaches political science at Syracuse University, where he specializes in the enlightenment, the American founding era, liberal democracy, and market capitalism. He has a PhD from Duke and has written many books now, including our topic for the day, *Fears of a Setting Sun: The Disillusionment of America's Founders*, published by Princeton University Press.

Anthony Comegna ([01:19](#)):

I'll say off the bat that I loved this book so much and I found it so informative and timely that I've already assigned it for an upcoming program. Welcome on the show here, Dennis. I know from experience trying to teach this period of U.S. history to students, especially this early republican era, we hear that, "Oh, elections were..." You think elections are dirty now. Elections used to be really, really nasty back then. But then that's kind of all that we hear. Set the stage for this book a little bit for us by telling us about politics and political culture in the 1790s.

Anthony Comegna ([02:03](#)):

And then as I think the kids say, spill the tea for us on especially the newspapers and the way that they treated the candidates and the kind of influence developing parties had on that whole process. Just tell us exactly how scurrilous this political culture was.

Dennis Rasmussen ([02:24](#)):

We're going to get to the good stuff right away. Okay, excellent. The 1790s are extremely partisan decade, which is surprising to most of the figures involved, right? Most of the founders going in think parties are bad things, mostly identical with factions, and they expect and hope that they'll never emerge. And yet, of course, they do emerge if not immediately at least within the first couple of years. As you suggest, during the 1790s, the newspapers are all partisan newspapers. There essentially are no nonpartisan newspapers.

Dennis Rasmussen ([03:00](#)):

At first, they just say the kinds of things about the other side that you might expect even from the more extreme figures on say Fox News or MSNBC. In *The Republican Press*, Hamilton is a monarchist and he's just trying to fleece everyday people and fill the pockets of money men and the like and vice versa. Jefferson is trying to let mobs loose on the streets and so forth. They're quite extreme and they lie a lot, but there's a certain level of decorum where, for instance, none of them would have considered criticizing George Washington during I'd say at least his first term.

Dennis Rasmussen ([03:37](#)):

He was all but sacrosanct. But things escalate over the course of the decades. By Washington's second term, especially once Hamilton is no longer in the Treasury Department and he can't be a kind of foil for Washington, *The Republican Press* sets its sights on Washington, who is this once untouchable figure, and they make up all the kinds of lies about him that I cite in the book, that he's a blasphemer. He's a womanizer. He's embezzling public funds. Not only was Alexander Hamilton controlling him behind the scenes, but actually Hamilton was his illegitimate son.

Dennis Rasmussen ([04:16](#)):

And, in some way, funniest one of all, that he was a secret British agent during the Revolutionary War. He was trying to betray the patriotic cause, but Benedict Arnold beat him to the punch, so he couldn't go through with his nefarious plans. And then things get still worst after Washington steps off the scene. It really in some ways reaches its height in the election of 1800, which is, of course, a race between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, two of our most revered founders. And yet the press goes after them. The Republican side says Adams...

Dennis Rasmussen ([04:50](#)):

He's a monarchist. He wants to institute hereditary monarchy in the United States so he can become president and then hand down the office to his son John Quincy. They say he has the character of a hermaphrodite, that he has neither the strength and firmness of a man or the sensibility of a woman, and so on. On the other side, Jefferson is painted as an atheist. Jefferson is an atheist. If he gets elected president, essentially there will be no more morality. Your wives will be raped in front of you on the streets. The world will go to hell.

Dennis Rasmussen ([05:23](#)):

It was a couple of years after this I think, and it was 1802 that a guy named James Callender published the first gossip about Jefferson and Sally Hemings, who we now know he had a number of children with, but there was kind of innuendo about... He called her "Dusky Sally" and how she was the mistress of Monticello and the like. It starts out pretty extreme pretty quickly and goes downhill from there. It was a pretty scandal ridden time. Even though we picture them as these figures who are somehow above politics, they're very political animals.

Anthony Comegna ([06:02](#)):

I would love to know the ins and outs of the theory about how Hamilton would have been Washington's illegitimate son. Just how the hell would that timeline have gone? I'd be interested to know.

Dennis Rasmussen ([06:13](#)):

He's born in the Caribbean.

Anthony Comegna ([06:16](#)):

But I'm going to try to avoid that. But instead, the purpose of the book is essentially to show... I love the device here of the setting sun or the rising sun, whichever it might be, on the back of Washington's chair during the constitutional convention, if memory serves. Franklin remarks on the sun, the image of it, and he says, "I've looked at it throughout the process here, and I've never known for sure whether it's a rising or a setting sun. Now I know it must be a rising sun," and all this. They feel good about these grand American experiment.

Anthony Comegna ([06:53](#)):

Americans during the revolution seem to be really feel a sense that they were moving world history, and then that gradually falls away. And that's what the book is about here, how they all ended up kind of being... Their naivete was quite tamed. Let's get into it a little bit here. You cover Washington first. He's interesting to me because for all his lamenting the rise of partisanship, earlier in his career in Virginia, he seems to have participated in that quite a bit.

Anthony Comegna ([07:25](#)):

One thing strikes out to me that it used to be whoever brought the most whiskey to the elections, to the polling places would win the House of Burgesses slot. Washington did that at least a couple of times. Did he not have some real place or role in creating the very problems he lamented?

Dennis Rasmussen ([07:46](#)):

Well, I think he did become a partisan figure, at least all but a partisan figure by the end of his second term. He saw himself as being above party, and yet... Look, you're right. I mean, buying votes with whiskey, I don't know if that's any better than party loyalty. As I suggest, I think most political scientists today would say that you really can't have democratic politics without parties.

Dennis Rasmussen ([08:10](#)):

That parties serve all these important roles, providing an organized locus for dissent and structuring voters choices and providing accountability to the voters and so on that you just can't have a functioning democracy without them. Washington never felt that way. He was as averse to parties as any... I mean, all the founders professed aversion to parties. This is very almost a stock theme of 18th century political discourse to say that parties or factions as they often call them were bad things. But Washington was really serious about it.

Dennis Rasmussen ([08:45](#)):

He was really sincere about it. On the individual level, he thought partisans were partial, meaning that they favor the parochial interest of some small group over the public good. Maybe you're buying votes with whiskey, but at least you're not corrupting the Republican politics, right? You're not favoring some over others. But more than that, on the kind of more social level or political level, taking in the whole country, he thought just Republican politics couldn't work with parties.

Dennis Rasmussen ([09:20](#)):

That they sowed conflict among the populists and divided the people that subverts public order in his view. By having a political party that opposes the party in power, the administration in power, they're preventing the government from being administered well. And that it opens the door to corruption, to foreign intrigue that he just thinks what he calls the demon of party spirit, that I used for one on my chapter titles, is anathema to Republican politics. This does seem I think totally naïve to many readers today, but this was not unique to him.

Dennis Rasmussen ([09:59](#)):

Again, this was a common view among the founders that parties were bad things and hopefully they'll never emerge.

Anthony Comegna ([10:05](#)):

What exactly was the fear then? If parties were corrupting the body politic, what exactly were the ultimate problems that they saw awaiting at the end of that process?

Dennis Rasmussen ([10:18](#)):

Again, just the community would be split apart. The people wouldn't feel like a people. They would feel like two groups facing off against one another, rather than as Americans. And that foreign powers would use this to drive the people further apart as they did. I mean, Britain and the Federalists and the

Republicans and the French kind of faced off against one another, and they thought this would open the door to foreigners meddling in American politics.

Dennis Rasmussen ([10:50](#)):

For Washington, he just didn't think Republican government could survive under these kinds of circumstances, that you need some kind of underlying unity in order for the country to hold together.

Anthony Comegna ([11:03](#)):

See, that seems a bit odd to me too. Just like thinking we could have a democratic polity without parties, Massachusetts, I guess, managed for a bit in 1780s with that kind of a situation. It also seems really ridiculous the idea that even if the union broke apart and each state was independent, the fear that Britain would invade to reconquer Massachusetts or something just seems ridiculous. What really is the problem here? I tend to think of it maybe like the Beard's, the old progressive argument, that these are a bunch of aristocrats really concerned about their own positions first and foremost.

Dennis Rasmussen ([11:51](#)):

Maybe that's right. I agree with you. It seems ridiculous to say they're going to come in and take back Massachusetts, but Britain did the invade the country in the War of 1812. They did try to reclaim territory in the Northwest, right? Canada is part of the British Empire and they're trying to expand the empire. But I think the real worry is if they break up... I think the most realistic alternative wouldn't have been 13 separate confederacies, but rather two, right? You'd have a Northern Federalist-ish confederacy and a Southern more Jeffersonian Republican confederacy.

Dennis Rasmussen ([12:28](#)):

The worry would be that they'd become tribute states to Britain and France, respectively, right? There were lots of... By the time the French Revolution had gotten underway and Napoleon [inaudible 00:12:39] and whatever, there were lots of tribute states to Revolutionary France, and they worried an American South could be like that, and that it wouldn't be a truly independent country anymore. I guess that would be the biggest or the longest run fear that they might have had.

Anthony Comegna ([12:56](#)):

You mentioned a bit earlier that Washington did fall into partisanship later in life. I thought that was a really, really enlightening part of the coverage on Washington, but I want to move to talking a bit more about Hamilton and John Adams, and then Jefferson. Bu does seem that the younger two here, Hamilton and Jefferson, really fell into partisanship much, much more than the older cohort from the revolution. But do tell us a little bit about how Washington eventually becomes much more of a Partisan Federalist right there alongside Hamilton.

Dennis Rasmussen ([13:33](#)):

Sure. He becomes more of a partisan... Let me back up. During his first term, he's trying very hard to be above party. His cabinet reflects that. He has Hamilton on one side, who's generally supported by his Secretary of War Henry Knox, are both on the Federalist side, but then he has Jefferson as Secretary of State and Edmond Randolph is a little bit more independent minded, but he's kind of a Jeffersonian Republican. He has figures from both sides on his cabinet, and he tries to be an evenhanded adjudicator between the two sides.

Dennis Rasmussen ([14:07](#)):

I think his sympathies are more with Hamilton's policies and Hamilton's outlook, but he tries to remain evenhanded. As time goes on and especially after Jefferson basically gets fed up and leaves the cabinet, it's harder and harder for Washington to straddle the two sides. I think it's more drifting than moving. He just kind of unwittingly starts moving in the Federalist camp. By the end of his second term, he has only kind of second rate rock-ribbed Federalists in his cabinet. He's not the evenhanded adjudicator that he once was.

Dennis Rasmussen ([14:42](#)):

And then in his retirement, he goes much further still. He unadvisedly comes back out of retirement during the Quasi-War with France to at least nominally had this new army and he basically says, "We don't want any Republicans. Only Federalists for office holders." He only correspondents with Federalists. He really sinks into the blinkered partisanship that he himself had found so problematic early in his career.

Dennis Rasmussen ([15:10](#)):

I think Washington comes off better than some of the other figures in the book, but it is a sad end for Washington that he falls prey to exactly what he had worried about and complained about for his whole career.

Anthony Comegna ([15:21](#)):

Now, Washington seems naïve for that though. It also must seem naïve for somebody like Hamilton or Jefferson to think that they might be able to ride the wave and master the storm, as it were, of developing partisan politics. Tell us a little bit about each of those figures, and then we'll cover Adams perhaps last here. I'm especially curious, of course, Hamilton didn't live too long into the rise of democracy, if you will, didn't really come on strong until the 1820s anyhow.

Anthony Comegna ([15:55](#)):

But am I curious, had he lived a full natural lifespan, what do you think his outlook would have been? Would he have been so pessimistic by the end of a natural life?

Dennis Rasmussen ([16:08](#)):

Okay, there's a lot of questions there. Let me back up and say, you first asked about the partisanship rivalry. It's Jefferson and Hamilton that are the two who are most bitter enemies and heads of the two sides. Of course, they're within the cabinet, right? They're in the same cabinet for the first four or five years, whatever it was. They hated each other on a personal level for sure. There was just a personal hatred where Jefferson looks down on Hamilton as an upstart trying to rise above his proper station.

Dennis Rasmussen ([16:46](#)):

He's a self-made immigrant and whatever, whereas Jefferson cast himself as the apostle of humble farmers, which Hamilton thinks just sheer hypocrisy, right? He's this rich, well-connected slave holder. They hate one another on a personal level. Of course, on a policy level, Hamilton wants a big robust powerful national government, a powerful executive, a sweeping financial program. And Jefferson sees this as monarchy in sheep's clothing, right? That he's just trying to all but put a crown on George Washington's head.

Dennis Rasmussen ([17:20](#)):

He's trying to turn America's agrarian paradise into this corrupt arena for money men and stockjobbers, Jefferson liked to call them. They have different visions of what the government should be and should do and should look like. But as you suggest, they don't see, at least initially, they don't see partisanship as legitimate. They too have bought this line that parties are unhealthy and inimical to Republican politics. And that too, ironically, feeds the flames of partisanship in the sense that Jefferson and Madison and their followers, they eventually come to see, well, we have to form a party.

Dennis Rasmussen ([18:06](#)):

We have to stop Hamilton. We have to stop the Federalists from returning to monarchy. We have to form a party, but this is going to be a temporary party, right? Once we rescue the American Republic, once we put Hamilton down, then parties will vanish. They'll no longer be necessary. They'll just fade away. They just don't foresee this day when there are two parties who've routinely alternate in power and check one another without upending the regime. That's just not somehow part of their mental makeup. Again, ironically, that makes the partisanship all the more bitter.

Dennis Rasmussen ([18:47](#)):

Now, you also asked, how might Hamilton have seen the country at the end of his natural life? That is to say if he had lived like... Well, he was younger too, so let's say he had lived like Madison well into Andrew Jackson's presidency. I guess, there is a sense in which he might have been heartened by the more centralized nature of political power, and especially Andrew Jackson was a very powerful executive and Hamilton was always trying to build off the executive branch. I don't think he would have liked why Jackson was powerful, right?

Dennis Rasmussen ([19:24](#)):

He was powerful because he saw himself as the purist representative of the people, right? It's not the voters of a particular state or a particular district voting for him. It's the whole country. He's somehow channeling the popular will. Of course, Hamilton's always skeptical of the popular will. He's always skeptical of excessive democracy or populism or kind of pandering to the people the way Jackson did. I think he wouldn't like that. Nor I think did Jackson really use his power for very Hamiltonian ends.

Dennis Rasmussen ([19:57](#)):

I supposed he did stand up to the South Carolina nullifiers, which Hamilton would have liked, but he also lets say shut down the national bank, which Hamilton very much would not have. Yeah, maybe it would have been more of a mixed bag for Hamilton had he lived into the 1830s rather, than being killed in 1804. But it would have been at best a mixed bag I think for him.

Anthony Comegna ([20:20](#)):

Yeah, yeah, I agree. I could totally see him standing side by side with General Jackson, President Jackson as he puts down the nullifiers in South Carolina, just like he was with Washington in the whiskey rebellion. But equally, I can see Jefferson, if he had lived another 10-15 years, whatever it would be, eight years maybe only. My math is bad here. If Jefferson had lived just another decade or so, he would have been right there with Calhoun and the nullifiers.

Anthony Comegna ([20:52](#)):

Tell us a little bit about Jefferson. He obviously lives a long time compared to the other founders. By the end of his life, what is he thinking about the union and why?

Dennis Rasmussen ([21:05](#)):

Jefferson is an interesting case in so far as for the vast majority of his life, he is very optimistic, almost relentlessly optimistic about America and its special virtue and its foreordained destiny to be this great unique Republic. This is even through the 1790s. I mean, he's very worried Hamilton and his financial program. He's very worried by the end of about say the Alien and Sedition Acts under President Adams. But through it all, he's pretty confident that things are going to turn out right in the end.

Dennis Rasmussen ([21:42](#)):

He thinks that underneath it all, the people, the American people, are good Republicans. And in fact, Jeffersonian Republicans, with a capital R. The nation is truly with him at heart. He thinks he was proven right. In the election of 1800, he becomes president. The Republicans sweep to power and he writes all this self-congratulatory notes to all his friends saying, "Our ship has reached port. We've weathered the storm. Things turned out right after all. America won. We survived the Federalists and now we can ride off into the sunset."

Dennis Rasmussen ([22:20](#)):

He stays optimistic through his presidency, through much of Madison's presidency. It's really not until the last decade of his life that he starts to become disillusioned. There's a number of reasons for that. He doesn't like the spread of industry, the rage for banks and financial speculation that he sees at this period. He worries about what he sees as the usurpations of the Supreme Court under Chief Justice John Marshall. But really the thing that I think sets him off, that really puts into a point of despair is the Missouri crisis.

Dennis Rasmussen ([22:59](#)):

This comes in kind of 1819-1820, where Missouri has applied for statehood and there's this question of, is it going to come in as a free state or a slave state? The country is evenly split at that point. We get the first real big sectional conflict that pits North and South against each other over the expansion of slavery. He writes a famous letter to a guy named John Holmes where he says that this event woke him like a fire bell in the night and filled him with terror. He all but predicts the path of the Civil War.

Dennis Rasmussen ([23:39](#)):

He says, "Once you have this geographic line dividing the North and South with a deep moral principle dividing the two, that is never going to go away. It's just going to be etched deeper and deeper into the nation's consciousness." Again, he all but prophesies the path of the Civil War. He says at the end of the letter very explicitly, "I'm now going to die believing that everything we fought for was in vain. That the present generation is going to throw away all the achievements of the founders. My only consolation is that I'm not going to live to weep over the destruction of the Republic."

Dennis Rasmussen ([24:15](#)):

It's really the clearest most forceful articulation of disillusionment that you could imagine from this guy who had been so perennially optimistic up to that point.

Anthony Comegna ([24:29](#)):

As you're very careful to point out, a large part of that problem was because people like Jefferson essentially gave up on their earlier inclinations toward abolition, and especially so after cotton become such an important cash crop. They just left it and did less and less and less, and then became kind of... You sort of portray Jefferson as like a cantankerous, angry, fearful old crank. Old slavery crank at the end of his life, but that's reflective of where the whole South was trending in terms of thought on slavery. Maybe go over that a bit for us.

Dennis Rasmussen ([25:12](#)):

Sure. I mean, I'm afraid Jefferson doesn't come off all that well in the book, especially the later Jefferson. That's absolutely right. Earlier in his career, he fought I think a reasonably forceful battle against slavery. He tried to put a really harsh denunciation of slavery and the slave trade into the Declaration of Independence. This was going to be his sort of culminating grievance, the last grievance against King George III. He came up with a couple of different gradual emancipation schemes for his home state of Virginia.

Dennis Rasmussen ([25:41](#)):

He also put forward a proposal to the Confederation Congress that would have banned slavery from all the Western territories, so both North and South of the Ohio River, which is a remarkable effort. I mean, it came within one vote of passing. And if had passed, this was the chief issue that frankly led to the Civil War, is the question of the expansion of slavery into the territories. If that could have been nipped in the bud from the outset, that would have put the country on a much better path. He fought whatever he did back in Monticello.

Dennis Rasmussen ([26:09](#)):

In his personal life, we can talk if you like about whether he was just a hypocrite or not. He was holding hundreds of people in bondage himself back at home. But on the political level, he was fighting a reasonably forceful battle against slavery in the 1780s. But then he frankly just gets worse and worse on this issue over time. In the 1790s, he does almost nothing. He just kind of puts it on the back burner. The real fight at that point for him is against Hamilton and the Hamiltonian Federalists.

Dennis Rasmussen ([26:37](#)):

He can't alienate the South by pushing against slavery, so he just puts it into the back of his mind, puts it on the back burner. As president, he does very little. He makes the Louisiana Purchase. You have this huge new territory doubling the size of the country. He could have said in line with what he himself had advocated in 1784, "Let's ban slavery from this huge territory," and he does the opposite of that. He all but welcomes slavery into the territory.

Dennis Rasmussen ([27:08](#)):

And then at the end of his life during the Missouri crisis, he does the worst thing of all, which is he positively encourages the expansion of slavery. This was because he adopts what I can only describe as a rather crackpot theory that was known as diffusion. The idea was that, well, if we open up more territory to slavery, this doesn't increase the number of people who are enslaved. It just spreads them out further.

Dennis Rasmussen ([27:35](#)):

He thought that somehow this would have benefits that the enslaved people would be better treated if they were more spread out, but mostly that each individual slaveholder would hold fewer people in bondage, meaning that they would have to give up less if emancipation were to come. He thought that expanding slavery would somehow lead to emancipation, which is just crazy as I suggest in the book. This is like saying, "Well, I have this terrible disease. Let it spread throughout my whole body and then surely it will go away on its own."

Dennis Rasmussen ([28:07](#)):

It's hard to reconcile his embrace of this theory with the idea that he's generally an intelligent person, but he did embrace it and he still saw himself as an opponent of slavery. Certainly in his letters he says, "No. This is the best way to get rid of slavery is to embrace this expansion." As I suggest in one of my harsher lines in the book, but one I'm proud of, is that he still considers himself an enemy of slavery.

Dennis Rasmussen ([28:33](#)):

But by this point, one might fairly say that with enemies like Jefferson, slavery hardly needed friends. All his actions were really helping slavery, even though he claimed to be trying to combat it.

Anthony Comegna ([28:46](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. Now, I would be remiss if we didn't at least cover John Adams a bit here, in part because I think Adams is my favorite of these guys. I mean, it's certainly not Jefferson. He's probably the one I like the least for obvious reasons, and then Washington for obvious reasons. Hamilton also. I'm a libertarian. I can't stand Hamilton. Adams is actually okay. I like him. Why did everybody hate John Adams so much? Because everyone seems to have hated him. Why?

Dennis Rasmussen ([29:19](#)):

Well, I mean, partly it's just personality. I mean, he was kind of a [inaudible 00:29:23] You're not likely to win many friends when mostly what you're doing is going around telling people that they weren't virtuous enough, right? This was really the theme of... I have a group of three chapters on each of these figures and each has a kind of theme. Washington's is the rise of partisanship. Hamilton's is the... He just never thinks the federal government is powerful enough, vigorous enough.

Dennis Rasmussen ([29:52](#)):

Jefferson is mostly, as I was just suggesting, the sectional divisions over slavery. For Adams, the theme is virtue, his complaints that the American people just don't exhibit enough civic virtue. They're not public spirited enough to sustain a Republican government for long. Again, that's not going to make you terribly popular to say, "Well, you're all selfish. You're not putting the country first." He's very brutal in puncturing Jefferson's myth of American exceptionalism, that we're this uniquely virtuous and pure people.

Dennis Rasmussen ([30:25](#)):

Adams says, "No, no, no. We're just as corrupt, just addicted to luxury, just as selfish as all peoples before us have been." He knew this would lead him to not be terribly popular. He complained about it. He also reveled in it that somehow this showed the purity of his own virtue, that he was so unpopular. Now, obviously he was popular enough to be elected vice president twice and president once, right? He's not entirely without support within the public. The other thing I'd say is I think he's just too independent minded to be really at home among either party.

Dennis Rasmussen ([31:07](#)):

He's definitely not on the Republican side, but he won't go the full way with Hamilton and the so called High Federalists on lots of issues. He was too willing to say, "Send the second peace mission to France," which through the rest of the Republicans and the hysterics." He was just too willing to do what he thought was right, which... I mean, I agree with you in some ways.

Dennis Rasmussen ([31:32](#)):

Those are quite admirable thing and maybe something that Washington, for instance, would have admired about him, but it's just not going to make him terribly popular when he both goes around telling people that they're not virtuous enough and doesn't really fit into either camps. I guess those would be my two main explanations.

Anthony Comegna ([31:52](#)):

I can perfectly well see, had Adams lived another 10 years, he probably would have been even less optimistic. He would have been much, much more pessimistic and probably only more so as time went on.

Dennis Rasmussen ([32:04](#)):

I think that's right. I mean, he was lucky to die with his son as the president, right? He had seen 24 years of the Republicans, his worst while opponents in power. Jefferson, then aide of Madison, then aide of Monroe. But at the every end, he gets to see John Quincy take the reins, and so at least he got to go out on a somewhat upbeat note as opposed to... I think you're right. He would have found very little to sympathize with with Andrew Jackson.

Anthony Comegna ([32:34](#)):

I forget who it was, but some historian I remember reading said that Washington died in 1799 almost as if to say, "Nope. I refuse to go into the 19th century."

Dennis Rasmussen ([32:46](#)):

Yeah, that's right. He too. It might have been better if it would have been a couple years earlier and he hadn't the Quasi-War and I think soiled his reputation at the end of his life. But yeah, at least he didn't get to see Jefferson take over.

Anthony Comegna ([32:59](#)):

But no, I'm curious, after having written this book and I'm sure spoken about it a lot in many different ways by now, were they right or were the wrong? Because in some sense, I think clearly they were wrong about all these apocalyptic fears. Even after several massive crisis, the country is still here. But clearly they were all kind of right in a way too. What do you make of this?

Dennis Rasmussen ([33:29](#)):

It's a good question. My epilogue addresses this question and it does in a sort of typical academic thing, on the one hand, but on the other type thing. Yes, no. I mean, I think their worries are still with us. We still worry about partisan polarization. We still worry about the lack of civil engagement. We still worry about even sectional divisions within the country. Those problems certainly haven't gone away. It makes

me think of... I didn't include this in the book, but there's a line I believe I read it in an essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson, but he attributes it to someone else.

Dennis Rasmussen ([34:09](#)):

Maybe Fisher Ames. But the line is something like, a monarchy is like a merchant vessel that will sail very well, but every once again, he'll rock and go to the bottom. Whereas a democracy is like a raft. It'll never sink, but then your feet are always in the water. That sort of makes me think we've learned to put up with having our feet wet all the time, but it doesn't sink.

Dennis Rasmussen ([34:36](#)):

Certainly the constitutional order has been more durable than the founders expected when they predicted, well, we're going to have to call another constitutional conventional, or we're going to lapse into hereditary monarchy, or the nation is just going to split apart. That hasn't happened, right? We've learned to live with these problems. We've learned to live with having our feet in the water. The fact that they had these worries, just like we have our own worries, I don't know, there's a certain comfort to be taken in that I think.

Dennis Rasmussen ([35:10](#)):

I do have a couple chapters on James Madison, who's an outlier, who doesn't have the same disillusionment at the end of his life. One of the reasons is he says, "Well, look, the country has already survived 50 years. It survived the Alien and Sedition Acts. It survived the War of 1812. It survived the Missouri crisis. The more it endures, the more durable it seems." If he can find solace in the fact that the country lasted for a half century, well, it's now less or more than 230 years, right? The constitution has lasted more than 230 years.

Dennis Rasmussen ([35:43](#)):

I always hear and we heard this much more around the time of the election and January 6th and the like that this is the end of American democracy. People have said this before that it was the end of democracy, but now it really is. I think if we take the longer view, we can see that things are in some respects much better than they were at the time of the founding, right? Obviously we don't have widespread slavery and the like. I think political violence is still less common today. I said that in the book and almost came to regret it on January 6th with the very harrowing attack on the Capitol.

Dennis Rasmussen ([36:23](#)):

In the first few years after the constitution's put in place, you have the whiskey rebellion. You have thousands of armed citizens marching on an army outpost in protest against attacks. You have members of the House of Representatives brawling on the floor of the House with canes and fire pokers. We talked at the very outset of the podcast about the viscousness of the press and of the presidential elections. I don't know. I guess part of me is tempted with Madison to take the longer view and to appreciate what we have for all of its ills.

Anthony Comegna ([37:19](#)):

All right. Thanks for listening, everybody, and thanks especially to our guest, Professor Dennis Rasmussen. I can't tell you how strongly I recommend this book. It's really a great read on the part of the founder's lives we rarely hear much about. I have to say too, it was pretty moving to read about people

who were so motivated to move and shape history become so deeply disenchanted with the outcome. It all kind of takes me back to Homer Simpson's dictum, never try.

Anthony Comegna ([37:48](#)):

But in any case, help raise up the sun of your favorite IHS Podcast, Ideas in Progress, by subscribing, rating, reviewing, and, of course, sharing the show far and wide. We'll see you back here next week.