Is the United States in 2022 more like the U.S. of 1858 or the U.S. of 1968?

Transcript of Interview of Doris Kearns Goodwin and Jon Meacham by Fahreed Zakaria on December 26, 2021 on CNN Global Public Square

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[10:00:16]

FAREED ZAKARIA, CNN ANCHOR: . . .

ZAKARIA: The January 6th [2021] riots which still echoes loudly. How to put this all into context? Well, we have joining us the Pulitzer Prize winning historians Doris Kearns Goodwin and Jon Meacham.

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The end of the year tends to prompt reflection so let's take a moment to pause and consider this moment in time and how perhaps future historians will view it. So, who better to help us with that than two of the finest historians of the day, both Pulitzer Prize winners.

So let me start by asking you, folks. [Some] friends of mine, were having a conversation, and one of them, I should credit Josh Steiner, said to me, so the question is, “Is this 1858 or is it 1968?” In other words, let me explain for people: 1858 being a point where the tensions and turmoil in the country broke the entire political and even the constitutional system. 1968, being a period of enormous turmoil but somehow the country came through and it was resilient and 10 years later, frankly, you know, 15 years later, things looked fine.

So, Jon, 1858 or 1968?

JON MEACHAM: Fantastic question. I pray that it's 1968 and there's a sentence you never thought you'd say, a year that began with Tet [a coordinated series of North Vietnamese attacks on more than 100 cities and outposts in South Vietnam that began on January 31, 1968], Dr. King's assassination, Lyndon Johnson gets out of the [presidential] race.

ZAKARIA: Robert Kennedy's assassination.

MEACHAM: [Robert] Kennedy is assassinated, Chicago disintegrates into chaos, the Democratic convention. And on election day 1968 George Wallace wins 13.5 percent of the vote in five states. 1968 is also the first year America ever had an integrated electorate. Think about that. The first presidential year after the 1965 Voting Rights Act was the first time a multiracial democracy was actually recognized fully by the Constitution, by legislation.

So we're really only about 56 years old. What happened in 1858 was these two clashing views of slavery and freedom, of power, identity, faith, and what worries me most is that what happened in 1858 was the power of passion and pride to overcome reason and a genuine devotion to the Declaration [of Independence].

ZAKARIA: What do you think of, Doris?

GOODWIN: Well, you know, what I think of when I think of the 1850s is that in some ways it does remind me of where we are today in the scary sense of ways. They had a partisan press, just as we do, now. If you are listening to one of the debates between Steven Douglas and Abraham Lincoln or you're reading the Republican newspaper, it's

going to say he was triumphant; he was carried out in the arms of his followers.

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You read the Democratic newspapers and they say he fell on the floor and you have to carry him out that way. So that was part of it. And you had a series of events that led to the ever-deepening split between the north and the south. And one of those events it just always haunted me when we saw January 6th was the caning of Charles Sumner.

You get a southern congressman Preston Brooks who comes into the Senate chamber against the anti-slavery senator of Massachusetts, Charles Sumner, hits him over the head with a cane with such force that he's out of the Senate for three years.

But that event was so shocking to the country because it happened inside of the Capitol that it expanded the Republican Party base that had mostly been anti-slavery people but now more moderate people got involved in it. I thought January 6th was going to be a similar event. I thought when you looked at history that that was a moment when a line would be drawn. And it seemed to be drawn at that time.

You had McConnell say that the president, Trump, was practically and morally responsible for what happened and that the attackers were inspired by his feeling that the election, his claiming the election was stolen, and that somehow you had to have some retribution for that, that there would be something happening. You even have Kevin McCarthy saying this was an un-democratic attack on the electoral system and maybe there's going to have to be some sort of -- I think he said censure, some kind of censure.

And then what's happened since then? I think we have to learn from the 1850s. If you don't start figuring out how to deal with those deepening divisions you're going to end up with something like that Civil War. But what happened in the '60s, I mean, I lived through that. You guys are too young. It seemed, I mean, it seemed like the old were against the young, the people in the country were against the people in the city, blacks against whites, riots in the city, anti-war violence, and then assassinations. I mean, two, three assassinations in that decade.

And it felt when I was a young girl like what's going to happen? And yet the story ends with finally you get peace, finally you get the first black president elected and you look back at the '60s and extraordinary things happened. I mean, that's the thing, we end that decade with the thought of the assassination of Bobby Kennedy and the Vietnam War at its height, and the assassination of Martin Luther King, but in the middle you had civil rights and voting rights and Medicare and aid to education, and NPR and PBS, and aid to the cities, and the most extraordinary social legislation since the New Deal. So, when we look back at a time, we have to remember -- this is what I think about history now too, we have to remember all the difficult things that happened and how we were never at the ideal that we wanted to be. But we have to remember that great things happened as well. And great things happened in that crazy decade.

MEACHAM: To me the test is democracy is really counterintuitive. You know, you've written about this brilliantly It's not the natural state of things. The natural state is find a strong guy, ally yourself with him so he will beat off the predators so you can get more food. Right? I mean, that's it. This notion that we're neighbors and we're going to concede a little bit in the morning because we might need something in the afternoon, you know, the give and take.

ZAKARIA: So that brings me to the thing you said which was fascinating to me which was that you thought January 6th would be this moment of restitution, and that when you heard Republicans initially, this seemed like that. And then they all went back to Trump, presumably because they noticed that they -- you know, that's where the base was. In history, is there any person who has had this kind of Svengali-like hold over a major political party that Donald Trump now has over the Republican Party?

GOODWIN: Well, I think what you're seeing now that wouldn't have been true before is the media that follows in certain way that it wouldn't have been able to before. I mean, you had Huey Long. You've had outsiders on the system who've had a hold on people. But I think for a president to have a hold in this way as we've seen, I'm not sure I fully understand it. I mean, I try to think -- I'm an historian, and you can probably bring up some characters from the past but it's not going to be like this hold we see today.

MEACHAM: I think interests have held parties. I think this white Democratic interest held the Democratic Party in the Antebellum period. There was horrible anxiety that, you know, the Taney Supreme Court, the Dred Scott decision, there were seven Democrats on that court that made that decision.

Taney had been the chief justice since the 1830s, from Maryland. So -- and part of what led to the civil war was this anxiety -- and historian James Oakes talks about this -- the fear about the scorpion sting, that slavery, if you contained it, it would end up killing itself. And that's what the Democrats of that era were so terrified of, and the election of Lincoln was the trigger of succession because they thought, all right, we are in fact going to be -- have this wall erected around us.

ZAKARIA: In an odd way, we're going to have to break here, but they accepted the election result. Right? They didn't contest, they said --

GOODWIN: No. No, no, no.

ZAKARIA: But when they said Lincoln did get elected so we will leave -- right? Which is different from now.

(CROSSTALK)

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GOODWIN: Lincoln said that the central idea behind the struggle, he says this in April of 1861, was that if the minority, and he meant losing the election can just as you say break from the union then the whole experiment of democracy is impossible. It'll show that people cannot govern themselves and that's exactly what's happening now.

ZAKARIA: All right. We have to take a break. When we come back, we're going to talk about the constitutional crisis that lies awaiting us in 2022.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ZAKARIA: And we are back with presidential historians Doris Kearns Goodwin and Jon Meacham.

So I want to lay out what seems to me a reasonable scenario, which is that Donald Trump seems to be trying to control the Republican Party for a purpose -- this is not just a hobby -- he would like to run again. If he runs again, so this is assumption number one, he wants to run. Assumption number two, he will get the party seemed enthralled with him. He will run and in 2024, whatever happens, he will claim he won. Doesn't that present us with a constitutional crisis?

MEACHAM: I think it's an unfolding one. It's an interesting use of the word crisis because, you know, it comes from Hippocrates. It's the moment in a disease where the patient lives or

dies. And I think we're certainly there, which I didn't think before January 6th, honestly.

[10:20:03]

I think we came as close to losing the Constitution, and when we say democracy, America is not a democracy, America is a republic. So let's call it American democracy. We came as close that day as we had since Fort Sumpter.

GOODWIN: Yes. I think when you think about the problem is the fight of our life right now in this generation has to be to secure voting rights and secure a peaceful transition of power. That should not be a partisan issue that the state legislatures are now being given the chance to overturn an election. That means that every election can be contested. Where will it be from the old days of George Washington when you had a peaceful transition of power? And I think -- I don't understand exactly why this country is not making voting rights the central issue of the time. It's not a partisan issue. Everybody -- and one of the things that old Lyndon Johnson said was the fundamental right on which all the others depend. And in a certain sense when he was arguing at Selma after -- to get that voting rights bill through, he said voting rights, it's not a northern problem, it's not a southern problem, it's not a black problem, it's not a white problem. It's not a state's rights problem, it's not a national problem, it's not a moral problem.

It's absolutely wrong to deny your fellow Americans the right to vote. It's the center of democracy. What is democracy? A system whereby people can choose their leaders. And if we make possibly harder and harder as we're doing now to get the right to vote and if we make the chance that state legislatures can overturn what the popular vote is, then I think democracy is really in trouble. But we can fight it. We still have the chance right now.

ZAKARIA: Let me ask you about the, you know, the other side here, which is, you know, the most difficult part of all this is not Donald Trump, it's that 70 million or let's say 50 million or 60 million still agree that the election was a fraud, that he actually won. I was looking at these polls where they asked which of the following phrases best describes the United States. And the one that wins out is a democracy in trouble.

Only seven percent, for example, of young people call it a healthy democracy but to -- the most interesting thing is it is the moment -- Republicans are most pessimistic than Democrats. 47 percent of Republicans say this country is a democracy in trouble, whereas only 37 percent of Democrats do. When you asked what do you see the chances that we will have a second civil war in America during your lifetime, 46 percent of Republicans say we will have a second civil war. Only 32 percent Democrats. So what I'm trying to get at is angry in exercises you might be, you know, what do you think explains this sort of Republican rage about where America is right now?

MEACHAM: I think it's about the Republican establishment from Eisenhower through George W. Bush not fundamentally delivering to the base. Who created the Warren Court? Eisenhower. Who appointed the justice who wrote Roe v. Wade? Richard Nixon. Who would campaign on anti-abortion amendments and school prayer and --

ZAKARIA: And on repealing the New Deal and on repealing Medicare, and on, you know, even Ted Cruz's campaign, we're going to abolish the IRS. What you're saying is they kind of make these crazy promises to the base to fire them up and then don't deliver.

MEACHAM: And that creates a trust deficit. And so think about -- I think one of the things that's happened to the Republican Party, the party of Eisenhower and Reagan and the Bushes and the party that nominated John McCain and Mitt Romney 20 minutes before they nominated Donald Trump, right, what happened? It's the will of the power. And I think that's part of what's in the polling numbers you're talking about.

Democracy again is not the natural state of things. We are emotional creatures. The inside of a founding for all of its failings was that if we had a chance to do something, most people would do the wrong thing.

ZAKARIA: If men were angels, no government is necessary, says James Madison.

MEACHAM: And to go back to say, oh, I don't know, Genesis, you know, human beings have been messing up since then. And so the point of the Constitution is to erect guardrails, so that it would be hard to do wrong things. The tragic implication of that is that it's therefore also hard as Doris was saying to do good things.

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GOODWIN: . . . You're right about the tendencies of people to be concerned about themselves and we see that and maybe they don't do the right thing but we've also seen time and again in our country's history where people have put ambitions for something larger over themselves. They fought in that civil war. I mean, when Lincoln was called a liberator, he said don't call me a liberator. It was the anti-slavery movement and the union soldiers that did it all. [10:25:04]

What about the civil rights movement in the '60s? What about the courage and bravery that that took? What about the people who are out in the settlement houses in the progressive era? There had been eras where the people were willing to put something larger and so that wars against a time like our where you have the feeling, where is the ambition? Where are the people in the parties, you know, in both parties who are willing to sacrifice something for what they believe in and let themselves not get elected the next time around?

ZAKARIA: So but -- let me ask you, Doris, when you look at periods like the civil rights period, which you lived through. Your husband wrote some of the -- late husband wrote some of the most extraordinary speeches that Johnson gave. It now looks, you know, through the warm lens of nostalgia, it all looks much easier. It was – there were deep divisions then. There were people who thought Johnson was destroying the America they knew. They thought Medicare was, you know, the worst idea. Ronald Reagan said it was, you know, the last straw, that America was going to go down a dark path. How do we come back, you know, from those kinds of divisions? Do you have to kind of beat the other side? Do you extend a hand?

GOODWIN: Well, I think one of the important things is that you're right, we remember how the story ended and we forget how difficult it was to live through it. And that's where we are now. We live with the anxiety now. We don't know the next chapters that are going to be written in our story. But I think the most important thing, when you think about young people, I think young people have to realize how tough the battle is going to be but they

have to be out there.

Right now we have to have some faith that there is an activism, they voted in greater numbers than ever before, there's a lot of passions that they have for the environment and for different kinds of issues. And I guess they have to have a rendezvous with destiny. But unless they believe that they can make a difference -- and there are things to do -- they should be out there organizing for voting rights, they should be out there organizing for environmental

change.

And they do it at a local level, and maybe that's what we have to hope on, maybe for a while, when you're going to look for change, that's what happened in the progressive era, it happened in the cities and the states before the federal government so maybe we've got to hope that in the local area people have more trust in government in the local area than they do in the state. They have more trust in the state than the federal government. Right now three-quarters of the people don't believe the government is going to do the right thing much of the

time.

MEACHAM: Yes.

GOODWIN: It used to. No, no, three-quarters of the people used to believe the government

would do the right thing almost all the time.

MEACHAM: In 1965. It was the high point.

GOODWIN: That's exactly right.

ZAKARIA: Now it's the opposite.

GOODWIN: And now it's one quarter.

MEACHAM: Yes. You can't find anybody who does.

GOODWIN: And if you don't have trust in government, government is us, it's who we are. We are the government. If we get active, you can't think of somebody that's out there. So I think that's what we got to hope, that the young people are feeling a sense of motivation. I think we're seeing some of that. We saw it in Black Lives Movement, which was a large part of all different peoples coming together to argue for something that matters. And we've got to just have hope that that's a new generation that's occurring just as it did at the turn of the 20th century. Just as it did in the '30s, just as it did in the '60s. Arthur Schlesinger used to say would come in 30-year cycles, we haven't quite seen it.

MEACHAM: Yes, we're down to 30 seconds now. But yes.

ZAKARIA: On that note of hope, I'm going to stop us so that we can stay hopeful. Thank you both very much.