Vincent Munoz: I think what we need to do is explain how our principles of free speech, free inquiry will help serve the cause of justice.

Betty Friendan: The First Amendment, the constitutional freedom of speech and freedom of conscience that is the bulwark of our democracy.

Bettina Apthekar: There was a passion in what was being said, affirming this what people considered a sacred constitutional right, freedom of speech and freedom of association.

Michelle Deutchman: From the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement this is Speech Matters, a podcast about expression, engagement, and democratic learning in higher education. I'm Michelle Deutchman, the center's executive director and your host. Today is Constitution Day, which marks the signing of the US Constitution on September 17th, 1787, 238 years ago. The seven articles and 27 amendments of this document established the fundamental framework of our system of government. This includes separating the powers of the government into three branches, the legislative branch, which makes the laws, the executive branch, which executes the laws and the judicial branch, which interprets them. This system allows for checks and balances between the three branches in order to prevent any one branch from becoming too powerful. The Constitution protects rights and freedoms of citizens and divides power between national and state governments. The campaign to have a day marking the importance of the Constitution began in 1997 as a grassroots campaign by Louise Leigh, a retired medical technologist.

In reflecting on her motivation, Leigh told the LA Times that she, "Spoke on university campuses and schools and service clubs and realized how little people knew about the constitution." In December 2004, Congress established Constitution Day under 36, US code 106, which requires that each educational institution that receives federal funds for a fiscal year shall hold an educational program on the United States Constitution on September 17th of such year for the students served by the educational institution. The UC Center is doing that today, and we have the privilege of discussing the legacy of the Constitution, civic education efforts, and how our democratic values and ideas are being shaped by today's technology and politics with the former archivist of the United States, Dr. Colleen Shogan. But before we dive in, let's turn to class notes, a look at what's making headlines. On Wednesday, September 10th, right wing commentator and activist Charlie Kirk was assassinated while speaking to a crowd at Utah Valley University, the first stop on Kirk's American Comeback Tour, Kirk founded the conservative group Turning Point USA in 2012 at the age of 18.

He regularly visited college campuses to answer questions and engage in heated debates. His appearances often drew protesters. This shocking incident, one in an ongoing string of politically motivated violence in the United States casts a dark shadow over the First Amendment and our ability to live out its principles. There is no place for violence in American society, especially as a response to ideas with which people disagree. I'm also deeply troubled by the growing ability of the Second Amendment to chill First Amendment rights. We extend our

condolences to Kirk's family and hope that this horrific tragedy will bring people together rather than further divide us. In other news, the president of Texas A&M University fired a senior lecturer and removed both the head of the English department and the Dean of Arts and Sciences after a video of a student challenging the lecturer's teaching of classroom material on gender identity went viral, responding to demands from state officials including the governor of Texas, that the professor be terminated.

The university administration justified the removals by arguing that the course content did not match the course's official description. Critics of the dismissals contend, they constitute a serious threat to faculty speech, especially amid growing political oversight of what is taught and discussed in college classrooms. The case raises broader concerns that state pressure and viral social media moments increasingly dictate what professors teach, chill open inquiry, narrow which topics are deemed acceptable, and undermine academic freedom on public campuses across Texas and beyond. Hundreds of students from four Washington DC universities, Georgetown, Howard, George Washington, and American staged coordinated walkouts last week in protest of the deployment of federal officers and the presence of the National Guard in DC. Students explained that heightened security makes communities feel less, not more safe. Student leaders also urged university administrations to resist cooperation with the Trump administrative directives arguing it creates a chilling environment for free expression, protest, and academic inquiry.

The walkouts underscore escalating tensions between students and university leadership over safety and speech rights on campus. Now back to today's guest, Dr. Colleen J. Shogan served as the 11th archivist of the United States, the first woman in American history to lead the National Archives and Records Administration, also known as NARA, a noted author and political scientist. Colleen is deeply committed to civics education and prioritized sharing the records of the national Archives to a wider audience. Under her leadership, NARA launched numerous strategic initiatives to enhance services and make its holdings more accessible both in person and online with the goal of cultivating public participation and strengthening our nation's democracy. Prior to becoming archivist, Colleen served in several cultural heritage leadership roles. She was senior vice president and director of the David M. Rubenstein Center at the White House Historical Association, worked in the United States Senate and served as a senior executive at the Library of Congress and its Congressional research service.

She was the vice chair of the Women's Suffrage Centennial Commission and currently serves as the co-chair of the board of directors at the Women's Suffrage National Monument Foundation and as a senior advisor at More Perfect. A native of the Pittsburgh area, she holds a BA in political science from Boston College and a PhD in American politics from Yale University where she was a National Science Foundation graduate fellow. Colleen is the 2024 recipient of the American Political Science Association's Hubert Humphrey Award for Outstanding Public Service. Welcome, Colleen. It is truly an honor to have you join us.

Colleen Shogan: Thank you so much. I'm really happy to be here this morning to talk with you.

Michelle Deutchman: We are recording this episode the morning after the assassination of Charlie Kirk, and I think we have to start there and I want to ask you about what you think that means for speech and for constitutional protections.

Colleen Shogan: Yes, I agree that's where we should start. It is a horrific incident that happened yesterday, the murder of really the public murder on a college campus of Charlie Kirk. And I'll just say to start, I want to extend condolences obviously to his family, his wife and children, and of course all of his colleagues that worked along with him who were very close to him. I think that this has a chilling effect for political discourse, particularly on college and university campuses. When I was the Archivist of the United States, some of my most favorite moments and some of my most favorite days that I spent were on college campuses. I traveled around to a lot of different universities and would do public events and interact with students. And the discourse that happened on those campuses was terrific because people asked me hard questions about some of the decisions that I made and some of my priorities and I was able to think about the feedback and provide answers, which is really what we should be fostering in a democracy.

And if we can't disagree, if we can't have that civil discourse on a college or university campus without political violence, then I think it threatens the safety and the of our constitutional democracy and the rights that we hold that really undergird the fact that we live in a representative government. So I will continue to speak on college campuses. I think I have five or six trips booked for this fall, and I will continue to do that and I will continue to enter dialogue with people on those campuses and I encourage other people to do the same because we cannot normalize this violence. Once we normalize the violence, then we've certainly ceded important ground.

Michelle Deutchman: Thank you for those thoughts. I could not agree more, both in terms of the horrific nature of the assassination, the condolences, and also just needing to double down on education and prioritizing the values that go along with open expression in a democracy. This is so much of what the center talks about and educates people about that we may not like the speech of others and that there are many, many ways, including civil disobedience, to show that we disagree with other people's viewpoints, but there's just no place for violence in our society. And I think this just reminds us how important I think it is about civics and about what the foundations of this country are. And I think we'll go from there.

I was telling you before we started that I'm a little starstruck. My job at the center is to think and talk about the First Amendment. So to be interviewing the person who actually physically and metaphorically was safeguarding our nation's founding documents, that's the legal eagle in me. That's very excited. And I'm wondering if you can start by telling our listeners a little bit about your journey. I don't imagine, or maybe I'm wrong, that you necessarily strived to be the United States archivist and kind of how you got there.

Colleen Shogan: That's a great question. I wish that I was able to say that this was a childhood dream and somehow I figured out the way to fulfill it, but it was not, although

I've been in this line of work for quite some time, I always like to start by telling people, and you mentioned this in my biography, very kind biography of me, but I am a political scientist. So coming to the National Archives, I came to the archives from that side of the equation. I was a user of the National Archives. I was a user researcher of particularly presidential records and documents through the presidential library system. And that was my entry point to becoming the archivist of the United States, not that I was a trained librarian or archivist myself. That being said, I spent over a decade at the world's largest library, the Library of Congress.

And even though I didn't work directly in collections or library science management, I worked alongside many talented librarians at the Library of Congress and understood how that institution worked. A collection-based agency whose mission is similar to the National Archives to share knowledge, to share American history. And no matter what my particular job was, whether it was at the Congressional Research Service or many of the other jobs that I had at the Library of Congress along the way or at the White House Historical Association where I led our educational and programming unit at the association, they were all non-partisan jobs.

And I think that was a really important component of my path to becoming the Archivist of the United States because I will say this, when I was interviewed for the job by the Biden White House personnel team, they were very focused on the fact that this appointment, whoever President Biden chose was a little different than the other positions they were searching for, whether it was in other departments or agencies. They were very focused on the fact that the Archivist was actually a non-partisan role. So they wanted to find someone according to the statute actually what it says someone that could best fulfill the role and the duties of the job, but without regards to partisan or political affiliation. So they took a very strict view of that whenever they were looking for someone from the job. And because I had had so much experience in a variety of non-partisan roles, I ended up being a good candidate for them.

Michelle Deutchman: I always love to hear people's stories and their journeys. So when you were sworn in 2023, as you mentioned after you were appointed by President Biden and confirmed in the Senate, you took an oath to protect and uphold the US Constitution. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about how you lived out that oath as Archivist and also how you articulate the Constitution's significance currently.

Colleen Shogan: Well, I take that oath very seriously and I took it several times because you take that oath of office no matter what position you are entering into federal service. I actually started my federal service in the United States Senate many years ago. And every new place that you work, you take the oath again including at the Women's Suffrage Commission. And this last time that I took the oath though publicly, I took it at the National Archives and Chief Justice Roberts swore me in and I was so, I don't know, proud the fact that he swore me in, so enamored by the fact that the Chief Justice swore me in that I got the oath from him, which he used and he signed it for me and I hung that in my office and I now have it in my office at home framed and sitting there.

I look at it every day. So I never forget that oath of office. I think it's really important because when you look at that oath, as you said, you don't swear to uphold the office of the Presidency or Congress or any particular branch of government or any particular elected official. You're swearing to uphold the Constitution, the principles of the Constitution. That is your focus and priority. And for me, I would say in the day-to-day basis at the National Archives, what that meant was underscoring the importance of the rule of law. And a lot of people, you shouldn't be surprised.

I mean any agency that you run, there's many laws that govern that agency. There's many authorizing laws that govern how you operate that agency, and I'm not a lawyer by training, but I had good lawyers that worked for me and I was very focused on when decisions came to me about records or decisions came to me about how to operate the agency or what priorities. For me, I went back to the law and would have dialogues with my senior staff about what I could do and of course what I was supposed to do.

And I think that's really important because the whole premise of the agency, the National Archives once again goes back to non-partisanship, is premised upon the idea that the archivist will serve in a nonpartisan capacity. And what that meant to me was that who I had to really listen to was the law that was before me, and I had to have that as my guidance. And of course the Constitution being the capsulation of the rule of law for the United States and what it enables us to do and the rules of the game, not necessarily the principles of government as that's more in the Declaration, but then how we execute upon those principles.

Michelle Deutchman: I'm feeling a little bit emotional just obviously, I mean as someone who's a lawyer and who works on these issues, just hearing you talk about the seriousness of the oath and of the responsibilities to uphold the law. I was very moved by an interview you did with a stand together where you talked about how you visited the Declaration of Independence every day, literally the physical document. And I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about why having physical or digital access to these documents is so critical to our democracy. Because I could see how someone might say, "Oh, yeah, I've seen that before."

Colleen Shogan: Yes, I think it's incredibly important. And I think the way you phrased it is important as well, physical and digital because some people are very focused on the physical, which is important, but we know that not everybody can travel to the National Archives in Washington DC for many different reasons. Not everybody can afford to do that. Not everybody has the accessibility to be able to do that. So we are blessed today in the United States that we're able to have the technology to be able to have digital recreations or digital copies of many of these records, including the Declaration of Independence that we can share with everyone.

All US citizens can see a great digital copy of the Declaration of Independence online if they can't come to the National Archives in person. But since I worked there and most days in Washington DC I traveled around a lot as archivist, but the days that I was working in the National Archives facility where the Declaration of Independence is housed, I would go out and a lot of times I went

in the morning, I would take a few minutes and without doubt, and I would walk over to the rotunda and it was only about a two or three minute walk from my office and I didn't take anybody with me.

I just like to go by myself. And if there was a group there, then I was obviously respectful of that, but most of the time there wasn't. And I like to go over and talk to the security guards who were there and then just spend a few minutes thinking about it because it reminded me why I had taken the job in the first place, why I wanted the job, and why this was an important job because these are the principles of the United States. It's our creed in the United States, for lack of a better word. It's something that as Americans, we should all agree upon. Now we could differ on how we apply those principles, and that's really what politics is all about. And that's how the Constitution negotiates and mediates those disputes about how we apply those principles. But these are the principles that make us Americans and I took that very, very seriously.

So much so that the declaration is quite faded today because it was exposed to the elements, particularly light for many, many decades, not when it was at the National Archives, but when it was in previous locations in Washington DC. And because of that, it's when you look at it, you can see the signatures, but it's very hard to actually read the document if you want to read those first couple of paragraphs that are so important. I expressed this, I knew this, but I expressed this after I became the archivist. And so what we did was take a copy of the declaration, which was made in the 1830s, actually did more damage to the declaration unfortunately because it created a template of the declaration and probably removed some of the ink in order to create that template. But then because we have that template, we have an exact replica in order to be able to make exact copies of the declaration.

And so we took a copy of that, a version of the declaration, and we blew it up to be really, really big, I mean a really big version of it. And we hung it right outside of the rotunda so that people could see the declaration even before they walked into the rotunda. And we put a little explanatory text underneath it saying, "Hey, basically this is a copy of the Declaration of Independence. We blew it up so that you can stand here and read it so that you can understand these principles."

And when I would come and walk around at lunch, I usually took a little walk around the building to see how many people were there that day, and to talk to a lot of our staff that were working on the floor that day. I would always see visitors standing in front of that enlarged copy of the declaration. And sure enough, they were reading it. So it served its purpose. And I encourage all Americans, even if you can't go see the declaration in person, pull it up online from the National Archives website and actually read it and think about what it means to you and what it means to be an American.

Michelle Deutchman: And I'm thinking as I hear you talk that perhaps in our episode notes we can put a link to the declaration so people can have access when they're listening to you talk. I was ready to quote you back to you, but you already said what I was going to ask about, which is the declaration is our nation's creed. And then a number of

times you have written about how even though the truths are self-evident, they are not self-executing, which really struck me. And so I was hoping that you could talk a little bit about a distinction between those two things.

Colleen Shogan: Right. So of course Jefferson asserts that these truths that he talks about or principles in the document are self-evident, so they should be apparent to all rational people. Of course, he's a product of the Enlightenment, and so that's the epitome of the Enlightenment. But he's also, Jefferson, a great student of social contract theorists and particularly John Locke. And we know this, that even though we are endowed with these rights by our creator or by nature's God, we are in a state of nature in which we have to appeal to government in order to protect those rights. And since we are living in a democratic government in the United States, it is our job to be vigilant, to make sure that the government indeed is holding up its end of the bargain and is protecting those rights that are self-evident.

So we have to stand up because we are in a democracy. We have to stand up for ourselves because we are in control ultimately of that government. It is not self-executing if we just let it go on autopilot, like a cruise control that you can put on your car when you're driving down the highway or the freeway and there's no cars in sight so that you can kind of relax if you're on a long road trip. We cannot put ourselves on cruise control in a democracy because ultimately we are responsible for making sure that government is protecting those rights.

Michelle Deutchman: Thank you. I want to now ask you a question, which I imagine you've been asked many times before, and it's a question that I'm often asked when I go and facilitate conversations and workshops about the First Amendment, which is that even though the language of the Charters of Freedom, which I learned preparing for this, that Charters of Freedom include the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, even though the language is so sweeping and stirring, many groups including women and people of color, were not counted for the purposes of these documents and we celebrate and revere them in spite of their significant limitations and omissions. And I would like to know how do you address this tension when you discuss our founding documents, especially today when we have such a pluralistic society?

Colleen Shogan: I think that the principles or the truths that are in the Declaration of Independence, I view them as promises. I don't view them as just because Jefferson and his co-authors for the Declaration because he did have some help from Ben Franklin, John Adams and others, just because they asserted it back in 1776 and they aspired to these ideals, did not mean obviously in any way, shape or form that they were in existence, that they were a reality then or for a very long time. And I would argue still today. So what we think about the American experiment, what is the American experiment? For me, it is about the fulfillment of the promises that were made in the Declaration of Independence. We are certainly further along on those promises than we were 250 years ago, but we're not done yet. Remember the phrase in the Constitution is a more perfect union.

And that's a really curious formulation, that phrase, I think about it all the time. It's not a perfect union, it is a more perfect union. And when you think about that,

what is something that's more perfect? I mean, how could anything be more perfect. In some ways, it doesn't make a lot of sense. What it means is the government always must be in motion to try to achieve something that is more perfect. So even if we think we're done and we've achieved all there is to achieve from a perspective of the fulfillment of liberalism or rights-based government, in actuality, our framers of our constitution are saying, "No, you're not. You're not there yet. It's always got to keep going. It's a perpetual cycle." And as archivist, I really thought a lot about this because I spent a lot of time in the Rotunda, like I said, that was my favorite place.

And I went there a lot and I looked around that rotunda. I had only been there for a few months and I realized we had an anniversary coming up, the 250th anniversary of the United States. So one of my earliest announcements as archivist was after checking with our people that are preservationists and conservationists at the National Archives, I made an announcement that we were going to be adding the Emancipation Proclamation to the rotunda for 2026 because there was going to have to be a lot of work done to get the document ready and we'd also going to have to raise money for a state-of-the-art case that could match the casing for the other charters of freedom. And then about a year later, I went on 60 Minutes and I announced we were going to add the 19th Amendment to the rotunda. Of course, the amendment that enables women to vote in this country prevents discrimination for voting on the basis of sex.

And I think of those two together along with our declaration and our Constitution and the Bill of Rights, I feel like that is... It's not the whole story of American history, it's not the whole story of the 250 years, but those are two great examples of how we have moved forward to try to fulfill the promises in the Declaration of Independence. And Lincoln was a great, right, Lincoln was the great articulation of the Declaration of Independence of the principles in the Declaration of Independence. He viewed the Declaration as our most important document, and it kind of always bothered me that we didn't have any representation of Lincoln in the Rotunda. And so the Emancipation Proclamation brings the conversation of Lincoln into the Rotunda. And then of course the 19th Amendment was the largest single enfranchisement in American history. So in some ways the largest extension of the most important right in democracy, which is of course the right to vote.

And so that made sense to me to add that document as well. And I can report this because I check in every once in a while that those, I raised the money successfully for both of those cases for the Emancipation Proclamation in the 19th Amendment. They were actually purchased and ordered when I was still archivist of the United States. And as far as I know, that is proceeding. So those two documents will be on permanent display starting in early 2026 at the National Archives joining the other three charters of Freedom, I think for their rightful place for display and reflection.

Michelle Deutchman: That's incredible. And you anticipated where I was going, which was to ask if that's still the plan, and I'm glad to hear that it is. And I will be in DC in early 2026, and I will get online as soon as I can to see if everyone gets to see those additions. So I want to move a little bit from sort of the more aspirational to a

little more of sort of the brass tax, which is every year, I'm sure you're aware, the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania conducts a civics knowledge survey to Mark Constitution Day. And in their most recent survey, only 65% of US adults surveyed could name all three branches of government. Only 7% could name all five First Amendment rights, and only just over 50% knew which party controls each of the houses of Congress. And so before we get to the part about how to improve civic knowledge, and we're headed there, I'd like to hear your thoughts on how did we get here?

Colleen Shogan: It's a great question. It's a complicated question and you probably would ask different people. They might have different answers. I think a good chunk of it is that there was a focus starting in the 1990s or so on what is called STEM education, science, technology, and math education. And for good reason because the test scores were really bad for American kids comparatively when compared to other countries, the youth and other countries. So for the future of the United States and to continue having an advantage in science and math and technology, there was a concerted effort really on many, many different levels in order to enhance science and math education. It's certainly at the federal level with no child left behind, but also at state level and localities. And there was a lot of philanthropic support for this as well. So when you look at how kids spent their time in classrooms, the shift went a lot had to go towards science and math because there was this focus on it. And there's only... I mean, time is finite. It's like money.

You can't create more of it. So there's a scarcity. And we know that social sciences, civics, history, those types of classes did suffer as far as the amount of time spent in a given week, let's just say in a classroom. I read one statistic recently that elementary students, they took a survey and K-5, so elementary students are spending right now, most of them 30 minutes or less on social sciences in a given week. And you'd say, "Well, that's not so important for K-5 not to be getting education in social sciences or civics, the basics of citizenship." And I would say, "Oh, it is." And I actually think that we should really focus on K-5 because if we don't have those discussions and that those teachings with kids at the youngest age when they're in school, it's going to be very, very difficult to then start those discussions in middle school and in high school.

So that's a large problem. And then I think the other thing is that there wasn't as much emphasis on providing good resources and training for teachers that did teach civics or history education, either there was an emphasis on making sure you can imagine some of the teachers, let's say chemistry in high school, they're probably going to have had a science background of some sort when they went to college or they have some sort of science education background or training that they have taken. And they may continue that training in order to be able to teach chemistry, but we haven't seen those same opportunities afforded to our teachers that teach civics and history. And I think that that deprioritization has had large ramifications, and we've done this for now several decades. So it's not just like we've done this for five years or 10 years. This has happened for several decades. And so that has compounded the problem. And I think that's where we're at today.

Michelle Deutchman: I appreciate those perspectives. They're not ones that I have necessarily heard before and they're very interesting. And now I'm going to ask you the million-dollar question, which is what are some of the steps that we can take to engage educators and students in primary, secondary and post-secondary education to reprioritize and further engage in a, quote, unquote, civics renaissance? And there, I'm quoting you and John Bridgeland, the CEO of More Perfect.

Colleen Shogan: I think... Yes. And don't actually... I can't remember if it was myself or John Bridgeland who came up with that word because we wrote that op-ed really synergistically with each other, but it's a good term because that's exactly what we need. We need to have a groundswell. This isn't just going to be, "Oh, we will provide a few good resources to the teachers that are the ones that teach civics to our high school students," that's really not going to cut it. It's got to be a national effort, not unlike what we saw for STEM education back in the late '80s, '90s, and the early 2000s. It's got to be that same type of level of effort at the federal level, at the state level, and at the local level. And I think also at the philanthropic level, and I have seen a movement in the past or the couple of years recently where we have seen philanthropy really get behind the idea of civics education and bigger and bigger investments in organizations like the organization I work for, More Perfect, who has as one of its five democracy goals, universal civics education.

So we need more funding and support for it. We need assistance on more training for the teachers who actually engage in civics education needs to be taken seriously. And we also need to rely upon our colleges and universities. And we have seen movement at colleges and universities who are creating civic centers, schools of civic thought, and they're creating democracy centers or focuses across the United States in a lot of different areas, not just a school's private, public. We're seeing that type of a groundswell occur all over in higher education. One area that I haven't seen of that which I think would be really important is our community colleges because we know a lot of our college students today start their education in community colleges and we oftentimes leave community colleges out of the equation. So if we're thinking about a place that we could really focus on to help with either civics education courses or civics education curriculum or centers or dedicated faculty, one place I would say we have to think about is community colleges.

Michelle Deutchman: That's really thoughtful and interesting. And I also, just as someone who's very into speech and words, I really like the language you're using about a groundswell and a movement and a renaissance. To me, they're very empowering words where people can be part of it. And we're going to talk a little more about how towards the end of the episode, how individuals in the higher education space, which is where our listeners are, can be part of it. You mentioned More Perfect.

And it's interesting because now that you've talked about a more perfect union, I feel I know a little more, I understand more about the actual name of the organization, but since you mentioned it, I think I'll turn to the fact that obviously I definitely don't want you to be telling me any state secrets, but I know that later today there will be an official public announcement of In Pursuit, which is the

history-based civics initiative that you're leading for More Perfect. And I'm wondering if you could just tell us a little bit about what the initiative is directed, who it's directed toward, and what the goals are, and then we can kind of move from there.

Colleen Shogan: Absolutely. So this is... In Pursuit is debuting on Constitution Day, which is perfectly appropriate. And after I left the National Archives, I got a call from some of the leaders at More Perfect and said, "We have this idea for this new history-based civics initiative, but we don't have anybody to run it. Would you come over and run it?" And at first I said, "Well, I think I might take a few months off, and this has been a little bit of a stressful time. I think maybe a break is in order." And to their credit, they kept at me and I got on a phone call and then I got on the Zoom and before you know it, I was agreeing that I was going to come on board to do this, but I'm really excited that I did because it is a perfect initiative for me to work on.

So what In Pursuit endeavors to do, of course that comes from the Declaration of Independence is to try to figure out this, is really tall order, is to try to figure out how we can uncover and discover the most relevant lessons that we can learn from the past 250 years of American history. What can we learn from the past 250 years of the American experiment? Or can we debrief the American experiment and think about it in a productive way? And you might say, "Well, that's very ambitious, but how are you going to do that?" And in the first phase of this project, which we'll debut starting in 2026 on President's Day in 2026 and run the entire length of our celebratory year, our 250th anniversary, we've asked some of the nation's most prominent public leaders, journalists, thinkers, historians to write short essays about our presidents and first ladies.

And their assignment is very simple but very challenging. We want them to uncover one lesson that is relevant to all Americans that we can learn from each of these public leaders, only one lesson. Now, you can't have multiple lessons where we're being very strict on that, one practical and relevant lesson. We can learn from these people that were so influential in American history and some of these lessons are going to be successes. Some of these lessons are going to be failures or responses to crises or challenges, but I think it's going to be absolutely wonderful. Substack has come on as a partner for us and they're going to help us disseminate these essays. They're going to be very short. You're going to be able to read them in one sitting in about 10 minutes. So only 1,200 words. And I think that people are going to be really excited about some of the parents we have.

President Bush is going to kick us off on President's Day and he's writing about George Washington. President Obama is writing about Abraham Lincoln, President Clinton on Teddy Roosevelt, Laura Bush on her fellow Texan, Lady Bird Johnson, Michelle Obama on something that may break the internet, I don't know, Michelle Obama on Jackie Kennedy, which I think a lot of people are going to want to read. And then Hillary Clinton, of course on one of her heroes, Eleanor Roosevelt, and then we have a whole bunch of other people as well. Those are some of the highlights that I think people are going to love. But Chief Justice Roberts is part of the project. He's writing, not surprisingly on William Howard Taft, respected journalists like Judy Woodruff and David Brooks and

historians, Jon Meacham, Annette Gordon-Reed, Richard Norton Smith. This is a nonpartisan project and we've deliberately picked people from across the political spectrum. And what we're trying to do is to also show Americans that history's not the third wheel.

We can talk about history in a productive way. It does not have to be ideological, it does not have to be polarizing. And we're going to start a national conversation about American history and get people excited about learning about our history, both the successes and the failures of our history. If you want to sign up, you can go to inpursuit.org, that's our website. It is live, and we will also have a page available on Substack. If you're a Substack subscriber, you can sign up there. All of these essays are going to be provided free of charge, and if you sign up, you will get them every week starting on President's Day 2026.

Michelle Deutchman: I'm watching our producer and I know she's signing up right now, and I'm going to do that as soon as we're done. First of all, your best problem would be that if you break the internet having people rush to learn about the lessons of American history. So honestly, I hope that's the case. And I also just wanted to say I love that you included first ladies, and I also really like that you've included not just successes but failures because I think that's such an important lesson of our country, but also to remind people that failing is part of learning and growing and how important that is. I also, as someone who's still kind of analog, I hope after the celebration you compile them all into a book.

Colleen Shogan: Well, yes, that's coming soon.

Michelle Deutchman: I can have you sign my copy of it, right?

Colleen Shogan: Yeah, right. We're talking to publishers now, so I don't have anything that I can announce or share right now, but I think that we're very confident this will also be provided as a book, that will probably be in 2027.

Michelle Deutchman: Okay. Well, I'll pre-order. So I want to take two of the things that you mentioned and sort of pull on them. One is to talk about one of More Perfect's other democracy goals that has to do with Ready access to trusted news and information. And I want to talk about the challenges of working to meet this goal in light of the ongoing targeting of media that's been happening, including revoking funding for NPR and PBS, and how does More Perfect struggle with that and that goal?

Colleen Shogan: The way that More Perfect is addressing what we call a news desert crisis in this country where there are areas of the country that because models are failing as far as local newspapers and local news, finding it very difficult to make that happen and be profitable for a lot of the changes that have gone on in how we get our information and how we learn about our information, More Perfect is working with philanthropies and philanthropic organizations all across the country to really figure out what are the new models that can be applied that can help save and preserve local news, and in some ways possibly transform some of these local news outlets so that yes, they're doing the same things that they did before,

covering school board meetings, covering the town selectmen or mayor's races or whatever's... The school debates that are going on in a community.

Everything that would... The sports that are going on in the community, but also serving as community engagement mechanisms in a community as well. So fostering dialogue, so doing things even beyond what traditional local newspapers or local media outlets have been doing. And this is very important because as you said, we are seeing some of our trusted news sources that people have relied upon, particularly at the local level, PBS with the removal of funding for PBS. That's where it's going to have the most impact. PBS not on the national level, but on the local level and the local level for NPR as well. So how can there be, in some cases, funding to come in to support some of these member stations so they can stay afloat? In other cases, how can new models based upon philanthropy and really a bottom-up solution, how can they replace some of these news outlets so that we don't have local news deserts in the United States?

Michelle Deutchman: Okay, thank you. I certainly have an image now of kind of looks like Joshua Tree, but with news but it's empty. Another thing I want to go back to, which you were talking about as you talked about In Pursuit, is about history and the importance of history. And you talked about this in that hill piece that you and John Bridgeland wrote when you said, "Reductionism is the enemy of an educated democratic citizenry," and yet there's been a flood of state legislative attempts to control curriculum, especially with regard to teaching US history, a movement to ban books and classrooms and libraries.

And very recently, the president criticized the Smithsonian Institution, which is the world's largest museum education and research complex for among other things, focusing too much on, "How bad slavery was." And I want to know if you can talk, I understand that your role is nonpartisan, but how does that happen when we're dealing with people who are attempting to use politics to influence the way that we teach American history and how do we keep the political and the historical separate from one another? And I know this is a big and hard question.

Colleen Shogan: No, it's a relevant one. Absolutely. I believe very strongly that I can speak for the federal institutions because that's where I've had the most experience. But I view that there to be three institutions that are responsible for preserving and sharing our nation's history. And that is the Smithsonian Institution, of course, the Library of Congress and the National Archives. And there's many commonalities amongst those three institutions, and there's many differences as well. But one of the things that they have in common is that all three of those institutions pride themselves on the fact that they are nonpartisan institutions. And that puts them aside deliberately in how they were created, how they were structured to keep them apart and insulated from political or partisan influence. You might say, "Well, why? I mean, why is that such a big deal?" And I think the reason why it's such a big deal is that these institutions collectively, these three institutions are charged once again with preserving our nation's history.

And they're there for all Americans, all Americans, no matter what your political beliefs are, your geographic, where you live, what your background is, they're there for all Americans. The only way they can be there for all Americans that

Americans can have confidence in what these institutions collectively do is if they remain a part and not influenced or not controlled by politics. So trust is a key component in everything that these three institutions do and how they operate. And if you don't have the public trust in the execution of that mission, then really the impact of these three institutions collectively greatly diminishes. So I would say it... I said it until I was literally blue in the face at the National Archives when I was the archivist.

We are here at the National Archives for All Americans because we provide the records of the United States so that people can understand their history, but also so they can hold their government accountable for the decisions that were made. And the only way to preserve that accountability is if we remain nonpartisan and independent, strongly independent. So you see Secretary Lonnie Bunch of Smithsonian talking a lot about the importance of the Smithsonian institution's independence. And that's why I think Secretary Bunch thinks this is such an important criteria for the Smithsonian, and its continued vitality as an institution that preserves and shares our nation's history for us.

Michelle Deutchman: That's a really important distinction, and I had never thought about how those three entities are really, like you said, independent in a different way than other federal agencies and institutions. I still am going to follow up though on one more question about this idea of is civics education nonpartisan because even though polling in the last couple of years has shown an increase in bipartisan support for civics in our very politically polarized climate, there are some who argue that teaching about our government and encouraging citizens and individuals to learn, participate and vote is no longer a nonpartisan pursuit. Rather it's a, quote, unquote, liberal endeavor. And I think that's a very damaging claim, and I want to know how you respond to it, because sometimes perception can become reality for certain people.

Colleen Shogan: It's really truly mind-boggling to me because now I want to be clear in civics education, we are not telling people how to vote or what to think or what to believe, or even in history education, you should not be telling students how to interpret history either. I mean, I know as archivist of the United States, my goal was to get as many records into the hands of the American people as possible, whether that was digitally, in person, all the different ways we could showcase the records and make that a place where people felt welcome to come and learn about American history, because I really wanted Americans to look at the records, learn about history, and then decide for yourself about what you think about various episodes or various challenges or various periods in American history. So we should never be giving people the answers in civics or history, education.

We should be providing them with the skills and the tools and the critical thinking skills to be able to operate as citizens and function as democratic citizens, as they become adults and throughout their lives, providing them with that information. So that is not a partisan or a political endeavor in any way, shape or form. That is something that is good for the health of our continued democracy and the continued vitality of the republic in which we all live. So I

fundamentally disagree with people who would say that, and I don't understand actually where they're coming from.

Michelle Deutchman: I appreciate that answer, and I also appreciate how generous you've been with your time, especially with less than a week to go for actual Constitution Day. So as much as I could keep asking you questions, I will close it. And this is a question that we ask all of our guests, and the idea is to leave our listeners with an action. It can be small, it can be large, that they can take towards to make progress on what we've talked about. And so I think on this Constitution Day 2025, what actions do you hope others in the higher education space might take to further civics education and further our democracy?

Colleen Shogan: Right. So I think it's a great question. I think that first, all your listeners, no matter what community you're part of, you can take steps to support your local or your university libraries, archives, and museums, because these institutions, as we talked about here today in this podcast, these institutions are facing some challenging times, yes, at the national level, but at all levels. We know there's threats to funding, there's threats to independence, there's threats to, as you alluded to, the potential censorship or availability of books or resources at some of these places. And we need to be vocal and supportive at all levels. So yes, it's important to advocate at the national level and let your elected representatives know what your thoughts are, but it's also important at the local level and the community level because that's where it starts, and that's very, very important. The other thing I would say is, I mean, I'll just give a shout-out to a lot of our parents out there today and or people that are taking care of kids, whether that's other caregivers or grandparents or brothers or sisters or anyone else, godparents, all are included here.

Take the opportunity if you can, to talk to your kids about democracy and talk to your kids about what it means to be a citizen. We've had just, unfortunately, a terrible tragedy happen in the United States. If it's appropriate for your kids, talk to them about what that means as well. I was very lucky. I came from a first-generation college household. I was the first generation in my family to go to college. My parents were emphasized to me all the time, the importance of what it means to be a citizen in a democracy, why it was important to be engaged as a citizen, why it was important to know what was going on.

Now, of course, this was many, many years ago, and my parents would read the newspaper, like the paper newspaper that arrived on the doorstep every day, or they watch the news on television, and we would talk about it when I had questions and they took me to vote with them and explained to me why it was important to vote and why it was... My mother always said it was the duty and responsibility for a citizen and a democracy to vote.

And it was her duty to know, to understand who to vote for, to educate herself so she knew when she went in the voting booth that she was making the choice that she felt was best. I would urge we want to rely upon all of the things that we talked about, our schools and our philanthropies and our nonprofits to be able to help us along the way. But I also want to urge parents and caregivers not to shy away from these conversations because... And I also, I've said this before, read

the Declaration of Independence on the 4th of July before you go out to your barbecue, please have your parties and your barbecues that it's a day to celebrate.

But I also urge parents to maybe read the first paragraph of the Declaration of Independence if you have age-appropriate kids, and talk to them about what that means as well, because we can't start too early and too often. Our democracy, like I said, these rights are self-evident, but they're not self-executing. This is where we can start to make sure that we ensure the vitality of our democracy for many, many years to come.

Michelle Deutchman: I am very moved by how personal your story and experience of democracy is, and I imagine that everybody who's listening can probably draw upon some aspect of how democracy has impacted them personally. I know certainly I am reflecting on certain things, and so I'm very appreciative of your perspective and your thoughts and of your hopefulness about where we've come as a country and where we can go. And with that, I'll just ask if there's anything else you want to say.

Colleen Shogan: Thank you for inviting me to be on this podcast, and that's how I think I would like to end. I mean, I will say this to people, even given the events of recent days, I do remain an optimist about American democracy. I always say I'm bullish on the American experiment, and I hope we can take 2026 as a time to reflect upon the past 250 years and think about what we've learned and how can we use those lessons to inform our present and to inform our future. We have the opportunity to do that next year, and I would urge as many people as possible on college campuses and all across the United States to take this seriously, and I will be out there doing it with you. Absolutely.

Michelle Deutchman: Well, out of tragedy, hopefully we can find opportunity. This was such a pleasure. Thank you again.

Colleen Shogan: Thanks, Michelle.

Michelle Deutchman: Well, that's a wrap, another big thank you to Colleen for joining us, sharing our insights as well as for the exciting new initiative at More Perfect. Don't forget to head over to inpursuit.org to sign up for updates and stay connected. Next month we'll dive into the growing number of First Amendment clashes unfolding between the administration and campuses across the country when we talk with William and Mary Law Professor Timothy Zick. In the meantime, be sure to explore the Center's latest fellowship research and sign up for one of our upcoming Fellows in the Field workshops. You won't want to miss the chance to learn more. Thank you for listening, and we'll talk to you next time.