

Michael Poliakoff ([00:00](#)):

Welcome to Higher Ed Now I'm here with my colleague Bradley Jackson, the Vice President of Policy at the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. And this afternoon we have an extraordinary guest in Dr. William Allen. It would take a long time to talk about all the things that he has done in his career. A Professor Emeritus of Political Science, a prolific author. He was the dean of the James Madison Honors College at Michigan State University. He served on the US Commission on Civil Rights. He was the chair of the State Council on Higher Education in Virginia. He served on the National Council on the Humanities, and this year he has been awarded the very coveted Bradley Prize. Welcome Professor Allen.

William Allen ([00:55](#)):

Thank you very much, Michael. What a joy it is to join with you and Brad.

Bradley Jackson ([01:00](#)):

Wonderful to see you, sir.

Michael Poliakoff ([01:01](#)):

I should perhaps give the history that Brad was Professor Allen's student at one point at Michigan State.

William Allen ([01:08](#)):

Yes, yes.

Bradley Jackson ([01:09](#)):

That's right. I learned the American founding from Professor Allen in his very own living room, eating food he cooked himself, a experience I had in no other graduate course. I had many wonderful graduate courses at Michigan State University, but Professor Allen's was far and away the most hospitable.

William Allen ([01:25](#)):

It was always a pleasure.

Michael Poliakoff ([01:27](#)):

I thought we might begin by talking about the intellectual odyssey of your life is so rich and so fascinating. You sat at the seminar table of Leo Strauss, which must have been an extraordinary experience. You've published on Federalists and anti-Federalists on George Washington, on Fisher Ames, then a rather remarkable book, Rethinking Uncle Tom. You've published on Montesquieu.

([01:56](#)):

And it was a few years ago I bumped into you at a Heritage Foundation event and you were wearing a clerical collar. And you simply said to me, "After running for so many years, the man has finally gotten to me," and you're now associate pastor of the Baptist Church in Havre de Grace.

([02:17](#)):

And most recently you wrote a long and detailed set of standards in African-American studies for Florida that drew the attention and ire and misreading of the Vice President of the United States, and you responded so eloquently. And you've contributed to Active's forthcoming volume, the Challenge of the

American Founding: 1776 or 1619? A really wonderful essay and we're hoping that that will be published within the coming months.

[\(02:49\)](#):

So welcome, and I'm so eager to have you talk about the development of your thought.

William Allen [\(02:55\)](#):

Well, thank you so much and I don't know if I can talk in an orderly fashion to cover all the points that you were making, but I want to focus very narrowly for an instant because you almost call the town which I now live Le Havre. And that's interesting biographically and historically because it's Havre de Grace as they say in Maryland, but of course it was named by Lafayette after his hometown, which was also Havre de Grace, Havre de Grace to be precise. It became the Havre in the Revolution when they were getting rid of all sacred references. And the de Grace refers to God, thanks be to God. So it is the Havre today in France, but it's still Havre de Grace in Maryland. So it's not surprising that I became a minister.

Michael Poliakoff [\(03:43\)](#):

That is so wonderful, so appropriate.

William Allen [\(03:47\)](#):

But I can't really contract the experiences I've had very readily other than to say I was blessed early on. I've always been an avid reader more than anything else. People often ask me, "What's it like to be in education, be engaged in teaching and learning?" And I say, "Well, I went to school at age four, and I've never left."

[\(04:08\)](#):

And that's essentially the story of my life. It's been the life of education throughout. But it was a life that began as you know very well, Michael, in the segregated south in a small town in northern Florida near the Georgia border. And people often make the mistake of thinking that because of segregation, there was no education. It is a huge mistake. I was blessed with extraordinary teachers and fellow students and essentially the same people throughout all my 12 years were the people who surrounded me and contributed to my educational formation, at least in the context of school.

[\(04:44\)](#):

And that played a huge role, but also was very important to me that I had especially a mother for whom these were very important things and who fostered a high regard for education and who was not at all impatient with my reading habits, which were perhaps a bit excessive. So excessive that once I went to... I had kindergarten at an establishment across the street from the public library in the town, small town, 6, 7,000 people.

[\(05:14\)](#):

And of course the public library was a place I could not enter by law. It was closed to what were called colored people in those days. But when I was about seven years old, I presented myself to the library in there to get a book to read, only to be told I couldn't come in there because colored people were not allowed. And so this was an opposing red brick building, so I turned around perhaps somewhat disconsolately and walked down the steep steps. Before I got to the bottom of the steps, she was back to the door and summoned to me back to the top of the steps and said, "Here, you can sit here and read this." So I ended up sitting on the steps reading what was certainly a child abridged version of the

Odyssey in the context of which my attention at that point in time, about seven years of age, was entirely fixed on Telemachus. Not accidentally because my father had been a commercial sea captain who was away for months at a time, and so these long absences, it resonated with me, the story I read in Homer.

(06:14):

So that characterizes a great deal of my education. And also I had much older brothers who had gone off to university by the time I was in those early years of my life and some of whose library ended up returning to the family home as they passed through their educational journeys. And so I ended up reading Jane Austin and [inaudible 00:06:34] and many other things as a direct consequence of having those libraries there to add to my classics illustrated for children.

(06:43):

So my life has been a life of reading and you might say, I suppose some of my critics would say, indiscriminate reading.

Michael Poliakoff (06:52):

You must be a little disconsolate at the decline in reading habits that we see so often. And I realize you and your wife Carol wrote a book called Fostering Excellence in Higher Education. It is now so easy to get things whether in print or in audio books, and yet we don't see that same thirst, that same hunger.

William Allen (07:19):

It's interesting you say that because I'm a really avid listener to audio books as well as an avid reader, but I still consider it reading when I'm listening to them. And it strikes me as entirely remarkable that people can think of audio books or even computer screens as not reading somehow or at least go through the experience with this least bit of contamination with the content. To me, it is still reading. Yes, I prefer books, always will, even though I've now deposited my library at a center out in Ohio because having exceeded many thousands of volumes and being at a point where I can no longer take care of this, I thought it was time to do something with it. So I've done that, but I also find myself frustrated because I can't reach and grab something anymore.

(08:06):

But nevertheless, I read across the media. I don't hesitate. I've been blessed. When I was an undergraduate, my last years in school and early graduate school, I was a news editor at a radio station. So I would rip copy off of the... There were two then, not only the Associated Press, but the UPI, United Press International, rip copy off the feeds and rewrite it for the jocks on the air to read it off. And so that meant I've always read voraciously, both for my own sake and in all the things to which I've exposed myself throughout my life. So I don't understand people not reading the same way. I don't understand them not being able to write cursorily.

Michael Poliakoff (08:45):

Yes, yes indeed. Every once in a while I torment myself thinking about those German scholars of the 18th and 19th century who didn't have the Lexica and the reference works and most assuredly not the online resources and thinking what would they have achieved if they had these?

William Allen (09:06):

Yes.

Michael Poliakoff ([09:06](#)):

And what excuse do I have?

William Allen ([09:12](#)):

Well, we still have to do the hard work. I mean, if you've got to read a manuscript, you've got to read a manuscript, and the online or AI are not going to make a difference with that. You've got to actually get to know who this person is, so much so that you identify with them intently as I have done both in the case of Washington and Montesquieu.

Bradley Jackson ([09:30](#)):

Professor Allen, you've spent your career dedicated to the study of political philosophy, and we're hoping that you can spend a little bit of time telling us how you became interested in political philosophy and in particular how you decided to dedicate yourself to American political thoughts and explaining the principles of this country to the citizens who live in it.

William Allen ([09:50](#)):

Well, it's both a short story and a long story to tell you the truth, because I went to college to become a physician and spent three years as a pre-med student, but I was also always an activist and politically interested, concerned broadly with general social and political questions. So I got involved in politics while I was an undergraduate and developed a growing interest in it.

([10:11](#)):

But that did not change my professional direction until I had a mentor, a mentor named Jerry Purnell, who was a political theorist as well as a science fiction writer ultimately. And Jerry made a profound impression upon me with regard to the study of political theory. That was not sufficient to change my direction, but it certainly gave me a new focus that I hadn't quite had before.

([10:34](#)):

I had also been a surrogate for Ronald Reagan in the 1966 gubernatorial campaign up and down the state and had become somewhat visible as a public speaker on these various questions. And so by the end of that campaign season, I was being invited to appear on a platform at the Philadelphia Society in San Francisco. And I was to talk on the subject of the New Left, which I dutifully did, and I thought did a reasonably tolerable job. I didn't embarrass myself.

([11:05](#)):

But on that program, there were several other people. One of them was William Shockley, for example, who gave his usual, in that day and age, presentation about the genetic deficiencies according to race. And Jerry Cornell, who attended the conference with me because he was there to support me as I was giving my paper, just stood up at the end of Shockley's remarks and with great outrage at the top of his voice, and Jerry had a high, squeaky, whiny voice that you couldn't fail to observe, in the top of that voice and pointing his finger dead down at my head, shouting at Shockley, "How can you say such things?" Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, which of course led me to shrivel and try to hide because who wants that kind of notoriety at the instant?

([11:53](#)):

But what that did was frame the universe in a certain way, a question of what burdens are you actually carrying? What are you dealing with? What are you confronting?

[\(12:02\)](#):

But then there was also Harry Jaffa who spoke. And after Harry finished and I was sitting there and I looked up and I felt really small, and I said to myself what am I doing on the same platform as he is? I don't know anything at all, and the only thing I can do with my life is go wherever he is and find out what I don't know, learn something.

[\(12:21\)](#):

That's how I got into political philosophy. That's how I ended up applying for graduate school and going out into Claremont where Harry Jaffa taught, and that's where I ran into Harry Jaffa and Martin Diamond and of course Liz Strauss.

[\(12:34\)](#):

So that was the turning point. Martin Diamond, particularly with regard to the Americans, although Harry Jaffa taught Lincoln and therefore America. It was Martin Diamond, who was the real Americanist and who was probably still to my recollection, the best teacher I've ever encountered in terms of classroom presentation, just utterly spell binding. So he focused us on the Federalist papers, and at the same time we were pursuing the broader questions of philosophy with Jaffa and Strauss.

[NEW\_PARAGRAPH]And I became focused on the American question, to get really to the heart of what you're asking me in addition to the broader questions in political philosophy, which we can talk about again. But I became focused on the American question because two things were going on. I appreciated the arguments my mentors were making, but they all raised questions that I didn't find answered. In the case of Jaffa, the question was, "Well, is Lincoln refounding? And if so, what went wrong at the founding?" And I became persuaded that one needed simply to go back and look at the founding in the way that Jaffa was looking at Lincoln to try to answer that question.

[\(13:42\)](#):

And then on the other side, with regard to Marty and the Federalist Papers and the anti-Federalists, the more I dived into that, the more I asked a simple question. Everybody observed that they disagreed about one thing more than anything else, and that was the teaching of Montesquieu with regard to the question of the large republic. And they were polar opposites in their reading, and no one took the trouble to ask which one got it right. And so I wasn't a student of Montesquieu other than trying to answer that question: which one got it right? And so I ended up writing my PhD thesis on that dispute and resolving what the distances were between Federalists and anti-federalists.

[\(14:21\)](#):

But in the process of doing that and doing it in France and reading thoroughly all the existing manuscripts in addition to the various texts of the spirit of the laws and other of Montesquieu's writings, I discovered Montesquieu independently of that debate, independently of the question of constitutionalism, as you will see in my commentary in the new translation and commentary I published this year, that to focus on the constitutionalism is to skim the surface of Montesquieu.

[\(14:49\)](#):

And I discovered that thanks to Leo Strauss. For after I had returned from France after my initial year abroad studying Montesquieu, and I was teaching at American University, my first university appointment, and Leo Strauss was resident at that point in Annapolis. And one of the first things I did after getting my family settled in was go over to Annapolis to call on Mr. Strauss and Mrs. Strauss in the little cottage they had there. And we were sitting and we were chatting, and he wanted to know what I had done, and I explained to my work on Montesquieu. And he began to talk about Montesquieu, and he began to quote virtually verbatim from the last three books of the spirit of the laws. I was stunned,

stunned. Nobody even reads those, let alone quotes them. And I couldn't... I left there, I wondered how...

(15:39):

I think he only taught Montesquieu once that I know only once, but he must've read it a good deal to be quoting it the way he was quoting it. And why those? And so I had to struggle in my own head to figure out what those final books meant and whether I could say I understood Montesquieu until I understood those final books given what Strauss had done.

(15:58):

And that's how the project became a full-blown project of translation and commentary, realizing I couldn't start with the constitutionalism. I had to do the whole thing, the order, the structure, all of it had to be done in order to say I knew Montesquieu.

Bradley Jackson (16:12):

So many of our listeners may be familiar with Montesquieu, but many would not be. And even those who might be familiar with Montesquieu, it might've been a while since they spent some time with him. So could you give us just a quick little seminar on what Madison in particular learned from Montesquieu that helped him frame our Constitution?

William Allen (16:35):

I think the most important thing that the framers learned was a theory of the large republic, which is, buttressed of course by the theory of separation of powers and checks and balances. Now, I say that because there's been some confusion. Vile confuses this question badly and wanting to drive separation of powers back to mixed regime theory and Polybius and all kinds of sources. Those are actually misdirections. What Montesquieu did was radical, and they understood that it was radical. It had nothing to do with mixed regime, sorting institutions by class. It had everything to do with effective restraint upon power.

(17:14):

And the ultimate argument in Montesquieu is the argument that politics is about limiting power. That's the purpose of politics. And these devices are the mechanisms to accomplish limitations on power. And what he has done is to work out an exact and rigorous distinction between unlimited power or despotism and politics, which is the constant struggle to prevent despotism, to prevent the aggregation of all power in the hands of one or a few or even the many as far as that's concerned.

(17:53):

So that means of course one is privileging liberty, one is privileging the principle of what he calls in the 11th books of the spirit of the laws of self-government. That's where he says, "Every person ought to have a free soul, ought to be self-governing." And that's essentially the effective argument for liberty as it is the effective argument for choice with regard to virtue and Aristotle.

(18:15):

So what Montesquieu has done is to take the ancients, and he himself said, "You don't understand me if you don't understand me in relation to the ancients," and to reconcile the ancient teachings on a modern foundation so that we get not mere virtue, which is why he distinguishes political virtue and moral virtue, because political virtue can lead to the kinds of excesses that we see in Spenser, to take an example, and therefore he calls it by definition self-renunciation. Well, what do we mean by self-

renunciation? Well, we must mean at least this much: departing from nature. So the idea of self-renunciation means living unnaturally.

[\(18:55\)](#):

And so what Montesquieu has done is to devise a theory to reinforce the claims of living according to nature, beginning with the most basic principles of nature, i.e. the association and society between the sexes and the family being built upon that and community growing out of that, out of which then comes, because human beings are rational, an awareness of the advantages that can be gained by exploiting that collective power. And that's what leads to the development of despotic tendencies, which have to be corrected subsequently with politics.

[\(19:28\)](#):

So I just gave you a quick summary of a very complicated argument stretching through the whole book, but that's what Montesquieu is about. So where do we come in as Americans? We come in looking with very tight focus at separation of power, checks and balances, limitations on the judiciary, et cetera, i.e. almost a bit of formalism you might say is what we have gotten out of it, but it is functional. It's formalism, but it is functional. I would conclude that you don't understand America unless you understand these terms of institutional reference in the context of the constant project of limiting power. Any other principle or purpose that's attributed to them is fallacious and misleading.

Michael Poliakoff [\(20:20\)](#):

You've modeled some wonderful things for us, and this gives us a good segue. ACTA is all about core curriculum and academic standards. Other things like free exchange of ideas, which we'll perhaps get onto.

[\(20:36\)](#):

I should mention sidebar, I was on the Yale campus when Shockley came to speak, and I should explain the whole thing. I didn't want to hear this crank, so I just stayed in my room and studied. I had no idea how much history was being made that night. And then of course it generated the C. Van Woodward committee report, and I'm even more outraged now the way he treated you.

[\(21:08\)](#):

Could you talk a little bit about... And then we'll get back to academic standards. Could you talk a little bit about where we are now and how we deal with even the most loathsome people? I don't shy away from saying that about Shockley. How do we develop a real campus ethic that allows us to engage and move forward?

William Allen [\(21:34\)](#):

Well, that's interesting you would pose the question in that way, which really goes to the heart of the mission of the university. In my most recent writings on this topic, what I've been emphasizing is the distinction between freedom of speech and academic freedom or freedom of inquiry. And that's a distinction that people have been very casual with in recent times. And I think it's really important that freedom of speech is a public principle, yes, and that principle is carried into the university. There's no question about it. But it is not defining of the university's mission or purpose. The university's purpose is inquiry, and that carries with it a fundamental commitment to a kind of skepticism, which is vitally important. And that skepticism means essentially an openness to question everything.

[\(22:22\)](#):



In fact, one of my ephemeral writings is entitled, Questioning What Everybody Knows, and I might summarize what I think the mission of the university is with that expression. It's to question what everybody knows, and therefore nothing should be taken as sacrosanct in a university setting other than the setting of inquiry itself, the commitment to inquiry itself, that's sacrosanct.

[\(22:48\)](#):

And so you ought to be able to say no to people who would want to disrupt inquiry. You ought to be able to close the doors to them and expel them and whatever else is required to protect the precincts of inquiry. But within those precincts, trying to tell people what they may or may not say or what they may or may not write is utterly inconsistent with the ultimate mission.

[\(23:10\)](#):

And I don't mean this in any trivializing Cartesian sense when I speak of skepticism, I don't want to drive this in the direction of any form of relativism or denial of the possibility of learning truth. I only mean to say this, that we all are burdened, and particularly when we take philosophic inquiry seriously, to challenge our understandings. And so we are skeptical not about everybody else, but about ourselves. That's what we're driving this inquiry about. Do I really know this? Is it true? That's got to be the heart of the University of Mission.

Bradley Jackson [\(23:53\)](#):

I'm reminded in this context of a thing I learned from you. I forget if it was a course you taught on Montesquieu or a course you taught on Aristotle's physics. It was one or the other, and what you said in that context was, "The burden of philosophy is that it requires sacrifices of us and in particular sacrificing that which we hold most dear." I wonder if you could talk a little bit about sacrifice in the intellectual life in this context.

William Allen [\(24:20\)](#):

Well, it's interesting you ask the question that way. Yes, I actually remember talking about that, and particularly in the context of the physics, because what I was saying at the moment was people misunderstand the physics as what we call in the modern world natural science, but it's really the work on the soul more than the [inaudible 00:24:40] is. It's really about the soul.

[\(24:42\)](#):

And what Aristotle is exposing in the physics is precisely this question of how to come to see the soul in its wholeness. And you can't do that through the prism of predetermined predilections. So you've got to be able to strip away, and that's the sacrifice we're talking about. You got to be able to strip away those elements of predilection, which otherwise we come to identify today as self or identity or any other of a number of such terms that are meant to draw a curtain on the possibility of discovery. And that's what's really interesting about them.

[\(25:24\)](#):

All of the mania for identity is actually a mania for trying to hide oneself from knowledge of oneself. That's why Montesquieu defined prejudice as being ignorant of oneself, not not knowing something else, but not knowing oneself. That's his definition of prejudice. And it is really spot on, spot on.

[\(25:48\)](#):

So yes, we have to sacrifice assent of preciousness about who we are in order to enter into the pathways of philosophy.



Michael Poliakoff ([25:57](#)):

And of course, that was C. Van Woodward's wonderful phrase, "To think the unthinkable, to discuss the unmentionable, and to challenge the unchallengeable."

William Allen ([26:08](#)):

Yes.

Michael Poliakoff ([26:09](#)):

Can I return us to a question that I used to infuriate faculty and administrators with at Colorado? What makes you feel good when you see a student receive a diploma? What makes you think that this is an educated person? I didn't make many friends with that, but I think it's a core question, not that we received six years of tuition, it's no longer four years of tuition, or that the person got perhaps a fairly strong major, but what does it mean to create or train a person who is worthy of a college diploma?

William Allen ([26:52](#)):

Well, I can tell you what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean they're ready. My typical approach to commencement is not to do what most people say, "Well, now the world is your oyster. Go get it." I used to say, "Now the work begins, and you're now free to go out and actually learn something."

([27:11](#)):

So no, I mean I celebrate obviously the accomplishment. I don't want to depreciate the effort people put into attaining their educations. I think that's important and valuable, but to fool ourselves into thinking that they've turned themselves into scientists or whatever the mode term is at the moment, well, that's insane. What they've done is gained entry to the opportunity to learn and not much more than that, and that learning is going to last a lifetime.

Michael Poliakoff ([27:41](#)):

Well one hopes that the propaedeutic studies over that period of time will create that foundation. Unfortunately, I'm very doubtful that for many students, even that is achieved.

William Allen ([27:57](#)):

Well, you should be doubtful because we live in a world in which we've done something very curious, and I will remind you of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Charter and the Declaration. What ultimately underlies that, which is critical philosophically speaking, that document and much of what Franklin Delano Roosevelt did, which fed into that and led to its development, explicitly seeks to create a society of isolated consumers who are not in fact thinking about anything and who are exclusively concerned with consuming. And that's why there's so much focus on making consumables available to them. So that means atomizing, separating individuals from one another as social units, and therefore eliminating the possibility of reflection.

Bradley Jackson ([28:49](#)):

So many rich things that we could go onto from here, but as we're thinking about the relationship between the American regime on the one hand and higher education on the other hand, I wonder if we could take a moment to talk a little bit about some of our founders, George Washington, Thomas

Jefferson come immediately to mind, although Madison and others were also involved in founding institutions of higher education themselves.

[\(29:21\)](#):

So could you say a little bit about the vision that the founders had for American higher education and contrast that a bit with the contemporary vision that you just started to lay out before?

William Allen [\(29:35\)](#):

Oh yeah, that's well taken. It's certainly true that Washington, for example, understood the purpose of higher education to be to build a civic body with understanding of the fundamental principles of self-government. This was built in even to the original militia plan. The idea of the militia wasn't to create separate state institutions, but as far as possible to engage people across state lines so they became more familiar from different regions of the country with one another, more conversant with one another, and formed a common community.

[\(30:09\)](#):

Washington has said in 1783, as you remember, "We have to establish a national character." And he saw at the heart of this project of establishing a national character a proper education, a proper approach to education. And so it involved two things. It obviously involved virtuous practices because you cannot expect to have self-government without virtue, but it also involved cultivation. But the trick was the government couldn't do the cultivating.

[\(30:36\)](#):

And that's why education became important because they didn't see educational institutions as the arm of the government even if they received governmental support. They saw those as separate institutions and social rather than political in nature. And they thought they were necessary in order to focus the attention of ordinary citizens on the aspects of civic participation that were relevant to reinforcing the tendency or the inclination to accept the responsibility of self-government, which is a pretty high, burdensome responsibility when fully reflected upon.

[\(31:12\)](#):

But Washington had great confidence that this could be done, that ordinary humanity was capable of this. And I think the Declaration of Independence can't be understood except from the basis of that affirmation. That's ultimately all that you can really understand from the expression "all men are created equal", that mankind in general is capable of rising to the challenge of self-government. If it doesn't mean that, then it's utterly vacuous. It means nothing at all.

[\(31:34\)](#):

So I would say if you look at their various contributions, whether it's Washington or Benjamin Rush or Thomas Jefferson or James Madison, et cetera, they all expect education to contribute to civic formation in some fundamental way. And Madison has explicit language about this towards the end of his life. And Jefferson, of course, in founding the University of Virginia, gives some formal statements as well as his early work trying to structure educational laws in the state of Virginia.

[\(32:06\)](#):

I'm a little bit more diffident in approaching Jefferson than I am the others, only because I find Jefferson perhaps the least reliable of the founders as perhaps the least honest of the founders in terms of divide between his private and his public expressions.

[\(32:22\)](#):

But nevertheless, let me put it another way. Jefferson has a way of mixing too much Jefferson in with most of what he did, and that obscures to some degree the principles on the basis of which he acted. And so anyone who would have inscribed on his tombstone, "I am the author of the Declaration of Independence," reveals something about his soul that ought to make others hesitate to embrace it.

Michael Poliakoff ([32:49](#)):

I found I think it was the 1819 notes for the Commissioners Rockfish Gap, Tavern-

William Allen ([32:54](#)):

The Rockfish Gap Report. Yes.

Michael Poliakoff ([32:58](#)):

That struck me as a well-reasoned defense of a strong core curriculum, and he's indeed explicit there that part of it is to form the statesmen and so forth. But yes, I quite agree on the spend thrift as much as one admires the intellect. There are some places-

William Allen ([33:25](#)):

There's some problems there. For example, the Rockfish Gap Report, I praise that very highly of course, in our book on Habits of Mind Fostering Excellence. I think it's a wonderful report, but one cannot abstract from the fact that in thinking about the university, Jefferson was very careful about what was included in the curriculum from a partisan point of view. And he didn't want to give too much exposure to the monocrats, and he wanted to be sure to build... There was some fundamental intellectual dishonesty involved in all that.

Michael Poliakoff ([34:06](#)):

Fair enough. Yes. I think it was Joe Ellis's book, American Sphinx.

William Allen ([34:07](#)):

Yes.

Michael Poliakoff ([34:07](#)):

I think rather says it all.

William Allen ([34:09](#)):

Yes, I'm afraid it does. But he deserves the credit for what he did and what he accomplished. There's no doubt about that. But we also have to observe the fact that he rarely acknowledged honestly what he was about, and he was not above underhanded scheming to get it.

Michael Poliakoff ([34:29](#)):

Yeah. Not by accident George Washington stopped speaking to him for balance of his life.

William Allen ([34:34](#)):

I'm glad you mentioned that. I could point out to people, if you're trying to figure out what was actually happening in the founding, you have no surer sign than the fact that both Jefferson and Madison ceased

to have any relationship with George Washington at a critical point. And that was because of Washington, not because of them. They would've continued to ingratiate if he'd permitted it, but Washington read character, and when he made a judgment, it was done.

Michael Poliakoff ([35:02](#)):

What haven't we covered? Actually a multitude of things.

William Allen ([35:05](#)):

Well, let me just go back to the very beginning to explain what it was like getting into graduate school because I think that has some implications for everything we've been talking about. That was a tough time for me. I was in my last semester of college, having applied and been admitted to graduate school, and in the middle of the semester my mother passed, and that was in Florida and I was in California. And that completely disrupted everything for me. I went home, and I probably would not have come back back. It was that serious, a moment of trauma in my life. But my very dear friend, Maureen Reagan, who engaged the dean of women, whom I hardly knew, Lucille Todd, the two of them conducted an assault across the continent to pull me back into college.

([35:57](#)):

And so ultimately I relented, I guess that's the right word. I don't know if that's the right word or not. But ultimately I did return and graduate that summer so I could go on to graduate school. And that meant then immediately I had to turn my thoughts to graduate school, and so I reached out to Harry Jaffa, and that's when Leo Strauss was moving to Claremont.

([36:18](#)):

So you have to picture this in your mind, what I'm going through. And then Leo Strauss comes to Claremont in the middle of the summer and they're holding a special seminar in the little cottage they rented for him and Mrs. Strauss in the evenings. And a select core of the incoming graduate students were asked to come each week and meet with him for a couple of hours.

([36:39](#)):

And so my first graduate education was in this seminar discussion with Leo Strauss. I am fairly certain we talked about the Rousseau with that meeting, but I can't be absolutely certain about that because I was in a very fragile condition that whole time.

([36:54](#)):

But my point is this. It is not as if I started out at age three or four on a trajectory and moved in a straightforward path throughout the course of life, but that there were these moments of, I suppose now they call them, I don't know, existential moments or whatever. These pivot points is what I would call them, I guess, where things could have gone any way, whatever. And I cannot give an account of the way they did go in the end. And so if I didn't have angels intervene for me when I was ready to abandon everything after my mother died, then nothing would've followed as far as I'm concerned.

([37:37](#)):

And then by the time my first year graduate school was over, not quite over in March, I got the orders to report for the draft. I didn't go to graduate school thinking I was going to be drafted. I hadn't been drafted in all those years before. And I was planning to go for three or four years to get a PhD, and all of a sudden I had to pivot and figure out, "I got to leave here. I should at least get a degree to leave with. So is there time for me still to apply for a master's and write a thesis?" I had three weeks. So I applied, I wrote a thesis which nobody should read, and I got the master's degree and then went to the military.

[\(38:18\)](#):

So you think okay, you're in the military for a couple of years, you come back. No, that doesn't work that way. I go through basic training, and I'm issued out for medical reasons. Now I no longer have a fellowship. I'm no longer in graduate school. I'm no longer in the army. Go back home to Florida and I'm at sea again. And so at that moment, I'm corresponding with a friend of mine who was traveling in Europe at the time while doing some substitute teaching, trying to figure out what I'm supposed to do. And we thought it'll be nice just to go and spend some time as expatriots in Italy trying to write poetry. And so I committed to that and launched the process, passport tickets, all that sort of thing. And before being able to leave, my father, who's there raising my siblings who are still there at home without my mother who had passed away, has this horrible automobile accident. He's just broken into all kinds of pieces, and the kids are there and he's there. There I am. What am I going to do? Well, got to take care of my family.

[\(39:23\)](#):

So these things happened over a long period of time, as it turns out, one right after the other, and there's no way out of that I could have found the path into higher education on my own. And if Marty Diamond hadn't on his own initiative contacted me while going through all of this and said, "I have a fellowship for you. Come back to graduate school," I don't know that I would've gotten back. So I want to put this in perspective so that people understand that sometimes accidents or angels make the difference in our lives.

Michael Poliakoff [\(39:58\)](#):

Well, I would say that knowing you as both Brad and I do, we have a tendency to look at this as predetermined. How very, very illuminating. Brad, anything else in closing? I just want to say thank you for spending the time with us and we look forward to sharing this with our wide act audience. It's such a wonderful reflection.

William Allen [\(40:26\)](#):

Thank you.

Bradley Jackson [\(40:27\)](#):

I will second that and thank you very much for spending time with us today. We appreciate it greatly.

William Allen [\(40:30\)](#):

Thank you. I really enjoyed it. And it a pleasure to see both of you. This is what they call a lagniappe in New Orleans.