

**Michael Poliakoff:**

Welcome to Higher Ed Now I'm Michael Poliakoff, President of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, known widely as ACTA. And today it is our great privilege and honor to have with us the Honorable John Hillen whose service to the nation and to higher education is so rich that my introduction could take up most of our time. He served our nation for 12 years as an army reconnaissance officer and a paratrooper, and won the Bronze Star for his valor in the battle of the 73 Easting during Operation Desert Storm. He has served at the highest levels of government as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State during the administration of George W. Bush, and has been in that capacity in war zones from Iraq to Afghanistan, to the southern Philippines. He has also made extraordinary contributions to the world of higher education. He is at this time a distinguished resident fellow at Duke University's Center for Politics and an executive in residence of the political science department.

He teaches courses on civil discourse, leadership strategy, diplomacy, and national security. He's also an affiliate faculty member of Duke's Program and American Grand Strategy, a topic that we're going to be talking about extensively today. He's concluded some five years of service as the James C. Wheat Jr. visiting professor in leadership at Hampton Sydney College, where he's also served on its Board of Trustees. He's taught at the business school at George Mason University and has won a number of teaching awards. John Hillen is a highly published author. His articles have appeared in foreign affairs, The New York Times, the National Review, The Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Post. He's the author of two very important books on business strategy. You can find in the show notes, the link to The Strategy Dialogue: A Primer on Business Strategy and Strategic Management.

Your previous book, John, What Happens Now? Reinvent Yourself As a Leader Before Your Business Outruns You was the topic of our leadership retreat as ACTA moved from a small to a mid-sized nonprofit. And I have no doubt that The Strategy Dialogues will figure prominently in a future leadership meeting for the ACTA team. So we have a great amount to talk about in education and in national policy, but I would be remiss not to talk about the service that you've committed yourself to as a member of ACTA's National Commission on American History and Civic Education. Not only as a member of the National Commission, but as an author in our forthcoming volume, what every college student needs to know about American history and government. And you've been a very generous contributor financially to these efforts helping us in so many ways. And that brings me to the first question. In these very difficult, very turbulent times when higher education is under particular attack, what can we do through the lens of civic education to do things that are better both in the short run and in the long run for this nation?

**John Hillen:**

I think there's two keys to civic education, and I like to think of it very broadly. The first key most people get because it can be captured in scoring and measured. And that is the extent of knowledge about our civics and our history, which is largely sometimes just a test of facts. And what you most often see is could native born Americans pass the naturalization immigration test that new immigrants have to pass to get citizenship? So this can be measured and that's fine. And I do think it's important for Americans to have a common set of facts about their history and of course related integral to it, the way in which they organize their political and social lives. In fact, when I think of civics, I don't think of it as a boring recitation of how many steps does it take to pass a federal law or how many branches of government are there?

Although that's important. I think of it as understanding the totality of how we organize our political and social and economic lives. For me, that's American civics and we can come back to why I think that's so important to think of it that way. So there's the facts, and if we got all the common set of facts, we'd be

better off for a number of reasons. I think the more important, the broader way to think about civics is we also not only have to have shared facts, we have to have a shared meaning. And if we have a shared meaning about our story as a nation, all its glorious and inglorious parts, and we can approach it honestly and we can approach it in a fact-based way without dueling narratives that represent present political agendas. If we can do it in a way which is not weaponized to give you a leg up in today's policy debates, then I think it has the chance of lowering the temperature in our politically divided times and making people start from what they have in common rather than what's separate about the way they think about the world.

But that really does require some agreement about shared facts and shared meaning. And so to give you a concrete example of where do I see this and some of the efforts I support is in the many efforts from the Ashbrook Center, from the Lehrman Foundation and others to use primary... So trained teachers to use primary sources to teach American history. Train students to get involved in everything from role-playing to other ways to have historical empathy with the decision-makers at the time, sort of like the program that I do at Duke and their American Grand Strategy program where we role-play on great experiences of American strategic history, which we just recently did over spring break in Japan. Those kind of exercises remove the weaponization of civics in history and return it to a more foundational common framework from which we can then talk about differences of policy or differences of opinion about contemporary affairs.

Michael Poliakoff:

Tell us a little bit more about your new role now... Actually not so new. You were a trustee at Hampton Sydney, and you hold a distinguished visiting chair at Duke in grand strategy. Talk a little bit more about the way you as a teacher, as a professor bring out this element of civic virtue and civic understanding in your students.

John Hillen:

So I've been teaching, as you mentioned, the past five years at Hampton Sydney College where I've also been a trustee and I had a chair there and leadership in the center for public interest. And so what does that mean to create leaders in the public interests? First I went back to, and I defined it's not people going into the federal government or even even into state government. The roles of Hampton Sydney alumni are replete with people who've done that from Presidency of the United States, William Henry Harrison, on down through to currently serving members of Congress at the state, the House of Burgess, Virginia State Senators, and even former US representatives and so on. I define public interest very broadly, which is anybody who's trying to be a good citizen in a freely Governed Republic, a lightly governed, a self-governed Republic. So what does that mean? So for me to be a citizen leader in the public interest is as much about learning the techniques of leadership that'll help you in the commercial world, that'll help you in the nonprofit world, that'll help you in the military world or other walks of life.

I'm now taking that, I would say that attitude and that agenda down to Duke, which is my alma mater where I'll be a distinguished lecturing fellow in their center for politics and also an executive in residence in the political science department and also an affiliate faculty member of the American Grant Strategy Program. The idea of coming there... Duke's idea and my idea and coming together around this was to present this broad approach on campus where you look at politics and the civic life in a pluralistic diverse society from the perspective of what's needed to succeed in a free republic, which is to have differing opinions, not try to navigate to the muddled middle on them, but to keep your opinions, keep your passions, but to make time and understand the techniques, to understand the other side, perhaps it [inaudible 00:08:45] or better sharpened your own positions.

And then to, as members of the same society, figure out ways to work together at the very least, not hate each other for holding separate pains and develop those habits of good citizenship in a diverse pluralistic society. And Duke has been after this for a number of years, which I think is one of the reasons why they've been more successful than some other colleges and having a civil dialogue on campus and without some of the drama that has occurred in other places because they're really dedicated to it. The students, especially the students, have started their own magazine dedicated to diverse political ideas presented as a civil but still sharp way. Nobody's hiding opinions there, but they're seeking to understand other opinions. And so it's a great atmosphere that they've got down there. And I'll be joining that effort along with some other things.

Michael Poliakoff:

I want to pause on what an achievement this is both for Duke and for you. This is a campus that was the place where the Duke lacrosse scandal happened, a sign of how ideological the faculty could be in a way that was very damaging both to the individuals caught up in it and to the university itself. And yet in this instance, at least it's showing a deep commitment to the intellectual diversity that so much of higher education lacks. One of the things that of course is disturbing now is that the federal government is trying essentially to force intellectual diversity onto campuses that's not likely to work very well. What's the secret sauce here that has caused them to recognize in Europe, of course, a distinguished public servant, a military hero, if I might say, decorated military officer, somebody who writes for conservative journals like National Review, what's the secret sauce that's made this work?

John Hillen:

Well, I think it's a combination of things. They're the sort of things that are necessary in institutional life anywhere, and I've written about this in leadership books and elsewhere. But one is there's got to be some organic element to it. As you just pointed out, it can't be a force down entirely and it can't especially come from outside constituencies. It's got to be organic in some sense. And my joining Duke in this capacity is not evidence of Duke's commitment to it. It's a continuation of a commitment they made a few years ago to it. And you might remember figures such as Jed Atkins, who was also on our commission, was at Duke for many years. John Rose, who did fantastic work there, former Senator Richard Burr, Republican Center for North Carolina is currently a distinguished fellow in the program and in some ways, I'll be taking his place as he rotates out.

So there's a commitment there and it's organic from the administration and it's organic from the students. Right now, the course I'm doing with a great colleague, a great scholar, Abdullah Antepli, the two of us are doing a course on civil dialogue and understanding different ideas and how to think in an age of divisive pluralism. And in fact, we're even using Alan Jacobs book of the same name, *How to Think*, which is a great little book for people to pick up. We are so oversubscribed, we're probably going to have to have a second section.

So that's the other organic piece. The students want to hear this. The students want to sit and talk in a thoughtful manner and think in a different way to understand the swirl of ideas and opinions that are hyped up in whatever social media platforms you choose to visit. And perhaps see as Cornel West and Robbie George have tried to show in their new book that you can still navigate to some truth within these issues instead of just staying in these camps of competing narratives where you search for and cherry-pick facts that only supports your narrative about a preconceived belief.

How do you get beyond that tribalism, that intellectual tribalism? So the provost and the president are very committed to this effort. There's an effort called Friends for Duke where alums really push on this, a number of faculty members and of course the students. That's the organic element. At the end of the

day, as I found out when I was doing an investigation for the Navy, when I served on their federal advisory commission about how do you get the Navy to change its ways? How do you get innovation in the Navy? We did find that top cover from the highest levels was necessary to get [inaudible 00:13:08]. And I think top cover from institutional leaders in higher ed is an absolutely necessary ingredient. I don't think it should come from the federal government, but I do think university leaders and ACTA has celebrated a number of them who've shown unusual courage.

The environment, whether the trustees or whether university presidents or provost really do need to step out forward. It's safe, it's safe out there. The general environment of campus politics, especially on elite college campuses, is still so orthodox in one direction that it's plenty safe enough to stand up a number of efforts that'll be small in comparison to the overall thrust of the kind of monoculture in many universities that just offer a different set of voices. And they're probably voices that reflect a balance that's much more apparent in the rest of society than especially in elite college circles.

Michael Poliakoff:

As you know, we present, at least annually, sometimes more often, a Hero of Intellectual Freedom award. This award generally goes to people who have been brutalized by their institutions. Carole Hooven at Harvard, Roland Fryer at Harvard, Joshua Katz, formerly of Princeton, Sam Abrams, who has been under siege at Sarah Lawrence. There's something very refreshing to think about elite schools that are doing it right or at least on the path. I'm a great advocate of University of Austin, Texas, which is a brilliant, brilliant experiment. But President Pano Kanelos will be the first to say, "We can't do this alone." This is something that is intended to inspire others as much as to be the successful entity that it is rapidly becoming. And so when we think of Duke and Vanderbilt University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, I realize the Duke rival and has now taken Jed Atkins and John Rose.

When I think of these schools that have great leadership, whether president or board or both, and of course Purdue is a watchword, it is encouraging that we can do this without Leviathan. I actually have now begun to go back and read the legends about The Golem of Prague that Rabbi Loew creates out of the clay in order to protect the Jewish community. But of course, the Golem is so dangerous that eventually it must be returned to the dust for which it came. It's so much better when these things come organically as you say. I want to move, John to your specialty, which is strategy. You've written two really wonderful books on business strategy, one of which we used at our leadership retreat already. What Happens Next?

As ACTA began to grow, I thought we've got to read this book and think it through and now a new one on essentially a dialogue of strategic ideas that inform good business decisions. And of course, that aligns with your teaching and research expertise in grand strategy. And I say with enormous gratitude, it will be your particular contribution to our national commission that this is part of that body that every college student needs to know about in the story of our nation. So over to you. Let's talk about strategy. Your life has been devoted to strategy in the service of this nation and in the service of higher education and business, of course.

John Hillen:

So I'd say as a general rule, what I found out in my own life and relatively early in my professional life was that something that has been proven by studies that I cite in my most recent book, *The Strategy of Dialogues*, and that is the fact that most executives, and by that I mean anybody in a position to make decisions, that's the essential activity of an executive. Most executives don't naturally think strategically. In fact, it's a very small percentage. One study I cite in the book says, only 4% of executives in any walk of life think naturally strategically. What does that mean? That means if I say, "Michael, we need to get

this done by the end of the month." My rationale in persuading you explaining it to you will be something along the lines of if we get it done by the end of the month, then we'll have the information we need to shape where we want to go next quarter.

And if we get to that goal next quarter, we'll be able to be in this position by the end of year. And if we're in this position by the end of the year, we may be able to reposition the whole organization given all the dynamics happening in our competitive environment in three years. So I'm giving you a series of chess moves with an imagined future. And I'm talking about the need for you to work extra hard for the next month because it's going to contribute to the art of the possible in some far-off future. That's thinking strategically. Big picture, not small matters right in front of you. Long term, not short-term, seeking to connect things. An analyst breaks problems down. It's a left-brain activity process, a lot of information. Strategists look for the art of the possible is an element of creativity. It's a right-brain activity and they seek to pull things together. How do dynamics in an environment, how do the ecosystems collide, interact, affect each other?

And I was sitting on top of my Bradley Fighting Vehicle in April of 1991, just right almost on the banks of the Euphrates River in Iraq. This is maybe a month after Desert Storm has ended, and I'm watching the Shiites battling Saddam Hussein's remaining forces in a rebellion that the U.S. had encouraged but would not actively help. And it was a bit of a botched policy as a result. And I thought to myself up there, if I was a proper cavalry lieutenant, I would've been thinking, "How do I get fuel for all my vehicles tomorrow? What is the order of March in the next day? I wonder if all the soldiers have food. Let me ask the platoon sergeant." That's what a proper young officer be thinking about. I'm sitting up there thinking about who's in charge of this policy and where's it all going?

How does this shape Middle East security, which I had studied at Duke as an undergrad. And what does this mean for the role of America in the post-Cold War world, right? Those are the thoughts spinning through my head at 25 years old, as 25-year-old lieutenant. So I knew I was in that realm. So I've always been interested in the field, but to explain it to others is difficult. I've learned that as a strategy professor teaching an MBA program, teaching grant strategy, teaching almost every other kind of strategy. And so the epiphany I had after years of trial and error, some success, some failures in the classroom and my own work was an epiphany that occurred to a lot of people in ancient times, which is when we wrestle with difficult conceptual issues, we ascend to a higher level of understanding. You can even call it a higher truth when we talk it out in a dialogue with penetrating questions, pushing people into understanding and defending their own thought processes, matching up concepts and frameworks to organize their thinking and all that happening in the dialogue.

So what I basically took is a series of Socratic dialogues and put the 10 most common strategic issues that organizations face into a dialogic form in the book with very relatable characters and a very simple set of lessons learned and summaries and all the rest. And it's been successful. I can imagine it's the number one book in several different business categories on Amazon right now. So I think it really appeals. This turns out to be a good method, a practical method for breaking strategy out of the conceptual clouds and down into your hands for everyday practical implementation.

Michael Poliakoff:

I have no doubt this will be the required reading for our next ACTA leadership retreat. It makes me think of an image that the late Stephen Covey developed. People laboriously chopping their way through a forest and only after some times getting the idea somebody should climb a tree and see if this path is going-

John Hillen:

That's the 4%. Now, two-thirds of executives are what they call achievers. They're principle action logic, how they explain their decisions to people. It's short-term achievement. Hey, you see that tree up there? Let's chop it down. Short-term achievement. Or they're experts. They are seeking for the data so they can make a un-impeachable decision because it's supported by data, that's two thirds of the executive population is focused on near-term task accomplishment to your point. The great lesson of the book is that everybody can learn to think strategically. It's not a mystery. It shouldn't happen in a star chamber, only at an off-site with the top executive team.

This is a muscle in your brain and just like a muscle in your body, if you have a trainer that can show you how to activate it, they can then also show you which machines in the metaphorical gym you can work out that muscle on. You just need to know where it is and how to activate it. So that's basically what I provide in the book. I provide a very simple set of steps and a thought process and a set of frameworks for people to find their strategic thinking muscle and exercise it every day in practical ways. Not just once a year at the occasional big thinking of, which I think is the wrong way to think about strategy.

Michael Poliakoff:

Let's return to the National Commission. And two questions. One, your particular expertise that you've described in making American grand strategy elements of it, part of that required course that we hope will be in the gen ed requirements for every American college student. And secondly, your vision and hopes for what the National Commission is going to be able to achieve in what I think I can boldly say in its gift to the country at its 250th anniversary.

John Hillen:

Yeah. And I think it will be a great gift because we have an extraordinary history that every American and everybody else for that matter, should have learned about. I came to it as a result of living an accident on a life of comparative politics. I've been in over 90 countries around the world, and not just alighted in the airport, but I worked, fought, taught, lived in them, visited them, and I think as a result... And some of them are very much in the crumbly bits of the world. So this is not just a grand tour of Europe at its finest, right? But a real trip around the globe more than a few times. And it made me realize how precious and special this wild American experiment in self-governance is. I feel like I have an almost mystical connection with the country as a result. I love the title of Peggy Noonan's new book, *A Certain Idea of America*, which she lifts a little bit from the opening of one of De Gaulle's volumes in his autobiography, which is, "I've always been in love with a certain idea of France," he says.

And I've always thought about a certain idea of America. And so for me, it's always revolved around that in comparison to everywhere else and the extraordinary uniqueness and the fragility of the experiment in self-governance. And if you think at the time, Michael, 250 years ago, the founding generation in America asked each other the oldest political science question ever, which is who should do what around here, right? Plato wrote volumes on it among many others. How should we organize our affairs? And they gave each other a bad answer from a management perspective. And the answer was, "We're going to do it ourselves." That's a terrible answer from a management perspective, all the employees are going to be in charge, so to speak. All the shareholders are going to be in charge. We're not going to have a boss, so to speak, we're going to be our own boss.

And then of course, they struggle through to work out the mechanics of that and ultimately arriving in the Constitution and our adaption of how it fits in real life since then. And to me, that's just... It's created such a unique country. And when I look at America's encounter with the world, which is [inaudible 00:25:14] about, it often arrives on the desk of people being educated, whether it's secondary education or higher education as a series of facts and figures, a series of treaties, a series of wars, some dates,

perhaps some periods, but there's not a lot of great narratives that tie it together. There's been a couple of attempts to explain, to organize you think, to have a framework for understanding the way America has encountered the world. I think of two from friends of mine. One is Walter McDougall's *Promised Land, Crusader State*, which sees this shift in the American personality after the first hundred or so years of America from promised land focus on itself and its own affairs and fulfilling its initial destiny as a continental nation to being a global power.

And Walter not being shy about it, alluding to the fact perhaps overextending itself and being a crusader state as opposed just a heavily involved international leader. Another great framework is from our friend Walter Russell Mead, which is that he shows that the real way to understand America's encounter where the world is to understand these four different schools of thought. Some of which are in conflict with each other, but always intention with each other, that have always animated American thinking, the Hamiltonian and the Jeffersonian and the Wilsonian and the Jacksonian. These represent instincts. These represent intellectual ways to understand the world and interpret our surroundings and even provide some signposting guidance for American leaders about what should be the role of America on the world stage. So I think these are great frameworks. When I look at the history of America's encounter with the world over 250 years through the lens of grand strategy, which adds, I would say almost the non-governmental elements of American development to strategy.

Strategy is not necessarily just a governmental affair because a grand strategy concerns the role of economics and the U.S. by design. That's been mostly a commercial and private enterprise. It also extends strategy through periods of war, through to periods of peace. So it's a much broader lens, and when you pull back the lens and look at 250 years of American grand strategy, you get a different view. What you see is you see something that reflects an axiom about the American experiment, which is we're a country with a government and not vice versa. And that animates a lot of American grand strategy. And so what I outlined in the essay in going through the history of American grand strategy in our encounter with the world is all these points where you see that we are essentially a... We have a unique political and cultural DNA flowing from our non-governmental nature.

And this has been as important or more important than governmental decisions about policy and our encounter with the world. So you see that we're a commercial nation, in essence, not a governmental nation. That we're a private nation, not a government employee nation, even in our expression on the world stage. That we're a civilian nation, not a militaristic nation, despite today having the largest military budget in the world. And so for instance, pictures of The Big Three at conferences in World War II, only one of The Big Three is never in uniform and it's FDR. And my students who don't have sometimes this baseline of common facts in meeting about American history say, "Wait, we won the war. How come our guy's not in uniform? It was a big war. The other guys are in uniform."

I'm like, well, "A, they won too because the Alliance won. But B, let's talk about America and how it expresses itself on the world stage and the fact that our commander in chief is a civilian even in times of war." And I go on with other further expressions, but the expression of America on the world stage really represents a country, not a government in those 250 years. And I think reinforces one of the essential civic points. America's civics is not about federal governmental facts and figures. Civics is about the framework of how we've uniquely organized our political, economic, social, and cultural lives. And the governmental piece of that is only one part, and in fact, restricted and enumerated in order to have all the rest of it be a free society.

Michael Poliakoff:

That's so beautiful. That's why our constitution begins with, "We the people." And I remember President Reagan starting one very memorable speech with, "This is who we are." I want to do something which

may seem a little strange. Think about our history as a nation going back really to the founding, to the Revolution and Ukraine. I've been arguing with a lot of people who simply tell me it's impossible. There's not a chance. And of course, that was what came out of the White House and the notorious encounter with Zelenskyy. But my mind immediately went to our American Revolution. Anybody with any sense, wouldn't have bet a farthing that our Patriots would've ended up anywhere else except the end of a British rope. And yet we did it.

And of course, as an ancient historian, I think about the battle of Marathon when the Athenians, the [inaudible 00:30:33] are outnumbered three to one, and the Persians think they're just going to turn around and go home. And what do they do in their hoplite armor? They advance at a run, and the route is just stunning. And then of course, 10 years later in Salamis and naval warfare, they do the same thing. Now, you are far more of a military expert than I am, but I keep clinging to that, that free people who believe in something can actually work some things that defy everybody's expectation.

John Hillen:

Very much so. And this goes back to the civic experience, not just a slate, if you will, of facts and figures stuck in front of the nose of every American and say, learn this so we can fulfill our civic mission. But the civics experience. I was up recently at the crossing of the Delaware site and in Trenton and in Princeton with the American Battlefield Trust and organization involved with it buys and preserves land on which American battles have been fought. Revolutionary war, war of 1812 and the Civil War, and we walked the ground. We didn't cross the Delaware in a Durham boat, but we did cross to Delaware. And then we walked to Trenton, and then we walked Princeton, which has recently been restored. And I encourage any Americans stopping through Princeton to spend time there, less time at the Institute for Advanced Studies and more time on the Princeton battlefield.

And they're next door to each other, so you don't have to walk very far. Because this is where George Washington was made as military commander. And that's where in many ways, the worm turned and the genesis of hope that you referred to of what a free people could do against overwhelming odds really sparked. Things further down the road, [inaudible 00:32:18] in motion, Saratoga may be one of the five most consequential battles in all of American history because it brought me as a diplomatic historian, brought a very important diplomatic dimension to it. It brought the French and ultimately the Spanish and the Dutch as financiers fully onto the side of the young American country in the struggle. But to walk those battlefields, to stand on the spot where Washington went from a discredited, wildly unsuccessful military leader to an inspirational turnaround specialist in one act of physical bravery and consummate leadership, you can stand on the spot where it happened.

And then to understand the great forces turning before that moment and the great forces and how they turn differently after that moment. Because history is contingent. We study history backwards, but we live it forwards. And I think it's important for students of it to understand how contingent it is and how the decisions of actors and their actions can really make a difference. And that really is one of those places, Chamberlain and little round topic, Gettysburg and so on. But Washington on the battlefield at Princeton, not even restoring his reputation, but starting as reputation as someone who could possibly pull off the challenge that you referred to, I think is a really powerful civic experience.

Michael Poliakoff:

We need to capture this, John, in our volume and in our white paper. That at a time when the profession of history has moved so desperately away from biography, from recognizing a way, as you say, a single actor can change the course of history. I'm not for a moment discounting the large economic forces, the social forces, all of which go into good history, but to neglect these moments that reassure us that there



are things that we can do as a people is a terrible abdication. And I think of that awful result from the Quinnipiac poll that we actually replicated in ACTA's survey of some 3000 students that most in the age group of 18 to 25 answered that they would flee the country rather than fight if Russia invaded. We can see the damage that's been done by not giving people a sense of the very real history. It's contingencies. And in addition to those warts and those failures, the successes, the glories.

John Hillen:

That's right. If you only have a narrative of... Wilfred McClay calls an Inglorious history, right? It can very quickly sap what Jimmy Carter famously complained to all of us in a nationally televised speech about, right? National confidence, national morale, introduce a kind of malaise and a lack of meaning. So we see that. We're blessed for this period we're going to, Michael by... And I don't think by coincidence. My friend Rick Atkinson's trilogy coming out on the American Revolutionary War, the second volume, which comes out I think this week or next week. And that is magisterial narrative history, which captures... I mean, one of the best military historians around and an almost lyrical writer.

He has been from the beginning of his career, I think, but his narrative history of the Revolutionary War is really spectacular. And I'm always encouraged that of all the highly specialized historians in the academy, I'll leave it that way, that people flock to these excellent popular histories. There are a lot of excellent popular histories, right? For every Howard Zinn, there's 10 Rick Atkinsons, and I'm always so pleased by that. There's really, really good narrative histories out there. And a lot of them revolve around the founding area, the Revolutionary area, the Civil War, the era of the World Wars. And so there's fantastic stuff available for Americans, and they seem to want it.

Michael Poliakoff:

When I was at NEH, I had the real joy of working for the late Bruce Cole, and he used to remind us in the nation that you could buy David McCullough's books in airports. In other words, it doesn't have to be stale, it doesn't have to be unreadable. And of course, all of David McCullough's books were replete with learned footnotes. He did really great archival work. So there was no compromise on the quality of the history. But yet, there was a way of making it something that was so relevant and so accessible to Americans that people would buy it in the airport.

John Hillen:

That's right. And yeah, one of the things I'm trying to bang an element of this and looking at it through the lens of grand strategy and purely through strategic engagement in the history of America's wars and diplomatic activity. Well, let me frame it this way, another Walter Russell Mead framing, there's two ways states direct their grand strategy, what Walter calls the lighthouse state. So there's Bismarck up in the top of the lighthouse, there's some other big brain national leader points the light of the national direction in a direction, and that's the way the state goes. The state marshals, the resources, the activity, and off the state goes to accomplish those things. Schleswig-Holstein, [inaudible 00:37:41], off we go. That's one model, and that is a model in most autocratic states, or even ones with the long tradition of what I'll call that the government directs the essential activity of engagement with others. In the U.S, the government has never directed the essential and bulk of American activity of engaging with the rest of the world.

Robert Morris outfitted a ship called The Empress of China before the end of the Revolutionary War, before the Peace Treaty was signed. And it went around the world to, I think it was Guangzhou, and opened up an American trading mission and a legation without any permission from a U.S. government at the time. And that's the nature, right? Of really the... We were more reliant on foreign trade in 1790

than in 1970 as a percentage of our economy, right? So the American engagement of the world is not because of a lighthouse state. It's because of what Walter Russell Mead calls the mirror state. It reflects society, the direction of our engagement with world. The thrust of our engagement world reflects all of American society, not some government policies, although those are important. And so what does the American engagement with the world reflect? It reflects the character, the essential traits of the country itself, and not just a government or administration at the time. An inventive, a restless, a commercially oriented nation. A nation that likes to exert its genius and its energy and industrial innovation and technological innovation and financial innovation.

And in fact, these were the secrets to the ways in which we won the most difficult wars of our history, World War II, which was largely one on the back of American industrial might. We took 2% of the combat casualties in World War II. We ended up the war with a nuclear monopoly and 85% of the world's advanced manufacturing capacity. Extraordinary, least successful grand strategy. Same thing with the union strategy in the Civil War, industrial might and so on. So we've always harnessed the dominant gene in our cultural DNA, which is this restless, inventive, commercially oriented private nation that happens to have a government as well to our grand strategy. But when you reverse the lens and look at it from that perspective, you can see that even in our grand strategy, even our engagement with the world, we've been a nation engaging with the world that also happens to have a government, not a government engaging the world and dragging the nation along with it.

Michael Poliakoff:

It's so well put. My mind went back to the... Not just the evil, but the stupidity of Goebbels when he said, the only thing Americans can make is refrigerators. How wrong he was.

John Hillen:

Yes. There were a lot of B-17s coming out of Dearborn, Michigan over the skies of his country very soon after he said that.

Michael Poliakoff:

Rosie the Riveter was soon at work. That is America. John, this is so inspiring. I can't wait for our commission meeting on October 3rd at Mount Vernon. And the essay that you're writing now, I think this will be a great inspiration. I should also mention how encouraging you've been for what we're calling the State House project to get more independent institutes for the study of American history and government. The one in Tennessee is... I can't say that's my favorite. That's like asking which of my children is the favorite.

John Hillen:

Yeah. Being a close friend of Wilhelm Boden at the Hamilton Center, I absolutely throw in a pitch for the Hamilton Center.

Michael Poliakoff:

Oh, it's brilliant.

John Hillen:

And of course at Arizona State where my friend Chris Howard is the Michael Krause COO. So I'm fond of their efforts as well.

Michael Poliakoff:

And our friend Walter Russell Mead now at the Hamilton Center and Allen Guelzo, who will be one of our authors now going to the Hamilton Center. But there was something that happened in the formation of the Tennessee Institute of American Civics that really does apply to all of them. But the governor in his state of the state address said, "I want an institute devoted to informed patriotism." Channeling of course, Ronald Reagan's speech-

John Hillen:

Ronald Reagan used those exact words. Yes.

Michael Poliakoff:

And that really is the sobriquet that I think we can put on all of these great and wonderful new institutes that are forming. Jed Atkins is doing a great job at Chapel Hill. These are the things that will revitalize so many programs, so many institutions that have really fallen away from the recognition of the American story. So I have to thank you for all of that. John, anything else we should cover in this podcast? You've been very generous with your time.

John Hillen:

No, I'm proud of the work that ACTA is doing. And if you take at face value what I've said of what I believe to be the dominant gene in America's DNA, and this is a term I use in part of my strategy books for enterprises to understand themselves and what's truly special about them, what we call in the business world core competencies. Because this is the foundation from which they can make the most progress when they do something new. Base it on your competitive advantages. For the U.S., it comes down to three competitive advantages. One is our geography. It's a combination of both pure geography or an island nation with two big oceans, although I more like to think of them as Alfred Thayer Mahan as highways rather than obstacles. Which I think President Trump recently seemed to think of as obstacles, said are big, beautiful oceans. Said, well, they're highways to us and highways from us, if you really think about it.

But also our geopolitics. We have two peaceful land borders from a military sense, militaristic sense to people. That's one advantage. Second advantage is we're abundant resources. We're the world's energy superpower, and we could be more if we wanted to be. But the third one is this, who we are as a nation and this cultural political DNA I've been talking about. The men who went ashore on D-Day and have led D-Day were brave. Everybody as brave as Washington's men who charged at Princeton or at Trenton or across the Delaware. But that's not why we win. Because at the end of the day, almost every society can produce small groups of brave men to do extraordinary things under times of unthinkable conditions. And I was recently with Duke students on Okinawa on the... Just brought to mind the awful conditions under which these men fought and labored. But every society can only produce that, but not every society can produce what turns out to be America's secret weapon.

Its secret competitive advantage, which is a private nation that is lightly governed, that lets people succeed of their own accord. What Tocqueville noticed almost 200 years ago except now on steroids, 200 plus years later, right? That's why entrepreneurs come here and want to start companies, right? We have this ecosystem of ideas, capital, infrastructure, risk-taking personality, restlessness, innovation, wanting to apply our most talented energetic efforts to non-governmental things. Not just to small groups of brave men doing hard things on the battlefield, always necessary. And I was one of those brave men once and was privileged to be one, but that's not ultimately America's competitive

advantage. So I think for Americans to understand this pulls them back to the fundamental answer the founders gave to the question of how should we govern our stuff lightly in order to be a free republic?

Michael Poliakoff:

John Hillen, thank you. This is an inspiration as we move towards the work of the National Commission. This is precisely the message that we want to share with one another and to the nation. It's a privilege and honor to have you with us on Higher Ed Now.

John Hillen:

Thank you.

Doug Sprei:

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