

CBS Mornings

02/17/26

7:51:58 a.m. [TEASE]

6 seconds

NATE BURLESON: We'll have more on the life of Reverend Jesse Jackson, and we will talk with presidential historian, Jon Meacham.

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8:00:08 a.m. [TEASE]

14 seconds

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Author Jon Meacham]

GAYLE KING: Coming up in this 8:00 hour. Some perspective on these very divided times. Historian Jon Meacham says we are in a moral crisis as a nation, but it's not the first time, he says. So, we'll ask how, in his view, it does get better.

(....)

8:03:34 a.m. [TEASE]

8 seconds

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Ahead; Historian Jon Meacham]

VLADIMIR DUTHIERS: Still to come, much more on Jesse Jackson's legacy. We will get some insight and perspective from historian, Jon Meacham. We'll also talk about the state of our democracy.

(....)

8:10:35 a.m.

6 minutes and 42 seconds

DUTHIERS: It may feel like our country is more divided than ever, but according to our next guest, conflict is nothing new in our democracy. Jon Meacham is a Pulitzer Prize winning historian and best-selling author. His latest book is called *American Struggle: Democracy, Dissent and the Pursuit of a More Perfect Union*. You can buy it right now by scanning that QR code that you see on your screen. Meacham chronicles the divisions and the debates that have defined our country from 1619 to the present. Jon Meacham is here. Good morning. I'm such a fan.

JON MEACHAM: Thank you.

DUTHIERS: Thanks for being here.

KING: Stop drooling.

DUTHIERS: I know. I've been — since I — since I walked in, I've been like the —

MEACHAM: You're like the youngest person who's ever said that. That's great.

DUTHIERS: — not that young, but I love that you said that. All right, I want to get to the book in just a moment, but we've got to start with the news this morning of the passing of Jesse Jackson.

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Jon Meacham Remembering Rev. Jesse Jackson]

MEACHAM: Reverend Jackson.

DUTHIERS: How would you reflect on Reverend Jackson's legacy?

MEACHAM: Enormously important figure between the King/Lewis era and the Obama era. I think I'm right in saying that Reverend Jackson is the only figure who went from both Memphis in 1968 where Dr. King was murdered in April to Grant Park in 2008 —

KING: Mmm

DUTHIERS: Mmm.

MEACHAM: — when Obama — President Obama wins. He ran for president twice in a significant way, 1984 and 1988. The 1984 campaign was particularly interesting. The 1988 campaign, he nearly became Vice President, and so it was a vital part of the arc of the freedom struggle.

DUTHIERS: So, let's talk about this book, because I sort of think that there is a theme in sort of what Reverend Jackson talked about throughout his life and times, which is he didn't want a society that did not include everybody. This Rainbow Coalition —

MEACHAM: Yup!

DUTHIERS: — that he talked about. You say we're in a moment of moral crisis.

MEACHAM: Yup!

DUTHIERS: What do you mean by that?

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Perspective on Today's Politics & U.S. History]

MEACHAM: I mean that if we don't recognize each other of equal dignity, if we don't see each other as those who stand equally before God and the law, then the covenant that is America falls apart. If — if I'm able to think of you as lesser than, then I don't have to accord you the full protections of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

DUTHIERS: Mmhmm.

MEACHAM: And when you have that kind of division, the notion, the animating force of a country based on the ideal of the Declaration of Independence, which Lincoln elevated at Gettysburg, we — we are dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. He didn't talk about the Constitution —

KING: Mmhmm.

MEACHAM: — he went back to the Declaration, a piece of American scripture. If that is not obeyed and applied, then chaos results.

KING: I like there's a line in the book where you talk about James Madison, who says "... it's vain to say that enlightened statesmen will be able to adjust those classic interests to the public good" — it makes me think about Congress — "but these enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm." What can we — ain't that good, Vlad?

DUTHIERS: Yes.

KING: What can we learn from that? Because it seems very similar to what's going on today.

MEACHAM: Absolutely. The founders would have been surprised, I think that it took this long.

DUTHIERS: Really?

MEACHAM: I really —

KING: For what? For what?

MEACHAM: — for there to be an authoritarian galloping at the highest level.

KING: Really? That it took this long? Wow!

MEACHAM: Because really — because, think about it, the Constitution is incredibly unwieldy. It's unwieldy because they assume that most of what we would want to do would be wrong. It's a theological document in many ways. It's based on the idea that we're driven by appetite and ambition more often than we're driven by grace and generosity. And guess what? I know you all are better people than I am, but I know that's true in my life.

KING: Yeah.

MEACHAM: And so —

KING: But Jon, many people believe that — many in power don't believe that the Constitution matters these days.

MEACHAM: — well —

KING: You're saying we don't — you're saying we don't have to worry about that?

MEACHAM: — no, no, no, no. Quite the opposite.

KING: Yes.

MEACHAM: This is an hour of — this is arguably the most important hour for citizenship —

KING: Exactly.

MEACHAM: — since the 1850s.

KING: Exactly.

MEACHAM: It has to be — what I what I am saying is that they — the founders, anticipated this. The Constitution was built for moments like this, for hours of stress and strain, where people would put power above principle. Our task is to put the principles above power.

KING: And who is the “our”?

MEACHAM: The United — we, the People. We, the People.

BURLESON: Yes. Jon, there's a younger generation that is quite frankly disgusted with American politics.

MEACHAM: Yep.

BURLESON: And you write that this book is a reminder that American politics, inherently is dramatic.

MEACHAM: Yep.

BURLESON: And that it leans towards the inflammatory and the superlative. Is there historical context for that younger generation that doesn't dive into history books that can give them some parallels to what's going on today?

MEACHAM: This is all about the story, right? We all grew up more adjacent to great moments in American history.

BURLESON: Right.

MEACHAM: Right. My grandparents fought in World War II. I knew — I didn't do it, but I knew people who had. If you were born in the 21st Century, the public sector has not covered itself in glory, right? September 11th, weapons of mass destruction.

BURLESON: Right.

MEACHAM: Iraq, great recession, COVID, President Trump, January 6 and school shootings and school shooting drills.

KING: Yes.

MEACHAM: Right? If you are that age, why would you trust grown-ups to protect you when we self-evidently say we can't protect you in schools. We have to drill for this. What does that mean?

BURLESON: Mmm.

MEACHAM: It means we have to tell the story of the Pettis Bridge, of March 7.

BURLESON: Mmm.

MEACHAM: Here's the story I would tell. Sunday, March 7, 1965 John Lewis and Hosea Williams walk across the Pettis Bridge into a representation of state power, to go to Gayle's point.

KING: Yes.

MEACHAM: That was the Constitution being perverted, the Declaration being perverted, and they walk into a blue wall saying, we don't want reparation —

KING: Yes.

MEACHAM: — we don't want revolution. We want you to keep your word. People like me, who look like me, wrote the Declaration. We voluntarily said we are going to be founded on this idea. We are morally compelled to fulfill it.

DUTHIERS: So, everything that Jon just talked about.

BURLESON: I wish we have more time.

DUTHIERS: It is not just an *American Struggle*, which you should buy right now, but in all of his books.

KING: Yes.

DUTHIERS: *American Struggle*, though, is on sale. Scan the QR code on your screen to buy it and learn more about those critical moments in our country's history. They are so important. Jon, thank you very much.

MEACHAM: Thank you.