

Doug Sprei:

Now that I know that many people on the internet call you Professor Greg, I'm going to welcome Professor Greg into the Higher Ed Now podcast. It's really a great pleasure and an honor for us to have you with us. We're huge fans of your work. And I also want to introduce Jack Golden, who is a student at Hillsdale College and currently interning at ACTA in What Will They Learn program. And Jack is really the instigator of us reaching out to you, Professor Jackson. And he turned me onto the History That Doesn't Suck podcast and I'm hooked.

Doug Sprei:

And so, we just both want to drill into the underpinnings of it and your outlook and just a lot of things about you and the work you're doing. And I think I'm going to let Jack ask the break the ice here.

Greg Jackson:

Sounds great. Fire away, Jack.

Jack Golden:

Yeah. So, the first question I have for you, would you tell me a little bit about the name of your podcast? I was looking through for a history podcast at the start of the summer because I was looking for something new to help me pass the time. And I typed in history podcast and I scrolled after boring name after boring name. And then I saw a History That Doesn't Suck and it sucked me right in. So, just tell me a little bit about how you settled on that name.

Greg Jackson:

Sure. So, it works on a few levels I believe. And what I am trying to convey is that if you're not a fan of history, and I would argue someone who doesn't enjoy history, they don't because it was presented to them in frankly, a terrible way. They were taught the history is nothing but a collection of names and dates to be regurgitated on the AP exam or even just that typical whatever test in the 10th grade. And I don't lay this blame so much on the teachers. Obviously, there are good teachers and they are not so great teachers, but often the overwhelming amount of information we expect teachers to magically get through over the course of one year, one semester, whatever it is, plus the testing component coming into the equation. It turns history into cram these names and dates down so that you can succeed on the exam. And as that happens, you lose the story.

Greg Jackson:

So, pick your historical figure. George Washington's one that pretty much every American will register with. Instead of seeing this complicated figure who is insecure and yet trying, someone who's failing, but manages to get up bloodied and broken. Someone who's got complex views that are shifting as his life goes on and is dealing with arthritis has a bad relationship with his mom. Things that we all can relate to. Not to say anything about your mom, Jack. I'm sure she's lovely.

Greg Jackson:

The typical, normal struggles. These are the things that bring historical figures to life. And we realize, oh, this is interesting. It's a story. And often in higher ed, or even K through 12, we scrub the story right out of history and we turn it into these names and dates.

Greg Jackson:

And what I wanted to articulate is you listen to my podcast, my goal is to make this so entertaining that even though you're working your full-time job, 40 plus hours a week turning a wrench, data entry, whatever. You'll actually want to unwind with this. That you'll enjoy it that much. And I'm also giving, this is the part where it sounds dull, but I am very purposely wrapping those stories up and all the textbook information that I believe an American citizen should know, regardless of whether you're a history major or not.

Greg Jackson:

That's a lot of answer for your simple question. But, the point was that I understand many people have had a bad experience with history and I'm promising you that this will not be another one of those iterations.

Doug Sprei:

So, the idea that history that does suck is really, you're talking about the rendition of it, not the actual history itself.

Greg Jackson:

For the most part. I am also willing to, and this is where it does work on a few different levels. I'm not looking to take any shots at any of my colleagues across the nation, but I do think that while we offer some very interesting upper division courses across the nation or even sometimes in our lower division here in the state of Utah, I'm at Utah Valley University, the lower division course is History 1700. That's your colonies up to present day in one semester, general ed wham, bam, you're done, move on course.

Greg Jackson:

Well, sometimes the way that we push things in higher ed, we assume that our students know a whole lot more than they really do. And so, you get these, I think, well intended professors that say, well, I'm not going to bore you with those things you already know. We won't talk about the distinctions between Federalists and Democratic Republicans. Let's talk about weaving in Northern New Hampshire between the years of 1805 and 1813. We won't talk about the War of 1812 either. Okay. That's great. I'm not saying there's anything bad about that information, but when we're talking about building up a citizenry of people who understand the basic tenants of government, how it functions, what do we go through that led us to either the good ideas we have today, or frankly, some of the kooky ideas, maybe as some might argue that we have today?

Greg Jackson:

Well, we all need that basis. And it's my experience in the classroom that when we assume our undergrads show up understanding the basic differences between say, I'll just stick with that first political party system, Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans. Nope. That's crazy talk. They at most know the names of some of those capital F founding fathers. And as far as many of them are concerned, they've been told that they all agreed on everything, that they just high fived each other and wrote a constitution that they all knew was just the best, even though it literally says that they're making a more perfect union, not the perfect union.

Greg Jackson:

So, I am also articulating... I'm going to get you the basic facts, the things that you need. And it's so cool that other stuff's out there. I'm not taken away from it, but let's walk before we run.

Doug Sprei:

Sobefore we move on to the podcast and treatment of history. Jack, why don't you go to another one of your questions? We want to probe a little bit more about you, Greg, yourself and how this all comes from who you are.

Greg Jackson:

Ooh. All right.

Jack Golden:

Yeah. You started to allude to it and touch on it a little bit, but why history? I see that you had a bachelor's degree in history from Brigham Young, your PhD was in history. What drew you to history as your academic pursuit and why is it important to study?

Greg Jackson:

History was the one subject I cared about since I was a kid. Frankly, I was not the best student in high school. I was a great student in middle school. High school, I checked out a bit, but history stuck with me.

Greg Jackson:

I'll never forget being in my 10th grade history class and I don't know why this was so fascinating to me, but Mrs. Berry was discussing Napoleon's forces moving in on Russia. And she mentioned how some of the ideas of the French Revolution ended up getting shared across enemy lines. And those ideas then crept into Russia. And for me, this just sits with me. That was the moment where a light bulb went on. I thought how fascinating, the way that people from different countries, different backgrounds, the way we interact, we exchange ideas and how that can shape the world. And those ripple effects that can then occur when those ideas sit and gestate in Russia, which remains so very autocratic for about the next century. And yet all the impacts that come from it.

Greg Jackson:

So, for me, it really was the story component. Again, she didn't give us just names and dates, right? I could picture these soldiers in battle and then the prisoners of war and the conversations happening. And my realizing how much that stuff is directly or indirectly impacting my life today. And that's where it became so supremely important to me.

Greg Jackson:

I graduated from high school with a not terribly impressive GPA, but knew I wanted to be a historian. And then took a very, I'd say unlikely path. I started community college. I went up the street at Chaffey Community. A year there of essentially a toning for my ways in high school. And then with a near flawless, a 3.99 something, I was in a good position to transfer and ended up at Brigham Young, as you pointed out. And the rest is history, shall we say?

Doug Sprei:

I've been listening to a lot of your episodes, the most recent ones. And the episode of July 18th, you flexed away from your typical storytelling format and you commune with the fellow historian, Lindsay Graham, his name is. Not the Senator.

Greg Jackson:

Not the Senator.

Doug Sprei:

A really great podcaster and just a great kindred soul for you, I think. And you both were riffing on that basic universally known quote, those who don't remember the past or doomed to repeat it. It was a great conversation and it made me wonder a little bit more about what do you think about viewing history in its most positive light? Could we also be doomed to not repeat the good aspects of history if we don't know what it is?

Greg Jackson:

100%. Yes. I have no doubt that beyond your own intelligence there, pulling that, you're also recalling from the conversation. We did touch on that. Both my dear friend, Lindsay and I, we're of that mind that Mark Twain articulated. That history doesn't repeat, but that it rhymes. And it's because we are the same species and we don't need to focus on the negative side entirely. That is an important component, right? We don't want to repeat mistakes of past generations and we'll have similar situations because we have all those same stupid impulses, selfish desires and whatnot, but we also have the same noble capacities as our predecessors. And as much as technology changes and it absolutely impacts our lives, right? It alters and overhauls the way some aspects of society function. Well, nonetheless, there are principles that are, at least to this point, they remain timeless. And it's very much to our detriment and risk, I think, for us to forget those lessons sometimes very painfully learned in the past.

Greg Jackson:

And I would say that certainly applies to the United States and its development as a Republic, as bringing in representative government in the form that we have today. That's been a slow build to all the excellence that we have. And you don't hear much of that conversation today. And I understand why. We're very focused on the gridlock and things that tear us apart. Yet, maybe if we thought a little bit more about the things we have in common, that would actually help us soothe and heal the differences because I maintain that Americans still have far more in common than not.

Doug Sprei:

Yeah. And just before we move on, it's really quite personal and visceral for me, I'm a little old, I'm from the boomer generation. My parents grew up in the Depression. And so, a hugely strong impression that I'm left with from them and my grandparents is just this reverence for Franklin Delano Roosevelt, for instance. And just coming out of World War II and my dad served. And just so much of history that was imparted to me through them where the country did unite all together around earth shattering events and momentous events that could have gone a different way if...

Greg Jackson:

A million different ways.

Greg Jackson:

Yeah.

Doug Sprei:

So, that's why I just... There's so much of history that is so important for us to retain and transmit to future generations. That's part of why ACTA is doing what it's doing, I think.

Greg Jackson:

Right. Yeah.

Doug Sprei:

Jack?

Jack Golden:

Well, one of the things that I'm really picking up from you as you talk is understanding history and the nuances and its complexities. That not just looking at the good, not just looking at the bad. So, my next question for you is what's the benefit to understanding American history in this nuanced way? And why did you choose storytelling in your podcast as the best format for that sort of understanding?

Greg Jackson:

So, really you've asked me two questions. Let me go ahead and answer one. And when I forget your second question, you can just remind me of it. That okay?

Jack Golden:

Yes.

Greg Jackson:

All right. So first of all, I'll hit the storytelling. That is something I would say in higher ed, and again, K through 12 as well, that's a crucial component of us as a species, as humans. We love stories. We learn through stories. It's part of how our brain developed to take in and hold onto information over the past tens of thousands of years. And with good intentions, with the desire to be objective. We're scientists, right? We're not just storytellers. No, we're better than that. We're social scientists who will tell the absolute, empirical truth.

Greg Jackson:

Well, okay. These are noble ambitions. And I maintain that I hold myself to that standard in all of my storytelling. And it's part of where I break the fourth wall often. Well, as I've... Conversations I've actually had with Lindsay, I'll go ahead and reference him again because we do collaborate quite a bit. For me, storytelling is crucial, but accurate history is paramount. So, I can't invent a conversation even though a composite conversation between two historical figures, like you might see in say, HBO's John Adams, right? A very excellent telling, but they're making up dialogue, right? They don't have a journal that tells you every single... Even if there's some things they took verbatim from say congressional debates. I will never do that. Right? I don't. If I have to insert, even if I'm changing the tense of verb for a quote, I've got the brackets in what I'm writing. Just like I would if I were writing the peer reviewed typical essay.

Greg Jackson:

But, the idea that it's a zero sum gain that we either are these academic, rigorous historians or we're lower, lesser storytellers. That is a false dichotomy that I will fight against all day long. And it's something that I think we need to bring back into the teaching of history and we can be very mindful. It's what I try to do. To say, I will break the story. I'll break the fourth wall whenever there's a risk that the storytelling is going to supersede accuracy. So, it's about reaching people. So that's why I do the storytelling.

Greg Jackson:

Now, your other question, number two, was about the good and the bad. As I recall correctly. There is a painful pendulum in my opinion, that people looking to uphold their present debuts will use to cherry pick the past. So, now we are getting a little bit onto the left right spectrum. Okay. We can have this conversation a bit. If you want to uphold a specific political view, you may take those historical instances that support it and you may omit those things that don't.

Greg Jackson:

And I don't think that we have a bunch of evil conniving people on the left and right that are very purposely doing that as they make Mr. Burns fingers and go ha ha ha in some big, empty [inaudible] Washington DC building, but rather this actually gets to the storytelling. And it's the storytelling that we pretend we aren't telling. When you have people on the left or the right who hear yes, accurate history, but it's been curated by themselves in their own little silos where they're cut off and not taking in the full picture to where all they hear is the history that supports their perspective. And then they hear something from the other side and it doesn't just sound like nuance. It sounds like a different tale altogether. It's not even the same history. Both are, in fact, just as accurate or inaccurate.

Greg Jackson:

And I know some listener might now get into the, oh, you're doing the both sides-ism a thing. Well, okay. Look, I'm painting with the broad brush. We're having a quick conversation. Obviously, there are issues where the right or the left, it doesn't matter which, they each have their issues where they're painting more broadly than the other, lacking more nuance than the other.

Greg Jackson:

Well, I'd say in the big scheme of things, if you really are looking to have discourse in the present, everyone has to be able to sit down. And whether we're talking about second amendment gun issues, abortion, whatever the big hot topic is of the day. If both sides understand the detractors to their position, as well as the reason why someone would support that. Right? So, I can sit down with someone who disagrees with me and say, I can get where you're coming from. I might disagree with it because I think there are still too many detracting factors, but I at least understand where you're coming from. And I know you're not just this vapid, evil specter that's trying to destroy the country, but that we just have genuinely different values. And so, we're pulling different things.

Greg Jackson:

Well, that's where we can actually have a dialogue. You can't have a dialogue when you don't even have the full picture.

Doug Sprei:

You just mentioned that John Adams series on HBO and I remember watching that and was very drawn into it because I love the actors. And I felt that it at least really drew me into the story of Abigail and John and learned a lot more about both of those. And I'm very intrigued by what you said a moment ago about the scripting of those. That it's by necessity of Hollywood production. And I'm also thinking of a movie that I really love is Spielberg's Lincoln. And I know...

Greg Jackson:

Excellent film.

Doug Sprei:

It's a wonderful film. And every time it's on, I'll watch it. I'll stop everything and just watch it. I think I've seen it 12 times since it came out. And I know that it's a Hollywood film and that Tony Kushner, the script writer, obviously took a lot of liberties with the dialogue. But, on the other hand, can you parse that a little bit about what's really virtuous in that approach? And then also maybe a little bit more about what compels you to do the direction you're doing?

Greg Jackson:

Sure.

Doug Sprei:

Which is different.

Greg Jackson:

Yeah. And I would put myself at something of a hybrid perhaps and I'll get to that in a second, but that high level storytelling that does put the art above the pure facts. And again, I'm going to say that can be on a scale because Lincoln, the HBO series with John Adams, that's not a film and that's not a series that just through caution to the wind and said, you know what, whatever is going to make this segment of the episode better, we're doing. I was impressed watching John Adams.

Greg Jackson:

This just comes to mind. I've seen that one more recently than Lincoln, which is also so excellent, but watching John Dickinson and John Adams, you're moderate and you're radical for the era, debate the Declaration of Independence. And they used actual quotes. They used the actual records. I recognized the verbiage as I was watching that scene. That's commendable. That was excellent. And while it's going to get... Some nuance is going to be lost because when you're making a film, it's really hard to pause and say, whoa, whoa, whoa. Now just so you know, we're going to make an interpretation decision as to what this character does. You can't do those things. That's the shortcoming of embracing art on that level.

Greg Jackson:

Yet, this is the epitome of making these historical figures real. You see John Adams having these family struggles, right? Abigail is livid with him as he's departing for Congress. And in this era, this means they're not going to talk face to face until God knows when. They're going to write letters. And here she

is, right? This founding mother of the nation, someone we hold on a very high level today. And what is she's doing? She's scrubbing the freaking floor, right? She's this very normal person.

Greg Jackson:

All of those things help make these historical figures real for us. When we have to be reminded of how normal they were, the struggles they faced and you don't get that in a textbook.

Greg Jackson:

Let's see here...

Doug Sprei:

A similar dynamic in Lincoln with the character of Thaddeus Stevens, the uncompromising abolitionist.

Greg Jackson:

Yes.

Doug Sprei:

Played by Tommy Lee Jones and Daniel Day Lewis in the most magnificent way. And also the scenes of Lincoln with his different cabinet. Really an assemblage of the team of rivals and I had read Doris Kearns Goodwin's book around the same time. And so, all of that conflated together for me into a wonderful experience. And yet I know that liberties are being taken in the dialogue, but I'm just hopeful that something essentially truthful has been imparted. And that they've stayed true to what really took place.

Greg Jackson:

And frankly, by and large, they have. I remember discussing the HBO series when it came out. I was an undergrad and talking about it with my American revolution professor. And he pointed out with a shaking... I say this with nothing but love. This is Professor York. If anyone's familiar with American revolutionary history, the man was a legend in his field and great professor. The only one who ever... No, I take responsibility. The only one from whom I ever earned a grade in a history course in college that wasn't an A. I'm afraid I got to B plus from him. He put me through the ringer and I appreciate him for it.

Greg Jackson:

But, I remember the disdain with which he looked down and shaking his head. His very full mustache just consuming his lips as he pointed out that John Adams was not the sole lawyer in the room defending the red coats following the Boston Massacre. They were in fact three lawyers. And okay, okay, Professor York. Of course at the time I was deeply impressed. Oh my gosh, HBO, just throw that in the trash. This is just terrible.

Greg Jackson:

And years later I reflected and thought, sorry, Professor York, I'm going to disagree with you. It brought to life... And I get it. They cut out the others because they have one episode, they're trying to do this. They're simplifying the story.

Greg Jackson:

But, the essence is very much there that John Adams is very much going out on a limb pursuing truth. He's pushing against. What we would say today, he's pushing against his party. It's not cool in Boston, a Patriot hotbed, to support the red coats. And he's not supporting them per se, but saying everyone deserves a fair trial and I'm going to pursue the facts. And if it turns out the soldiers of the king that we don't like are not guilty beyond a shadow of the doubt, then we need to stand by the laws that we claim to adore.

Greg Jackson:

And so, that's where John Adams himself, he becomes a living example of what we should be aspiring to today, right? Where we're pursuing truth, regardless of whether it works on our own partisan agenda or what have you. Those truths are there, even if the story was simplified. And a good teacher could show that clip and then have that discussion.

Doug Sprei:

Wonderful. Let's pivot. Jack, you and I together. Why don't you take the lead on this one? We want to pivot more to your process, Greg, about...

Greg Jackson:

Sure.

Doug Sprei:

What's going into putting together an episode. Jack, why don't you unpack that question a little bit?

Jack Golden:

Yeah. Yeah. And just briefly. Really appreciate everything you just had to say about the complexities and all that. I happened to be listening to your episodes on the Civil War about Frederick, Maryland as I was driving through Frederick, Maryland and Southern Pennsylvania. I was on my way to visit my fiance about a month ago. And as I drove through you're talking about the Civil War and I'm listening to you do a really beautiful nuanced understanding of Lincoln. Moral qualms with slavery, but didn't think it was in his political power to abolish it. And then your name dropping Fredericks. And I looked up at an exit sign and went, oh my gosh, I'm here. I need to be really paying attention. I'm looking around at the things he's describing. So, just wanted to say that.

Jack Golden:

So, the question on your process.

Greg Jackson:

Thank you.

Jack Golden:

Would you tell us a little bit about the research process? What goes into putting together an episode? And if there are things that you wish you could cover more, but that they don't make the cut. Just things like that.

Greg Jackson:

Sure. So, when I started this podcast, I conceived of it as this is where I make myself sound as boring as possible. Well, I conceived of this as essentially being an audio textbook. This is everything that any citizen of the United States should hypothetically know by the time they're done with K through 12. And what is reiterated in general eds in college.

Greg Jackson:

Now, granted, I go a few cuts deeper than that, but that's the basic premise. So, that being the case, I have to limit myself on... Sometimes I come to stories or figures that are very near and dear to me on a personal level. And I have to say to myself, nope, I don't get to go into that so much because I have to keep moving.

Greg Jackson:

What I don't want to do is make a podcast that's never over. The never ending podcast. Or that's 2,000 episodes. I want this to be something that someone discovers and thinks to themselves, yeah, I will listen to every episode of this. So, right now I'm just over 100 episodes as you know. About 116. And we're in the progressive era. American history gets only bigger with a larger population and going global. I wouldn't be surprised if I've got another 100 episodes ahead of me, but having a podcast that will take you from the American Revolution up to the end of the 20th century in 250 or even 300 episodes, that's not overwhelming. That's something that someone could say, yeah, I'm going to make my way through this thing.

Greg Jackson:

So, the Civil War. Oh my gosh. I was holding back so much. So, so much.

Jack Golden:

Yeah.

Greg Jackson:

There's so much detail that... I'm particularly proud of the Gettysburg episode. I am not sure how I packed that entire battle and the Getty [inaudible].

Jack Golden:

That was a fantastic episode.

Greg Jackson:

Thank you. There was so much editing involved. Nope, Nope. Peach Orchard has to be three sentences. I can do this. So, there's that.

Greg Jackson:

And I cross reference with a number of textbooks as I'm designing and thinking about what the next episodes are going to be. Obviously, I have a good, broad understanding in my head. I've taught the basic colonies to present course a million times. I do have a PhD in history. I think we're aware of that. Right? But, I'm always checking with other textbooks and going, okay, what stories am I missing that need to be in here?

Greg Jackson:

And then of course, I'll occasionally go out for the stories that maybe wouldn't typically be in a textbook because they're just so fascinating or I think they elucidate something that textbooks maybe have failed to bring in. The Brooklyn Bridge episode, for instance. Spending one episode talking about this monumental masterpiece of architecture. For me, it was an opportunity to point out some of the productive things that are happening in the Gilded Age, which very unnuanced is often [inaudible] as this low point of vice and sin in American history.

Greg Jackson:

The episodes themselves... By the way, just tell me to shut up if you're like, Greg, this is not what we're looking for and on board.

Doug Sprei:

Are you kidding?

Greg Jackson:

Okay. Okay. Good. All right.

Greg Jackson:

So, the episodes themselves, I of course want to make sure I bring the best of bear in secondary literature. What my colleagues across the nation have written. So, I'm on J Store. I'm getting the latest works. Whether they're they're books, articles, you name it. Of course, being at UVU, that's been excellent because I have a great library to access, but I've also dropped a pretty penny on some books because inner library alone wasn't going to get it to me fast enough and episodes... That's one of the different things about doing this versus your typical academic articles. Right? I have a two week schedule that I must maintain. So, I have spent \$100 dollars on an overnighted book because I needed it immediately. And I was not about to let...

Greg Jackson:

There's a bit of a burden, I'll be honest, when I know how many people I have listening to me and the audience continues to grow. I know I'm impacting the way a lot of Americans understand their history. So, there's just really no expense to be spared on making sure everything's right.

Greg Jackson:

But, secondary sources. And then of course the primary sources themselves, right? I'm getting into both of those. Grateful for Professor Blight's excellent biography of Frederick Douglas. And I've also of course, got all three of Frederick Douglas's autobiographies. So, primary source, secondary sources. Basically, I treat every episode like I'm writing an academic article and the end result, each episode is typically 8,000 to 10,000 words of writing. Usually over 100 footnotes and two dozen or more sources.

Doug Sprei:

Do you have any graduate assistance helping you When do you sleep? If you have a two week schedule. I'm mind boggled by that.

Greg Jackson:

I'm a hard worker and no one accuses me of being lazy. The first volume, because of course I conceive of my episodes basically as chapters and large volumes. This is essentially a multi volume audiobook that I happen to release in podcast form. And I'd love to talk to you about why as we go on. If that isn't one of your questions, I won't to address that's, but we'll put a pin in that for now.

Greg Jackson:

I wrote The Revolution entirely by myself and UVU has been excellent to me. It is a teaching institution though. So, it's a [inaudible] teaching load and I'm cranking out episodes, 8,000 plus words within a two week window. The first few were fine because I wrote them over the summer and I don't think it really dawned on me what I just set myself up to do.

Greg Jackson:

And most podcasts are weekly. I couldn't dare try to do that. And I didn't dare go to monthly because I felt that would be... Algorithms and whatnot for podcasts being found, I didn't dare release that infrequently. So, I felt like I was sprinting a marathon for quite a while.

Greg Jackson:

I did start to bring on some help. And so, I brought on someone who could proofread and then research. Her name was [inaudible]. And eventually I had her co-authoring the episodes with me. Now I needed this to be me, right? I'm not going to say anything into this microphone that I don't 100% agree with, that I'm not totally on board with. So, to use some speak that your listeners, I think, will understand perfectly. I always make sure I'm first author, essentially, in the way that I treat most of those.... I'm going to say most of those episodes that there were... There's a very small handful where time constraints being what they were, especially as I started getting asked to go on History Channel or make other appearances and whatnot. Where I'd have to say, okay, I'm going to let you write more than 50% of this, but you know I'm going to vet this thing desperately.

Greg Jackson:

And Zach was one of my more recent researchers who I elevated eventually to allow to write. [inaudible] and Zach are the only other two I've brought on. Probably close to a dozen people in a research capacity at various points. Those are the only two I actually said, okay, you can do some of the writing. And poor Zach. I think it was hard for him at first when he'd write something I'd come through and go, that's great. Delete, rewrite. It wasn't quite my tone or things that I just had to have. I'm a perfectionist.

Greg Jackson:

So, anyhow. To answer your question, though. I did bring on help. UVU was great to work with. As this grew, they were interested in supporting it. So, I was able to bring students on. I did also bring students that weren't from UVU to bear. Brigham Young is still just down the street. So, I basically take the best applicant I'd get. And if that was a UVA student, phenomenal. If it was a BYU student or graduate, also phenomenal. And that's more where I've landed now. My researchers are paid and they tend to be... They're either very senior undergrads or they're graduating. Zach just left me to go to Harvard Law. I keep telling him I don't know if that's the right choice, but that's fine. That's fine.

Doug Sprei:

Well, I'm glad you have that much help because it's magnificent. And you've got sound design now. And what I'm getting at is I have to say for my whole life, I've shared your reverence for audio theater and radio theater. I just loved it since I was a child. And again, our parents go way back to the fireside chats.

Greg Jackson:

Yep.

Doug Sprei:

Everything that Orson Wells and Norman and Corwin. And then I even love the Fire Sign Theater, which is kind of surrealist stuff in the 60s.

Greg Jackson:

Sure.

Doug Sprei:

So, what I'm getting at is there's some personal decisions in terms of style that you have really inflicted into this. And I'll give you example. In one of the Teddy Roosevelt episodes, you start the whole thing with this very... It just draws me in, a description of the earthquake in San Francisco. And you don't just mention it for 30 seconds. You take us right there into the living room of a family where the mother is, I think, cooking at the stove or something. And then the whole house starts to shake and they have to scramble under the door frames. And it's terrifying...

Greg Jackson:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Doug Sprei:

The way you describe it. And you go on for five minutes, at least, really taking us into the vivid right then and there rendition of that. And so, we can actually feel it for ourselves and it's done in this audio format. There are sound effects and whatnot, but it's incredibly vivid. And that is really part of the setup of this longer narrative about Teddy Roosevelt. It's a second installment, I think.

Greg Jackson:

Yep.

Doug Sprei:

And I just wanted to see, could you briefly unpack a little of that decision making in how you tell a story?

Greg Jackson:

Sure. So, in order for a story to have impact, you have to go to a certain level of depth. So, just as I explain to my research assistants and as I've mentioned when giving keynote to K through 12, school districts and whatnot. You fly at 30,000 feet because of course you got to get through this curriculum. Right? I spent five minutes, as you just pointed out, talking about the San Francisco earthquake. All right, but that episode was really about one of the three c's of the square deal of Teddy Roosevelt. So, I need to move on, but fly at 30,000 feet to give people the overview and then swoop down really, really close.

Doug Sprei:

Okay.

Greg Jackson:

And look at just one tree. A tree that is going to speak to that whole region of the forest though.

Doug Sprei:

Right.

Greg Jackson:

And that's how I weave together these close, intimate stories that suck you in and you identify with the past, but then I still keep us moving at a textbook clip. So, we're going to experience the San Francisco earthquake. And there's always a cold open to every single episode, which those are always 100% me. I don't let my research assistants touch those. That's my signature on an episode. Every cold open, 100%.

Greg Jackson:

So, the cold open sucks you in and then we can fly to 30,000 feet and the episode is weaving back and forth, back and forth.

Doug Sprei:

That's part of the marvel of it for me because that's where I got grounded and then you had me for the rest of the hour or the rest of the session there. And whether it was the basement bakeries in Manhattan, the horrible conditions and the flies drifting from the ceiling into the bread. It was really incredibly visceral. So, that is just something I'm so glad to hear a little bit more about.

Doug Sprei:

And Jack, did you want to talk a little bit about... Drill into what will they learn? And you're trying to get more about the mission and the ethos. Did you want to try to probe in that direction?

Jack Golden:

Yeah. I would love to. So, we talk a lot at ACTA. And one of the things we look for in these gen ed programs is survey courses that are broad enough in scope as to give students a knowledge of the sweep of American history and institutions. One of the phrases we use a lot is working knowledge. And you market your podcast is one that's a survey, paraphrasing here, a survey of everything you need and want to know.

Jack Golden:

And so, my question for you is how would you articulate the mission? How do you understand the purpose behind your podcast? And who precisely is it for?

Greg Jackson:

Sure. It is a rigorously researched, exactly what you said. I give my little preamble, if you will, at the beginning of every episode, right? I'll spare it now. It does take 15, 20 seconds, but a rigorously research survey of American history. That's essentially what it is.

Greg Jackson:

I had the typical American in mind when I launched this podcast and I don't mean it is for elites. I don't mean that it's for people who are at the other end of the economic, social spectrum. It's for everyone. Though, I will perhaps say I had more the average American in mind. There's already plenty of stuff for well to do Americans and frankly, including college. I wanted to make this because I take great issue with the idea that everyone who goes to college is more intelligent than those who don't.

Greg Jackson:

A lot of that speaks to opportunity. And frankly, plumbers are making a lot more than a number of our graduates from institutions. So, it might speak to greater intelligence in some cases that someone says, trade school all the way. But, none of that negates the fact that as a representative government, if I can get a little Tommy Jefferson on you for a second, everyone who participates in the election process has to have a degree of education. And I don't mean a degree in it hangs on the wall. That's fine, nothing against that, but we need to understand who our nation is. What are our principles? How does our government function? How on earth can you have a good... How can you make good selections as to who you're going to put into those positions if you don't even understand what the position really is, how it's evolved, what it does?

Greg Jackson:

So, I think history is crucial to answering all of that. And I wanted to present all of this and in a very nonpartisan way. I have allergic reactions to partisanship. And in fact, I have friends on the left and right. Not that I don't have my own political views, but as an important mentor to me once said, you're not ready to debate until you can explain the other person's position so well, they would look at you and say, yes, that is exactly what I think and why.

Greg Jackson:

So, I hold myself to that standard. And I'll have episodes where I kick it to my more conservative or more liberal friends and say, hey, what are your thoughts? When you read this, what do you think I'm leaving out? Or what did I hit overly? And I'd say the majority of the time I usually just get, wow, well done, Greg. And I appreciate that. But, sometimes they've had important contributions where they said, this is part of why I think the way I do. And it doesn't mean I necessarily make the change. I'm the editor in chief at the end of the day. I'll take those edits as I will, but the vast majority of the time I end up going, wow, that's a great point. Okay, I've got to incorporate that.

Greg Jackson:

So, this is really meant for the American public, and it's not meant to tell anybody that they are right or that they are wrong. It is meant to help them have the basic tools they need to be able to engage, to know who we are as a people, and then to be able to have public discourse.

Doug Sprei:

Well, before I riff on... I have something to riff on drawing from what you just talked about, but I wanted to shoehorn in a little, just a quick question about the music.

Greg Jackson:

Sure.

Doug Sprei:

Because I'm a musician and actually helped create the music for our podcast. But, I was blown away to learn that you actually wrote the music. Did you perform it? How did that come about? And what's going on there with the music of History That Does Not Suck?

Greg Jackson:

Sure. So, you have a podcast, Doug. You know you can't watch podcast without a few things. And in the nitty gritty, that includes artwork that you got upload to iTunes. 15 by 15 at a minimum. And then you got to have a jingle to open things up. So yeah, that was me. I play guitar and bass the best. And I'm a hack on piano.

Doug Sprei:

Who's playing the violin?

Greg Jackson:

That's my sister.

Doug Sprei:

A family affair.

Greg Jackson:

Yeah. We're a very musical family. So, the original theme song, that's me on guitar and bass. Then that's my sister on violin. It's still the same theme song, but when I teamed up with Lindsay, he does my sound design now since my first sound designer, Josh, still a dear friend, but he moved on. And he was an amateur. And I mean that in the kindest, best ways, right? An amateur is someone who isn't trained. So, he was just doing his best with it.

Greg Jackson:

And I think he did a great job, but Lindsay's a professional. So, one of the things he suggested we do is that I permit him to do a new arrangement and that included bringing in all sorts of bells and whistles. So, my theme is definitely sill there, but I love what Lindsay... He just took it to the next level. The cello that's in the revamped version is actually played by a musician who tours with the Hamilton musical. I thought that was a fun, little connection. And then he composed the background music and continues to. He updates that on occasion.

Doug Sprei:

Yeah. Because there's actually background music during the whole story. It's not just an opening signature.

Greg Jackson:

Yeah.

Doug Sprei:

And so forth. So, I absolutely love it. And I suspected you played the guitar and bass and probably programmed the drums as well. Right?

Greg Jackson:

Yeah. Yeah. And I can hack on the drums as well, but that's...

Doug Sprei:

So, let me just. This is my last line of inquiry and Jack, if there's anything that you have to cap this off, then we'll end with you. But, a few minutes ago you just mentioned your version, which we share toward hyper partisanship. And it dawned on me, a mind bending question that I wanted to ask you. And I don't know what you'll think of this, but what would History That Doesn't Suck look like 25, 50, 75 years from now if you're making episodes about what's happening right now in America? Because we're at some incredible inflection point that maybe is rivaled by the Civil War time. I've never seen in my lifetime, the country this divided and it's quite alarming actually. And this is certainly historic times we're living in.

Doug Sprei:

I wonder can you open up your imagination if you were gifted to be able to create episodes about what we're living through now, how would you go about approaching it?

Greg Jackson:

Well, I'd approach it the same way I approach every single other era. That would mean reading what other scholars have concluded, coming to my own conclusions as well through primary sources. I would be reading and absorbing all the various news sources. Everything from MSNBC to Fox and so forth. And articulating what the different perspectives are, but I also think Doug, and this is where I might come across as a overly optimistic, almost candied esque figure, if you're up on your enlightenment French literature, but I'm absolutely aware of how divided we are as a nation.

Greg Jackson:

It's part of where I hope History That Doesn't Suck is something of a healing balm. And I've gotten those messages actually from families where they listen as a family and they doubt a real conservative and a real liberal in the family. And they came to better understanding with each other from listening.

Greg Jackson:

I think that we overstate our divisions. That, yes, the Civil War is... Forgive me, but you're just an idiot if you think this is the most divided we've ever been when there was an actual Civil War, right? So, most people can carve that out in their heads, but we suffer from the same, again, same species. We suffer from the same myopic view that every generation does in which they are convinced that they have at the hardest, that they have the most unique challenges and problems because there's just not willing to do the work and realize how similar the struggles were in other generations or the far greater challenges that were faced in other generations.

Greg Jackson:

I think that when we consider Jeffersonian Republicans literally murdering Federalists on the eve of the War of 1812, I pause and wonder, I don't know, maybe we're not that bad in the present or we are bad, but there have been some other pretty low points.

Greg Jackson:

We haven't had a presidential assassination attempt now in a number of decades. That's actually a pretty good run for us. If we don't only remember the successful assassinations, but all the attempted assassinations.

Greg Jackson:

So, I'm not trying to downplay what we're going through today. I actually mean this as there is still plenty of opportunity for dialogue because we have been here and we have been lower and we have bounced back as a even better version of ourselves than we were previously.

Greg Jackson:

I refuse to accept the idea that America's best days are behind it. That's only the case if we choose to make it that way. I think of Benjamin Franklin's words as so many people know coming out of the convention, right? What have you made? A Republic if you can keep it. That's the challenge for every generation. If we choose to keep it, we have a bright future still ahead of us.

Doug Sprei:

Wow. I think we share your view, your vision on that very much. And I just want to ask though when you're creating episodes now, is there an [inaudible] to Fox and MSNBC because you're going to use those as first... They're diametrically opposed to each other. They're just in different worlds.

Greg Jackson:

Yes.

Doug Sprei:

So, that might be some new vector to have to juggle.

Greg Jackson:

One of my biggest pet peeves in the present is the term fake news as though this is new. No. It is been going on... The Boston Massacre, before America was America. If you revisit, or if you haven't had the chance to listen to it yet, go to episode three.

Doug Sprei:

Okay.

Greg Jackson:

And you will notice that I share the Boston Massacre from two perspectives and this would perhaps be a really good example of what I would do if I were writing in the year 2060 about 2022. I share how this was an unfortunate policing incident, according to a London publication, which reports on the unhappy incident in Boston. That's how it's described. Then there's the Boston Gazette where it is a massacre, and with no disrespect to my own Patriot ancestors who fought in the revolution, I unabashedly

consider myself a Patriot. I love my country, but in some ways it's almost farcical that we convince ourselves that five people shot in an evening, in an engagement between two sides was a massacre.

Greg Jackson:

And the fact that they were let off by a jury of New England men should tell us that, maybe massacre is a bit strong of a word, right? You don't let people who commit massacres off as innocent or slash a little branding on the thumb. Please don't do it again. Now, go rejoin your regimen.

Greg Jackson:

So, we've had these ridiculously polar opposite news sources for time and [inaudible]... Yellow journalism is another fantastic example. How on earth can we claim that fake news is some new concept when we've got Hearst back at the turn of the century, a century ago. Allegedly, we actually don't have a source proving that he said this, but claiming that he would furnish the war through his journalism. Holy cow. And even if he didn't say it, he certainly... His actions lived up to that rhetoric.

Greg Jackson:

But again, I take this as a positive. If we've had these elements there the whole time, and yeah, we didn't have social media, right? That's a new version of things. And so, technology shifts, but we're the same species. And you can see that we've done these same things in repetitive patterns. And so, I find hope in that. If these imperfect predecessors of ours were able to deliver what they did to us then good grief. We too can push through our bickering, our partisanship, our misrepresented facts and deliver something even greater to the next generation.

Doug Sprei:

Well, thanks for that. And since my good colleague Jack here at ACTA was the spark plug for us approaching you in this whole episode, I'm going to let him have the concluding chord, the last question or however we want to bring the conversation to a close. So, Jack you go right for it.

Jack Golden:

Yeah. Thank you. Weaving some of the things you've been talking about over the course of this conversation together. I'm thinking about an idea that Lincoln had about national unity before he was even president, as a wig. And he spent a lot of time writing about how our unity doesn't find the same basis that a lot of other nations do. We don't have a common ethnicity. We don't have a common shared history even, but that it's our common conception of justice and our aspirations to form a more perfect union, to call in that thing you were talking about at the beginning of the episode.

Jack Golden:

So, just weaving those together. You're talking about all of the sorts of things that make me interested in getting involved in education and being part of educating each new generation in the future. And so, I guess the last question I have for you, and this might be a very difficult one for you to answer having over 100 episodes in the tank, but what episode or what moment in U.S. history, if you had to pick one, the must know, the must take away pivot from History That Doesn't Suck. What's the episode someone has to go listen to?

Greg Jackson:

Oh my gosh, Jack.

Doug Sprei:

[inaudible] questions.

Greg Jackson:

Wow. The number one.

Jack Golden:

If it's easier, you can absolutely just answer the one you're most proud of. I got to twist the knife a little bit and say, all right, you got to pick one. What should someone listen to?

Greg Jackson:

Okay. I'm going to give you an answer and I'm going to caveat that this is an off the cuff response that perhaps would change with greater reflection. But, I appreciate you pushing me on this. One episode. Okay. I'm going to say either the episode on the Constitutional Convention, which I think was 15. Yeah. Forgive me. It gets a little hard to remember the exact numbers with over 100 of them. Or it's going to be episode one. And the reason for that is there is so much myth and lore that feeds right into our present surrounding our founding. We sometimes grab some stuff from, what I'll just deem the middle, right? From Washington's presidency, which frankly, most people have no clue what really happened then. And I get it. It's okay. I don't mean that in a judgey way.

Greg Jackson:

But, from there right up to the present. We will occasionally grab some stuff, but really the lore is in our foundational myths as with any nation culture. You name it. And so, I think there is perhaps a greater need for us to be clear on our understanding of our origin than perhaps any other point.

Greg Jackson:

The Constitutional Convention episode, I go into detail on the fighting, the bickering, the people who charge out of the room, the people who say this is a treasonous conversation to begin with, but we have no power to go beyond the federal scheme, as they call it. The word federal's about to change in its meaning.

Greg Jackson:

So, it really shows how even this constitution that today is revered. Frankly, I reverence it not because I think it came out the gate perfect, but wow, it came out pretty good for its historical context. And they were smart enough to say, we know we've probably botched something so here's article five. Here's how you're going to fix stuff.

Greg Jackson:

I think all that's there, but also episode one where we get to the most mythical of mythical beings, the unicorn of the American experience. It's the early story of young George Washington. Who is barely even a historical figure for most. He's been turned into either this Rambo figure who is apparently a brilliant general, though he wasn't. He was a so-so general who always had the right answers or he's this

overstated elite who was selected because he just had the right everything for political machinations and neither of those are accurate.

Greg Jackson:

And in episode one, we meet this insecure, trying, ambitious but insecure, unsure of himself kid who just gets demolished by the French and learn some very hard lessons. And while it might not teach any sort of civic lesson, the way that say the constitution episode does, I think it's a moment where you get very raw and real with George Washington and realize, oh my gosh, this poor guy. He's as clueless as anyone else. He was as insecure as anyone else about what's coming tomorrow. He thought his career was over at age 22. If this guy who can end up on Mount Rushmore had those insecurities, maybe I'm not doing so bad myself.

Doug Sprei:

Well, you know what? I'm going to just... A bonus wrap up, very quick, forward looking question. What can we expect in the weeks and months ahead from History That Doesn't Suck?

Greg Jackson:

Sure. So, I am, right this very minute, you who are Zooming with me. You see my home office here. Yeah. The books that are open. Books on the shelves.

Doug Sprei:

I want one of those mugs behind you, by the way.

Greg Jackson:

Tell you what, you give me your address, I'll send you one. Everyone else can go to HTDspodcast.com and buy theirs, but we've bonded. You too, Jack.

Doug Sprei:

I'll arm wrestle Jack about that.

Greg Jackson:

Perfect.

Jack Golden:

Fantastic.

Greg Jackson:

I'm working on an Ellis Island slash immigration episode. That's the one I'll be recording next. The next one you'll hear though. It's already recorded and it's in the excellent hands of Airship with Lindsay and the crew. That's our last Teddy Roosevelt focused episode. So, this is big stick diplomacy. We're going to talk about the Roosevelt corollary and we're going to spend half that episode just building the incredible engineering feat that is the Panama Canal.

Greg Jackson:

And then we're pushing through some more progressive era social issues. So, we'll have an episode on basically the experience of Black America in the progressive era where we're going to go ahead and do the 19th amendment because there's so much important women's history before World War I. Even if the amendment doesn't come until after the fact. We're going to go fly at Kitty Hawk. We're going to make some model T's. And then it's time to get into the trenches. We'll hit World War One.

Doug Sprei:

Well, Professor Greg, I can't overstate how delighted we have been to spend this time with you. Honestly, it's just been so great to have you. And thank you so much for your time and for sharing with us on Higher Ed Now. And really fulfilling this young guy's vision of having a podcast with you. You made it happen and we're both very grateful.

Greg Jackson:

It's my absolute pleasure. Thanks to both of you for having me.