

Scene on Radio

Rich Man's Revolt (Season 4, Episode 1): Transcript

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/rich-mans-revolt/>

[MUSIC: In the Dark]

Erin Burnett, CNN: The reality of this is that the president's apparent disregard for the rule of law has been a theme....

Max Boot, CNN: This is in fact a violation of our democratic norms, the separation of powers, and there's so many other norms that President Trump....

Amal Clooney: And today, the country of James Madison has a leader who vilifies the media, making honest journalists all over the world more vulnerable to abuse.

Mitch McConnell: One of my proudest moments was when I looked at Barack Obama in the eye and I said, Mr. President, you will not fill this Supreme Court vacancy. **[Cheers]**

John Biewen: In the last few years, powerful people have assaulted some of the basic practices of democracy in unusually brazen ways. In a bunch of countries, and certainly in the United States. Millions of Americans don't seem to mind. I mean, things have gotten pretty nuts out there.

Steve Bannon: Woman in the back there.

Woman: I just want to say this.

Steve Bannon: Yes, ma'am.

Woman: Never in my life did I think I would like to see a dictator. But if there's gonna be one, I want it to be Trump! **[applause]**

John Biewen: In the U.S., the question of whether our republic would survive came back as a real topic of discussion. In launching a formal impeachment process against Trump, Democratic Party leaders evoked the small 'd' word, again and again.

John Lewis: The future of our democracy is at stake!

Nancy Pelosi: What is at stake in all of this is nothing less than our democracy.

John Biewen: Our democracy. What do we mean by American democracy? In the mainstream national discourse we talk about it with reverence, but maybe because we do, we don't often question it or examine its assumptions. For some people, saving democracy means getting back to the way things were, say, in 2015. When people in power played by the rules most of the time. When things were normal.

Elijah Cummings: We have got to get back to normal!

Joe Biden: This is not who we are. This is not who we are!

John Biewen: But, yeah ... no. Those who've listened to this show will know we're gonna take a more critical look than that. We're gonna say yesterday's "normal" was not good enough. Sure, democracy in America is in crisis today. But isn't it fair to ask: When was it not?

John Biewen: Hey Chenjerai.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Hey John, what's going on, man?

John Biewen: We're back. [Both laugh]

Chenjerai Kumanyika: That's right.

John Biewen: So, I've got a question to start us off, a question for you. On a scale of 1 to 10, how patriotic are you?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: (Laughs.) Seriously? Like... Come on, man. Zero!

You know me.

John Biewen: I'm shocked and my feelings are hurt.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. And I want to be clear, like, I don't think being patriotic makes anybody a bad person. Like I really, this country means a lot of things to a lot of people. And I've seen people get their citizenship, and that's really moving in certain ways. But if you're asking *me*, Chenjerai? No. No. Patriotic about what?

John Biewen: So would it be fair to say you're about as patriotic as Frederick Douglass was feeling when he gave that famous speech, What to the Slave is the Fourth of July? ...

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, exactly. Just read that speech and that's me.

John Biewen: That kind of captures it.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: But I mean, so I think, yeah, a lot of people get that America has some deep problems of oppression and exploitation built in early on. But it's kind of like, I think it gets more complicated, even for me, when you say exactly what was the thing that was wrong. When you try to really name it, you know what I'm saying?

John Biewen: Yeah, I mean with all of the work that historians have done that a lot of us have learned, including things that we've talked about on this podcast, really, no thoughtful person anymore would say that the United States gave equal rights to everybody at the beginning. That's easy. Huge swaths of the population were not only excluded but were profoundly victimized by this country. But then again, if you just say that, that sort of suggests that that was the main problem with American democracy, or the

only problem. That it was a problem of inclusion, who was and who wasn't allowed in the building, so to speak.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: It's funny because I think about some of the universities I've been in where they're like, where they have like a diversity and inclusion initiative. And I'm looking at their slave roots and going, wow, there was a lot of black people included, formerly, on this land. [Laughs.] But I grew up learning that, yeah, okay, people were excluded from America -- poor people, women, black folks, indigenous people. But somehow, you know, America was still this exemplary, unprecedented model of democracy, and therefore, even with those flaws, it was somehow still a force for justice in human history. And that really our work today is still just about, it's kind of like it is, inclusion. Right? In *Seeing White* we talked about inequality was kind of like baked in, and exploitation was baked in. You know? And the more I learn, I just have this sense that it's not just about inclusion, but actually something about the nature of the project.

John Biewen: So, not just who was allowed in but the very structure of the building itself, to use that metaphor again. So I think that's in a way what we're gonna be looking at in this series, is sort of like, in its deepest DNA, including in our founding documents, how democratic is the United States? And how democratic has it ever been?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. Well let's do it.

[MUSIC: Algiers, "The Underside of Power"]

John Biewen: I'm John Biewen, producer and host of *Scene on Radio*.

And yes that was Dr. Chenjerai Kumanyika, media scholar at Rutgers, activist, artist, and podcaster. Welcome to Season 4. We're calling the season *The Land That Never Has Been Yet*. We're gonna take a hard, fresh look at democracy in the U.S., such as it is. We'll do lots of history, and tell a bunch of stories that shed light on this question: Are anti-democratic forces as central to the American project as democratic ones?

I've spent a year researching, traveling and reporting, and I've interviewed a truly stellar lineup of people, with input from Chenjerai and our editor, Loretta Williams. Like in our Season 2 series, *Seeing White*, Chenjerai's gonna join me each episode to help make sense of it all. We'll hear from him again later in this episode.

[MUSIC: Algiers: Because I've seen the underside of power / and it's a game that can't go on....]

John Biewen: Here in part one: The American Revolution. What was it really about? Was it about democracy ... or something else?

The first thing to remind ourselves, though: Long before 1776, there *were* societies – complex, richly developed, self-governing societies – on this land. And I don't want to just acknowledge that and move on. What can the indigenous cultures of this continent teach us? For one thing, by helping us to see more clearly, by way of contrast, the society that those European colonial settlers built here.

[Sound of walking]

Davy Arch: Hey Karen. **[Karen:** Hey Davy.] This is Karen George. She's a master weaver and is doing a style of weaving that we did precontact.

Karen George: This is gonna be a belt or a sash, however they want to wear it. And this, it's like squares within squares and it's called a spider's web.

John Biewen: We're on a wooded hillside in the Great Smoky Mountains, in what's now called western North Carolina.

Davy Arch: Before she had glass beads like these that she's weaving in, she would have been using shell beads and stone beads, and I've seen beads made from clay.

John Biewen: Davy Arch is showing me around. He's 62, a master artist, folklorist, and storyteller. His graying hair hangs in a braid down his back. He's a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee and he's lived all his life here in Cherokee, North Carolina.

John Biewen: What's the water we're hearing?

Davy Arch: It's a branch that comes off the mountain here. And water runs all over these mountains, it's constant.

John Biewen: Other members of the Eastern Band of Cherokee demonstrate traditional basket making, wood carving, pottery. It's all meant to evoke a Cherokee town in the year 1750.

Davy Arch: This is the Oconaluftee Indian Village, and it's operated by the Cherokee Historical Association. And when I was sixteen I started working here as an artist. I set and made arrowheads all summer that summer.

[birds chirping]

Davy: This building is built to represent what a house would have looked like in pre-contact times. They would set a row of poles up,

usually on about a twenty by twenty square, or in an octagon about the same size....

John Biewen: Davy shows me the other traditional buildings on the site: A sweat lodge. The dance grounds...

Davy Arch: And this is where the prayers would have taken place....

John Biewen: And, finally, the council house. It's a big, seven-sided building with several rows of seats, like bleachers, that ring the room.

Davy Arch: The clans would be sitting in here, and sometimes it was everybody in the village. Usually these houses were large enough that the entire population could get inside the town house, or the council house.

John Biewen: This is where the important decisions got made in Cherokee communities. Davy tells me the people would seat themselves according to their clans.

Davy Arch: In each community, there would usually be a council of seven women, one from each of the seven clans. These were the elder women and they ruled the roost. I mean, their word was law.

John Biewen: Sometimes the decisions were about war and peace. If the community decided to wage war, a male war chief would be appointed to take the lead. In peacetime, a different male chief would serve. The peace chief was not the decider; his job was to execute the community's decisions – decisions reached through consensus, which might take days or weeks.

Davy Arch: So this was how the government worked. And it drove the Europeans nuts when they came in and tried to do business with us. They might have to sit for a month and listen to all the councils, all

the children, all the, everybody, you know, say whether or not they wanted to do business with this trader, or something, and then at the end of the month they'd decide they didn't want to do business with them. [chuckles]

John Biewen: Those who carried the most influence were the seven clan elders, who, Davy points out, were also mothers and grandmothers. They stood to lose husbands and sons in any fighting.

Davy Arch: So when they were sitting in on council to decide whether or not to participate in battle or war, they took that into consideration, which created balance. That was our whole objective as human beings was to create balance, and *be* in balance with our surroundings and everything else, so, by these women taking part in the decision-making....

[MUSIC]

John Biewen: By 1750 the Cherokee people had already been in sporadic contact with European explorers and settlers for two hundred years. The worst would come later, under the flag of the United States. The genocidal Trail of Tears of the late 1830s, the government's "removal" of the tribe to Oklahoma Territory, took the lives of some four thousand Cherokee people, from hunger, cold, and disease. Davy Arch and the 16 thousand enrolled members of the Eastern Band are descended from those who returned to the mountains, or never left.

Barbara Duncan: Some hid in the woods. And there was kind of a network, a resistance network, supporting them, carrying food to them, telling them where the army was, telling them where to hide, where to go. And there were people who walked back from Oklahoma. And so those people are, as people here say, the grandmas and grandpas of the Eastern Band.

John Biewen: Barbara Duncan is a folklorist and author who recently retired after twenty-three years with the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, here in Cherokee. She's a European American like me. I asked her, based on her lifelong study of the tribe's history and culture, how she sees traditional Cherokee society compared to the one our European ancestors built here.

John Biewen: There are phrases that we love to use in describing what we think of as our form of democracy, like 'government of the people, by the people, and for the people.' Which of those two systems would you say better fits that description?

Barbara Duncan: Well I would have to say the Cherokee system. I think that, as a woman I look at....

John Biewen: She starts by pointing out that, unlike women in colonial America or the early U.S., Cherokee women had an equal say in decision-making.

Barbara Duncan: One of the things that you find over and over again in the 1700s, as the Cherokees go to these meetings to make treaties and agreements about trade and alliances, military alliances, they keep asking the British, where are your women? And for the Cherokees, for any agreement to be binding, the women had to participate in the decisions.

John Biewen: Barbara says Cherokee culture had much more respect for individual choice. For example, there was no shame, or penalty, if a warrior decided not to fight a battle he didn't believe in. And, she says, the Cherokee and other Indigenous tribes in North America shared a very different social contract than the one imported from Europe.

Barbara Duncan: If you look at the southeast and you look at the accounts and the archaeology, you can see that every town had a storehouse that was for the common good. And everybody would contribute some of their garden, or their crops, or their, you know, the results of their hunting – their meat, their skins, their furs – would become part of this common storehouse which the chiefs and the clan mothers could distribute if people were sick, if people were poor, if somebody came to visit. So there was this concern for the common good that was built into the culture.

[Music]

John Biewen: European settlers noticed this, that Native tribes made sure everyone got fed without question. And Barbara says untold thousands of settlers, especially those struggling to get by, defected and joined Native communities and were welcomed. By contrast, European culture, at least as defined by its elite classes?

Barbara Duncan: Our culture is based on acquiring things, acquiring more things than other people, and getting to the top of this hierarchy, which is how we see everything. And we can see this in our traditional stories, right? If we look at our folktales, which are not some ancient thing from the Brothers Grimm but also still very much alive today in Disney movies. For the stories with Jack – Jack is the main character who goes out to seek his fortune. Happy ending for Jack is that he marries the princess and has a pot of gold. And so, you know, it's elevating your social status and getting money. There is not a single Cherokee story or American Indian story that ends like that. That is not a happy ending in American Indian stories. The happy ending in American Indian stories is that somebody learns a lesson that helps them get along with people.

John Biewen: So what did Cherokee people, from what we know and what the record says and so on, what did they make of the Europeans at contact?

Davy Arch: It was interesting. A lot of really comical, just, remarks came from observing Europeans all through time. They were filthy people, you know. Stunk and, you know, lived with their animals, and you know just did crazy stuff. [Laughs.] Then my grandfather would love to quote Drowning Bear, the chief of Kituwa at the time of the Removal. He had been read the book of Matthew out of the New Testament, asked him what he thought of it. He said it's a wonderful thing. He said it's a shame the white man is no better off for having it for so long. [Laughs]

[MUSIC]

[BREAK]

[Hubbub, kids' voices. Rob Shenk: What part of Ohio?]

Teen 1: We're from Salina, it's kind of a small town.

Teen 2: It is a small town, not kinda.

Rob Shenk: Well thanks for coming to Mt. Vernon today, hope you're enjoying your visit....

Teens: Yeah ... We are.

Musician, Don Francisco: This is a nice little song, called "The Soldier's Joy." [Plays fife]

Mt. Vernon staffer: So, I'm gonna send you guys forward inside the house, take pictures if you want to, try to turn off your flash. If you have any gum, you're gonna pass by that trash can, that's where it's gonna go.... [Sound of hubbub, teens' voices...]

John Biewen: It's the spring, school tour season at Mount Vernon, George Washington's estate and slave labor camp in northern Virginia. High school and middle school students roam the lawn next to the 21-room mansion on that high bluff overlooking the Potomac River.

Rob Shenk: I'm Rob Shenk, I'm the senior vice president for visitor engagement here at George Washington's Mount Vernon.

John Biewen: And it's a *beautiful* Tuesday morning in the spring...

Rob Shenk: It is. I mean, look at that, come over here. You can see, I know maybe you can't see it on the radio, but you can see this beautiful view that Washington created here, on purpose. He, like many men of his age, fancied himself a landscape architect, so he's purposely building an experience here by these carriage paths that would lead you in and out of the wilderness and showing you these distant views of his beautiful home here on the banks of the Potomac. So it was all by design and kind of this interesting melding of both nature and kind of refinement.

John Biewen: The property feels big and sprawling, with its many gardens and the bowling green and slave quarters. But the estate is a fraction of what it was when Washington was here.

Rob Shenk: That's right, so we have around 500 acres left of Washington's plantation here at Mount Vernon. At its height it was around 7,500 acres and fashioned into five different farms. We're standing at what he would have called Mansion House Farm. It's the most formal, it's his home. It's where the light trade and industry would have been located, but surrounded by four really working farms that were producing all sorts of agricultural output.

John Biewen: George Washington, the Father of our Country, as we like to say, the general who won the Revolutionary War and became the first president of the United States. And yes, the owner of several hundred captive human beings.

[Outside sound, fairly quiet]

John Biewen: I look in on the men's slave quarters, in a low-slung building not far from the mansion. There's a row of bare wooden bunkbeds. A guide is explaining to guests that the food ration the enslaved workers received was not enough to keep them alive and healthy.

Woman, off-mic: They would grow their own. So after they got done with, you know, their day's labor they had to go and....

Man: Tend to their own garden? [inaudible, crosstalk]

Woman: Yeah.

Man: Hmm.

John Biewen: She's saying, the captive laborers had gardens of their own that they tended after hours.

Another aspect of Washington that's not stressed in most American classrooms is his tremendous wealth. He was an English gentleman, fourth-generation American gentry, one of the very richest men in the colonies at the time of the Revolution—thanks in part to his wife's inherited wealth, which was even greater than his own. Here's Rob Shenk again.

Rob Shenk: Washington, early in his life in particular, is a very ambitious man. He is trying to establish himself, establish his wealth in this new country. I mean, really, the wealth is how you kind of climb the social ladders for the most part. And Washington, much like his father and much like the other Virginia elite, are all very much focused on land speculation. Land is how you gain wealth in this new world. By the time of his, really at the height of his life, he owns around *52-thousand* acres, 81 square miles. And this is in Virginia, far western Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky. This is in Pennsylvania. This is in New York. He is acquiring land at a pretty aggressive clip to try to essentially build his economic portfolio.

[MUSIC]

John Biewen: These were, uh, these were not average people.

Woody Holton: No. And I wrote my dissertation at Duke back in 1990 and I thought I had a pretty clever title for it, which was “The Revolt of the Ruling Class.” Because that's who they were. The vast majority of the names that we know from the revolutionary era were elites.

John Biewen: Woody Holton is a historian at the University of South Carolina.

Woody Holton: And my specialty is the American Revolutionary era, but specializing in the people who are not on the back of the two-dollar bill. That is, Native Americans, women, African-Americans, and

how they influenced the famous people like Jefferson and Washington.

John Biewen: For Holton, the starting point for understanding the revolution, and why it happened, is to recognize this: A lot of its leaders were people sort of like George Washington – wealthy Southern planters and slaveholders. And most of the rest were rich business people and lawyers from places like New England and Pennsylvania.

Woody Holton: And so it was always a vexing question for me. Why would the people at the top of the hierarchy, why would they be the ones starting a revolution?

John Biewen: Why, indeed. A lot of revolutions, down through history, have been class-based, bottom-up affairs. Poor and working people overthrowing the rich elite. Often to escape desperation and to get better compensation for their back-breaking and sometimes life-threatening work.

The American revolution was really not that. So, how to answer Woody's vexing question? For starters, he says, most of America's founders were not originally spoiling for a split with Britain. As late as the fall of 1774, he says, people like Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson are pissed off, but not yet in full-on rebellion.

Woody Holton: They are protesting the British but they do not want independence. Really, what they want is conservative. That is, they want to turn back the clock to how things had been in 1763, before parliament tried to tax them and regulate their trade in ways that it hadn't before, and limit their western expansion. So all they want to do—it's the British that are taking the initiative and trying to change the relationship between the colony and the Crown.

John Biewen: To make sense of this, we need to back up to before that important date Woody mentioned, 1763. And George Washington, the

colonial settler on the make, is part of the story. Let's go back to Mount Vernon and Rob Shenk.

Rob Shenk: I think, you know, many Americans today know the George Washington on the one-dollar bill. They know the old, crotchety George Washington. I think fewer people know and appreciate the young, athletic, ambitious, action-adventure hero Washington.

John Biewen: In the 1750s the young Washington, just in his twenties, is already a high-ranking military officer, thanks in part to his family connections. He's fighting in the Seven Years War, also known as the French and Indian War. It's a war between the British and the French to claim large chunks of North America. The British colonies don't have much money to pay soldiers, so they promise them land for their service.

Rob Shenk: Washington and other members of the Virginia Militia are granted significant landholdings out in what would be the Ohio country. Now, if you know the history of the French and Indian War, the British, after this tremendous victory over the French, are confronted with enormous debts, more than they know what to deal with. They've put all this money and treasure into securing North America. And they're fearful of kind of a continuance of low-level violence, particularly on the part of Native Americans on the frontier. So they issue, the King issues this proclamation, the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which essentially says, you know, no, we don't want you Americans to travel and settle beyond the Appalachians. That will only incite Indian revolts, which we don't have the money or troops to put down....

John Biewen: The proclamation is also designed to keep the American colonists close to the coast, so they'll remain dependent on the Brits for trade.

Rob Shenk: Washington and many other Virginians are incensed over this.

John Biewen: The decree frustrates the plans of Washington and some of his fellow elite Virginians, says Woody Holton. They wanted to profit from their western property, but now they can't sell it.

Woody Holton: You know, same way that if you're selling your car now, you can't sell me your car unless you've got the title. And they couldn't get title on the land, people like Washington and Jefferson, Madison, who were speculating in that western land, they couldn't get title to it until they, until the Proclamation of 1763 was repealed. And it was never repealed. The only thing that repealed it was the American Revolution.

John Biewen: So yes, we hear about the Stamp Act of 1765, and the tax on tea and other essentials two years later, which led to the Boston Tea Party – all that stuff that angered the American Patriots in the following years. But many historians argue the Proclamation of 1763 was an important early break in the relationship between the British Crown and leading American colonists like Washington and Jefferson.

Woody Holton: It was their single largest source of income, other than marrying rich widows, which you only get to do once, unless you become a widower. Other than that, it was their single largest source of income and the British cut it off. And so we know that was one of the things that drove them into the revolution.

[MUSIC]

John Biewen: Woody says later, in the 1770s, as the colonists protested this and other British restrictions, events tumbled forward and got beyond

the control of these conservative elites. In his book, *Forced Founders*, Holton writes about another group of people who helped shove the so-called patriots toward revolution, a group usually described as passive and helpless in our traditional telling of the revolution.

Woody Holton: Enslaved people were attentive enough to what was going on—they had to be—that they knew that a conflict between whites was coming. And within that they spotted opportunity for themselves.

John Biewen: In late 1774, the protests and rhetoric were heating up in the colonies. Some enslaved black people approached Virginia's governor, Lord Dunmore, who was loyal to the British Crown. They offered to help his side, the British side, against the American rebels.

Woody Holton 'Here we are, man. Put us to work. We'll fight for your freedom, we know you need labor because there's very few loyalists,

especially in Virginia, among whites. So we're gonna be your black loyalist army, and in return for that you'll give us our freedom.' And Governor Dunmore turned them away. But they kept coming.

John Biewen: Finally, a year later, in late 1775, Dunmore took up the enslaved people on their offer, and formed what he called the Ethiopian Regiment, made up of about 200 men who'd escaped from slave camps. They helped win a battle, defeating a colonial militia and capturing two rebel colonels – one of the men they captured was the former owner of a soldier in the Ethiopian Regiment. If that weren't enough of an insult, Lord Dunmore issued an emancipation proclamation, offering freedom to any slaves who could manage to escape from their masters and join the British.

Woody Holton: And that alliance infuriated the white colonists and really became the thing that turned these people—remember, I said they were just protesters. Now they're not just protesting, now they're not just trying to turn back the clock and make the British Empire the

way it was before. That's added an emotional content. They now want out of the empire and that becomes their reason for wanting to declare independence.

[MUSIC]

John Biewen: Some of the strongest evidence of that anger can be found in Thomas Jefferson's first draft of the Declaration of Independence, written in June of 1776.

Thomas Jefferson, Declaration "Original Draught": ...the Christian King of Great Britain, determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold....

John Biewen: In that draft, Jefferson writes a long paragraph in which, weirdly, he blames the King for slavery in the colonies. Remember,

Jefferson is a major slaveholder. He also writes this, a clear reference to Lord Dunmore's emancipation proclamation.

Thomas Jefferson, original draught: ...he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which *he* has deprived them, by murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them...

John Biewen: "Obtruded" -- meaning, the Crown forced African slaves upon the innocent white colonists, and is now encouraging those enslaved people to once again victimize their masters by attacking them.

Woody Holton: The reference to slaves is by far the biggest of the grievances. It's the only one where he uses all caps. It's the last, and you know they saved the best for last rhetorically in those days. Jefferson is just screaming that this is the premier, the capstone grievance against the British.

John Biewen: In the final draft of the Declaration, all that's left of this passage is a brief reference, saying the King "has excited domestic insurrections amongst us." The rest got cut out because some signers of the Declaration objected to Jefferson's florid denunciation of slavery, a practice they intended to continue. So, back to Woody Holton's question: Why did these rich men, the most comfortable people in Colonial America, come to lead a revolution?

Woody Holton: Trying to understand the mind of this paradoxical figure, the elite revolutionary. You know, if you really forced me, which I'd rather not be forced, to put the motives of the American Revolution into a single phrase, it would be resistance to British meddling. Meddling in, not just general meddling, but meddling in those relationships, especially relationships between the gentry and the slaves, and earlier than that the gentry relationship with Native Americans.

[MUSIC]

John Biewen: So, yes, Woody says, the American Patriots had a legitimate beef with the British government about taxation without representation, the main spark of the Revolution that we hear about in history class. But he argues the Revolution would not have happened if not for these other British moves that infuriated the colonists: actions like the Royal Proclamation that stopped land speculation in western Native territory, and the later effort to lure enslaved black people over to the British side.

Woody Holton: We have to be capacious enough in our own thinking to see that the people like Jefferson and Washington and Franklin and Hancock, who rebelled against the British, were doing it for a complex set of motives, some of which we would really admire and others of which we would not.

John Biewen: And how much of it was about, ‘We want to create a democracy. We want to be free so we can create a democracy on these shores.’

Woody: None. None on the part of most elites. I mean, I think there were some idealistic dreamers. I think Jefferson had *some* tendencies that way and would have more. You know, they were reading enlightenment writers, especially Montesquieu. Um....

[MUSIC]

John Biewen: Woody says men like Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were broadly interested in democratic ideas — more so than guys like Hamilton and Washington, who really were not. But he says what drove the elite revolutionaries was a desire to gain freedom from British meddling, and the ability of the colonies to govern themselves. But that did not mean giving

regular people in these new states—even white men, let alone anyone else
—a lot more say in governing America.

[MUSIC: Cyanide]

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Hey, John.

John Biewen: Hey.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yo, when you were younger, did you have things that you kind of revered, as a child? But now you look at it and you're like, ah, maybe not.

John Biewen: Well, the first thing that comes to mind, if you're talking about my childhood and the word reverence, we'd be talking about pro athletes. Those were the people, those were my heroes. They were kind of, a little bit more than human I would say.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. They just kind of walked on the clouds, right? But I mean in some ways, athletes do do amazing things, so you

were probably on better ground than me. I mean I sort of, I think I revered *Star Wars*.

John Biewen: Okay.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And other movies that were, I mean, to me it was like almost religious, it was just the greatest accomplishment of human...

John Biewen: Human civilization.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. And I think, when I look back on it, what I realize is, the weirdest thing is, I think I wasn't seeing *Star Wars* very clearly at that point because I was revering it, although I was watching it all the time. You know, and I think that's kind of how the founding of this country is in a way, is that we've held it up in such a light that although we're looking at it, sometimes we can't really see it.

John Biewen: Yeah. And I would go a step further and say that we also don't even really look at it much. Not even in the same way that we do—in a country that really doesn't, famously, doesn't think about history all that

much. But at least, you know, like, the Civil War, we have kind of live debates about what it meant and why it happened. Not really with the revolution. We just, we all think we know, we tend to think we know what it was about and that it was this great and glorious thing that happened.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right.

John Biewen: So even you take something like the phrase, “All men are created equal” from the Declaration of Independence. And people have attached tremendous meaning to that phrase, that it's almost this short stand-in for what this whole country says it's about and wants to be about. But if you look at what Thomas Jefferson even meant when he wrote those words—Woody Holton and I talked about this, and he thinks that it was kind of, in part, an opening rhetorical flourish of a sort. It was sort of like these Enlightenment ideas were out there, in the air. And he kind of grabbed this idea because it's going to, at the very top of the statement, it's going to make this whole thing sound really noble and lofty. So that was part of what he thinks he was up to. But then in another way, in a more kind of concrete way, what is really meant, it seems, by those words is, Jefferson is saying, hey, King of England, guys like me and Washington and Ben Franklin and

all these guys, who are just kind of rich white guys but we're not actual nobility or royalty, you know what? We're as good as you are. And we have the right to govern ourselves.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, I mean....

John Biewen: Which was a radical statement at that time but it wasn't....

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, but it was about them.

John Biewen: Exactly.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And other people were not really included in the Declaration, even though we try to act like they were later. But what I found really interesting about Woody Holton's kind of analysis was that it wasn't only about who was included in the Declaration, but actually what kind of document the Declaration is.

John Biewen: Yeah, and one thing he said to me in our interview was, he said, and this is based on the work of other historians, but he said he's

been convinced that the Declaration was really more of a secession document than it was a revolutionary document.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Mmmm. Yeah. Well, that's interesting because kind of like the Civil War secession document,

John Biewen: Yeah, it evokes the Civil War, doesn't it.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: You use the, you have the language of sovereignty, freedom, and rights, all those things, in the Declaration of Independence. But the question becomes, freedom to what? The right to what? So in a weird way, it is sort of like the Confederacy secession from the U.S. in 1861.

John Biewen: Yeah. So. So really, in a way, what the founders of the United States were saying is, we don't want to be part of this club anymore, the British Empire. Because you're imposing rules on us that we don't like, rules that impinge on our ability to do the stuff we've been doing, which, well, is to exploit and subjugate these people that we're holding captive.

And of course, underlying that is the message, you're eating into our business opportunities and our profits.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So typically we draw this big distinction between the Confederacy and American founders. Right. And they were quite different. I mean, to be historically accurate, they're different. But there are these areas of overlap. And I think it's important to really kind of confront that and drag the founding out of this glorious light if you really want to see some of these underlying economic and white supremacist relations.

John Biewen: And another way that historians now talk about the American Revolution was to make a distinction about, what kind of revolution was it? And to say that it was a political revolution.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. And it was, I mean, it certainly shuffled who was in charge over here. But, you know, the American Revolution was never going to deliver freedom or economic equality for women, for enslaved Africans, indigenous people, and people who didn't have property. And I think, by my count, that's most of the people in the country.

John Biewen: Exactly.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So, for example, I think about the enslaved black people who went to Lord Dunmore and said, look, we just want to be free. So if that means we've got to fight for you, we're willing to do that, you know, to fight for the British. And I think that's important because for one, we get to see black people fighting in the Revolutionary War. And we get to see black people as actual agents of history. But even more importantly, what this shows us is the ways that black freedom has always meant pushing beyond national identity and patriotism and some idea of being a good citizen, certainly as it was defined back then.

John Biewen: And in that context, it seems entirely understandable, right, that black folk were not going to give up a possible opportunity to pursue their freedom—why? In order to be loyal to America? First of all, which didn't really even exist then, but also was not promising freedom to black people any more than Britain was.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. So it's like, you know, to me it's kind of damned if you do and damned if you don't. You know, you had the black

people who fought on the British side to get their freedom, and that was condemned. But then there was another set of enslaved black people who were forced to fight on the American side against the British, but they were doing that with the expectation on the part of their masters that they would return back to slavery after the revolution was done.

John Biewen: Before we go, though, I also want to back up to the beginning of the episode and our visit to the Cherokee Village and the way we looked at Cherokee society and governance. You know, in our white-dominated American society, when we talk about the founding of the United States, we talk almost entirely about what got *created*, when folks who look like me came over here and built this new country. And this wondrous thing that those demigods, really, Washington and Jefferson and so on, what they built.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Well, you know, gods create things, right? But I guess they also destroy things, when you really think about it. And we probably don't talk about that enough.

John Biewen: We don't talk about it enough. And maybe the most important thing that got destroyed, of course, was many, many actual lives. By some estimates, tens of millions of indigenous people died from disease and genocide in the several centuries' process that led to the creation and the founding of the United States.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And in the few places where we try to begin to reckon with that, we do focus on the lives, and we should. But what also was destroyed were the political systems and possible futures that come from different ways of living together, different ways of governing, that were offered by indigenous people, really in a lot of places in the world and certainly here.

John Biewen: Yeah. And the point of this is not to romanticize indigenous people or to say that they were, you know, these perfectly and magically enlightened people. And in fact, even some of those details about the Cherokee -- there were five hundred, more than five hundred native tribes in what is now the United States. Not all were matrilineal or consensus-based like the Cherokee were, although many were. But the point is to say that indigenous folk had working systems for governing themselves that

they'd developed over millennia. And they had at least as much to teach us colonizers, and maybe more, about how to live together, than the other way around.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Of course, oppression and class struggle exists in every society, but in some ways, you know, the indigenous societies on this land were more democratic and more free than we are to this day.

[Theme music]

John Biewen: Chenjerai Kumanyika. Next time.... the United States really got its governing structure in the late 1780s, with the Constitution. How democratic was the Constitution, or not, and really, what were the framers up to? What were the real motives behind the writing of *that* founding document?

Our editor on the series is Loretta Williams. Music consulting and production help by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. Our theme music, *The Underside of Power*, is by Algiers. Other music this season by John Erik Kaada, Eric Neveux, and Lucas Biewen. The Thomas Jefferson

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