TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Historian Ed Larson Takes a Critical Look at the Presidency

Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, welcomes professor Ed Larson from Pepperdine University.

Lawrence: Hello, and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of The Phi Beta Kappa Society. This podcast features conversations with Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who spend one academic year with us. They travel to up to eight Phi Beta Kappa-affiliated colleges and universities, partake in the academic life and present a lecture on a topic in their field. Lectures are always free and open to the public. For a full schedule and to learn more about the program, visit pbk.org.

Today, it's a pleasure to welcome Ed Larson, who is a university professor of History at Pepperdine University. He is one of our country's preeminent historians and received the Pulitzer Prize for History for his book, "Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion." Professor Larson is the author or co-author of 14 books. Among them, "The Return of George Washington Uniting the States" was a New York Times bestseller and he and I share a bit of personal history, having overlapped at our alma mater Williams College. Ed was a senior when I was a freshman, so he was one of the big kids. It's good to have you with us, Ed. Welcome.

Larson: Great to be here. Thank you very much.

Lawrence: So Ed, was there a moment when you thought to yourself, I want to be a historian?

Larson: Well, there certainly was a moment when I said to myself, I want to be a college professor. I grew up in central Ohio. Near us was Kenyon College and we used to go up to Kenyon College, The Gambier Inn, and have lunch on Sundays. That's where my dad went to college and I figured, this is the life. These people get to live in a gorgeous college town and just think and talk to students.

My mother had a couple of relatives who were professors and I talked with them and this was a life, to be a college professor, and so apparently when I was just a little kid, people would ask, what do you want to do when you grow up? And they expect you to say a fireman or something like that. I'd say I want to be a college professor in a college town. And so that was

my dream from right on and if you'd asked me originally what it was, I always liked the humanities. I loved to read. I love to write, but I also liked the sciences and so you got in between and so history of science was my, ended up being my PhD., but history is on the borderline between social sciences and humanities.

Lawrence: When you're teaching or in your writing are there people you pattern yourself on?

Larson: Well, when I go back to high school, I realized I went to a public high school in Ohio, and you know, you're lucky to have a few good teachers and there's nobody, in my opinion, nobody more valuable in America than good public school teachers. And so I ended up taking every possible class I could. And I learned in high school that you shouldn't take the subject. You should take the teacher. Because if you have a good teacher, it doesn't matter what you're taking. It doesn't matter whether you're taking chemistry or sociology. It'll be a great class and you'll learn a lot. But if you have a bad professor or a mediocre professor, even if it's a subject in theory you're interested in, it's not going to be that great an experience.

Lawrence: What makes a good classroom teacher?

Larson: Well, I think it's different now than when we were in school. You have to engage them in a different way. It's much more back and forth. It's more multimedia in a way today. But in every respect, I think the key to being a good teacher is caring about the students and knowing your subject. And there's always this group at research universities that say that all that matters is research. And there are other people who say all that matters is teaching. And I firmly believe you've got to balance the two, because if you have good students you've got to be at the top of your game at research as well. But you can't be just distant. You can't not care and just have grad students do all the grading and grad students handle all the sections and you just come in and give this lecture that you clearly don't care much about. You've got to care about, whether you're teaching a seminar, it's different teaching a seminar than teaching big lecture class.

Lawrence: So I want to talk a little bit about the relevance of your history projects, and it seems to me that you have hit on a number of projects over time, some of which we'll be talking about in your year as a Visiting Scholar that are particularly relevant to today. So let's start with your remarkable book on the election of 1800, which you call "The Magnificent Catastrophe" and ask you first, how does this tell us a little bit about polarization and lack of civility today, what we learned from the election of 1800, that magnificent catastrophe?

Larson: The election of 1800 was the first partisan political campaign. There was an election, a divided election four years before, but there weren't two organized parties. And that period of the 1790s is studied; there's some wonderful books about it as a period when two distinct political parties, when the, when they wrote the Constitution, no one thought there'd be political parties, not Madison, not Washington. It's not that they didn't know elections were hard and they didn't know that elections were tough. They were. Washington had gone through fierce selections. Ben Franklin had gone through fierce selections, but they were never partisan. You weren't tied to a party. You were, you were fighting to win the election over other candidates. Now, what had happened for a whole variety of reasons after the, during the Washington administration, but even more so during the Adams administration because of terrorism and the fear of terrorism from France, that Adams was arguing that France and Hamilton, we're

going to argue with the France, was gonna bring their Jacobin terrorism to America. These atheistic terrorists are going to come over and they're going to attack America.

There was a tremendous fear of immigration. Immigration was a huge issue because there were, this is the flow of Germans and central Europeans and Irish who were moving into America, changing the culture of America, and religion was very divisive. You had Jefferson, of course being, and Madison being the advocate of a separation of church and state, and you had Adams being allegedly the candidate of religion. And there was an established church in Massachusetts, a very and religion was very much involved with government. And Hamilton, even though he wasn't particularly religious himself, latched on to that as he observed that the only way they're going to elect us right-wing business people is if we latch ourselves with evangelical religion and establish religion and then they'll be voting for that, but we'll really get our business tactics in. And so you had these factors and so you had the country dividing up into these highly polarized camps.

It was fed by the development of partisan newspapers. Where before, you know, there were newspapers in America to be sure, but they were neutral and they mostly were, had advertisements in and anecdotes and stories, and then during the 1790s, every town ended up having at least two newspapers and they were harshly partisan and you could read them and you saw a different world. If you read the Federalist paper versus the Democratic Republican paper, you saw a whole different presentation of immigrants or religion or France, what was happening there. And you'd see the world differently as today if you watch MSNBC or if you watch Fox and they funded papers, even a town that wasn't big enough to normally have a federalist newspaper like Alexandria, Virginia or one not with enough Democratic Republicans or Jeffersonians, as you'd put it, at some town in Connecticut. They would fund that paper with outside resources and feed it in so they could present the world in their own partisan camps.

Lawrence: I want to stay in the late 1700s just for a little bit longer. You wrote a really interesting book on Washington's period between the time he's a general and the time he becomes president, the time we don't really focus on that much. What do we learn from that? And in particular, how do you situate him with the other two great generals turned presidents, Grant and Eisenhower and the way in which their time between being generals and becoming president prepares them for this ultimate job of being President of the United States?

Larson: That's a great question. I've never been asked it quite that way. I wrote the book for the very reason you said at the beginning, this partisanship we talked about. There are some tremendous biographies of Washington, but you look at those books and they skip over this period.

You get a lot about a Washington during the revolution and you got a lot about a Washington when he was president, but in between there's no mention of Washington and they talk about the collapse of the confederation. And I'm sitting there as I'm teaching this going, now that just can't be true because Washington, I mean, he served throughout the whole revolution, he never went home. He took all the chances. He sent men to their death. He was a devoted leader. And he was pulling a country together. And everything's collapsing and he's just back there farming? Whoa, wait, this doesn't make any sense because he'd become so committed, he so believed in the cause of America and the cause of Republican government. And he'd talk

about America being the great experiment and something new under the sun. He's just going to go home and watch the whole thing collapse and not be involved?

I said I want to look closely at that period to see what he was doing. And I ended up getting a fellowship at Mount Vernon, his home near Washington, and I was able to, and basically I tracked everything he did during that period, and what I found was he was constantly writing letters. He was constantly meeting with leaders from around the country, whether it'd be John Jay from New York or the Pinckneys from South Carolina or the Morris's from Pennsylvania or Henry Knox from Massachusetts. He was constantly meeting with them in person, talking with them, arguing passionately that the confederation is a total failure and we have to have a more effective union. And he always said the same thing: we need, and this goes all the way back to his last major document when he was a general, he wrote a circular letter to the states where he argued the confederation isn't working.

We need a government, we need a central government. We don't, we can't, sovereignty can't just be in the states. And the central government has to have complete control, not only over foreign policy, not only over monetary policy, but interstate and international trade, commerce. It must have control over war and peace, and the military. It must have control over the frontier because he thought the future of America was frontier. With this, he shared that view with Benjamin Franklin and many others, but not Hamilton. What made America different and special was that people weren't trapped like they were in England where there was no other place to go and all the land was taken up and the rich were rich and the poor were poor, and everybody's going to stay where there were. America was different. Democracy could exist, or republicanism, because there was a frontier.

People could, with ambition, could go to the frontier and build their own estate. They weren't, and if they didn't like being under the thumb in one place, they could go somewhere else and if you lost, and that's what made in America different. The original colonies, now they were filling up. We've got to have the West and be able to go west. And we need an effective federal government to do that. The one that can have a military and one that can protect it and one that can open the west. So all these factors and he was writing and thinking and intermixing with everything. What led up to the constitution? The Mount Vernon Compact was written in Mount Vernon. When Madison, sometimes called the architect of the Constitution, for the two months before he went to Philadelphia, he stayed not at home, but at Mount Vernon.

He was living with Washington. He was a bachelor then, and he stayed up in a room and they talk about this all the time. When all the compromise were worked out in Philadelphia the day before they were meeting with George Washington. They were having dinner with Washington, whether it was Gouverneur Morris or Roger Sherman or Franklin working out these compromises. They were working together. So Madison may still be the architect of the Constitution. But if that's true, Washington is its general contractor and if you've ever built a house, you know, it ends up looking at a lot more like what the general contractor thinks than the architect. And that's the story I wanted to tell which simply because the way these other books were structured is left out of those other accounts. And we get Washington, the general and Washington, the president.

Lawrence: As someone who's studied a number of presidents now and thought about the presidency, do you see the skills needed to be an effective president evolving right up to the time we're living in right now?

Larson: When you see that Eisenhower, who I think was maybe the most effective president in my lifetime, I wasn't very old when he was alive, but I reach into that as his lifetime. And how, in many ways he was so similar to Washington, working with a lot of people, listening, being willing to be the hidden-hand president. Well, if you're going to have to have a treaty with Britain, let John Jay go out there and get all the blame and still get the treaty, and don't put yourself in the middle of it and survive that way. Let Hamilton take the heat for the bank and not take the heat yourself. Let Jefferson take the heat for the Native American removal policy. Don't take the heat yourself. Because that's what Jefferson, as Secretary of State, led that activity. So you bring in strong people and let them operate, but in a way that you're shaping the overall.

Be willing to be flexible, not in your ends, but your means. Be willing to be dynamic and care about the long picture of what you want. There are certain skills. So you have these, these goals that you really care about: be flexible on meanings, be willing to give credit to others, be willing to trust others. Washington was certainly trusted and was faithful to his members of his cabinet and other leaders. Of course, Abraham Lincoln was famous for that too, with his team of rivals, letting them operate. I don't think that's changed. I think that's...You can see that in the leaders in the present day, you can see that willing to try to reach across party lines. Jefferson was famous, after that highly partisan election, he gives this speech that says we're all Republicans, we're all Federalists. He tries to draw people together and then he leads not from his radical position that he had staked out to win the election.

He leads to try to bridge the gaps. So he left many Federalist in office. He protected the Federalist shipping with the Tripoli, the war in Tripoli. He bought the Louisiana Purchase. He did activities that reached across to try to draw across party lines. He didn't try to preach to just his own base. And that allowed Jefferson, who had just barely won with the narrowest possible electoral count victory, just as he had narrowly lost the time before. And Adams, Adams could do nothing focusing on his own base and out there alienated from even his own party. He did nothing to solidify himself and unite the country. The country became more divided. Jefferson comes in and he sees what Adams had done and instead he tried to unify the country and he does. He succeeds in winning overwhelmingly reelection and then Madison, his handpicked successor, wins even bigger, and by the time you get to his next handpicked successor, Monroe, he's unanimous.

So you have these different skills that end up trying to reach across party lines, work with both sides and treat others with respect. Listen, listen, listen, and don't try to take all the credit yourself.

Lawrence: You've spent a lot of time writing on politics, thinking about politics. Are you a political person yourself?

Larson: I love to follow politics and I watch it very closely. I never wanted to be a candidate. It's just not my personality. I feel for candidates in the sense that they're so exposed. But I've always

been involved. I've worked, when I was getting my PhD. at Wisconsin, I also worked for the state legislature as an analyst for the state senate. Then later I worked for Congress while I was finishing up my dissertation here in Washington, DC. I've volunteered in campaigns. I've helped candidates. I try to donate money to campaigns. Voting is important, but I think it's more than voting.

They just had the Emmy's where the winner of the best actress, and she's in a wonderful show, said now the duty is to go out to vote. I think it's more than go out to vote. It's go out to work in campaigns and it's go out to put your money where your mouth is.

Lawrence: So how are you going to put your money where your mouth is?

Larson: Well, thanks to Phi Beta Kappa, being chosen as one of the Visiting Scholars, we get a little honorarium each time we give a talk. And so that money I give back to the state where I'm speaking and figure out some candidates who I think would be good for our country and either in governorships or in a state office or more likely in Congress or the Senate, and just give that money back. Because it's found money. It's money I didn't expect and just try to give it back to that state.

Lawrence: Thank you so much for being with us, Ed. It's been a pleasure to be back together.

Larson: Thank you for having me on the program.

Lawrence: Thanks for listening. This podcast is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Our theme song is "Back to Back" by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar Program, please visit pbk.org. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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