

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Washington is broken. It's a lament that's lamentably familiar these days. But it's anything but new.

As far back as the late 18th century, the founding fathers were worried about the fate of the nation. Today we'll take a step back, and with the benefit of historical perspective, look at where America stands now. Stay tuned for an exploration of polarization, Trumpism, and the missing middle ring.

From Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, this is Trending Globally. I'm Sarah Baldwin.

Today, we're joined by two scholars of American history and society, who are going to help us contextualize the state of our nation. Gordon Wood has been a professor at Brown University since 1969. He's a historian of the American Revolution, who's been called an American institution himself. In 2011, President Obama awarded him a national humanities medal.

Marc Dunkelman is a visiting fellow in International and Public Affairs at the Watson Institute, a former senior fellow at the Clinton Foundation, the author of *The Vanishing Neighbor, The Transformation of American Community*, and perhaps most amazingly of all, a Cincinnati Bengals fan.

Dunkelman's research draws on the political and social trends Professor Wood identified nearly a quarter century ago in his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. During our conversation, Dunkelman told us about the subject of his latest book, *The Vanishing Neighbor, The Transformation of American Community*. The book examines the way our social patterns have changed since the American Revolution and what that might mean for how democracy works in the United States.

That revolution, according to Professor Wood, was not just about freedom from the monarchy.

**GORDON WOOD:** Most people tend to think of politics as an autonomous set of rules and elections. But actually, politics is always a reflection of society. Now, the American Revolution starts as a colonial rebellion that is a breakaway from Great Britain. But I think it turned into something much bigger. To sum it up in one sentence, it was a middle class revolution.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** So it all started with an upheaval, one that's a little less dramatic, or at least less visible than the Revolutionary War. Here's Mark Dunkelman.

**MARC** The brilliance of Professor Wood's book is that he essentially argues that everything you  
**DUNKELMAN:** learned about the American Revolution in third grade is important, but it's not the whole story. That, yes, tea and the Stamp Act, and taxes and taxation without representation, those are all parts of the story. But underneath the sort of political argument, the discussions of who gets to choose important policy decisions is an underlying upheaval.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** As it turns out, that upheaval is a social one.

**MARC** I think that the upheaval that he identifies in his Pulitzer Prize winning book from a quarter  
**DUNKELMAN:** century ago is, what I call township of American community, is established then or established a little earlier, and lasts for the better part of the last 200 years.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** So what is a township? And what does that have to do with American democracy?

**MARC** If you think about how you build a community, there are sort of two models that will be familiar  
**DUNKELMAN:** to most of your listeners. One is Downton Abbey, right, where you've got sort of a town in manner. You've got almost a feudal lord sitting at the top society. And everyone stratified below.

In the United States, or in the colonies, there was a different core social architecture, a different building block, which was a township across a village green in the north, where people from different stratas of society began to talk to one another. They couldn't avoid one another.

**GORDON WOOD:** The American colonists had tremendous experience with self-government, which is what makes our revolution much more stable than, say, the French Revolution, where the participants had no experience in self-government. We had 100 years or more of self-- they were electing their representatives to their local legislatures for 100 years.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Different from England, different from anywhere where the rich people sat in a castle on the opposite side of town from everyone else.

**MARC** Even if there was someone they didn't like who lived at the end of the street they had to get to  
**DUNKELMAN:** know them.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** They were at church together.

**MARC** They were at church together. They sent their kids to the same school. There were

**DUNKELMAN:** unavoidable interactions. And there was an element of equality then.

**GORDON WOOD:** I think the federal Constitution is response to the democratization that's taking place in the states.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Even if people had different amounts of power and material wealth, they had to talk sometimes. And they formed relationships. Relationships that Dunkelman calls middling relationships.

**MARC** Namely, relationships with people who are familiar, but not intimate. If they bumped into one

**DUNKELMAN:** another, they would know to have a conversation about something more specific than the weather. They would know her mother was sick. I heard your son was having trouble in school. Whatever the questions--

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Or your business is good.

**MARC** Exactly. They have that sort of mutual familiarity.

**DUNKELMAN:**

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**SARAH BALDWIN:** In a recent *New York Times* Op Ed, Dunkelman writes, middling relationships are the best suited to pierce our much bemoaned filter bubbles.

**MARC** I think that those relationships are right at the core of American democracy.

**DUNKELMAN:**

**SARAH BALDWIN:** And those are what we're seeing fewer and fewer of?

**MARC** Those have begun to dwindle. Exactly.

**DUNKELMAN:**

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Because?

**MARC** Well, because we're spending more and more time talking to people we know intimately well.

**DUNKELMAN:**

**SARAH BALDWIN:** OK, think about whom you text.

[PHONE VIBRATES]

Probably your closest friends and family members. Probably not your neighbor's. Dunkelman says that today our social circles have changed shape. They don't work the way they did when the US was founded or during the more than 200 years since. Townships and the kinds of interactions they created don't really exist anymore.

The social architecture of America has changed.

**MARC**

It's not that there aren't prejudice, and bigotry, and stratas, and divisions within them, but at

**DUNKELMAN:**

the core, there is some element of mutual interaction. That, I think, has begun to shift for the first time in American history, where we are moving from townships to networks. And so the impact is that we are very closely in touch with the people who we know who are our 10 or 12 closest acquaintances.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** And less close with the people we don't know or don't want to know. Dunkelman recently

wrote, the fact that neighbors in colonial villages, frontier towns, urban tenements, and inner ring suburbs were so frequently compelled to pierce the bubbles of race, class, ethnicity, and politics, stirred the pot of ingenuity and nurtured a sense of common purpose.

**MARC**

You mentioned in the introduction I'm a Cincinnati Bengals fan. There are only about 18 of us

**DUNKELMAN:**

all over the country. And we all know one another because we're all in touch on Cincinnati Bengals blogs, and we all read the same Twitter feeds, and whatnot.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** But they don't read the same feeds as fans of, say, the Steelers, like me. And that kind of metaphor extends to politics as well. In *The Vanishing Neighbor*, Dunkelman says there's a big conversation right now about the sorting of the US. The idea that people with the same politics live near each other. But that's not the only thing we should be concerned about.

**MARC**

The question is in each of these counties, whether or not they are overwhelmingly for one

**DUNKELMAN:**

candidate, for Donald Trump, or for Hillary Clinton, are the people who live next door to one another who are inevitably voting opposite ways actually talking about it? Because we are so enveloped in relationships with people we were very intimate with or people who we know across a single social common interest, that there are fewer and fewer interactions across the fence.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** And would puts it a different way.

**GORDON WOOD:** Of course, I'm no sociologist. But I can have my experience. We had a neighbor just two years ago who began a practice of just before Christmas holding a party for all the neighborhood. And we all found out that we got to know each other, even though we hadn't talked to each other, people across the street, next door, meeting them for the first time in this Christmas party, because this woman took the initiative to hold a party. And we're living in houses. Not in apartment buildings.

But my son lives in New York and he's in 4C, or 14c, or whatever. And he doesn't know any of his neighbors. And I lived in Chicago in a apartment building for a year. And I never got to know any of the neighbors.

[SIRENS AND BUSY STREET SOUNDS]

**SARAH BALDWIN:** And when we're on opposing political sides, the interactions we do have can happen in really unproductive ways.

**MARC** We have many more opportunities now to connect with people who agree with us or to  
**DUNKELMAN:** connect in a very ephemeral way across Twitter and trolling people who we disagree with rather than in a substantive way.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** It's easy to see why this happens, Dunkelman says.

**MARC** People are desperate to find people who connect with them, and who agree with them, and  
**DUNKELMAN:** feel like they belong in a niche of people who share a common set of beliefs. So the desire, if you've got a limited number of hours in the day, the desire to actually connect to someone with a different point of view--

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**SARAH BALDWIN:** But we don't talk about the lack of dialogue, our de-townshipped society as much as we should.

**MARC** The conversation today is that it's cities that are meant to be our salvation, because they put  
**DUNKELMAN:** people in close contact with one another. And those people are more likely to spend time talking to one another.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** And it's in their interest to make that work. The idea is that in the urban United States, we're mingling, at least we think so.

**MARC DUNKELMAN:** And my experience, you know, this is entirely parochial, there's nothing scientific about it, was that when my wife and I lived in Dupont Circle, a neighborhood just a few blocks from the White House in Washington, which is sort of the quintessential new urbanest ideal. When I walked out of my apartment, which was in an 8 cut up brownstone and took my dog on a walk around the same four blocks every morning, it was very rare that I met someone's eye, or nodded, or said hello. You have your earbuds in and you're listening to your Watson Institute podcast, or you are rushed off, or you're holding your child's hand, and you're in a rush to get to school before you drop them off and head to work yourself.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** The public conversation about urbanization and our shifting ways of living together often focuses on this idea of diversity in cities.

**GORDON WOOD:** We're a much more diverse society. And that's frightening to a lot of people. Every time you read about what goes on in New York or what even goes on in a city like Providence, you realize you don't know your neighbors. You're off to work and you come back and you just don't do this anymore. You don't circulate with your neighbors. You don't really know them. And that certainly is true in big cities. But it's spread to the suburbs.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** But that conversation might be missing the point.

**GORDON WOOD:** Those who are living in urban areas have none of these fears. They're used to diversity. But there's no neighborliness either. Everybody's autonomous so to speak, in an urban setting.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**SARAH BALDWIN:** In that same opinion piece, Dunkelman wrote, we've abandoned the familiar relationships formed between members of a bowling league or an elks lodge. We're more connected than ever, but we're simultaneously estranged from the people who live next door. So how does this shift in the way we talk or don't talk to the people around us actually impact our democracy?

**MARC DUNKELMAN:** In the absence of having regular contact with people who take the other view, or belong to the other party, or somehow are in conflict with your own viewpoint, it's very hard to send to

Washington someone who you believe will compromise, because the other becomes sinister rather than simply--

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Other.

**MARC** Other.

**DUNKELMAN:**

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Dunkelman says that our whole political system was constructed on a particular political foundation. Again, that idea of township where different people are forced to interact civilly.

**MARC** And that foundation was about the basic orientation of community on our side of the Atlantic.

**DUNKELMAN:** And that the constitutional system built in 1787 to 1789 is one that really reflects the needs, and the balance, and the sort of current thinking of that period.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** But today, we just don't have the same ways of living in a community. We're no longer townshipped. But networked. So the question stands.

**MARC** Does the constitutional system that we had built now 2 and 1/4 centuries ago, does it still work

**DUNKELMAN:** to sort of move back to the analogy that you offered, which is you built a house, which is the government, on top of a certain foundation, which is the social structure of American life. If the foundation moves, you've got a bunch of different options, right?

You can try to shore up the house. You can try to shore up the foundation. You can modify the house so that the weight bearing beams are placed in different places. So it may be that the institutions of American democracy have to be amended. Maybe the filibuster doesn't work in an American society where people are so rarely in touch with people who have different points of view. Maybe it does.

Maybe at the same time there are things that we can do in our own communities that makes it more likely that we will actually interact with people on the other side.

**GORDON WOOD:** Who knows what's right. My own view is that we live in a fog. You know, people talk about the fog of war. But I talk about the fog of life. You look back and you see that in history, the one lesson you get is that people didn't know what was happening. They really-- no one anticipates. Once in a while, somebody anticipates a future. But most of the time, we have no idea what the world is going to be like, say, 50 years from now.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** This has been Trending Globally, Politics and Policy. If you enjoyed today's conversation, you can subscribe to the podcast on iTunes, SoundCloud, or Stitcher, or download us on your favorite podcasting app. If you like us, rate us and help others who might enjoy the show find us. For more information, go to [watson.brown.edu](http://watson.brown.edu).

[MUSIC PLAYING]