

What It Means to be an American

By Khushi Salgia

The United States is known to have the best democracy in the world. We are revered throughout the world for our independence, our individualism, and our innovation. Millions of Americans coming to the polls to share their opinion on how to make the country better is how we improve. Most of us are familiar with the 15th Amendment that grants every adult citizen the right to vote in passed in 1870. What most people don't know, however, is that from the late 1800s to the early 1900s, eight southern states enforced "white primaries" which banned black people and other minorities from voting, despite it being unconstitutional. "Texas students are required to study 2 years of history in middle and high school, yet most of them don't know about white primary elections," says historian Jeremy Suri during his talk at Collected Works Bookstore in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Jeremy Suri is not only an author and historian, but says he is "first and foremost, a teacher," having received a President Associates Teaching Excellence Award. He has written a New York Times article in which he suggests an a more realistic approach to building community within the country rather than Biden's unattainable goal to "build unity" He also co-hosts the podcast *This is Democracy* with his son, which is in the top 2% of all podcasts in the country. The driving force behind his work is to educate people on the past so they can make informed decisions in the present, which impacts the future.

Having a father who immigrated from India and a mother who immigrated from Russia, Suri says he is "fundamentally a historian because he wants to figure out how we got here, how we created such amazing and horrible things, and how we manage a world that is unmanageable." Suri's passion for history is valuable in the 21st century as "parents want their kids to study lucrative majors, but what makes money today may not necessarily make money tomorrow, and it just narrows the vision for young people." He advises young people to "stop listening to your parents and pursue your passions." Being a well-rounded individual is incredibly important, especially for young people who are still developing their interests. Although STEM fields tend to be prioritized, the humanities also hold their own unique type of merit. "History allows us to map the intricate roots in the soil and see how the plant grows," says Suri.

Suri's latest book, *Civil War by Other Means: America's Long & Unfinished Fight for Democracy* details the effect of the Civil War and how Lincoln's desire for equality has still remained unfulfilled. "This book is different from my other books," he narrates, "because I believed democracy was secure until six years ago." Six years ago, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States, and six years ago, just like Suri, many Americans lost hope in democracy. How can a president like this have been elected in the first place? How can one man do so much damage? "Like cancer," says Suri, "society can keep operating for a while even with a tumor in it, and Trump's presidency was an unmasking of

the tumor. Our country is filled with many such tumors that have yet to be discovered. “As horrible as Donald Trump is,” Suri says, “he is too much of an idiot to have done this himself. He just latches on and joins the crowd.” An incident like this can’t happen in a vacuum. There are centuries of history that have culminated to create the culture we have today that can allow something like this to happen in the first place. “The crisis of democracy and the crisis of history go hand in hand,” emphasizes Suri, “We can study the past to learn how to improve the present.” This is why history is so important. The past doesn’t exist by itself, it affects everything that happens in the present. History will continue to repeat itself until something changes. Unfortunately, our society tends to devalue the humanities, especially history. Since public schools don’t clearly outline the importance of learning history, students often feel disconnected from what they learn in school without realizing the modern implications that the past has. As Suri says, “We need to stop allowing football coaches to teach history.”

Now knowing the importance of history, how can we use this knowledge to our benefit? Suri emphasizes that “it’s not about voting out leaders, it’s about fixing institutions.” To our benefit, however, “we have the best democracy in the world.” It’s important for citizens to educate themselves with reliable narratives of what happened in the past in order to make informed decisions in the present. Suri recommends that “we read old newspapers from the Library of Congress.” This way we can learn about the true story of past events without the bias and misinformation of modern media. The number one step to improve our country is to become educated on it first.