

John Boccacino:

Hello, and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Carol Faulkner:

The Declaration of Independence was written with a purpose, which was to declare independence from England, but it did a whole bunch of other things at the same time. It was a statement of political philosophy, commitment to ideals of liberty, equality, and contrasting those ideals with what they believed the British Empire had imposed upon them, which was tyranny in their view.

Shana Gadarian:

This is a time where there's general agreement of we need to have an independent country, whereas there's agitation in thinking about what does that look like in practice? How do you actually work collectively to make an army, to govern oneself, to collect taxes, to print money, to do trade? How do you do that as both all of these colonies and as a sovereign federal government?

John Boccacino:

July 4th, 2026, marks a special Independence Day. It's the United States' 250th birthday with events planned across the nation honoring America's semiquincentennial. Now, on the Syracuse University campus, the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs has been leading a community conversation centered around this milestone, offering a series of weekly lectures through a free USA at 250 public course. The lectures explored American history, society, and politics, from the Revolution to the present, relying on Maxwell's stable of talented interdisciplinary faculty members to lead these educational sessions.

Now, leading up to America's 250th birthday, we thought it would only be appropriate to have on two of those Maxwell faculty members who contributed to and drove those meaningful conversations here on the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. We are joined by Carol Faulkner, professor of history and senior associate dean of the Maxwell School, along with Shana Gadarian, professor of political science and associate dean for research in the Maxwell School. They will reflect on what 250 years of American democracy looks like, from the ideals that launched our nation, the figures and moments that history sometimes overlooks, and why the questions the founders wrestled with still feel relevant today. Thanks for making the time to join us here on the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. Carol, give our audience a little background on yourself and your area of expertise.

Carol Faulkner:

Sure. I'm a 19th-century American historian, so actually, I can teach the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence, but it actually is not my area of expertise. I specialize in anti-slavery and feminist movements in the 19th-century, and social movements more broadly. But I was inspired to teach this class because I saw other universities doing it, and I thought Maxwell would have something unique to contribute to commemorating the 250th in a class because we are so interdisciplinary, and our faculty touched so many issues, not only historical issues, but also politics, policy. And I really wanted to bring all that different expertise to bear when thinking about the 250th.

John Boccacino:

Shana was one of the faculty members who also participated in the course. Give us a little background on yourself and your expertise.

Shana Gadarian:

Sure. I'm a political scientist by training. I tend to study things that are how everyday Americans understand and react to the political world. I study the US contemporaneously, and I'm just really interested in how everyday people understand what's going on in the world and then think about what they want their government to do in reaction to that.

John Boccacino:

Well, when it comes to everyday people, it's hard to pinpoint a more significant moment than, again, the 1770s and 1776, as people were banding together in Philadelphia, the Continental Congress, to come up with this idea of the Declaration of Independence. Carol, I'll start off with you. How would you describe the historical significance that went into the Declaration of Independence?

Carol Faulkner:

The Declaration of Independence was written with a purpose, which was to declare independence from England, but it did a whole bunch of other things at the same time. It was a statement of political philosophy, commitment to ideals of liberty, equality, and contrasting those ideals with what they believed the British Empire had imposed upon them, which was tyranny, in their view. And so, the Declaration of Independence starts with this great opening, very inspiring language about equality, and then it's a list of grievances against the King and all their complaints about what the King has done wrong. Thomas Jefferson, later President of the United States, was the principal author, but it was edited by the Continental Congress, and some passages were left out. And so you can see the final version and the original version on the National Archives and Library of Congress sites if people are interested to see that editing process. And so, it was a very aspirational document in 1776, I would say. They had to become independent, then they had to set up a government, but it was very inspirational for other Democratic movements well into the 19th-century, I would say.

John Boccacino:

What do you think was the groundswell? How did we get from colonies having grievances to forming this just stark declaration that we are an independent nation?

Carol Faulkner:

Well, I think everyone didn't even agree in 1776. There were many Americans who remained loyal. The Native American population was divided. The white population was divided over who to side with. The black population was definitely divided over who to side with, and no one really knew what would happen. And one of the things that people had to decide was, who is going to represent my interests better? Is it the colonists, or is it the British? And a lot of people were like, "I think it's the British because they're more likely to win." And especially for people like Native Americans and enslaved Americans, the British made explicit promises to them that were much more favorable than the American colonists.

And so, I think it was definitely not foreordained that these colonies were going to come together and be able to agree on anything. And the fact that they did, I think, took a lot of hard work, but also a lot of agitation. The society was going to become very literate. It wasn't totally literate at the time, so there was a lot of reading of the Declaration of Independence out loud, reading of Tom Payne's Common Sense out loud, and trying to get the message out that the King of England was not the right leadership for the American colonies.

John Boccacino:

Had there ever been any sort of documentation like this, declaring a colony separating itself from its monarchy, from its governing body that ruled over them before?

Carol Faulkner:

Not that I know of, but I mean, some of the colonies and local communities had mini declarations before this, but not on a national scale. But it was very inspirational, and so the French Revolution issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man. A French woman, Olympe de Gouges, issued the Declaration of the Rights of Woman. So there were a lot of declarations that followed. And really, I think it's very interesting why a declaration is something that was issued by these revolutionaries, because to declare something means that you are an independent being with agency, and you are not subject to the King. You really are a citizen who has rights, rather than a subject who has whatever rights the King gives you and Parliament gives you. The King, I would say, was like, "This is not who I am." The King was like, "Why are they rebelling? I don't understand. I'm a very benevolent king."

John Boccacino:

We live in a real-time society now, but it wasn't like this declaration was made and automatically made it overseas to Great Britain. The response time, I mean, do you know how long it took for King George to receive the intent of the colonists, as I'm sure he probably stewed about hearing their declaration?

Carol Faulkner:

He definitely eventually did receive a copy. I think we don't know whether he ever actually read it, but there was definitely a long delay of months and months and months. Yeah.

John Boccacino:

I can only imagine the uneasy feelings of the colonists after issuing this declaration. And I know, Shana, with your background in political science, you've studied how politics operates during times of crises. How would you describe the crises that Americans were facing all that time ago, and then the response to come up with this cutting-edge document to say, "We've had enough of these grievances? We can govern ourselves."

Carol Faulkner:

I think when I teach Intro to American Politics, one of the frameworks we try to understand is that politics is essentially about learning how to work together collectively, even when you disagree about some details. And so, I think what happens in this kind of time of crisis is the colonists decide they have to learn how to work together. And the framework of freedom and liberty means that they are going to have to disagree about the details of some of that. They're leaving a lot of people out, but fundamentally, they are thinking about the collective as a whole, and they have to learn how to then negotiate how to set up not just governing institutions, but they have to raise a military. They have to think about taxes. They have to think about what everyone's contribution to this new country is going to be.

And that is both there's both agitation, as Carol said, to the king, but there's agitation within society because those decisions are really quite fundamental, and they're not permanent either. We have this period of time between the Declaration of Independence, and the Revolution, and the eventual writing of the Constitution, when the government is being formed, and it turns out to be not super functional at the national level. And then they have the founders later on need to figure out how do we take what we started with that we thought would be functional, right? We need a bicameral legislature. We can't have one House. We need to think about what powers the president would have that looks different than a king.

So I think this is a time where there's general agreement of we need to have an independent country, whereas there's agitation in thinking about what does that look like in practice? How do you actually work collectively to make an army, to govern oneself, to collect taxes, to print money, to do trade? How do you do that as both all of these colonies and as a sovereign federal government? So all of that's being worked out, and it is, I think, relatively chaotic. Part of the way the country decides we're going to create this new

government is also to leave a lot of people out and say, "We're going to leave some institutions in place like slavery. We're going to only have certain people who are going to have the right to vote, and that's going to be white landowners." So I think there's both agitation and consternation about how to actually practically work together, and then deciding we can't do all of this at once. We're going to leave some of these big institutional changes until later, which, of course, leads to other problems down the line.

John Boccacino:

It's really impressive when you think about how many moments in American history soldiers who were fighting for independence could have walked away because they were behind on pay. I mean, like you mentioned, the fledgling government had no way to raise funds to pay for this continental army that was defending the rights of this fledgling nation. How impressive was it that this union that was held together with patches was able to survive those really tough infancy days and reach the point that we are now?

Shana Gadarian:

What we know about political identities is once they form, they are very strong in how people think about all sorts of issues. And so, to the extent that people start to think of themselves in what Carol termed in terms of citizenry, instead of subjects, that helps inform a willingness to set aside what are sometimes material things. I'm fighting for this new country that I am a citizen of, where I will have rights, as opposed to going back and reverting to this idea of being subject to another country. I think that identity is extremely powerful, and I think it helps allow people to sometimes give up what are important material things, like pay and stability, in looking forward.

I mean, there were certainly deserters. There are people who, one, who don't participate, who are loyalists, and then there's also people who decide to leave. But I think this idea of being a citizen also comes with obligations and responsibilities. And for people who are in the Army, I think that identity becomes ... Also, to be successful, you have to win this, or at least participate and not desert, even when it's very hard, you don't have enough food, or the battles aren't going your way.

John Boccacino:

When did you start to see maybe more of that collective consciousness forming of we're Americans, not just Virginians, not just Massachusetts residents, or New Yorkers, but having that collective shared identity?

Carol Faulkner:

I think it starts to happen actually quite quickly, and in response to the Declaration of Independence, because many Americans start saying, "This should apply to me." So, enslaved people, or free black people for that matter, begin petitioning for the end of slavery. They're like, "You're complaining about tyranny and slavery. We need to overthrow slavery." And so this is why, after the American Revolution, Northern states slowly start abolishing slavery. I think 1780 Pennsylvania, I think, is the first, and it's explicitly linked to the American Revolution. So there's a dialogue about what does this mean and what do we believe in as a society? If I could go back to your question to Shana briefly and just pump up the lectures a little bit, I highly recommend Professor Alport's lecture on military history of the American Revolution because he talks about the difficulty for George Washington of creating an actual disciplined army out of the colonists and also the lack of a unified war aim among the British, and some of the other things that led to the ultimate victory of the colonists, which, of course, was a bit of a shock to everyone.

John Boccacino:

If the founding fathers, if those politicians were around today, how surprised do you think they would be that their work done in the Continental Congress to launch this nation had been effective and that we're still going 250 years later?

Carol Faulkner:

I guess I would say my guess is they wouldn't be surprised. They're all a lot of men with really big egos. But I do think that our country would be unrecognizable to them, and that's not a bad thing. So, rule number one for historians is the past is a foreign country. You can't expect people to think, and behave, and act in the same way that we do today. And so, it would be unrecognizable to them, but as I said, that's not really a bad thing, I don't think.

Shana Gadian:

I think in putting institutions in place, the founding fathers made it very hard to change them. They put in many stops to changing institutions. If you think about things like how much momentum and how many people you need on board to change ... Again, we're talking about the Declaration, but if you go to the Constitution, to think about changing the Constitution, the number of states you need to get to do that, or the super majorities that you need in Congress. So, in some ways, the founders I think, would be very surprised about the makeup of who is a citizen and who can participate in government, but they may be less surprised that we still have the same form of government with tweaks around the edges, because they set it up in such a way that it's extraordinarily difficult to change, and the status quo is much easier to maintain.

And so, I think, in some ways, they designed the country to be enduring. And our colleague, Dennis Rasmussen, has a book called *Fears of a Setting Sun*, where he goes back to the founders who have some concerns about the end of the nation. So I do think there are founders who are concerned that what they've set up is temporary, but I do think, in the actual creating of the way our electoral laws and our institutions, they made it so hard to change them that they may be unsurprised that they are still standing even in somewhat different form.

John Boccacino:

When it comes to our relationship with democracy, how has it changed since its founding of the country?

Carol Faulkner:

Well, we're much more democratic than we were at the beginning, as Shana had pointed out, but it was a long struggle to get more democratic, and we are still trying to get there to a truly democratic society. So, it's unfolded in our lifetimes. One of the lectures that I gave in the class was on the woman's citizen, and citizen question mark, and I ended with the ERA because the country had never passed the Equal Rights Amendment. And so, what does that mean about what we think about women as equal citizens? And so, it's still an ongoing conversation, I would say. And that's one of the things that the Declaration of Independence does is it's not a legally binding document. It served its purpose to declare independence, but it also gave us these ideals to strive for that are not located in other American documents.

And so what governs? Is it the Declaration of Independence, or is it the Constitution? And as I said, the Declaration of Independence doesn't actually have legal standing, but Americans repeatedly turn to it over and over again as inspiration. And I think the best example close to us is the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention in 1848, which rewrote the Declaration of Independence to include women and listed their own grievances against the tyranny of men. For July 4th and in July, I highly recommend a visit to Women's Rights Historical Park in Seneca Falls.

John Boccacino:

Shana, a question for you that I want to tie in off of what Carol was just mentioning right there, when it comes to this democracy, what is our ability to endure through periods of division? Tell us about the strength of democracy and the strength of America as a whole.

Shana Gadarian:

When I teach students about American democracy, we talk about collective action, that essentially doing politics is learning how to work together on a task, even when you disagree on every other task. And when you think about democracy, fundamentally, it is about every person having a voice and every person counting, but also every person trying to work with others that they may fundamentally disagree with. And the only way that politics and legislation gets done is through finding Democratic representatives who can also work together, even when, again, the people they represent might have different views on the size and scope of government. And so, I think enduring democracy is about enduring willingness to work together and listen to each other, even if you don't ever change anyone's mind, and even if you don't ever agree with them on most things.

And so, I think if we think about democracy that way, it's okay when we have ... The lecture I gave in the America 250 class was about political polarization, that political polarization makes that agreement, and working together, and actually getting things done harder but not impossible. And so, I think democracy endures as long as people continue to work together, and the divisions that they see, either ideologically or across other social differences, are not big enough that they stop trying to work together and trying to talk to each other.

John Boccacino:

I think that a lot of people might be amazed. They think of factions and polarizations as being this modern invention, but the two have been intertwined since the founding of our country. What kind of lessons do you teach your students, or did you address during that class about the relationship between polarization in politics and different factions?

Shana Gadarian:

Right. I mean, factions are just interests, right? We all have interests we can identify, and parties are just ways to put together different factions together to win seats in Congress or to win in other legislatures. And so, factions have been around since the founding. I mean, our founding documents are all concerned about ... the Federalist Papers are all concerned about how to take factions, and you can't reduce them because then you reduce freedom and liberty, because that's how people identify and work together. But how can you take them and make them functional? And so, one of the answers is to just have factions fighting against each other, and we get that into modern interest groups and parties. I think the idea that people have different interests, whether those are social interests or political interests, that's fundamental to working together in a society.

And again, the founders themselves were very concerned about the factions being so big and fundamental that people couldn't work together, and so there's different solutions to that. And the solution essentially that we came up with as a country is to be big and diverse, and have lots of different factions, and let them compete against each other. Those factions get organized into political parties, and those political parties then compete against each other for seats to represent people. And those political parties and the factions change over time, and that has been enduring since the founding. What is different now is, in modern politics, polarization is across the parties is quite deep. And then, within the parties, the people's political identities also now align with a lot of the other social identities that people care deeply about, like religion, and race, and economics, and education. And so, those political differences that we've had for a long time now are filtered into our social life as well.

And so, it is true that we've had polarization for a long time. Polarization and factions make it harder to work together, both on the mass level and then particularly on the elite level. And our polarization now is broad and deep, but it is not the case that it is so deep that we are in a point where politics is completely not functional, but it is true that the interest that people have, both social and economic and political, those have been around for a long time. How they're organized into the parties has changed over time, and the fact that they are now sitting on top of other social identities mean they feel very deep, and they feel very important in ways that, I think, makes doing politics harder but not impossible.

John Boccacino:

Carol, I know you had mentioned we were talking about Seneca Falls. How would you describe the role that women played in shaping the revolution?

Carol Faulkner:

The Revolution had a huge impact on women, and women certainly participated in a variety of ways, but I don't think we could describe them as political leaders. Some of them were intellectual, some of them wrote and contributed to the political philosophy of the new United States in that way. But for the most part, and this is reflected in the society that emerged, women did not have political power after the American Revolution, despite claims to liberty and equality for all. So I'll just mention a few of the women who played a big role in the American Revolution. One would be Deborah Sampson, who actually disguised herself as a man in order to fight for the American Revolution. And there's a great biography of her by a historian named Alfred Young, and there's actually a free excerpt, I noticed today, on the Museum of the American Revolution website. She actually went on a lecture tour afterwards, talking about her experience serving in the American Revolution as a woman. That was common also in the Civil War for women to disguise themselves as men in order to fight.

Another important figure was Mercy Otis Warren, who wrote the first history of the American Revolution and was the wife of a Revolutionary. And so, she was in the same political circles as all of the Founders and contributing to those same ideas, and did so in her history of the American Revolution. And then I always mention to my students, Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams, who, when he is at the Continental Congress, writes to him and says, "You should remember the ladies when you are there." This is a very famous letter, and you can find it on the Massachusetts Historical Society website. "You should remember the ladies while you are there. The men are not the only ones who's experienced tyranny, and the men may just want to watch out if they don't address the issue of women's status." And it's written in a very flirty, "Hey, I miss you, husband," kind of way, but it's also like, "You think you're doing something special, but you're not the only person in this new country."

John Boccacino:

Are there other lesser-known figures that you think we should also be rediscovering?

Carol Faulkner:

One I would say, due to where we are, a few of the people I'll focus on are Native Americans and members of the Haudenosaunee. One is Polly Cooper, who was an Oneida woman who helped supply George Washington's troops at Valley Forge. And the Oneida were allied with the Americans, which was not true of other Haudenosaunee, the Onondaga, the Seneca, in particular. And some other people that are worth exploring are people like Cornplanter, who was Seneca, and Joseph and Molly Brant, who were Seneca and who allied with the British and actually played very important roles for the British, because one of the key issues in the American revolution in this area was the presence of Native Americans

because one of the grievances that the colonists had was that they wanted to expand westward and the British wouldn't let them because the British were protecting the Native American lands.

And so, many Native American communities aligned with the British, including the Seneca, including the Onondaga. And so those reasons and that ... And the Oneida now call themselves the first allies of the Americans. And so, this kind of difference among the Native Americans really reflects a larger difference in the colonies, in general, which is people had divided interests and allegiances, and that made a real difference in the Revolution. Another lesser-known figure is Phyllis Wheatley. She was an enslaved woman in Boston, and she was very much contributing to and aware of the conversations about liberty equality in that period, and published a book of poems, which was, of course, incredibly unusual for an African-American woman at the time, and especially an enslaved person at the time. And so, she has a number of good biographies. Of course, you could also read her poem, but she's another person who was contributing to the ideas because her book was so widely read.

John Boccacino:

How large of a role did our Central New York region play, Carol, in that revolution in advancing the efforts to launch our country?

Carol Faulkner:

It played a very big role, I would say, and not always the prettiest one, for sure. One of the most famous military campaigns in this area is the Sullivan-Clinton campaign, which destroyed 40 Seneca villages. The Americans destroyed 40 Seneca villages. Many of the Seneca went to the British at Fort Niagara, which you can still visit Fort Niagara today, and remained there. But also, folks can visit Fort Stanwix, and there's a state history site for the Battle of Oriskany, which was one of the bloodiest battles of the American Revolution. And so that's all within driving distance of where we are now.

John Boccacino:

The USA at 250 classes that we offered through Maxwell, Carol, when you're looking back on it, what made it so special? What made this something that really was a success when it comes to sharing history and getting our community engaged with it through Maxwell?

Carol Faulkner:

I'm glad people wanted to tune in and all that, and I thought all the lectures were great and interesting. And part of it was, gee, I would like to hear all these people, different people, talk about the significance of the 250th from their own research and area of expertise. So we had quite a mix of faculty, and I really enjoyed all the lectures. And so I think I tried to balance the history and the contemporary because I think people were very much yearning for the contemporary. And I also tried, because of where we are located, we had two lectures on Native Americans because everyone who was involved felt that that was really important to do, and so recognizing the historical significance of our location. I'm glad people are interested, and I'm looking forward to seeing the videos.

John Boccacino:

Shana, how about for you? What made it special to get to contribute to this public course?

Shana Gadarian:

One, it was just nice to see the breadth of people that we have studying the US from many different perspectives. I'm a political scientist who studies campaigns sometimes, and so I'm always interested in thinking through how people, again, understand the world as it is and how it could be. And so, I think

that's probably what resonates with people about large birthdays, like 250, is because you can think back in nostalgic ways about the past. And so I do think there's a part of the American public who really thinks positively about the past, and thinking about how wonderful things were. And part of what academics do is complicate things, and so we also think about the complicating nature of the past and how we got to this moment.

And then, elections are all about the future and how we want to move forward as a country. What is it that we're not doing now that we want to think about for the future? And so I think this class has a mix of both of those things. It both can help us understand how we got to this moment and maybe some of the both positive and revolutionary things about our country, and then thinking about some of the things that we might be less proud of, and we would want to think about how we'd want to change those. And then also thinking about who we are as a country and how we move forward, what we want the story of America to be from 2026 onward for the next 250 years. And so I do think that that mix of nostalgia, in some ways, taking a clear-eyed look at the past, and then this kind of future-looking, how do we want things to be going forward, is why these kinds of classes are popular and also just thought-provoking. We can think through who we are as a nation and then how we want to change things, if at all, going forward.

John Boccacino:

If you had one thing you hope that listeners take away from our conversation, from the course, when it comes to reflecting on our 250th birthday, what would that happen to be?

Carol Faulkner:

I would say that America is always at least trying to be better, if from different perspectives, and we can't necessarily agree on what that better is, but I do think that all Americans really view the Declaration of Independence as aspirational and something that joins us together.

John Boccacino:

Well, I cannot thank our guests enough for sharing their expertise. Carol Faulkner, professor of history and senior associate dean at the Maxwell School. Thank you for making the time today.

Carol Faulkner:

Sure. Thank you.

John Boccacino:

And Shana Gadarian, the professor of political science and also associate dean for search in Maxwell. Thank you as well for coming on.

Shana Gadarian:

Yeah, thanks for having us.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.