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SHAKESPEARE'S POWER

with Eliot A. Cohen, hosted by Rebecca Burgess

Eliot A. Cohen joins Rebecca Burgess to discuss his new book on Shakespeare and power politics, *The Hollow Crown*.

Brian Smith:

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Rebecca Burgess:

Oh, for a muse of fire that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention. But today, in fact, we are not left to any arbitrary leniency of a willful goddess of inspiration to get us going for this latest episode of

Liberty Law Talk because our theme today is Shakespeare and politics, the stagecraft of statecraft, and even the statecraft of stagecraft when it comes to understanding the halls of power and those who would be in it. My name is Rebecca Burgess, and I'm a contributing editor for Law & Liberty, a senior fellow at the Yorktown Institute, and a visiting Fellow for the Independent Women's Forum. But importantly, for today, I am a partisan, wholly and devotedly, of all things Shakespeare.

And joining me today is Eliot Cohen, the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and the Robert E. Osgood Professor at Johns Hopkins University. Formerly counselor of the Department of State. His books include The Big Stick and Supreme Command. Thrice welcome, Eliot. What news on the Rialto, as we might say?

Eliot Cohen:

Well, Rebecca, first and foremost, thanks for having me. It's great to be here. I lead a very odd life in some ways, bouncing between military matters at the moment, which is my professional expertise in one way, and then Shakespeare. It's odd, but it's nice to be back with Shakespeare because the rest of the world's pretty grim right now.

Rebecca Burgess:

All right. He provides us comfort and also much thought to chew on. So I thought, in this midwinter moment, when everyone is settling down in front of their fires, all sated with holiday cheer, that it is a truth universally acknowledged that all thoughtful people want, or are in need of, a good book and a good conversation. And voila, you have gifted us The Hollow Crown: Shakespeare on How Leaders Rise, Rule, and Fall. Just out recently by Basic Books.

And so I thought we could use the next hour or so to talk about what Shakespeare teaches us about politics today or helps us analyze those in the halls of power. The characters within Shakespeare are always of interest, whether it's Henry V, whether it's Richard II, or whether it's

Prospero. And I'm going to needle you about some you didn't put in there, including the prince from Much Ado About Nothing and that band of unserious statesmen, not statesmen yet, the princes in Love's Labour's Lost, who have to learn how to become serious statesmen.

But I would love to start off by asking you: What has teaching Shakespeare and introducing Shakespeare into your syllabi at Johns Hopkins or others taught you anew about international relations, grand strategy, or politics?

Eliot Cohen:

Well, that's really a whole range of questions. Let me just start as a teacher. So, I'm about to become emeritus at Hopkins and shift over full-time to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. I've had a 34-year career at Hopkins, which has been wonderful.

The last course that I taught was for freshmen, and it was a freshman course on Shakespeare. And I have to say—it was just a wonderful way of rounding out a teaching career because what you see is how young people, who maybe have never really been exposed to this in a really serious way, they may have had an encounter with it in high school, but they're now at a stage where they can begin to appreciate it. You can see how it opens a world for them, and that's a delight. And it's, in a way, at a time when we could all use a bit of optimism—it's a source of optimism that you realize there's always going to be a new generation coming on, and they can respond to the classics very, very powerfully. So that's the Mr. Chips in me, if you will.

I began … I've always loved Shakespeare. I began thinking about teaching it after seeing Henry VIII, which is a play not often put on. There used to be some dispute about whether it was even by Shakespeare. I think most people think it is now a collaboration with another playwright named John Fletcher. And if your listeners will bear with me, I'd like to read the bit of the soliloquy that got it all started.

So what's happened is Cardinal Wolsey, who was Henry VIII's chancellor, has just been deposed, and it's sudden, and it is a sudden fall from power.

And here is what he says: “Farewell! A long farewell, to all my greatness! This is the state of man: to-day he puts forth The tender leaves of hope, to-morrow blossoms, And bears his blushing honors thick upon him: The third day comes a frost, a killing frost, And,—when he thinks, good easy man, full surely His greatness is a-ripening,—nips his root, And then he falls, as I do. I have ventured, Like little wanton boys that swim on bladders, This many summers in a sea of glory, But far beyond my depth: my high-blown pride At length broke under me, and now has left me Weary, and old with service, to the mercy Of a rude stream, that must for ever hide me.”

So my wife and I saw the play, and I was really struck by that soliloquy because my immediate reaction was, I know that guy. I mean, I’ve been in Washington now for well over three decades, and I’ve seen all kinds of things, and I was so taken by that, I took it … I was meeting with a bunch of students who were all graduate students by the way, later on, and I said, “Let’s talk about this.” One thing led to another, and before you knew it, I was teaching Shakespeare to a bunch of students at a professional school of international relations.

And I think the thing that strikes you, as you study Shakespeare from the vantage point that I have, which includes a fair amount of government service as well, is, first, how a lot of the fundamental predicaments of political characters just don’t change. He also mentioned how there are phenomena that he captures that are still very much with us. You just need to learn how to do the translation.

So, if I can give just one example of that. So, one of the plays that I have always enjoyed teaching is Coriolanus, which is about the great Roman general who becomes a traitor and comes to a sticky end. But, first, he’s an incredibly successful general. The problem is he has no political sense whatsoever. I’ve known a few generals like that, actually, in my time.

Rebecca Burgess:

Zero political prudence.

Eliot Cohen:

Right. Political prudence is not their strong suit. But there comes a point where he's just been tremendously successful in battle, and they're about to make him consul, which is the thing he really wants—it's the honor he really wants. But he has to kind of go along with the people, with the plebs. Until they ask him to show his wounds, to take off his toga and see the scars of battle, and then he detonates, and everything goes downhill from there.

And I was teaching this to a group of graduate students, including about half a dozen people who'd been in very hard places and done hard things in places like Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan. And I said to them … So these are people in their late twenties, early thirties, some of them. I said, "Don't feel obliged to answer this question, but has anybody ever asked to see your wounds?" And the conversation just exploded.

Rebecca Burgess:

I bet.

Eliot Cohen:

Because, yes. I mean, psychological wounds, not physical wounds. And so I think part of what Shakespeare gives us is the ability to see things that are around us, much more vividly in a way, because he's abstracting us from our current context. I could go on, but let me pause there and see where you want to take this.

Rebecca Burgess:

Well, in every direction, of course. But on this particular note of showing wounds, I think it is of interest, and we'll probably touch on it later. I think it's inevitable that in the rise to power, or in statesmanship, how much do you have to show the work of statesmanship to be a successful

statesman? Are you supposed to make it look easy? Are you supposed to reveal your trials and tribulations?

And I think there's a difference, perhaps, between Shakespeare's day and ours, between that. It seems like, today, we emphasize the personal story of the politician. But is it any different than that showing of the wounds, or showing of the interior, if you will?

Eliot Cohen:

Yeah, we like people to show their vulnerabilities. But, the point that Shakespeare is making with the story of Coriolanus is we've always wanted our leaders to show their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Now, we've taken it to a pathological extent.

So I'm going to just give an example. So when they finally do the memorial to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, what do they do? They make a big point of having him in a wheelchair. In point of fact, FDR went to great lengths not to be photographed in a wheelchair because that was not the image he wanted to convey.

To go back to Shakespeare, what you see is a lot of leaders who actually have all kinds of burdens, pathologies, and so on, and who do make considerable efforts to conceal them. Actually, Henry IV, the father of Prince Hal, who became Henry V, talks about that about how he tried to conceal himself. But the truth is, those things are always there.

And I think one of the things Shakespeare shows us is, if you pay close attention, you can see what they are, which is a useful thing if you want to understand the people who are your leaders. The challenge that Shakespeare gives us, and the more I've read Shakespeare, and reflected on the more kind of diabolically cunning I think he is, he just gives you frequently little glimpses into a personality. And if you're not paying a lot of attention, you won't notice, which is kind of what the personality wanted.

But what Shakespeare is going to do is say, okay, I will tell you the things you need to know, but you've got to watch carefully. And that's one of the things that Shakespeare can teach the student of politics, is the art of close observation.

Rebecca Burgess:

Well, so you already quoted Cardinal Wolsey's beautiful speech, it is so powerful. And it is from that point of vulnerability, a man who has realized that power is no longer in his grasp. Is this where we start to study power and those in power, from their vulnerabilities or the vulnerabilities inherent, or is it just one of many paths? Does it open up something, or are we missing something if we start from the standpoint of vulnerability?

Eliot Cohen:

I don't think that's where you start. This is Cardinal Wolsey at the end of his career, not at the beginning of his career.

Rebecca Burgess:

Right.

Eliot Cohen:

No, I think you look at all kinds of other things if you want to see how people actually get into the business of acquiring powers. The way I organized the book is I didn't go play-by-play. I began with one large section on how people get power, how they use power, and then, finally, how they lose it.

Again, one of the things that's a bit sick about our current world, is that is where we want to start, with people's weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Not that you shouldn't pay attention to them, you should, but first you want

to see, I think, what is it that makes them effective? What is it that makes them succeed?

I mean, if you take Prince Hal, for example, who becomes Henry V ... Of whom, by the way, I have a very dark view, that is of King Henry V.

Rebecca Burgess:

You do.

Eliot Cohen:

A very dark view of this is Henry V, the Shakespearean character. The real Henry V, I couldn't care less.

But you see him kind of having a glorious old time, hanging around with a bunch of lowlifes in the east cheap, in what's probably a brothel. And it's comic, and it's good fun. And here, again, you get to Shakespeare, the close observer. Actually, this is one of the ways in which Prince Hal is learning how to be a king, and that becomes clear, I think, later on in the play. But, again, you have to pay close attention if you want to see how this is going to feed into his ability to inspire people, to manipulate people, which he does a lot, and to rule.

Rebecca Burgess:

Right. The setting is, in fact, quite important for Shakespeare. I know you spend a little bit of time talking about how important, when you're talking to those who actually put on Shakespeare plays, they say that figuring out the staging, figuring out the costuming, sometimes is where they start from. It's not the secondary consideration, it is where they start from.

For Shakespeare, the opening scene, the first scene, and the second scene of the first act, in fact, are always of prime importance. In Henry IV, it is so well done because you start in the halls of power before the king, and

it's the exact same speech, the exact same dynamics that are in scene two with Prince Hal in the tavern. And so Shakespeare is telling you, here is politics high and low, here is England, for Prince Hal to figure out how to govern and rule England. He's going to have to figure out how to understand both of these on their own and how to tie them together. And I've always thought, gosh, darn it, that's so brilliant, how can we not do that, too?

Eliot Cohen:

Well, you're absolutely right. You always need to pay attention to how Shakespeare sets the stage initially. It's also very important, I think, to pay attention to the very end, where he'll occasionally drop this little thing on you, where, if you pay close attention, you go, aha.

So at the end of Henry V, for example … Throughout you've had the chorus, who is cheering Henry the V on and saying, "Oh, how can we possibly capture this guy's greatness in just this little theater of ours here, and touch of Harry in the night," all that stuff. And at the very end, the chorus says, "Thanks for being here. By the way, he died young, and his son was an infant, and all his conquests kind of fell apart. And we've talked about that before. See you later."

It's just a couple of lines, but if you look at the end of that, of Henry V's story, you go, listen, why does Shakespeare put that in there? Why does he have to end on a two-line downer?

And I think the reason is he's explaining a lot of the stuff that went before. One of the things that I talk about, I use, there's a technical term for it, it's what the Greeks called anagnorisis, where you suddenly realize the truth of your situation. That's what happened to Wolsey there, where he goes, I've been swimming on a sea of glory, and, poof, it's all gone.

It happens to individuals, but it can happen to us as readers of Shakespeare and people who observe Shakespeare. I think if we read it closely enough, where you go, "Oh, oh, that's what's going on."

But just to connect it to the real world of politics, that's very important too. I think one of the problems that we have when we talk about foreign policy, military affairs, and so on, is a lack of close attention to what's going on right before our eyes frequently. Governments, in particular, fall prey to this, and I've seen it firsthand, but I've also seen it in other places as well. You get caught up in government talking to itself, you get caught up in highly classified this and that, and you forget to say, "Whoa, that's right in front of me, that actually means something," and to pause and reflect on what it means.

Rebecca Burgess:

Right. And there's a timing aspect to that as well, right? And I wonder sometimes whether the pace of government in our daily life is just so frenetic now that we … Unless someone is astute enough to carve out some time for themselves for reflection, the reflection doesn't happen. And the consequences of that, of course, as you just mentioned, we see all the time. But I've wondered about that, especially recently, since my own time in coming to DC, which has not been as glorious as yours, I'm still laboring in the analytic vineyard …

Eliot Cohen:

It's still early yet. I'm towards the tail end, you're at the beginning.

Rebecca Burgess:

Yeah. Right, right. And we'll talk about that arc of power soon, so you can tell me the pitfalls to avoid. But I've wondered: Have we taken away the ability for our leaders, for ourselves, to have that moment of anagnorisis, of actually understanding the situation in front of us? Barring some huge kind of cataclysmic changing of the guard, which happened with Putin invading Russia, and then, of course, all the events on October 7th with Hamas and Israel. But should it really take something so profoundly catalytic for us to have these moments of, oh, the real world actually has changed from how we have been talking about it?

Eliot Cohen:

So, to get very serious for a moment, I just came back a week ago from eight days in Israel, where I'd led a small military and national security delegation to meet with a lot of people there high up. And they've just gone through this shattering experience. And, of course, one of the things … I'm actually writing a piece about this for The Atlantic.

One of the problems is that for the people at the very top they don't actually have time to process any of that. And the surge of emotions is such that you can't really expect them to process it. No, I think it's a very large problem.

One thing I've always been struck by, and I made a bit of a study of some of the decision-making during the Second World War, it made a big difference that Churchill, when he would go to meet Roosevelt, would sail across the Atlantic, which meant that he would have three or four days where he wasn't checking emails, and he could think things through. And I think wise executives do try to carve out that time.

I was, for my sins, I was a dean for a number of years at Hopkins. And one of the things that I learned, I said, I wanted to get an executive coach because the situation we were in was pretty difficult, and I wanted to get all the help I could get. She was a wonderful teacher and is now just a good friend. But that was one of the things she always emphasized, you've got to figure out a way to give yourself blocks of time where all you do is you think. And that's when I began taking really long walks every day and without headphones on, without listening to music, just long, long walks and I think it's a critical thing. And I do think that we've lost it in another way. I think a lot of senior political and military leaders don't have the time to immerse themselves in Shakespeare…I don't know, J. R. R. Tolkien, I mean something that is deep and fascinating other than what their day-to-day lives are like, and I think they suffer for it.

Rebecca Burgess:

So, to turn to the actual contents of your book, I love the taxonomy of power that you give, so essentially, your theme is power and the arc of power, and there's almost a little bit of a Homeric cataloging of ships in how you go about in acquiring power and exercising power and losing power. So, how does one acquire power? For Shakespeare, of course, there are three different ways, and you give us those.

Eliot Cohen:

So, the easiest way is inheritance. Now, of course, a lot of the plays that I use are primarily the histories, one or two of the tragedies, some of the Roman plays, but preeminently the history plays. And you might say, "Well, okay, fine, if you're living in a monarchy, of course, the crown prince inherits, but what relevance does that have to us?" Well, actually, it has a lot of relevance because if you stretch the concept of inheritance a bit, that's where it's not the case that you've... Let's take a particularly pointed case right now. If you become the president of Harvard, it's not because you've necessarily worked your way to the top in a difficult competitive environment. You've been picked and you enter into it. Now, in the past, it was the accidents of birth, I suppose, but it's not the same thing as building a business from scratch or building any kind of organization from scratch where you have acquired power, you've been selected somehow, which means that at some level for anybody in that situation, it's not something that you've acquired on your own.

Rebecca Burgess:

Figured out the mechanics of.

Eliot Cohen:

Right. And with all the learning and the scars that are associated with that, and inheritance is a fraught thing. The reason why Henry V is successful as a king, I think, is because even though he is inheriting the crown, first, the process is very difficult. He and his father have a terrible relationship. It isn't even entirely cleaned up at the end before Henry IV dies. But what Henry V has figured out is he actually has to earn this. And

I think a lot of people who get picked for very high-level positions, one way or another, don't fully appreciate that. They don't fully appreciate that, actually, even though they have been selected, they still have to earn it. That's a very difficult lesson, I think, for lots of people.

I then talk about how people acquire power by means, which might be somewhat underhanded, sort of maneuvering. And that's really the Henry IV case. I mean, there's a bit of crime there. He does kill his predecessor, but it's not simply a criminal seizure. It's some of the dark arts. And Washington, DC is filled with people who practice the dark arts. And the challenge there I think, is for people who often have used somewhat underhanded means to get where they are again, to establish legitimacy, and they too have to earn it.

You have the third mode that I talk about is seizure, where it's basically a crime. It's what Macbeth does. He kills off his predecessor, and then... And, of course, the problem that he faces, which he recognizes, and he does it anyway, is that once you've seized power by murder, you have to keep on killing people. And there's a big difference between him and Henry IV, Henry IV maneuvers Richard II out of power. He later on has him killed, but that's a separate matter, whereas in Macbeth, it's straightforward. I mean, it's bloodshed. And there, too, people don't usually do that nowadays in organizations and bureaucracies by actually literally sticking a knife into somebody.

But if you hang around any organization long enough, sooner or later, you will see somebody turning around and finding a knife that has been planted in their back frequently by somebody they didn't expect. And then people are living with the consequence of a seizure powered by a coup. And I guess the larger point for all three methods is that... Actually, people sometimes think, "Okay, once I'm in charge, things are cool." No, that's when it all begins, actually. And you always have to work at ways, people find themselves always having to work at ways to make their power legitimate and to make it effective and to be able to hold onto it.

Rebecca Burgess:

That's one of the really interesting contrasts, I think. Similarities in contrast, as you mentioned between Henry IV and Macbeth, is when you get to Henry IV, Part II, Henry, now King Henry, realizes that the exact same arguments he used to oust his cousin, Richard II, can be used in turn against him. And how do you prevent that? So, he made appeals to competence. He made appeals to his own ability, to justice, all of these things.

But in effect, it really came down to he had a greater ability and a greater kingly sway and that was what was legitimate, trumping the blood, trumping all of these things. And suddenly, he realizes, "Oh, there are these generals lords on my borders who are also very militarily competent who are winning some of these wars for me, and now they're looking at me, and they are discontented with me. How do I stab off suddenly?" And you talk about that legitimacy question and how that also affects Prince Hal. He, as prince in waiting, as king and waiting, it turns out that is the most dangerous position and most difficult to be in because he is an automatic threat to his own father. So he can't be serious around his father. So, from the perspective of the one coming up to power, how do you guard yourself against your own father so that you can get the foothold to establish rule?

Eliot Cohen:

It's a very common thing. One of the points I make in the book is that Shakespeare is fascinated by the politics of courts. And again, you might think, "Well, okay, we don't live in monarchies," or, I mean, the Brits do, but we don't. And even that is a different kind of monarchy for sure than it once was. But actually, if you think about any organization, it's a court. The guy or gal at the top is the king or the queen. There may well be a crown prince who's sort of designated. By the way, that's not always the case in Macbeth, and under Scottish law, the king can pick their successors. So it's not necessarily going to go down to his son. That's one of the issues that Macbeth confronts. You have various courtiers who might think that, "I'd actually be a much better king than the current king." There's usually a court jester or two. So that phenomenon, I've seen it in universities, I've seen it in the State Department, I've seen it in the Defense Department. It's universal. People live in courts.

The other thing is the shadow, just to go back to Henry IV, the shadow of illegitimacy. The good thing about inheritance is it involves a certain kind of legitimacy, whether because you're the son or daughter of the king or because there's been some sort of formal process that everybody perceives as legitimate for the selection of the next CEO. When people have acquired power in not entirely legitimate ways, I think one of the fascinating things that Shakespeare shows us is it never goes away.

So in Henry V before the Battle of Agincourt, when Henry V is feeling sorry for himself, he's about to manipulate his men into thinking that he's one of them, which he isn't. He tries to buy God off. He says, "So I'm going to give lots of money to the church, and I've got people singing psalms. We're going to rebury Richard II." It's one of the reasons why I think he's such a creep. He is a guy who feels he can manipulate everybody, including God. But the main point here, I think, is he knows that what his father did was illegitimate, and some of the shadow of that falls even on him.

Rebecca Burgess:

Right, yeah. Well, I must admit to being one of those who are swayed by the rhetoric of the chorus, and I buy in, I buy in.

Eliot Cohen:

So here's the fascinating thing: you're not alone. I mean, I once did a test when I was teaching this to a bunch of my very bright students, and I kind of go through the whole litany of why I think… Look, he launches an unjust war. He is quite cruel in these show trials he does of the conspirators against him. He orders the hanging of one of his best friends. He is kind of deceiving his men about what he really thinks about them. He orders the massacre of a whole bunch of French prisoners of war. Again, Shakespeare just kind of gives you a little note about that, and then it goes on to the other stuff. And then he seduces this French princess, except it's also, there's a bit of a threat of rape in it. So I say, "There are all those things. Okay, now having said that, and thinking about the Agincourt speech, 'We few, we happy few.' How many of you, if

Henry the V were to walk in here right now and say, 'Follow me,' would follow him?" Everybody's hands-

Rebecca Burgess:

All the hands go up.

Eliot Cohen:

All the hands go up. I should say, "Okay, teaching is dead. I failed."

Rebecca Burgess:

No, you're still doing the teaching. And then you say, "All right, and now, the next day, would you have regretted it?"

Eliot Cohen:

That also, again, this is part of Shakespeare's genius. If we look at our own reactions to some of these characters, that could be very instructive. I mean, the same thing with Richard III. He's evil. I mean, he murders his brother, he murders these two cute little nephews in the Tower of London. And you know what? We find him kind of funny and charming, and we like the fact that he breaks the fourth wall and he confides in us and he says, "Can you believe I'm getting away with this?" And against our will we go, "Yeah, that's pretty cool, isn't it?" And-

Rebecca Burgess:

See, he's an absolute creep to me. And I've always been like, "How does Anne fall for his wiles? How can that be possible? How can she be so blind? She hates the guy. She marries the guy. What is this?"

Eliot Cohen:

Yeah, but don't you have any friends who did that?

Rebecca Burgess:

Yes. Yes. I mean, I recognize the pattern, but it's not one I want to recognize. But so true. But back to a little bit of Henry, and I think this gets us to your next block of considerations, which is exercising power. Once Prince Hal becomes Henry—and side note, I have to thank you so much for not titling this book "Shakespeare for Situation Rooms and Boardrooms" or something like that, it kind of takes a lot away from it.

So Prince Hal becomes Henry and he has to reestablish his kingliness, his fitness to rule in front of his people on this stage, the stage of monarchy, the stage of nations, of... Well, it's the beginning of the Hundred Years' War, more or less, or the pre beginnings of it. And so he has to make certain all of his actions are seen by his courtiers and the world amplified. He is on a stage, he can't get away from that. How can he not distance himself from Falstaff? Because Falstaff, well, "Banish me and all the world," all of those things. All being said, he is still, not from a political standpoint, he's a liability for sure. He's also not a good citizen, really. And something needs to be done about that so that the youth don't take them as an example. So, how do we square those responsibilities and personalize them? Does personal responsibility take second place to political responsibilities once you are in office?

Eliot Cohen:

Oh, I think you put your finger on it. I think part of what you're seeing there is the dehumanizing effect of power. One of the things that Shakespeare does, this is something I think I always felt, but I feel more strongly now after immersing myself in this, is Shakespeare shows us how the exercise of power burns away a bit of your humanity. For me, the brutal thing is actually in... So first, let's begin with the Falstaff, who is humanity on some level. We love him. He's a rascal. He's funny. He has no illusions. He's probably the most beloved of Shakespeare's characters. Well, there are two moments in which we see that Henry does have to break with him. I think you're absolutely right, although Henry has also

learned from him because what Henry has learned from Falstaff is this is what normal people are like. Henry is not a normal person, and in fact, people like Henry cannot be normal, and most very successful political people are not normal human beings in a variety of ways. The way Henry does it, though, is quite brutal. I mean, he-

Rebecca Burgess:

Yeah, " I know thee not, old man: fall to..."

Eliot Cohen:

"I know thee not, old man." So this is at the end of Henry IV, Part 2. Falstaff is hoping to cash in his chips, and he doesn't just say no, these are the words that every teacher dreads to hear from a former student, "I know thee not, old man." I mean, it's completely contemptuous. And then Shakespeare reminds us in Henry V in the opening scene, we are indirectly told that Falstaff has died and that the king has broken his heart.

Rebecca Burgess:

Right.

Eliot Cohen:

And you do wonder: Was the coldness in both cases necessary, or did it reflect something deeper about who Henry really is? Which is my view. But like I said, I just-

Rebecca Burgess:

But your view...Yes, yeah.

Eliot Cohen:

I just think it's-

Rebecca Burgess:

It is absolutely fair. I mean, I think it is all there. I just want to indulge my being rallied by the noble speeches, if you will. All right, so exercising power, I mean, so you break it down into inspiration, manipulation, and murder, so force, keeping oneself in power through these ways. But maybe why is it that everyone wants power? What is it that power has that people are willing to pay such high prices to acquire it and to have it and to hold onto it?

Eliot Cohen:

I'll fall back on a conversation I had in graduate school with a wonderful woman. She was a political philosopher, Judith Shklar, who was the first woman in the government department at Harvard. Who was, as a child, had been a refugee from the Second World War. And there was a group of us sitting around the table of a political philosophy class, graduate students, all of us, very ambitious. At one point, she turned to all of us and she said, "There are two reasons why you might become a political scientist: either you're in love with power, or you're afraid of it." She said, "I'm afraid of it," and looked at us.

And I think it's... Ultimately, the craving for power means that there's something lacking inside you that you want to transcend or expand beyond. I think that the people I've known who are genuinely content with their lots in life don't want it and who have a sense of perspective. And that's why, I mean, we'll talk in a moment about why people leave power, but that's why the figure of Prospero and Tempest is so powerful. I mean, he knows he has to let it go if he's going to be a human being again. And it's why as people grow older, I mean, I know this, just feeling it internally, particularly if you've had a pretty happy life, which in my case I've had all kinds of satisfactions out there. You don't crave all the things that come with power and the responsibilities, the dehumanizing parts, you don't want it. I think when you still have these cravings, which

haven't been internal cravings, which haven't been fulfilled in some other way, you do crave it.

Rebecca Burgess:

Side note because I don't want us to get too caught up in all the current relevance of Merchant of Venice, but that is one interpretation that a friend of mine and I kind of talked about with the ending of Merchant of Venice is: Why is Portia after brilliantly defeating all the legal minds of Venice, if you will, why is she content to go back to Belmont, this kind of made up fairytale place? And his response to me, and this is interesting, I'm the woman here, and he was a male professor, and he said, "Well, I think Portia realizes that the most important things are not going to happen in Venice. The most important thing is this little realm that she is able to control without having to disguise herself, all of these different types of things. But in the family life that she has created by choice, there is a refuge. Jessica, the daughter of Shylock, comes there."

And I thought, "Well, that is interesting too, and it is true." But what about for those of us who, and you talk a little bit about this, of the students or of Cymbeline, the old courtier trying to keep the young princes away from the court? All they want is to experience the life of the court because hearing stories about it is not enough. So is this the tragedy of the ambitious young person who thinks, "But I need this realm and this stage of politics to meet my meaning?"

Eliot Cohen:

Yeah. Look, I think a noble ambition is a healthy thing. The desire to have the power to do some good with it and to have some notion of what that good is—that's an admirable thing. But I think, at the same time, it's important to know how it can be dangerous and how it's not enough simply to desire power. If you want somebody who desires power, it's Richard III. He has no idea what he wants to do with it, he just wants it. That's different from, I don't know, somebody like a Churchill who clearly wanted distinction, he wanted admiration. And if you want to get psychological, it does go back to his childhood, his relationship with his

father and his mother, and all that. But in any case, with Churchill, it's clear he wanted to do something with it. And I think that's the critical thing, the critical distinction.

I used to have students who you'd say, "Okay, what do you plan on doing after school? What would you like to do?" They say, "Okay, I want to make policy." To which my response was always, "Great. What policy do you want to make?" And I very rarely got a good answer to that. And at the end of that conversation, I would say, "You might want to go and have another think about why you want to... I'm not saying you shouldn't aspire to be Secretary of State. That's perfectly laudable. But why? To what end?"

And I think as a teacher or as a mentor, that's the important question to ask. It's not to try to deflect people from the pursuit of power. Also, 'cause if that's in their nature, that's what they'll do no matter what you say, as Belarius finds out in Cymbeline.

Rebecca Burgess:

Right. So Coriolanus seems a little relevant here, too, because he seems motivated by honor and glory.

Eliot Cohen:

Yeah, that's exactly what I was going to say.

Rebecca Burgess:

And so I think, particularly today, we have a very cynical view of power and those who approach power. And, of course, that's all imbued with truth. But on the other side of it, there's a nobler, if you will, aspiration in there, which is for honor and glory. And how do we square this, or how do we allow it? Or is it possible that there are some just motivated by that thirst?

Eliot Cohen:

Yeah. I mean, look, the desire for some kind of glory is a very important motivator for human behavior. For something like Coriolanus, it's success on the battlefield, for academics, it's getting to be a tenured professor at a major university. For other people, it's getting to be a CEO or maybe having a smashing podcast. But that, I think, will always be out there. The problem with Coriolanus is not only that he has zero political sense, but his desire for glory is coupled with contempt for everybody else.

Rebecca Burgess:

Absolutely.

Eliot Cohen:

And I think that's the perilous part. And it has a profound naivete to it as well because the people that he honors, and one of the people who he honors, who actually turns on him, and that's Aufidius, sort of his rival soldier. He says, "A lion that I would be proud to hunt." he calls him at one point. Well, actually, there are a lot of problems with Aufidius that Coriolanus is not perceptive enough to see. So, that ultimately ends up as Coriolanus' real problem. Not his desire for glory, not his sense of honor, which is an entirely appropriate thing. It's more the narrowness of his conception of honor and glory and his inability to bear with other people.

Rebecca Burgess:

So, is inspiration in wielding power always manipulation?

Eliot Cohen:

I think it usually has some element of manipulation. It usually has some element of artifice. Churchill didn't just get up and give those speeches off the top of his head. He wrote them very carefully. He edited them, he chose his words very carefully. So, there always has to be an element of

calculation. And if you want, you can call it an element of manipulation as well.

But again, that doesn't mean it's evil. I think it's just in the same way that I'd like to think I was a pretty good lecturer. Lecturing is performance art. And-

Rebecca Burgess:

Absolutely.

Eliot Cohen:

... if you don't think of it as performance art, you're not going to be good at it. And if it is performance art, well, you better think about the performance. You got to think about-

Rebecca Burgess:

Yes.

Eliot Cohen:

... when you're downstage, when you're not, and all that stuff.

Rebecca Burgess:

Yeah. I'm laughing because that was my moment of anagnorisis, if you will. The first day of teaching, I thought, "Wait, no one told me. No one told me that this is a performance as well."

Eliot Cohen:

It is.

Rebecca Burgess:

“And somehow, my brain has to be clicking at a high rate of speed here as well.” And I remember thinking, “Oh, that’s what makes a good teacher when they can combine those elements. Not just the knowledge, but the ability to deliver it with passion, so that bringing forward of your own personal connection with the text or the subject matter so that those in your audience are alerted that it matters.”

Eliot Cohen:

Yeah. You asked me earlier what I had learned from Shakespeare about international politics. I think one of them is the importance of theatricality and of staging of performance. I thought more and more deeply about Volodymyr Zelenskyy, particularly in the early phases of the Ukraine War, where he put his skills as an actor and as a director to wonderful use in mobilizing his own people and mobilizing international support in ways that I wouldn’t have expected. So theater really does manage. And the politicians who are not particularly good are the ones who don’t understand that and don’t work at it really, really carefully.

Rebecca Burgess:

And that can be at all levels. I know you mentioned LBJ and the types of suits he wore, and Reagan did that, too, in the opposite. He had a very fine sense of fashion, but as president, in fact, he wore larger suits that were less tailored. They looked a little bit more everyman, and that was an important part of being the communicator, the great communicator.

Eliot Cohen:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think it’s true of all competent leaders, whether or not they’re good people, is they are thinking about those things.

Rebecca Burgess:

Right before we turn to the losing power part of this, on the question of honor, again, I think you mentioned this in your book, I don't think I'm just imagining it is that difference between Hotspur and Prince Hal in terms of honor and glory. And King Henry IV thinks, or seems to think, that Hotspur would be a better heir to him. And it turns out, in fact, that would've been a disaster because Hotspur, he only has the hotness of his passion in the moment and no forethought, whereas Prince Hal kind of does, which brings in that honor's apparently not enough to-

Eliot Cohen:

No, it's not enough. And I would also say I'm not sure that... Henry V says that he's hungry for glory, but I think his sense of honor is different from Hotspurs. Hotspur is a more genuine human being, he's a more lovable human being. And you see that in his interaction with his wife, and that's clearly a loving match. Whereas the only thing you know about Henry V and Catherine is, it's a seduction with an element of coercion in it.

But for me, though, the thing that's interesting about that story is that Henry doesn't understand his own son. And he also doesn't understand what his kingdom needs. But you can understand why he, who is a very calculating kind of guy who has gone through a lot in order to get where he is but has always been sort of calculating, wants a bit of his opposite as his successor. You say, "I wish it was Hotspur. Was kind of bold and audacious, and he's fiery, and he's spontaneous, and he's unlike me." And it's one of those cases where it's a father wishes his son was something completely different. And maybe the truth is Henry V is even more calculating than Henry IV and arguably much more successful. And maybe at some deep, deep level, Henry IV knows that and doesn't want the rivalry there.

Rebecca Burgess:

Yeah, yeah. Well, I mean, as all the Henry plays, the history plays are, is kind of charting that course from medieval England to post-medieval England and the modern age. But losing power, since we're on that stage,

what happens when people lose power? Who walks away from it, and who simply loses it?

Eliot Cohen:

So one of the ways in which I think people simply lose it is they deceive themselves about how they got there and about who they are. And the classic case is Richard II, who really no longer knows who he is, once he's lost the kingship. When he's confronting Henry IV at one point, he's saying, "I've got this army of angels up there are going smite you down." And then he goes, "I don't have any friends at all." And he falls apart. I mean, he's a very interesting case because he is somebody who, once he's no longer king, there's no sense of who he is. He doesn't know who he is. And he says as much, which is quite remarkable, is that speech where he says, "I've wasted time and now doth time wastes me."

Rebecca Burgess:

Time wastes me.

Eliot Cohen:

And so, he's really quite a pathetic case. Somebody else who falls prey to her own magic is Joan of Ark, who I think is a figure really worth talking about than Henry VI, who attributes her successes to magical powers and other people attribute it to magical powers. But actually, if you look closely at the accomplishments that Shakespeare shows you, they're all very human kinds of statecraft and calculation and ruses of war and so on. And so, I've got a chapter there on people who convinced themselves of their own magic. And I reference Barack Obama, who I think was intoxicated and had people around him who were intoxicated by some sense of his magical powers, which, in retrospect, were very far from being evident.

But in terms of people who walk away, the two archetypes that I give are King Lear and Prospero. So King Lear wants the trappings of office but without the responsibilities.

Rebecca Burgess:

Absolutely.

Eliot Cohen:

That's the thing that's so striking about him is he's going to divide his kingdom. He still wants to be treated as the king in every possible way, including the deference he gets from his kids, the retinue, all that. And he doesn't realize that if you give up responsibility and authority, that other stuff goes away.

Prospero is really a wonderful case because Prospero, who has all these incredible magical powers, decides to relinquish them. "I'll break my staff and bury it several fathom deep and deeper than the plummet. Ever sound, I'll drown my book.", his book of magic spells. And in the book, I said, "Well, why does he do that?" I mean, he's going to go back. He's been able to do all kinds of incredible things on this island because of his magical powers. Why does he make a big deal of relinquishing them?

And the reason why is, I think, he realizes that the exercise of power on that island, that magical power, but most power is a kind of rough magic, is dehumanizing. And the hint, again, is just a little thing. But Shakespeare gives it to you, is at the very beginning of the play when he's going to explain to his daughter Miranda, how they ended up on this desert island, stranded there and so forth. He says, "Okay, it's time for me to tell you how this all happened, but first, help me take off my magic robe."

So, there are two things about that. One is he realizes he cannot talk to his daughter as a father talks to a daughter while still being this all powerful wizard. But he also realizes he can't take it off by himself. He has to ask her to help him take it off. And so there's, I think, a wonderful insight there. And he is a different man at the end of the play. And it's not that it's necessarily a happy ending.

He's going to go away, and every third thought will be of death, but he's a human being. You see it in the way he treats the people who have been subservient to him, including even Caliban, who, at the beginning of the play, he's quite brutal towards. He's effectively saying, "Do what I tell you to do, or I'm going to torture you." And at the end, he kind of admits to the king with whom he's been reconciled and says, "Yeah, that guy's mine. I'm responsible for him." It's a very, very different tone.

Rebecca Burgess:

Yeah. There's that whole, the shipwreck which he conjures up or the fake shipwreck. It doesn't quite happen. There's that interesting dynamic between him, who seems to be without empathy in that moment and sympathy, by the way, of watching the human drama, if you will, unfold. Which his daughter is just alive, too, and cannot distance herself from him. And she pleads with him. And so there's that, as you were saying, there's something about power that's potentially dehumanizing. You have to take that cloak off in order to remember, in a sense, why you exercise power in the first place in order to improve. Or I would say one ought to exercise power in order to improve the lives of those around one in one's state. But that's interesting.

But back to Lear, I think Shakespeare gives us such a pointed commentary on that wish of Lear. "That's literal madness.", he says.

Eliot Cohen:

Right?

Rebecca Burgess:

Yeah. Literal madness, now rage, rage against the winds as you're out of because there is nothing more foolish than to think that you can hold onto power but not have power. And that you're going to have a happy ending in that type of thing.

Eliot Cohen:

So often in Shakespeare, people deceive themselves, as in real life all the time. And that's why Prospero was such a wonderful counterpoint to him. At the end, he's not going to deceive himself, which means that he's not an entirely happy character. In the book, I draw the comparison with George Washington, who twice relinquished his power, both at the end of the revolution and then after his terms as president.

And George Washington was not a happy man in either case. I mean, he had all kinds of troubles that he was facing, but he was an infinitely more human character than he might otherwise have been. And it's one of the reasons why he is such an extraordinary figure in American history and why we were so lucky to have him.

Rebecca Burgess:

Plutarch, which I'm, like, duty-bound to always mention Plutarch when I can, but he is arguably Shakespeare's greatest teacher. And in Plutarch, we learn, and in history, we learn that, in fact, the statesmen, the generals who have given most to their countries, often have the most unhappy endings. They're driven into exile, forgotten, banished, or killed. And there's this question of gratitude you might say, which is something that let Lear become so alive about. And gratitude from the point of, "I gave my life in public service. What have you given me? And now you're just going to take it all from me." But I also wonder about—but is there a little note of legitimacy in the people sometimes doing that? Because how else would those people leave or give it up?

Eliot Cohen:

Yeah. Or I think it's also sometimes you resent your benefactors, most of all.

Rebecca Burgess:

Absolutely. Yeah.

Eliot Cohen:

But that's been no doubt. No. Look, I think that's, and Lord knows I've seen, and even to some extent, experienced cases like that where you've done an enormous amount of good. And your reward for that is going to be abuse. And I think that's why... And I'm not sure whether Shakespeare really fully conveys this, although maybe in Tempest, he does to some extent. One of the things that's really important for a powerful person to be able to do is really two things. One is first to take satisfaction in what you've accomplished, not in people's gratitude for it. That is a hard thing for people to do, because if you've been the center of...

Eliot Cohen:

... for people to do, because if you've been the center of attention, you want that validation, but you're not going to get it. But the other thing is knowing how to walk off the stage. Again, it's a theatrical metaphor, isn't it?

Rebecca Burgess:

Yes.

Eliot Cohen:

It is really important to know how to walk off the stage. And there are a lot of people in the political world, in the business world, in the academic world who've never figured that out.

Rebecca Burgess:

There are certain presidents or former presidents of think tanks who couldn't stay in retirement and had to come back out, and then the issues

that caused within, which is a separate question about founders versus rulers and governors, if you will.

Eliot Cohen:

Absolutely.

Rebecca Burgess:

But I think, also, part of it is just that desire to power is, in a way, an exercise of temporal immortality perhaps. And giving that up is the confrontation as Wolsey once again does and prosper of death.

Eliot Cohen:

I remember talking to one very senior official in the defense department, and we were talking about somebody else who was really clearly at the point where they should retire. And he looked at me, he said, "Eliot," he said, "You have to remember for so-and-so the next big job is death."

Rebecca Burgess:

Yes.

Eliot Cohen:

True enough.

Rebecca Burgess:

Well, I know we're kind of nearing the end of our time, but I wanted to go back to King Lear just for a moment because that play is just so complex. But it also seems to me that Lear, in addition to his sin of wanting to have all the trappings of power, none of the responsibility, mistakes the rule of a kingdom for the affection of a family and doesn't understand that he

could force affection in a way from his daughters. But that making that the test of political succession is, in fact, one of the pitfalls, say at least of a monarchy. But it's beyond a monarchy. It's always the test of legitimacy from one's designated heir or not.

Eliot Cohen:

It means, I don't think he knew what the meaning of real affection is. He doesn't know it with his youngest daughter. He doesn't know it with the one nobleman who really is genuinely loyal to him, who he banishes but who sticks with him. I think, in many ways, he's a great example of somebody who has been corrupted by the exercise of absolute power in such a way that his understanding of other human beings has shrunk. And maybe that's one of the conclusions to draw: is you exercise power long enough, there's an initial period where the exercise of power can cause you to grow. After a while, the exercise of power causes you to shrink, and Lear has shrunk. And although Lear is one heck of a depressing play, the redeeming part of it is he's grown back a bit at the end. He's grown back not only in his ability to recognize who the people around him really are, the bad, but also the good, but who he is. That line where he says, "I'm a fun, foolish old man," well, that's what he is.

Finally, at the end, he knows who he is, and that's not given to everybody. And self-knowledge is something that one should strive for. It's know thyself. In that sense alone, I would say Lear is an uplifting play.

Rebecca Burgess:

You begin your introduction in the book with a nice little anecdote about some people who see on the stage Goneril and all the rest of it. You know them, you've worked with them. I should have warned you at the beginning that I actually played Goneril once.

Eliot Cohen:

Oh, really? Oh, dear me.

Rebecca Burgess:

Yes, I did. High school, senior play. It was one of these things. I had no choice. You're given the role. And I thought, "Oh crap." And I will say, this is the fun of doing these things, of course, is we put on an excellent production, let us say. But for about two or three months afterward, there was a noticeable distancing of some people around me.

Eliot Cohen:

Now, was that because of them or because of you?

Rebecca Burgess:

Well, you know how effectively I've portrayed that role.

Eliot Cohen:

You're such a nice person. I can't believe it anyway. But I think there is a larger point there, which is particularly in the exercise of power, you're frequently playing a role, and after a while, you play the role, you become the role, and I think that's something that theater can teach you. And I've heard from professional actors that you play a character in a very serious way over a long season, it takes a while to deprogram yourself and to get that person out of your system. Well, for anybody who's powerful, something has to be an act. It just is. And you may become somebody who you weren't really, but I'm sure it was all about them, not about you.

Rebecca Burgess:

Yeah. No one lost their eyes afterward. I don't have that-

Eliot Cohen:

I doubt you would go in for the eye gouging.

Rebecca Burgess:

Yeah. It's a little too messy for my taste. But that lack of awareness, you've mentioned this a lot about Kloting, and I think it gets with Lear and maybe where we'll end up maybe about America today, which is those who grow up with power, those who spend a lot of time in power often forget how to wield power responsibly. And there's this lack of the effects of it almost, which you show with Kloting and how he is just cruel or just capricious in a way.

And that's why, initially, I wanted to needle you a little bit about Much Ado About Nothing. You have this prince and his little coterie—they come back from a war, and they're supposed to be the statesmen, and serious, they fight wars. And instead, what do they do? They create absolute havoc by just being like, "Let's play with the lives of these lovers, these men and women." How are we supposed to square that? Or what happens? How do we not have that? How do we find the medium between frivolity, which can end in death? Thankfully, it's a comedy, it doesn't. It could have been an Othello ending there with Much Ado and the horrors of Macbeth.

Eliot Cohen:

That's a deeper question about how do you become a serious person? And I think the answer is you don't become a serious person through the exercise of power or through, in that case, being successful in war. You become a serious person in some other way, which is much more introspective or reflective. And that's, I think, what we're missing. We talked earlier about how people don't have time. Among other things, they don't have time to read Shakespeare. They don't have time to read the Bible, they don't have time to read Tolstoy. They don't have time to do, or they don't make time for themselves to do the things that ultimately would make them much more serious, and those things have to lie outside politics. And I think the people who do keep an even keel, it is because of the things that are outside politics. It's because of a husband or a wife or a relationship with parents or religious faith or a deep, airy addition. You can find it in many ways, but you're not going to find it in the pursuit of power.

Rebecca Burgess:

To bring it up to America in the twenty-first century, that question of seriousness, I could say throughout the plays, throughout your book, you mentioned the importance of rhetoric. And it seems like today, not only do we have unserious politicians, we have very poor, rhetorically skilled politicians.

Eliot Cohen:

Yeah, we do.

Rebecca Burgess:

Is this connected or do we put too much emphasis maybe today on rhetoric?

Eliot Cohen:

No, the problem is it's not that the opposite of good rhetoric is not no rhetoric. It's bad or misleading rhetoric. And I think in a lot of some of the tropes of our time on the right as well as on the left, you have slogans which are effective, which are rhetorically cheap. When you use the word rhetoric now, it means insincere speech. That's usually how people talk about it. What Aristotle meant by it was persuasive speech. And he thought that rhetoric was absolutely essential for the functioning of any democracy because it's how you make arguments about things that are really important.

I think part of the reason for it, frankly, is just the decline of high quality education. If you look at a Lincoln or Churchill, very different masters of the English language, but both of them, they knew their Shakespeare, they knew their Bible.

Rebecca Burgess:

Absolutely.

Eliot Cohen:

And that enriched the kinds of speeches that they gave and the way that they made arguments. I think with a lot of politicians today, they don't really think it's necessary. Maybe they've been intoxicated by emails and tweets and Instagram and all that, but they don't understand the power of a well-delivered speech. Even today, even with all of our distractions. I have very ambivalent views of the Biden administration on Russia-Ukraine in particular. And one of the things that continues to baffle me is why we haven't had a series of powerful speeches about why this matters. It does matter to us enormously, and it's not hard to construct the case either. This is not esoteric. So why not? Where is it?

Rebecca Burgess:

It seems like we've forgotten in America, perhaps because the system works so well for so long that when you have institutions that carry forward the leadership in a way that you didn't have in monarchies, you still in fact do need the leadership of particular individuals, presidents, secretaries of state defense, others who have the microphone, if you will, to make the case. And that seems what we are absolutely leading.

Eliot Cohen:

I think that's absolutely right. The Cold War, you had the clarity of its beginning. You had John F. Kennedy, you had Ronald Reagan. You then had a period when the world seemed like a very benign and unthreatening place. It gets a bit darker after 9/11, and President Bush made some speeches. And then, after that, the world did not seem like a dangerous enough place, and the consensus didn't seem in peril enough for somebody to realize that they needed to get up there and make the argument. And unfortunately, the world is now a much more perilous place. This past year, I've been in Ukraine, I've been in Israel, I've been in Taiwan, so two war zones and one potential war zone. It's very serious.

There are absolutely echoes of the 1930s, but we don't really have a Churchill delivering the speeches that begin to wake people up in time.

Rebecca Burgess:

Nor do we seem to have a common language, if you will. And I know you've done work in civic education and the importance of deep something that goes back to the Edie Hirsch of the deep civic literacy or cultural literacy that allowed a Lincoln to do what a Prince Hall did, which is everyone in America had a copy of Shakespeare, high and low, those in power, just common. Lincoln himself taught himself through Shakespeare. We seem to lack some of those texts or core texts or core images that we can pull from today, which makes a book like yours necessary on Shakespeare and politics. Though in a perfect world, everyone already would know that Shakespeare was important and relevant to politics. Given that situation, where's the hopeful road, the path that we can take forward?

Eliot Cohen:

Well, I think, let's go back to where I started, those bright-eyed freshmen at Johns Hopkins University. They were wide open to what Shakespeare had to teach them, and many of them were in the sciences and that were engineering, things like that. And this was not central to their worldview. And that's always, by the way, been my experience when I've had students who are not from liberal arts backgrounds or from STEM areas, I never underestimate the ability of young people to absorb fresh experiences. You just have to deliver it to them. And I think you see institutions and movements out there that are doing this, but you've got a teacher talking here. I think the solution to this is more education. Education takes place in many different ways, in many different places. People have the opportunity to shape this in their homes, in junior high, in high school. The universities are a different proposition, and I worry a lot about the universities.

But the truth is, I think the essential battles are actually fought a lot earlier than that. They're fought in junior high and high school. And

that's where I think people should focus. And that's why I wrote those pieces that I've written about patriotic education.

Rebecca Burgess:

Hearts and souls of men, right?

Eliot Cohen:

Yeah.

Rebecca Burgess:

Well, like the chorus in Henry the V and like Puck in Midsummer's Night Dream, I have to draw this to a close and ask our listeners for their blessings and their patience and all those wonderful things. Right before I do that, I'd like to give you the last word. Do you have a favorite quote or speech or character in Shakespeare we didn't get to cover that you'd like to leave us with?

Eliot Cohen:

Yeah, I do. It's from Julius Caesar, and one of the characters that I like, and this will sound odd, is Cassius, who always gets written off as an envious conspirator, which I actually think is not true. Actually, I think Brutus has the weaker personality. Brutus is the one who's vain. Brutus is the one who doesn't want Cicero around in the plot because he wants too much attention. Well, guess what Brutus wants? And Cassius is a much more realistic guy, and there is an element of envy with Cassius. But at the end of the day, they're friends.

And this is on the eve of the Battle of Philippi. There's this wonderful exchange. Brutus says, "And whether we shall meet again, I know not. Therefore, our everlasting farewell takes forever and forever farewell, Cassius. If we do meet again, why, we shall smile. If not, why, then this parting was well-made." And Cassius responds, "Forever and forever

farewell, Brutus. If we do meet again, we'll smile, indeed. If not is true, this parting was well-made." And it's a beautiful moment of reconciliation between two friends who had had a rupture. And the mirroring of the language, I think, captures that, and it captures an essential human dignity that, at the end of the day, they both have. And you know what? The guys who do [inaudible 01:17:10] don't have.

Rebecca Burgess:

It's a resonant ending, for sure. A resonant ending for this. And by the way, neither of us will exit pursued by bears.

Eliot Cohen:

Well, that's true.

Rebecca Burgess:

Well, thank you so much again, Eliot, for doing this and joining us and having this great conversation. It was a pleasure to have you with us today.

Eliot Cohen:

Rebecca, I enjoyed it immensely. Thanks for having me on.

Rebecca Burgess:

Wonderful. That was Eliot Cohen. I am Rebecca Burgess, and this is Liberty Law Talk. Thanks for joining us.

Eliot Cohen:

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