

Announcer: Welcome to Civil Discourse. This podcast will use government documents to illuminate the workings of the American government, and offer context around the effects of government agencies in your everyday life. And now your hosts, Nia Rodgers, public affairs librarian, and Dr. John Aughenbaugh, political science professor.

N. Rodgers: Hey, Aughie.

J. Aughenbaugh: Hi, Nia. How are you?

N. Rodgers: I'm good, how are you?

J. Aughenbaugh: Lovely, thank you.

N. Rodgers: Huzzah. So, I thought it would be good if we talked to people about why we're actually doing this podcast, since it's coming out of nowhere. This... First of all, I should note for the record-

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, we didn't do a market survey, to see if there was demand for this.

N. Rodgers: We really didn't, so we'll be actually pleasantly surprised if there is demand for this. But we... One of the things that I wanted when I started this idea in my head, so the first thing I thought was, "I am going to make a brilliant podcast, and everyone will love it." And then I realized one does not do that alone, first of all, for the most part. I mean, there are some people who do that, but not really. And two, that isn't what I wanted at all, actually, once I started working out the idea in my head.

N. Rodgers: What I wanted to do was connect people to information, which is of course what I do as a librarian. I connect you to this idea, and I say, "Look, here's this idea," or, "Here's his information. You interpret it. You live your life. You do you." And then I realized what I really wanted was a conversation, so I started thinking about who I would want to have conversations about the federal government with, and the person who came to mind is you, in part because you are so easy with the topic, and I know it's in part because you've taught it for what, like since rocks were a feasibility study, and dinosaurs roamed the Earth-

J. Aughenbaugh: Or 20 plus years.

N. Rodgers: Whatever. Math, whatever. I don't do math. Although maybe sometime I could be comptroller general. That would be cool. But anyway, I'm aspirational if nothing else.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, but see, the comptroller general is a fascinating position.

N. Rodgers: Well, yeah. David Walker went around saying, "The country is on fire," and nobody was listening. Bless his heart.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah-

N. Rodgers: He was so interesting, and I think it was like me and three other people, probably you, and a couple of other people were listening.

J. Aughenbaugh: Well, I mean I got interested in comptroller general because there's a Supreme Court case about this, okay?

N. Rodgers: Of course there is. There's a Supreme Court case about everything, isn't there?

J. Aughenbaugh: Everything, right? Okay.

N. Rodgers: All the interesting stuff.

J. Aughenbaugh: Okay, and you know, the fact that he has a 10 year contract. Wouldn't that be great?

N. Rodgers: Oh, so he goes over two pres... Oh. That's cool. I didn't realize that.

J. Aughenbaugh: And by the way-

N. Rodgers: Didn't realize it was 10 years.

J. Aughenbaugh: And the comptroller general is actually an employee in the legislative branch. Yes.

N. Rodgers: No. You can tell from the look my face, I don't believe you, but it's true, right? Because-

J. Aughenbaugh: Oh, it is.

N. Rodgers: ... you would never lie to me.

J. Aughenbaugh: No. I mean, it is. The Supreme Court case of Bowsher versus Synar. Bowsher was the comptroller general, and the main reason why the Supreme Court said they can't go ahead and do this, is that the comptroller general reports to congress, and congress doesn't execute the law. Which branch does? The executive branch.

N. Rodgers: Hence execute.

J. Aughenbaugh: That's right. Separation of powers.

N. Rodgers: Executive.

J. Aughenbaugh: But anyways, we digress.

N. Rodgers: As we are going to be doing a lot.

J. Aughenbaugh: A lot. No, but I mean-

N. Rodgers: But see, that's interesting, and that's how... What I was looking for was somebody who would say, "Aha, this thing that you have given me sparks something in me that makes me say these interesting things, that are-"

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, because this is going to be a podcast about government documents that are available to the public.

N. Rodgers: Exactly. Public access.

J. Aughenbaugh: And there are explanations about why these documents are created, what are their purpose, and that was my interest in wanting to do the podcast, which is to explain, to teach, to have a conversation about why these documents are important. I mean, they just don't exist in a vacuum, so whether or not you're talking about an executive order, or an appeal that's submitted to the Supreme Court, what's known as a cert writ, which one of our colleagues will be talking to you about in a future podcast, or what goes into getting a person's visage on a stamp? Or-

N. Rodgers: Oh, it turns out our copyright librarian is obsessed with this idea. She's doing research left and right, like I said, "Hey, it'd be really interesting to talk about that," and she was like, "Give me a couple of weeks," and I said, "Oh, you, okay." Way to go librarians with their... and way to go professors, and that's the nice combination, is people who-

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes. And-

N. Rodgers: Are driven by interest.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah. We are curious. We have enthusiasm. I mean, we've spent years looking at this stuff. And those of you who will listen, you'll be like, "You've spent years looking at what goes into the Federal Register." Yes I have.

N. Rodgers: And I'm going to just say for the podcasters who can't see his face, when I said, "I want to talk about the Federal Register," he lit up like a Christmas tree.

J. Aughenbaugh: Oh my God.

N. Rodgers: He's like, "I talk about, I love the Federal Register," and I thought, "And that's what I love about you, Aughie, that you would say the words, "I love the Federal Register," with no irony."

J. Aughenbaugh: Oh, absolutely none.

N. Rodgers: Just as an actual fact in your life.

J. Aughenbaugh: You know, just like kids like birthday cakes, or some people like puppies, Aughie likes the Federal Register.

N. Rodgers: Which is both awesome and disturbing. But that's part of what we were here for, and part of what we were here for was to remind people that that access is your right. Your right as a citizen on the Earth. Not just an American citizen, but a citizen anywhere. You have the right to ask your government questions. You have the right to question and understand what your government does. If you don't, you're living in the wrong country, and you need to move, because that's part of the awesomeness, especially in the United States, but in lots of other countries. We shouldn't act like we're the only people who do that, because we're not.

N. Rodgers: There's lots of documents from lots of other countries.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, this is not a podcast about American exceptionalism.

N. Rodgers: Exactly.

J. Aughenbaugh: Okay.

N. Rodgers: We're awesome, but we're of a group of nations that are awesome, and that idea that you should be able to say, "I don't understand what the comptroller general does, and somebody should be able to explain that to me in real words," not in-

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, and it's a right and an obligation, because-

N. Rodgers: Oh, good point.

J. Aughenbaugh: ... one could make the argument that if we're going to make... Living in a democracy or making a democracy work is actually that. It can be work at times, and there is an obligation. If you don't understand why a federal agency harmed a member of your family, well, you could perhaps take a look at the transcript of

when they were nominated to occupy the position, and understand what went into it, right? Is that a process that needs to be fixed? Repaired? Does the process lead to, if you will, certain people, certain outcomes, and now you have a better understanding.

J. Aughenbaugh: I hope, or we hope, that that makes you a better citizen, a more informed citizen, and that's why I was excited when you approached me about doing the podcast. These are publicly available documents, but they have a backstory, in the language of Hollywood. Sell this as a script. Well, the backstory behind the Federal Register is... Nobody-

N. Rodgers: And executive are unconscious all over the room. Yeah, that's probably not going to work, but there are some things that do have really fascinating backstory, as far as how they came to be produced, or how they... What's the reason behind them, or how that stuff works, and I think you're right. I think there's some parts of it, I think people don't know because they're just not told. And some parts of it are so nuanced that they can't cover that in school, when you're in your K through 12.

N. Rodgers: And sometimes you don't even get it in college. You sort of get that broad, "And there's the government, and there's three branches, and they all work together. The end." Right? And we're trying to say it's a little more nuanced than that.

J. Aughenbaugh: That's right.

N. Rodgers: It's a little more complicated. There's humans involved. There's mistakes involved, but there's also triumphs involved. There's things that the government does that are great. There's things that they have done that have been great, and there are things that they have done that have been less than great.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, and part of, I would hope, the value of this podcast going forward, is you will see those triumphs, you will see those failures, but also understand that you as a citizen can learn about these, and perhaps begin to make expectations, maybe even changes if you want to, or to go ahead and say, "Hey, that works, and I want to support that going forward," or, "That doesn't," or, "Wow, I should probably pay more attention to the budget process," or, "I should pay attention no matter who the president is, when the media reports that there is an executive order that just got issued."

J. Aughenbaugh: Or, you know, something pops up on your phone about it's the so many odd year anniversary of this commission, "Well, what's the big deal?" Well, maybe we will get to it. Maybe you'll get interested, and maybe you will want to go ahead and say, "Wow, I should pay attention to that."

N. Rodgers: And there will be some episodes you won't be interested in.

J. Aughenbaugh: No.

N. Rodgers: And that's okay, too.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes.

N. Rodgers: We recognize that we're interested, because we're goofballs who watch CSPAN for pleasure.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes.

N. Rodgers: Like, "Oh, I've got my dinner, I'm sitting in front of CSPAN, I'm enjoying it." I know you bring that up to your class, of, "Hey, did you guys see this on CSPAN last night?" And I'm sure they think, "No."

J. Aughenbaugh: No.

N. Rodgers: No we did not, because real people don't just sit around and watch CSPAN. Which is not true, real people do sit around and watch CSPAN. Everybody has the right to whatever they find entertaining, within the legal limits of the law, but I-

J. Aughenbaugh: And we may even discuss that.

N. Rodgers: And we will, I'm sure at some point, get to that. We have many, many topics we want to discuss. It started off with, "Oh, there's these four or five topics," and then it's turned into there's a two page list so far, and we're not even close to the end of adding things to it, like "Who owns the animals in the zoo?" Stuff like that. Just interesting things, which-

J. Aughenbaugh: There's a well known Supreme Court case about mudflaps. Yes there is, and we will get to that.

N. Rodgers: Exactly. That kind of thing, and it's fascinating to me, to us, I think I speak for you as well, when I say it's just fascinating to figure out how those things fit in the overall scheme of the history of the United States, and how we've come to be where we are. We recognize that there is deep partisanship right now, in large... No, in small but well known parts of the federal government. I come back to the idea there are three million employees, and you only see 565 of them on the news, because everybody else is just doing their jobs, and going home, and feeding their families, and going to bed.

N. Rodgers: So, it's not-

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, the infamous, nameless, faceless, government-

N. Rodgers: Bureaucrat.

J. Aughenbaugh: Okay. Who, when they do their jobs well, it never gets reported, and if they screw up, then they get reported, and then we go ahead and say, "Damn bureaucrats."

N. Rodgers: Right. And-

J. Aughenbaugh: Which, by the way, both Nia and I are bureaucrats. In the very technical sense of the word, we're bureaucrats, and we're extremely enthusiastic about our jobs.

N. Rodgers: So, we're both employees of Virginia Commonwealth University.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes.

N. Rodgers: And I work in the library. I work in Cabell Library, which is one of the two big libraries that we have on campus, which is on the side of the campus that does the humanities, and arts, and engineering. There's another side of campus that does the medical side. That's the other library. And you are in the political science department.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes, I am an assistant professor in the political science department. Before I came to VCU, I worked at Virginia Tech. I've been teaching for over 20 years. I typically teach American political science. The institutions, like the courts, the bureaucracy, public policy, constitutional law, and some of you are like, "Oh yeah, I hate class with that guy." I once was aspiring to be a lawyer, and now I'm not.

N. Rodgers: That guy ruined the law for me.

J. Aughenbaugh: And hopefully-

N. Rodgers: And hopefully we won't be ruining things for you as we're doing this podcast. That's not one of our goals. There are a couple of stated goals we have. One of the goals that we have is we are not going to pretend that we are neutral. We started off with the concept that we might try to pretend that we are sort of absolutely neutral about things in the government, and then we realized that we were going to have a conversation, and that was not going to work. So, we're not going to try to be absolutely neutral. What we are going to try to do is

present you with as much information as possible, for you to make the decisions you need to make.

N. Rodgers: I would strongly urge you to not hear us as telling you what to think.

J. Aughenbaugh: Oh, no. Yeah.

N. Rodgers: Neither one of us want to tell you what to think. That's not something we're interested in doing. We are not-

J. Aughenbaugh: No, I mean we'll-

N. Rodgers: ... autocratic in that way.

J. Aughenbaugh: No, we'll explain things. We'll delve into getting a better understanding of how a process works, or what is the meaning behind something, but we're not going to tell you what to think.

N. Rodgers: And we'll occasionally disagree with each other, I suspect on things.

J. Aughenbaugh: Sure.

N. Rodgers: And that's also okay. It's okay, again, civil discourse, right? The name of the podcast-

J. Aughenbaugh: Podcast is Civil Discourse.

N. Rodgers: ... is Civil Discourse for a reason. We want there to be more civility in the discourse that we are having as a nation. We are seeming to struggle with that right now. We're seeming to struggle with the idea that you have to pick a side and you have to entrench on that side.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, I have no interest in that. Nia doesn't have any interest in that. We have worked together for years. We enjoy talking about these kinds of things. We will disagree. We have disagreed. And every-

N. Rodgers: It's yet to come to blows.

J. Aughenbaugh: It's yet to come to blows. For Nia's part, she always makes sure that I am well caffeinated. She knows that's important. But nevertheless, we can disagree, but still want to go ahead and have a meaningful conversation.

N. Rodgers: And you should be able to do that with your... Either people in your family, your friend group, people online with Facebook, you should be able to bring up your

points, and use facts to show why you feel a certain way, and we're going to try to arm you with as much ability to do that as possible. So, one of the things we're going to do with the podcast is we will have a research guide that goes along with the podcast, that will give you links to the documents that we're using for each of the podcasts, because we will mention a document in each one. They will also link you to any other things that we think are relevant.

N. Rodgers: I know that we are... We at some point are going to destroy my childhood dream of Schoolhouse Rock, I'm Just a Bill, and when we do that, we will also connect to that, so you can see what's being destroyed if you're not familiar with it, with the crushing of my soul.

J. Aughenbaugh: I'm the... I believe going to be the... I'm going to be the killer in that particular podcast.

N. Rodgers: Yeah, I think you are the soul crusher, and I'm the soul crushee, so that kind of thing we will make sure you have links to. There will also be information on that research guide about reaching me, and reaching Aughie, if you want to send us email, if you want to send us questions, if you want to make commentary, if you want to propose a topic. If there's something you'd like to know more about, we would be happy to hear about it. If neither one of us knows enough to talk about it, we will go find somebody who does.

N. Rodgers: Aughie knows everybody on campus, and the few people he doesn't know, I can try to get to know, and bring them in for things. So, there'll be lots of different areas that you'll hear us cover. We're happy to cover things that you're interested in. Just let us know that.

N. Rodgers: The address for that research guide is in our outro. If you listen to when Donna says thank you, she also tells you where to go for that. And that also is a slight little thing I want to bring up, which is that we are not making the podcast just the two of us. There is Tony, our engineer. There is Donna, who is our professional announcer. You'll be able to tell that, because her voice sounds professional, unlike the two of us, who sound a little bit like-

J. Aughenbaugh: We're having a conversation at a bar.

N. Rodgers: Exactly. We are one step above a bar. And then there's Isaak, who did our music, so we appreciate that. And we have a lot of support from the library, as far as technical support.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, and also a big shout out to the staff at the library, who actually trained Nia and I on how to do this, because we really weren't all that educated.

N. Rodgers: No. No. They're good people at the library, and they'll be happy to help you, and if you are not a VCU student, faculty, or staff member, and you're listening to this podcast, local libraries will be happy to help you do these things.

J. Aughenbaugh: Sure.

N. Rodgers: You just need to find the local library that... and if you can't find one, email me, and I will help you find one, because that's what I do. So, I don't... I think that pretty much covers my goals. Does it... Do you have anything that you want to mention about?

J. Aughenbaugh: My interest in doing the podcast, Nia, goes back to why I became a college teacher in the first place, which is it's an opportunity to go ahead and learn things in an environment where it's all right to go ahead and ask why, or what if, or how does this work, and hopefully with the podcast, we will answer some of those questions. We will share our enthusiasm, and you may not get enthusiastic about every subject, fair enough. We hope that you do.

J. Aughenbaugh: But find what interests you in what's going on in the government. As Nia's fond of saying, it's your government, and-

N. Rodgers: I was just getting ready to say that. How well you know me.

J. Aughenbaugh: And I concur in that sentiment. It's your government, and a lot of it works, some of it doesn't, but hopefully with the podcast, as the title suggests, you can be civil, and you can talk about these things. You can disagree, but you'll also find that there is agreement. There's probably more of it than what you think, or what's portrayed in the media, or what you see on social media. Nia and I come from these... come at these topics from different backgrounds, and every time I talk to her, I learn new things about stuff that I thought I already knew, because the questions... I mean, and that's part of, I think, the value of discourse, and any kind of learning environment, is the questions oftentimes allow people to share an experience.

J. Aughenbaugh: And to me, there's value in that, so... And hopefully you guys will find value in our podcast.

N. Rodgers: And if you don't, no harm, no foul. Find another podcast. Our feelings will not be hurt if we are not your cup of tea. Well, my feelings might be a little bit hurt, I have to admit. I'll get over it.

J. Aughenbaugh: Well, and I like coffee. Tea.

N. Rodgers: So there you go. Tea? Who drinks that?

J. Aughenbaugh: Yuck. But anyways, thank you for listening.

N. Rodgers: Yes, thank you so much.

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