Human Scale
Guest: Jeff Taylor
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Jeff Taylor is a professor of political science at Dordt College and the author of Politics on a Human Scale: The American Tradition of Decentralism.

WOODS: When I heard you had this book, I had no idea it was so hefty. I had no idea what an achievement this was, and then I look on the back, and I see Bill Kauffman wrote a blurb, and he's a favorite guest of this show, so you're already doing well with my listeners.

TAYLOR: I was very humbled that Bill, among other, were willing to sign off on the book and give it an endorsement.

WOODS: Also Don Livingston. I should have him as a guest on the show. I don't know why I haven't; I think just because I'm an idiot or something. I should have him on because he's done so much to shape my own views on the subject of decentralism and the American tradition. Anyway, they can speak for themselves. I want to talk to you right now. I want people to know something about you and where you are coming from, not because I want to pigeonhole you—because I think in your case that's completely impossible—but as a reminder to people that it is possible to live outside the Hillary Clinton to Mitt Romney spectrum of opinion.

TAYLOR: Yes, yes. Well, yeah, when it comes to labels, I am willing to answer to a variety of anything from a liberal, to a conservative, to a libertarian, to a populist because really my thoughts and I guess my actions have elements of all four of those. Among other things I guess sometimes I am more of a communitarian as well. It kind of just depends on the context. Growing up as a kid, when I first became interested in current events and politics I was young, but the Vietnam War was still going on, and that war didn't make sense to me, but at the same time the more I read about communism I realized that that was something that was a horrible, detestable system, but I just didn't think war was the way to try to stop that. So I remember I was one of two sixth-grade members of my class that favored McGovern over Nixon back in '72. So then I guess I was more on the left side of the spectrum. And then later on in that decade I became more of a conservative Republican interested in Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party. Then in the '80s I got disillusioned with Reagan when he filled his cabinet with establishment types. I felt like that was a betrayal of what he had promised, and I started

looking at people on the left side of the spectrum. In the end I guess my thought has elements of all of those things, because I am less interested in the individual political party or an ideological label. It's really more the principles or the values that I consider important, and I think the things that are really true and important in life really cut across those party lines and ideological labels. So I am really kind of a mixture of different things. It depends on what kind of issue you're talking about, I guess.

WOODS: What you've done in this book is not only to recount some history that most people don't know, because it doesn't fit into the comic-book version of U.S. history, but also you're giving an advocate's account of decentralism. It's not just talking about historical figures and episodes, but it's an advocate's account. Why decentralism?

TAYLOR: Well, because I think that is one of the fundamental questions of the day, and I think it's one of the ways in which our political system has gotten way off track. I guess one uniting principle that I have had since I was young is the dissatisfaction with the status quo. I guess I look at what is, and I think this isn't what we were promised. This isn't something that really fulfills our noblest aspirations. And why is that? So with this book, I am looking at something that we were promised with the Constitution, which was a federal system of government where the bulk of the activity of government was going to be kept at the state and local level, and the national government was going to primarily focus on foreign affairs. Obviously it hasn't worked out that way. So I am asking the question, why is that? And as you say, I am taking a normative view of this, saying that I am not pretending to be neutral. I think devolution of power or decentralization of power is preferable. I think it's safest. I think it makes the most sense in terms of fitting who we are as human beings, and I try to explain how we got from a very decentralized republic 200 years ago to where we are today.

WOODS: I want to talk about some of the historical periods and episodes that are covered here. There are just so many. I want to skip ahead to Goldwater and Reagan because I know that's what people would be most interested in, but they are just going to have to wait because let's start off with the Democratic Party, which for a long time was a decentralist party. That was what we associated with the Democrats in the 19th century, and then all of a sudden by the end of the century, going into the 20th century, you had a complete sea change. How did that happen?

TAYLOR: I put most of the responsibility on Woodrow Wilson for that. The Democratic Party, and this was true of both wings of the Democratic Party in the 1880s, 1890s, both what I would call the more establishment wing of Grover Cleveland, sometimes known as Bourbons, they were more economically and socially conservative; and then you had a more progressive liberal wing that eventually William Jennings Bryan became the leader of. Both of those wings still paid adherence for the most part to the Constitution, to the idea of federalism, states' rights, the 10th Amendment and so on. Where you see the big shift in the Democratic Party away from that traditional view, which was really laid out at the very beginning by the party's founder, Thomas Jefferson, you see that shift taking place in the 1910s under Woodrow Wilson. Wilson

comes in talking like Jefferson, but governs like Hamilton. He was a very smart man, a very good politician, and in the end he co-opts the Democratic Party. Traditionally the Republican Party had been the big government party, and by putting the Democrats on that same side, he really removes any kind of effective national break on the centralization of power.

WOODS: Now, Wilson and Teddy Roosevelt were political opponents for many years, and TR couldn't stand Woodrow Wilson, but when push comes to shove, what was the real difference between Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson? Was it so huge that it would be the sort of thing you would break a friendship over? How substantial was it?

TAYLOR: No, I think it was primarily personal.

WOODS: Yeah, me too.

TAYLOR: I think it was personal rivalry. It was very different styles between the two. Although they were both learned, and they were both authors. But I think it was a personal rivalry more than anything. In the end Wilson essentially embraces the platform that Theodore Roosevelt ran on in 1912, which was a very centralizing, Hamiltonian view of government. Even the opposition that TR had to Wilson while Wilson was in power was more on the idea that Wilson didn't jump into World War I fast enough. It wasn't as though one represented the peace side, and one represented the war side. They were both warmongers. It was just a question of how fast you get into war. TR was kind of the John McCain of his day.

WOODS: And they both favored a strong executive, and they both saw federalism as just an obstacle, just get out of the way so I can oppose my policies on the country. But getting back to William Jennings Bryan, I think most people associate the shift in the Democratic Party to Bryan himself, to the campaign for free silver and that sort of thing. Also, Bryan did favor Prohibition, which was a centralizing policy.

TAYLOR: Well, it's true, and oftentimes even admirers of Bryan, at least admirers to a degree like Michael Kazin of Georgetown, a historian who wrote a nice biography of Bryan a few years back. oftentimes they will say Bryan was the link between the old-style, small government, Jefferson approach in the Democratic Party and then the transition into Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal and the big government approach of liberalism, and it was really Bryan that changed the party in that direction. I think that's entirely incorrect, though. I think it was Wilson who was to blame for that, and I think even something like Prohibition, in that case, that was not something that Bryan favored by executive fiat or Supreme Court Ruling. That was something that he believed should be sent to the states following the rules of the Constitution. We can debate the merits of Prohibition, but at least Bryan was somebody who did respect tradition, did respect the Constitution, and actually was not at all the kind of big government liberal that he is often depicted as today.

WOODS: Let's talk about the Southern Democrats. I think this is one of the things that has made political decentralism toxic to many people, especially left progressives, because they say

the Southern Democrats wanted political decentralization simply so they could oppress people, and that this is therefore the hidden agenda of people who use these words now, that these words of decentralization are really just code words for oppressing members of minority groups. What's your take on the Southern Democratic tradition?

TAYLOR: Well, with the Southern Democrats it's complex. On the one hand, there was a rich tradition of a belief in decentralized government through state's rights, but also a type of populism, the idea that the people versus, say, the government, or big corporations, or other institutions that take power unto themselves, that the people really should be in charge of their own lives, their own country. That kind of populist, decentralist approach has very deep roots in the South going back to Jefferson, and it's one reason that the South was solid for generation after generation, because they believed in those basic principles of Jefferson. So I think there was a kind of neutral, principled commitment that had nothing to do with race, with slavery, with discrimination, segregation, any of that. But then on top of that, eventually, there were Democrats, both the more populist type but also the more elite type that often would use those arguments of states' rights in defense of a cause that I think is reprehensible, the whole idea of keeping people down, especially through state power, through obviously slavery, but then later on it was segregation. So it became a tool that I would say was honorable, but it was used oftentimes then for dishonorable means. We shouldn't blame the tool for that. So yes, it's a convenient way of dismissing things like states' rights, nullification, to just say that's something that bigots support. That's something that Calhoun was for. That's what the segregationists in the 1950s were talking about. It's an easy way of dismissing all that, but as you've written in your book on nullification, it's much more complex than that. Nullification was actually never used directly in defense of slavery, but it was used in defense of the abolition of slavery and getting around the Fugitive Slave Act, and all of that by a lot of the northern states. That's all kind of been lost because it's inconvenient history.

WOODS: And, of course, the same people who say that what we saw some of the Southern Democrats doing forever discredits decentralization will never say that some of what everyone today acknowledges to be outrages perpetrated by the federal government forever discredits centralization. Nothing ever seems to discredit centralization. The 20th century should have discredited centralization, and yet we hear not a peep from those people. They are all still living in Birmingham, 1963. It's a different world today also in the United States in terms of people's opinions, in terms of demographics, and yet, the sense is that if anybody is allowed to do anything other than what the federal government demands, before you know it, Jim Crow will be reinstated.

TAYLOR: Yeah, it's true, and in the end a lot of it is ignorance, but I think some of it is just intellectual dishonesty, where the opponents of the constitutional framework will reach for any straw to try to discredit that just because they don't like it. Some of it people just don't know, but I think others of it—people who at least should know better—just aren't being honest about it. In the course of writing the book one of the things, I don't know that it ended up in the

book, but reading through the causes of secession that were listed by I think there were four southern states that held conventions and explained why they were leaving the Union, at least one of those states specifically mentioned nullification as one of the reasons they were leaving the Union because they blamed Wisconsin and some of the northern states for ignoring the Fugitive Slave Act, and they said the federal government wasn't coming down on them and stopping that. So the irony there is that they were specifically criticizing nullification because it wasn't being used for their particular concern.

WOODS: How do you interpret the nomination of Barry Goldwater? It seems to me as if from your point of view this was an aberration without long-term significance, and in fact, the eastern establishment of the party more or less sat out the election and let Goldwater implode. What do you think about all that?

TAYLOR: I do see it that way. Sometimes I've wondered how could he have gotten the nomination in the first place.

WOODS: You know what, Jeff? Let me interrupt for a second because I just remembered that we actually do have a lot of listeners around the world, and I don't want to assume that everybody just knows who Barry Goldwater is. So start off by telling people who he is. Sorry about that.

TAYLOR: Goldwater was a United States senator from Arizona, and then he became the Republican Party presidential nominee in 1964. So he was going to represent the Republicans that year against the sitting president, Lyndon Johnson, who was a liberal Democrat, and Goldwater was a conservative, and that was a time when the word liberal was still riding high and most Americans considered themselves liberal, partly because they were thinking in the older sense of the word, that they believed in liberty. Goldwater, of course, did as well, and to some extent he would be considered a more libertarian Republican today, but he was proud of being called conservative, and so he was emphasizing the Constitution, emphasizing smaller government. Although he was rather hawkish on foreign policy. So there was a little bit of a disconnect there. But Goldwater obtained the nomination over the howls of the Republican Party establishment, and I have sometimes thought, well, how was he able to beat out Nelson Rockefeller, and George Romney, and William Scranton, and all of these other establishment figures? One explanation is that during the primaries they were divided. There were a bunch of different candidates. They never really settled on one, and by the time they did, it was too late. Goldwater had enough delegates to win. I think that's part of it, but I think part of it, too, is that they maybe thought Johnson was unbeatable that year, and so maybe they didn't pull out every stop to prevent Goldwater's nomination. As you say, in the fall, once Goldwater won the nomination, they just kind of let him twist in the wind. Some of them publicly came out against Goldwater and supported Johnson and others and just sat on their hands and didn't do anything. And Goldwater ends up being buried in a landslide, and it doesn't seem to have long-lasting influence. Although it sets the stage for Reagan, but what you find with Reagan is more

of a direct betrayal. In the case of Goldwater, we don't know what he would have done as president because he didn't win.

WOODS: I happen to think that if Ron Paul had by some miracle gotten the Republican nomination, I think the way Goldwater was treated by the party would have looked like a picnic. It would have looked like they were giving him the Medal of Freedom compared to how they would have treated Ron Paul.

TAYLOR: I am sure you're right. I am sure you're right.

WOODS: And, of course, you were a delegate to the 2012 convention.

TAYLOR: Yes, one of the highlights of my life was being in Tampa and being on the floor of the convention that night and casting my vote for Ron Paul—one of about 200 of us, I guess, that were able to vote for him. It should have been more, but nevertheless, that was a great experience. But I'm certain that you're right, Tom, that the Republican establishment, not only would they have not helped Paul if he had gotten the nomination, but they would have actively worked against him, smeared him, lied about him, done everything they could, opened up the checkbook and helped fund Obama in that case.

WOODS: Yeah, yeah, they would have done things to him they would never, ever have dreamed of doing even to Obama himself, whom they portray as evil incarnate. I wonder if at some point we might have you on to talk about your experiences there, because I know you've written at great length about what you saw there at the Republican Convention. May I ask that parenthetically? Would you consider doing that?

TAYLOR: I would love to do that, yes.

WOODS: All right, we'll come back to that another time, but talk about Reagan. It's strong language to use the word betrayal when it comes to Reagan. When you say that he appointed establishment people, it is worth noting that just yesterday on the show I had David Stockman, who said that really the three people who ran the administration were Deaver, Baker, and Meese. Now, Ed Meese was a conservative but a fairly conventional conservative, not one who is going to make substantial changes, I think.

TAYLOR: That's right. The people closest to Reagan, including I think his wife, Nancy, and there's a couple of exceptions of Meese and the Attorney General, William French Smith, but for the most part, the people who were acting as his kitchen cabinet, but then also the top positions in the administration in terms of the State Department, the Treasury Department, the Defense Department—these were not Reagan conservatives. They were not people who had belonged to the conservative movement going back to Goldwater, before that going back to Taft. These were Richard Nixon, George Bush, Gerald Ford, moderate, liberal, Republicans. You pick your label. They were mushy centrists who really cared about power and money above anything else. And if you're having those folks write the script, you can't really expect the drama to move in the conservative direction that Reagan promised, and it didn't.

WOODS: Where do you see decentralism today? Is it deader than ever, or is it experiencing a rebirth, or something in between?

TAYLOR: I'd say something in between. We're seeing actually at the state level a bunch of different instances of—they are not usually calling it nullification—but it really is de facto nullification, and it ranges from things with federal gun control laws for state legislatures, and governors are saying we're not going to follow those, to federal drug laws. There's been a little bit of a change recently with the federal government in terms of how they are dealing with marijuana, but in a variety of different ways to some extent this has been true of Obamacare as well. There are state governments that are saying: if we believe that the federal government has overstepped its constitutional bounds, we're not going to follow that federal law or that federal regulation. I see that as a healthy development. Whether you agree or disagree with the particular state action, I think the fact that states are willing to stand up and say we do have some sovereignty. We do have a right to interpret the Constitution and be a watchdog of the Constitution. I see that as a very healthy thing.

So there is some of that going on, but at the same time I'd say we're a long ways from where we ought to be, and one of the central points of the whole book is if you're going to have a return to constitutional federalism, and you bring power closer to the states, closer to the people, you're going to have to have one of the two big parties championing that. And sadly, neither of the two big parties at the national level really care about following the Constitution and decentralizing power, and to a large extent today I put the blame on the Republicans because they are the ones who pay lip service to it, but of course, they don't actually practice it.