Sarah McConnell: If you type "Bigfoot" into a Google search, you get about 43 million hits. Click on the Wikipedia page. You'll be led through the history of the big furry Sasquatch, the most reputable sightings, including pictures, the science behind it. Could he be a remnant of Gigantopithecus? This is the conspiracy theory rabbit hole, and fess up, we've all been there.

Jason Hart: Oftentimes, the truth is less interesting than these wild conspiracy theories that people sort of adhere to and latch onto. People love that stuff.

Sarah McConnell: From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Today, we're talking about the weird things that people actually believe. But first, speaking of conspiracy theories, fake news is in the running for the phrase of, well, the last three years. Journalists are responsible for helping us separate fact from fiction, but it's hard for journalism to do its job when American trust in the media has plummeted in recent years. Mallory Perryman is a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University's Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture. She's taken a closer look at media bias and our trust in the news.

Mallory P.: I think we have what I would call a connection problem. We have a lot of good journalism being done in this country, perhaps some of the best journalism we've seen in decades. We have a very informed audience. We have people who are interested in politics. We have people who are willing to learn and want to know more about the world around them, and we're more connected than ever, and yet, we have a disconnect between journalists and the audience, where the audience is not necessarily understanding what journalists are doing, and their role in democracy, and how important they are, and I think maybe we just have a problem where journalists aren't necessarily communicating as well as they could what important role they fill in everybody's day-to-day lives.

Mallory P.: You hear a lot about how journalists don't necessarily understand the audience, and I agree with that to an extent, but journalists are always trying to understand what their audience needs and what it wants, and yet, we have a misunderstanding on part of the audience of what it is journalists do, and their role in democracy, and how important they are, and I think maybe we just have a problem where journalists aren't necessarily communicating as well as they could what important role they fill in everybody's day-to-day lives.

Sarah McConnell: I'm really interested in what you notice with your own students. How long have you taught? I ask that because I wonder if you've seen a shift even since when you first started teaching this subject and now.

Mallory P.: I absolutely have noticed a shift. I started teaching journalism in 2007, when I was still a student myself, training younger journalists at the University of Missouri, and now fast-forward to today, where I have my own classrooms. I've stuck with broadcast journalism students, so that part's been consistent, but what has been different is how these students think about journalism. They're very much advocacy minded. They care very deeply about social issues in a way that perhaps young people have always felt deeply about social issues, but these students are willing to take the advocacy and put it into journalism, which cuts both ways in terms of is that a good thing or bad thing for journalism.
Mallory P.: You have this traditional view of objective, neutral journalists producing regular day-turn style news, and then you've got this new space that the internet has opened up, podcasting has opened up, new revenue models, new types of media have opened up where there is a place for journalism that cares about the world around it, and tells stories that advocate for the voiceless, and for the climate, and for policies that benefit people. I do see a shift toward that. They really feel very deeply that the stories they tell should matter.

Sarah McConnell: So would you say that we were maybe in a moment with sweeping generational differences between this generation and the people before, when it comes to perceptions of news, the media, and reporters?

Mallory P.: I wonder. Does everybody always think they're in the midst of a sweeping generational moment? I don't know, but it certainly feels that way to me.

Sarah McConnell: Yeah.

Mallory P.: Because these students, in a way that I always had a computer in my house, and my father can't say the same thing, and his father can't say that they always had a telephone in the house. So yes, in that way, the technology has changed, but even more so than that, these students will always think of media in a way that we just don't. We say, "Where do you get news?" "Oh, I get it on Facebook." To my students, that's incredibly normal. In fact, for many Americans, that's becoming a major, and maybe even the main way, of access to news.

Mallory P.: You know, Pew Research Center periodically asks Americans where they get news, and you've seen, of course, increased access to news online, but especially social media, and a lot of people lament that. They're like, "We don't want people getting news through Facebook," because obviously Facebook is curated by an algorithm. You're choosing your friends, and you're choosing news outlets to follow, but in a lot of ways, you're being exposed to perhaps more headlines than you would have ever seen, unless you flipped through the daily paper, and people just don't access news that way.

Mallory P.: So it cuts both ways. My students are seeing news, and I'll ask them, "Where do you guys get news from?" And they kind of have to rack their brains, because they don't log in in the morning and sign on to the Washington Post. That's just not how they consume news. But they do log in in the morning and scroll through their Twitter feed. They probably see 10, 12 headlines first thing in the morning, and they don't even realize they're consuming news in that way until I point it out, because to them, it's just a habit, but it's a new habit, that's very different from the habits of the past.

Mallory P.: You've also researched the extent to which each of us thinks our political opponents get their news from a bubble, so liberals think those conservatives are feasting on a daily diet of Fox News and Sean Hannity. Conservatives are
convincing liberals are feasting on the New York Times and Rachel Maddow. What do you find? Are those biases true?

Mallory P.: That is absolutely true. There is a concern in this country about the idea of selective exposure, and it happened especially with the internet, now that you have more news options than ever before, so you think, "Where do people go and get news? Well, of course, they go... Liberals flock to MSNBC, and conservatives must flock to Fox News," and that's somewhat true. If you give a conservative a headline choice, and they have to choose a story between Fox News and MSNBC, they are more likely to choose the headline from Fox News.

Mallory P.: But it's not true that people ignore news that doesn't fit their views. What is true is that a vast majority of Americans actually get news from a few major traditional news sources, ABC, NBC, CBS, you know, even to an extent cnn.com, which is one of the most popular places to get news online. So, most Americans are getting pretty neutral, traditional, objective news sources that don't really... certainly nonpartisan.

Mallory P.: But the problem, as you mentioned, is that everybody seems to think that everybody else has different news habits. They think liberals believe that conservatives are feasting, as you say, on Fox News and conservatives believe that liberals are only consuming liberal news, which is easy for them to believe, because they tend to believe that most media outlets are liberal. They believe that their opponents are consuming news that is only making them more extreme, and that is a problem in a country where we already have very, very high levels of political polarization.

Sarah McConnell: Talk to me about your deep dive into an annual poll of people's perception of bias in the media, and whether that's changed over time.

Mallory P.: Gallup is a major polling agency that has been polling public attitudes about media for a long time. They first did this in the 1970s, and found that about over 75% of Americans had a great deal of trust in media. Today, that number is about 45% of Americans, which sounds low, because of course, it's less than half of Americans who have what we would consider a positive view of the American media, but that is up a little bit. Our lowest point was in 2016, believe it or not, where we had around 30, 35% of Americans having a great deal of trust in media, and that's gone up a little bit, largely because of Democrats.

Mallory P.: I believe today, you have over 70% of Democrats with a positive view of media and only 20% of Republicans with that confidence in media. So we definitely have a partisan divide that has always been true to an extent. If you look at the graph over time, conservatives have always had lower opinions of the media in the Gallup poll, but the divide is starker now than it ever has been before.

Sarah McConnell: Let's talk about a tricky issue, much covered in the news, maybe less talked about generally, but as reporters started to look at Donald Trump and debate
among themselves whether they thought he was racist, or should be called a racist. It seems like the media began to change, and as reporters decided that it was a fair label, I think you had massive change in the public perception of whether reporters were deciding to be activists.

Mallory P.: I think that was a turning point. The comment that President Trump made about the Congresswoman, the, "Go back to where you came from," comment, that was... objectively was a racist comment, but the question of whether to call that a racist comment in reporting was, I think, a turning point. There were a lot of smart people who have been in journalism for a long time who disagreed about whether coverage should explicitly label that a racist comment. And there were very good points made on both sides of that argument, and part of it was what does labeling it accomplish, right? Does it do anybody any good? Does it serve the public to label it a racist comment, or are we turning people off to our coverage, and not letting them listen to the explanation of why it was wrong?

Mallory P.: And on the other hand, there's no question about it. That is a racist trope. Whether President Trump knew it or not, the comment itself... You know, calling him a racist based on that, I think might be questionable, but it was a comment that should be called out for what it is. But is it the media's job to call that out, or do we allow someone else to call it that, and we quote them, or invite them on our shows? That is an open question, and it's a good one, and I'm glad that journalists are thinking about it. However people chose to cover that story, what was important was not necessarily whether you called it racist or not, but whether you explained the history of such a comment, and whether you put it in context.

Sarah McConnell: So, if the public, especially conservatives, now perceive great media bias where they had not before, or mistrust, is the media biased?

Mallory P.: We have a problem declaring whether bias exists in the media at large, and studies have come up with different conclusions. Most studies end up concluding that, if they look at a vast majority of major news organizations, the there is not an overt left or right bias in coverage, but as you mentioned, some of the concern is that, especially among liberals, the concern is that there's a corporate bias in news. Then, on the right, you find that a lot of the concern is about individual journalists, and that people on the conservative side of the spectrum believe that journalists aren't like them, and that they're out of touch.

Mallory P.: My counter to that is that there may be more liberals than conservatives in newsrooms, but that doesn't mean that the coverage is left leaning. I think sometimes even when journalists have left-leaning opinions, they in fact maybe overcompensate by trying really, really hard to make sure that they are being neutral and objective in their coverage, and seeking out perspectives that are very unlike their own. But it's difficult to know without a content analysis of every news story, and every journalist in America, whether there is this sense of bias in the news. What we do know is that people think it's there, but the
problem is that people on the left and the right both think it's biased, so what's the answer?

Sarah McConnell: Do people trust local reporters more than they trust so-called national reporters?

Mallory P.: Absolutely. People trust local reporters at a much higher rate. Pew Research Center recently did a study where they looked at attitudes toward local reporters all across the country, and you can look at the data for your country, for your state. It's really illuminating. Here in... We're in Richmond, Virginia right now, and local news trust is much higher than the national level, which is a great thing.

Sarah McConnell: How should we improve trust in the news? How can we shore up our democracy by making sure people feel safe in consuming the works of hopefully relatively objective reporters?

Mallory P.: Last year, the Knight Foundation in conjunction with Gallup did a study where they asked people, "What's wrong with the news? Why don't you trust the news?" And the top three answers were accuracy, concerns about accuracy, concerns about bias, and concerns about transparency, which seem like such big topics, but the truth is that we actually do a really good job in those areas. If we are inaccurate, we issue a correction. If we're biased, we take that into account and we do a better job the next time. We're sort of a navel-gazing profession. We are constantly thinking about what we do and trying to do better, and we just do a poor job of communicating that to the public.

Mallory P.: I think we have a public relations problem in a lot of ways, and I think the number one way to improve trust in journalism is for journalists to get out there and say, "Here's what I do. Here's my process. I'm going to be completely open with you. I'm going to show you what I do. Here's why I interviewed this person, and why I didn't interview this other person, probably because they didn't return my calls." They just need to be open with people about the process.

Mallory P.: And a lot of that is going to come from media literacy programs. Showing people what it is that journalists do. It's amazing how much people don't understand about the profession. You know, they have to stand up for themselves. Journalists are very hesitant to do that sometimes, because they don't want to make themselves the story, but I don't think of this as making the story. This is just standing up for what you do, and if you believe that what you do is important, and journalists do, then they should share that with those around them.

Sarah McConnell: Mallory Perryman, thank you for sharing your insights on With Good Reason.

Mallory P.: Thank you so much for having me.
Sarah McConnell: Mallory Perryman is a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University's Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture. Coming up next, you might think you’re not the conspiracy theory type, but have you ever crossed your fingers for luck? Where’s the line between all in and just a little superstitious? Jason Hart is a psychologist at Christopher Newport University, and he's fascinated by, as he puts it, "Why people believe weird things." He and his students explore ghosts, psychic experiences, and conspiracy theories to better understand why we are drawn to unscientific explanations for the world around us. Jason, you teach a senior psychology seminar called The Psychology of Weird Beliefs. What do you explore with students?

Jason Hart: Well, we explore the paranormal. We explore pseudoscience and plain nonsense. Usually, we talk about things like ESP, ghosts, talking with the dead. We also go into what I call denialism, so people who deny evolution, people who deny the safety of vaccines, people who deny climate change, and our recent addition to the class has been fake news.

Sarah McConnell: Do we, as humans, all believe in weird things, it's just that some of us are a little bit more scientific in explaining our strange and false beliefs?

Jason Hart: Right. Our default is really not to think scientifically. It's easier to rely on cognitive shortcuts, what we call heuristics. They're very efficient, but they're not always correct, so when we do spend more effort thinking about things, it's not a fail-safe. We can still be wrong, but we're less likely to be wrong if we've processed the information in a thoughtful and rational way. But yes, we all have weird beliefs, even myself. I have to catch myself all the time. When I get on a plane... A superstition is a weird belief. Like, the fact that when I get on a plane, and I take my right hand and slap the side of the plane before I enter it, it's a weird belief. I mean, it's not going to keep me safe, but so far it's worked.

Sarah McConnell: Yeah. Do you think that we evolved over eons so that our weird beliefs are actually adaptive, that in some ways, they help us survive?

Jason Hart: Yes. I think so. I mean, we are pattern-seeking creatures, okay? If I do this, something's going to happen, so if I touch a hot stove, I'm going to get burned. You've made that connection, that pattern. We make patterns all the time. However, some of those patterns are incorrect. In my class, we talk about two types of errors, if you will, a type one error, one in which you believe in something that's probably not true. That would be something like believing in the ability of people talking with the dead. The second error, or type two error, is failing to believe something that is probably true, so like evolution would fall into that category, as well as the safety of vaccines.

Sarah McConnell: Do you think understanding our beliefs that are wrong, and why we have them, relates to how we see political choices?
Jason Hart: Well, I think we need to take a step back and think about how people see the world in general, so a worldview if you will. You pick the party that best supports your worldview, and when you have a party that does not support your worldview, what can you do? Well, you basically say, "Well, they're the ones who are wrong," which makes you feel better when you attack the other group, and you think you're right.

Sarah McConnell: Give me examples of where you could see illustrations of worldviews/weird beliefs or false beliefs for liberals, and then the same thing for conservatives.

Jason Hart: Okay, so if we're thinking about a worldview where you believe that the Bible is inerrant, you would probably more likely to believe that dinosaurs and humans coexisted. So if you're thinking about how it differentiates between Republicans and Democrats, if you look at the data, Republicans are more likely to deny evolution than are Democrats. If we look at the other side of the ledger, Democrats are more likely to believe that GMOs, genetically modified organisms, are dangerous.

Sarah McConnell: Do you have your students address politics in the classroom?

Jason Hart: Yes. I do, so I make sure that we pick on everyone.

Sarah McConnell: Yeah.

Jason Hart: Because as I alluded to earlier, everyone has weird beliefs, so political orientation does not shelter you or buffer you from holding weird beliefs. Neither does intelligence level. We all have weird beliefs. But I do ask them to write a letter to a politician, who's made a statement that is not consistent with the evidence. It's really difficult to change a person's mind. It's even harder when you're condescending, or you come off as arrogant, or you're attacking them, so don't be a jerk to people. As kind, cordial, not condescending, but also informative for the person who's reading the letter.

Sarah McConnell: How did you first become interested in the whole psychology of the weird beliefs we all hold?

Jason Hart: Well, it was also actually late arriving, because as a younger kid, I was a big believer in the Loch Ness Monster. I was just really into what we call cryptozoology now, the study of hidden animals, so Loch Ness Monster, bigfoot, Sasquatch. That was my jam as a kid.

Sarah McConnell: Yeah.

Jason Hart: I loved it, and I love dinosaurs too, so the fact that maybe a dinosaur was sort of hidden in the jungles of the Congo really appealed to me. One of the books that really changed my life is Carl Sagan's A Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark. I just picked it up on a whim, and it really changed my life,
and how I teach. He really had a call to arms about how pseudoscience and the belief in the paranormal were creeping in, the darkness if you will, and science needed to be that light to keep that darkness at bay.

Sarah McConnell: Give me a litany of the kinds of true weird beliefs that we all know are out there, that people do fall prey to.

Jason Hart: Well, I mean, that's the thing about it. Conspiracy theories are really interesting, because some conspiracies are actually true. There was a conspiracy to assassinate JFK, for example, or to fly planes into the World Trade Center buildings. That's a conspiracy. What differentiates a real conspiracy from a fake one is evidence and logic. You can have facts that are part of a false conspiracy. For example, the 9/11 truthers believe that jet fuel does not burn at a high enough temperature to melt steel. Now, that's true. However, what they're failing to acknowledge is that steel will weaken under those temperatures, and there's other things in that building that burned, which can increase the temperature to a point where steel can give way.

Sarah McConnell: Right.

Jason Hart: Oftentimes, the truth is less interesting than these wild conspiracy theories that people sort of adhere to and latch onto.

Sarah McConnell: Are some of us more likely to have these so-called weird beliefs than others? For instance, are creative people more likely to have these beliefs than others?

Jason Hart: Yes. Some great data about this out there, where creative people are really good at finding patterns, so if you're a scientist on the cutting edge, you're seeing things that maybe other scientists don't see, but you're also more likely to find patterns that are not real. We actually did a study looking at this, with our CNU students, where we had them complete a measure of creativity and also a scale that assessed paranormal and pseudoscience beliefs, and what we found was the more creative you are, the more likely you are to believe weird things. The less creative you are, the less likely you are to believe in weird things, so there seems to be an association between creativity, which has its benefits, but it also may have its drawbacks.

Sarah McConnell: Creativity means sees patterns?

Jason Hart: Yeah, we all are pattern-seeking creatures. It's just that creative people are more apt to see patterns that the person who's less creative is not likely to see.

Sarah McConnell: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Jason Hart: So if you're in the lab, and a scientist, and you're highly creative, you might take more risk to look for a pattern that may or may not be real, whereas a person who's less creative is less likely to take that risk.
Sarah McConnell: That's interesting, because I think about alien abduction, for instance, or even the whole concept of aliens. I could see a super-scientist looking for life on distant planets having very elaborate visions of what life may look like outside the planet Earth, whereas you could also picture someone that has very little science background, super confident that there are alien abductions.

Jason Hart: Right. And we got to make a distinction here. There are legitimate scientists who are looking for life outside of Earth. The problem is, is that if you believe that aliens have actually interacted with us or have abducted some of us, that's where we say as a skeptic, "Well, show me the evidence."

Sarah McConnell: Right.

Jason Hart: And most of the evidence that they have is anecdotal, which is really not good evidence at all.

Sarah McConnell: What about these weird beliefs, as portrayed and perpetuated through popular culture and movies?

Jason Hart: Well, if you think about a science book, you go to Barnes & Noble, for example, and you look at the science section, I mean, the real science section, how many bookcases do they offer for that? But if you look at like the new age stuff, or sort of that young adult fiction, where you're talking about sparkly vampires and things of that nature, there's a lot more space dedicated to those books in the Barnes & Noble, and the reason why is that people want to learn about... or they're more attracted to that than they are science. People love that stuff. I like some of that stuff.

Sarah McConnell: Let me ask you this. Knowing what you know about false beliefs, and weird beliefs, would you rather we have them or not?

Jason Hart: Well, some weird beliefs I would say are less damaging than are other beliefs. In other words, if you believe in ghosts, and it does not cause of psychological or social harm, like you're not up at night with anxiety about, "Oh, there's a ghost that can affect me," but you entertain the possibility that there are ghosts out there, I think that's okay. I don't want to be the skeptic that rains on your parade. However, if you don't believe in the safety of vaccines, that impacts me and my kids, if someone doesn't vaccinate themselves or their kids, so when someone's a vaccine denier, that carries more weight with me than someone who believes in ghosts. I just encourage people to get outside of their bubble. It's uncomfortable. Do you spend time with people who hold beliefs that are not like your own? Really listen to them. Don't try to argue with them. Listen first, and be empathetic about that other person's position.

Sarah McConnell: Jason Hart is a psychologist at Christopher Newport University. This is With Good Reason. We'll be right back. Welcome back. From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. Coming up next is an encore presentation of our
conversation with Pulitzer Prize Winning Author and Journalist Rick Atkinson. In 2003, Rick Atkinson was embedded with General Patraeus in the 101st Airborne in Iraq. In the middle of the night, he learned he’d won his third Pulitzer Prize.

Rick Atkinson: I hung up, and I’m looking around, and everybody’s asleep, so the watch officer was a young lieutenant, and he was watching The Simpsons. I went in and I said, "Eric, I need to tell somebody, so I’m going to tell you, since you’re the only one awake now. I just learned that I won the Pulitzer Prize for history." And he looks away from The Simpsons for about three seconds, he looks at me, and he says, "Oh, that's nice," and goes back to watching The Simpsons, which was absolutely the right response.

Sarah McConnell: I'm Sarah McConnell, and today on With Good Reason, a conversation with Pulitzer Prize Winning Author And Journalist Rick Atkinson. Rick, you’ve spent much of your career writing about the military and your childhood on military bases. What was that like? I've heard you say, "We were Bedouins."

Rick Atkinson: Yeah, I think military families tend to be nomads. We moved every somewhere between one and three years, and the saving grace, I suppose, is that everyone else is in the same boat. It seems perfectly normal when you’re a kid, of course, and I think that the advantages to it are that you see the world, you are forced to become somewhat self-reliant, I think. You see a lot of different perspectives on things. The disadvantage is that you have no hometown. When I’m asked what my hometown is, I always stumble, because it’s a difficult question to answer.

Sarah McConnell: You almost went to West Point after high school. What changed your mind?

Rick Atkinson: Yeah, I did. Having grown up in the army, I really never had any aspirations to do anything other than go to West Point and follow my father's footsteps into the army, even though he was not a West Pointer. I applied for an appointment, and got it, and spring of my senior year, I began thinking about it for the first time, belatedly, and really decided that it was not for me. You had to be an engineering major then. It was all male, still then. That seemed very unappealing.

Rick Atkinson: It was the height of the Vietnam War. Kent State happened that spring. My father had just come back from Vietnam, so the notion of committing yourself at the age of 17 to four years at West Point and then a five-year commitment, minimal, in the army afterwards, just didn't seem like the right fit for me, so I really did decide at the last minute to turn down the appointment and do something else. I wanted to read English, study literature, and you couldn't really do that at West Point at that time.

Sarah McConnell: How did you end up writing for a small newspaper in Kansas, then?
Rick Atkinson: Well, I ask myself that on a number of occasions. My father was stationed in Kansas after I got out of graduate school, and I had no money, no job, no prospects, no skills, nothing, maybe a little ambition, and my mother, who was very worried about me, prevailed upon me to call a man named Lee Porter, who was the editor of the Topeka Newspaper. I called, and he was kind enough to take my call, and said, "I don't have any openings here in the big city of Topeka, but I do know of an entry-level reporting position in Pittsburgh." I said, "Oh, Pittsburgh, that'd be fine. My mom and dad are from Philadelphia." Mr. Porter said, "Not that Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Kansas," so I started working on the paper there, my first newspaper job.

Sarah McConnell: But it was the Kansas City Times not long after, where you won your first Pulitzer.

Rick Atkinson: Yeah. I moved after 16 months in Pittsburgh to Kansas City. I actually worked for the Kansas City Times, which was the morning paper. The Star is the afternoon paper. And I won the national reporting Pulitzer. I wrote about the West Point class of 1966. I wrote a four-part series about that class. They lost more men in Vietnam than any other West Point class.

Sarah McConnell: You later turned that series into a book.


Sarah McConnell: Before that book, what had led you back to West Point to investigate and report on this class of 1966?

Rick Atkinson: There was a bit of serendipity, actually. My father's closest friend in the army had a son, Mike Fuller, who was in the class of '66, so one day, we were driving to my brother's wedding in Southeast Kansas, and he began telling me almost in a monologue about what had happened to his class, how they had arrived at West Point in July 1962, full of idealism, full of John Kennedy idealism, "Ask not what your country can do for you," leaders of their generation, and determined to win the war in Vietnam, as it turned out.

When they graduated in '66, they all went off to war, virtually without exception, and then of course, recognizing very quickly that something had changed within the culture, the country was against the war, the country was against the warriors, and these young men, and they were all men then, 579 of them, who had been leaders of their generation suddenly found that they were pariahs. It was an extraordinarily heavy burden that they were carrying long after the war, long after they had left West Point, in some cases long after they had left the army.

The class was badly divided over the war. The class was badly divided over how to honor the dead, whether the wall was a black gash of shame, "An open urinal" as Tom Carhart was saying, or as Jack Wheeler and others were saying, it
was a work of genius that would resonate for generations to come. These kinds of cataclysmic frictions were really evident in the class.

Sarah McConnell: How many of that class did die in Vietnam?

Rick Atkinson: 30 of them were killed.

Sarah McConnell: Why so many, when they are to be the officers, who are less in harm's way?

Rick Atkinson: Well, officers were not out of harm's way in Vietnam. You're talking about platoon leaders, lieutenants in a platoon leader's war. The army was so hungry for young officers it sent them straight to Vietnam, so they arrived there in many cases knowing how to march really well, which they'd learned at West Point, but not knowing a whole lot else about combat.

Rick Atkinson: There was one character named Buck Thompson. He was from Atchison, Kansas, and he was a famous figure at West Point. He was one of these radiant young men who catches everyone's attention, has a knack for getting in trouble, but a bigger knack for getting out of it. Buck was there. He'd gotten married right out of West Point. They can marry the day they graduate, and many do. He had a young son, and Buck was at Hill 875, which was a ferocious firefight in Vietnam, where several of his classmates were killed in that fight in the central highlands around Dak To. Surrounded, basically, by the enemy, air strikes were called in. The air strikes are errant, and Buck and a number of others were killed by friendly fire, by our own air force. That story has stuck with me forever, and there are many like that.

Sarah McConnell: How much older than you are these men?

Rick Atkinson: They tend to be nine, 10 years older than I am. They're war babies, born in 1943, 1944. For me, it was like having 579 older brothers, and of course, you know, now they're well into their 70s, so they're beginning to pass naturally. I always think of them as 18-year-olds arriving at West Point on R day, reception day, so for me, they're really 18-year-olds in the summer of 1962 forever.

Sarah McConnell: We spoke with a couple of the members of the West Point class of '66, Jeff Smith, Mike Fuller, and Lieutenant General George Crocker. This is what they said about you.

Speaker 5: I think he's now viewed as somewhat of an honorary member of our class. In fact, we've technically made him an honorary member of the class.

Speaker 6: He called me at home one evening and said he was a reporter for the Washington Post and was doing some research for an article. I said, "Well, you know, I'm pretty busy studying here." He said, "Here's the deal." He said, "You go talk to the public affairs officer about me, and if he gives me a thumbs up, you'll talk to me, and if he doesn't, I'll go away." So I did, and he gave me a
growing report of Rick Atkinson. He characterized him as, "If you like the truth, you will love Rick Atkinson."

Speaker 7: Rick has a marvelous ability to gain the confidence of people he interviews, and to recreate scenes, and capture what was going on not only in fact, but also in the minds of the individuals who are conducting the activities. He makes you feel as if you were there.

Speaker 5: He wrote our personal history. It was our story, and we are eternally grateful.

Sarah McConnell: Those guys really love you.

Rick Atkinson: Well, I really love them too. The book, The Long Gray Line, ends with the chaplain, James David Ford, who'd been chaplain at West Point for almost 20 years, eventually became the chaplain of the US House of Representatives, also for 20 years, and he describes how he had, in some cases, baptized these young men at West Point, as young adults. He had married them, and then in some cases, he'd also buried them. He ends by talking about, "I love these men," and I feel the same way. I have grown not only to admire them, but to have a deep reservoir of affection and love for them.

Sarah McConnell: The next Pulitzer that you won was as part of a team with the Washington Post, for a series that ran in 1998, investigating the DC police force shootings.

Rick Atkinson: Yeah. I had come back from being a foreign correspondent, a war correspondent, in Berlin, and I ran investigative reporting at the Washington Post, which is a job, as you might imagine, they take very seriously, and have since Watergate. One of the stories was about fatal shootings by the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, DC. In the end, we were able to assert that reckless gunplay, that was the phrase that we used in the first sentence of the first story, reckless gunplay had marked the behavior of the DC police department for a number of years.

Rick Atkinson: We determined, irrefutably, that these young men and women, they were frequently in their early 20s, mid 20s, were put out onto the dangerous streets of the District of Columbia, and this is a time when crime was much more serious than it is today in Washington, without having the proper preparation for all of the things that police officers in a violent city can face. It was a brilliant series, I have to say, on behalf of the reporters who were putting it together. It won the Pulitzer Prize, the Gold Medal for Public Service, which is often considered the highest of the Pulitzers awarded each year. It was a great instance of the power of the press, I think, to affect reform and to affect change.

Sarah McConnell: Like the rest of us, you're now seeing this rash of videos of police shootings that have emerged across the country. How did being part of that intensive series change your perspective on the current issues?
Rick Atkinson: Obviously, some of the same problems that we uncovered persist around the country. The consequence is that the relationship between those sworn to serve and protect and those who are to be served and protected is so painfully at odds with what you would want that kind of relationship to be, so that you find extraordinary mistrust of police forces, and again, that makes the cop's job all the harder. It's hard enough under the best circumstances, and when people don't trust you, that makes it almost unbearable.

Sarah McConnell: You spent several months with General Patraeus in Iraq in 2003. How were you able to get the access to General Patraeus, to become embedded with him?

Rick Atkinson: Don Graham, the owner of the Washington Post at that time, he asked if I would be willing to deploy. I said okay, so I called Dave Patraeus. He said, being Dave Patraeus, "Sure, come down. Come down any time you want." Patraeus and I, in his Black Hawk helicopter, flew into Southern Iraq together, just as an enormous sandstorm, which eventually lasted three days, began, so we're flying with zero visibility into hostile territory, and we landed at a remote hellhole in Southern Iraq. We'd heard that some bad things had happened that day. There was a young soldier named Jessica Lynch who'd been captured. There had been an attack by army helicopters the previous night, which had gone badly. They'd been shot to pieces, and Patraeus's face, not eight inches from mine, said, "Tell me how this ends. Tell me how this ends."

Sarah McConnell: You were with Patraeus, in Iraq, when you heard you won the Pulitzer for the first book in your World War II trilogy.

Rick Atkinson: I was. Of all places, we were outside the time of Najaf, and by my satellite phone, I called in my story to the Washington Post, and the editor I was talking to said, "Hang on a minute," and finally, Len Downie, who was the executive editor, came on, and he said, "We weren't sure when we'd be able to talk to you again, so we just want you to know that the Pulitzer board, today, awarded you the Pulitzer Prize in history." Well, I was really gobsmacked, I must say, because I was just not thinking about that. I didn't know it was Pulitzer day and all the rest of it.

Rick Atkinson: I hung up, and I'm looking around, and everybody's asleep, so watch officer was a young lieutenant, and he was watching The Simpsons. I went in and I said, "Eric, I need to tell somebody, so I'm going to tell you, since you're the only one awake now. I just learned that I won the Pulitzer Prize for history." And he looks away from The Simpsons for about three seconds, he looks at me, and he says, "Oh, that's nice," and goes back to watching The Simpsons, which was absolutely the right response.

Sarah McConnell: You're now working on a book about the American Revolution. I sort of yearn to know, from you, that we are still the Americans we once were, good or bad, that we are a certain people as distinct from others, and that some of that is good, right?
Rick Atkinson: Yeah, some of it is good, and I think that's true. I think that's a legitimate aspiration. My study of who we were in 1775, well first of all, we're a very fractious people, to the point of you know, the American Revolution is first and foremost a civil war. We were perfectly willing to kill our neighbors in that war, just as we were in 1861. So you see that the depth of passion that flows through this people is in fact... it is a boiling blood. But you also see these extraordinary traits that we still cling to, of a belief in diversity, a belief in individual dignity, a belief in compromise.

Rick Atkinson: Sometimes you wonder today, if we lost that, well that's what the founding fathers were all about. As rigid as they were in separating themselves from the mother country, virtually everything that they do in the cause of both the revolution and consequently in the cause of forming the new republic, is an act of compromise. Remembering that periodically is a good thing for us, that those who cannot compromise are so rigid and brittle that they're on the losing end of history. It's not how history has moved forward in this country.

Sarah McConnell: Does the American military moral code hold? Do you think that it is working for us?

Rick Atkinson: Well, I write about war not because I'm particularly interested in battles per se, or the weaponry, or anything other than the characters who are involved, because I do believe that war, and the incredible intensity, the stress of combat, is a revealer of character. It's important not to glamorize either war, obviously, or the notion that somehow we are more moral as a fighting people than others.

Rick Atkinson: Now, there was plenty of killing of prisoners, of German and Italian prisoners, and Japanese prisoners in the Pacific, in World War II, and I write about it to some extent. There are a number of atrocities, rapes of French women in Normandy, for example, that belie the notion that somehow we are simply liberators who have come here sowing peace and restoring the good people of France, or Italy, or wherever, to their antebellum, peaceful existence.

Rick Atkinson: It's important to understand that war is corrosive, and that it makes good soldiers do bad things, and it makes bad soldiers do horrible things, and that when we, as a people, decide that we're going to send our young men and women off to war, that corrosion is part of what we have committed them to. We see that with the examples of atrocities that have been committed in Afghanistan and Iraq. Are they representative of soldiers, and sailors, and airmen, and marines who've been fighting there for all these years? No, they're not representative at all, but it is part of the landscape of combat, and the longer you are in it and the more frustrating the circumstances are, the more corrosive the effects of that kind of circumstance. The stress changes soldiers who are subjected to it.
Rick Atkinson: So, you know, my feeling is that all in all, we have, as a people, over centuries now, tried to adhere to civilized standards of warfare. There are rules, and we punish those who violate those rules, but you're kidding yourself if you think, first of all, that we are better than some others, and you're kidding yourself if you believe that you're asking 23-year-old soldiers to be perfect in their behavior, when they are scared to death every day they are in combat. It's not enough to say, "Well, they volunteered. It's a volunteer army." That's not enough. That's not good enough. You have to feel that you have skin in the game as a citizen.

Rick Atkinson: You have to feel that it's as if you're sending your own sons or daughters off to war, and we've lost a substantial portion of that, I fully believe, over recent years, where it's just easy to kind of turn away, and to get on with your life. You applaud them when you see them at Washington Nationals games, in the fifth inning, when the veterans are introduced, or at a hockey game when they're introduced in one of the intermission periods, and you clap for them, and you feel good about them, and then you forget about it, because you're not required to think any deeper than that.

Sarah McConnell: How would you like to be remembered, if you had any say in it?

Rick Atkinson: Well, I'd like to be remembered, first and foremost, I think, as a good father, as a good husband, as a good friend. I'm proud of the books that I've written, and the books still to come, I hope. You'd like to see on your gravestone something equivalent of, "He was a good friend. He was a good father."

Sarah McConnell: Beloved younger brother of the West Point class of '66.

Rick Atkinson: That's right, and I'll always be younger.


Rick Atkinson: Thanks, Sarah. I look forward to that myself.

Sarah McConnell: Rick Atkinson has won three Pulitzer Prizes throughout his career, as a journalist and historian. This program has been made possible in part by a major grant from the 2016 Pulitzer Prize centennial campfires initiative, and by the Law Firm of McGuireWoods, also the University of Virginia Health System, connecting doctors and patients through telemedicine, to deliver high-quality care throughout Virginia, the US, and the world, uvahealth.com. With Good Reason is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia Humanities. Our production team is Allison Quantz, Elliot Majerczyk, and Cass Adair. Jeannie Palin handles listener services. Special thanks this week to Deb Farmer of WHRV and Steve Clark at VPM News. Some of the music is by Blue Dot Sessions. For the podcast, go to withgoodreasonradio.org. I'm Sarah McConnell. Thanks for listening.