Presidential historian Jon Meacham is a contributing editor to Time magazine and executive editor and executive vice president of Random House. He is the author of “Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush,” “Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power” and “American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House,” for which he won the Pulitzer Prize in 2009. Meacham is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and of the board of the Society of American Historians. He regularly appears on TV as a commentator on politics, history and religious faith in America. A native of Chattanooga, Tenn., he studied English literature at The University of the South in nearby Sewanee and holds several honorary doctorates.

What can state legislators learn from Thomas Jefferson?

Jefferson is often seen as a philosopher and architect, some sort of figure above politics in many ways, and in many senses he wanted to be seen that way. But for 40 years, from 1769 until he left the White House in 1809, he was a practicing politician. He sought office, he held office, he pretended he didn’t want office—all the themes that continue to unfold in our political life. But he understood that however philosophically attuned he was to the culture and currents of his time, if he were only philosophical, that put him in a different category. He would have less impact. It foreclosed the possibilities to put those ideas into wide action. His ability to amass power, hold on to it, exercise it in a real cut-and-thrust, everyday legislative arena was what made him truly great.

Could Jefferson be elected in today’s political landscape?

Well, he was elected then and it was different, but it was a difference I think of degree, not of kind. Remember, Jefferson and Adams ran in the first contested presidential election, in 1776. The negative ads at the time—and they didn’t come from a super PAC—gave voters a choice: You could have Adams and God or Jefferson and no God. So those of us who think that either FOX or MSNBC created this are wrong. This has gone on for a long time.

Jefferson’s temperament was such that he would have a very hard time with the hyper-criticism of the moment. He would read all the Twitter feeds about himself, and it would drive him crazy. When you read Jefferson’s letters and think about him, he was probably too thin-skinned for his chosen profession. I suspect some of your members may have something in common with that. One of the reasons I admire politicians so much is their capacity to get in the arena, put up with people kicking them in the shins just for the hell of it.

In studying George H.W. Bush, what did you learn that surprised you?

He’s the last of a kind: the last president of the World War II generation, the first president of the post-Cold War era, and the last president to make a decided choice to go contrary to his own political interest when he broke his “no new taxes” pledge in 1990.

He’s a man who signed up on his 18th birthday to become a naval aviator, was shot down at 20 and lost two of his crew mates, went through Yale in two and a half years, built a business, started running for office in 1964, lost two Senate races, lost a presidential race, but just kept going, kept going. It’s a story of great public service, but also ferocious ambition. This is one of the most competitive men who ever drew breath, who hides it brilliantly, but it has always been an effort to hide it.

One of the fun things about writing biographies is reading old report cards. On Bush’s high school report cards, his teachers’ comments are wonderfully prescient: He gets so intense over everything, he worries too much, he tries to hide it and be cool, but you can tell he’s really worried. That’s a theme that runs throughout. He’s really a giant of 20th century history, and he deserves a moment on the stage by himself.

What can Bush’s story teach us about moving beyond gridlock—in D.C. and between D.C. and the states?

Three things happened, more or less on his watch, and they were a little bit beyond his control. One was the rise of reflexive partisanship, the idea that a House Republican Caucus would be more interested in a House majority than in the success of a Republican president. If you talk to Newt Gingrich, if you talk to Vin Weber, they’re pretty honest that their goal was to break the 40-year lock the Democrats had on the House. Because
George Bush was not helping them do that, they made the decision they did. That was totally beyond George Bush’s life experience—that a Republican caucus would turn on a Republican president for its own partisan ends. So a rise of reflexive partisanship was one.

Another was the rise of cable news. Commentary became more constant. You had CNN’s Capital Gang. You had the beginning of the world we know now—incessant chatter with politics treated more like a sports event.

And the third thing that changed—and Bill Clinton is the apotheosis—was this idea of confessional politics, that he would feel your pain. George H.W. Bush is one of the most sensitive men I’ve ever known, but he would never show that in public. He just thought the presidency itself required a different level of dignity.

Do we overstate the current polarized political gridlock?

It’s worse than it’s been in a long time. We had more cooperation in the ’50s and early part of the ’60s than we do now. Is it as bad as it was in the 1850s? Maybe statistically you could argue that, but I think today is more like the ’30s. I think we have an ideology of opposition that has become reflexive. People are willing to wait longer, stall until there can be a shift. No former president or governor, I suspect, would say they always got what they wanted 100 percent of the time; you’re not supposed to.

What happened? I think it’s this idea of free agency. Interestingly, party gridlock has rarely been so strong, and yet party has rarely mattered so little in terms of your loyalty. You have a donor class that is arguably more important than the old traditional party structure, along with the proliferation of money, which has an insidious effect, if not an explicit one.

So what can change it?

If you look at things historically, it’s a great executive leader and cooperative legislative leaders who are willing to trust the executive on a couple of big things. If you don’t have those ingredients in the cocktail, then you’re not going to have a cocktail.

When you have a Ronald Reagan or a Lyndon Johnson in ’64-’65, you have someone who respects the legislative side, works it very hard and tends to get a couple of big things done—and a couple of big things is as good as it’s going to get.

What does it take to become a great leader?

I think patience. The greatest leaders have had a capacity for personal patience that is genuinely remarkable. Look at Ronald Reagan. He started his public life in the ’50s and was elected president in 1980. He ran three times, was able to hone his ideas and read all the time.

There are others. George H.W. Bush went from losing a Senate seat to being U.N. ambassador, chairman of the Republican National Committee, ambassador to China, director of the CIA, vice president. He was patient, but he fought for each of those jobs along the way.

I think great political leaders—Thomas Jefferson, FDR, Eisenhower, Reagan—were always in tune with the cultural currents of the time. They knew what everybody else was reading. They read what was on the best-seller list.

I don’t think a great leader can know too much history. Harry Truman once said, “The only new thing in the world is the history you don’t know.”

What do you think about how history is taught today?

I’m very old-fashioned about this, perhaps unsurprisingly. I think learning the dates and the facts is essential because you can’t make sense of what you don’t know. Understanding history gives you the capacity to judge how worried you really should be about current problem X or problem Y.

If you know about William Jennings Bryan and Henry Wallace and Ross Perot, that may help you put the popularity of Donald Trump in context. Is he Ross Perot? Is this a populist uprising, or is this like what Rich Hofstadter wrote in “The Paranoid Style in American Politics”? Is it nativist? You can’t answer the question if you don’t have the tools, so knowing what happened in the past at least gives you the capacity to assess how much to be concerned.

Anything else you’d say to state legislators?

Stay in the fight. It’s so important.

Editor’s note: This interview is part of a series of conversations with national leaders. It has been edited for length and clarity. The opinions expressed herein are not necessarily NCSL’s.