



The Scientist Turned Spy

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[00:00:00.2] Jeffrey Rosen: On September 17th, Constitution Day, the historian Patrick Spero will release a new book, *The Scientist Turns Spy: André Michaux, Thomas Jefferson, and the Conspiracy of 1793*. It explores a plot orchestrated by the French government to exploit tensions between American settlers and Spanish authorities in Louisiana by establishing an independent republic.

[00:00:28.9] Jeffrey Rosen: Hello friends, I'm Jeffrey Rosen, President and CEO of the National Constitution Center, and welcome to 'We The People', a weekly show of constitutional debate. The National Constitution Center is a nonpartisan nonprofit chartered by Congress to increase awareness and understanding of the Constitution among the American people. In this episode of We The People, we'll discuss the history of the Michaux conspiracy and explore new evidence that Patrick Spero has unearthed in the archives of the American Philosophical Society that implicate Thomas Jefferson in the plot. We'll also hear from Patrick about the American Philosophical Society and Jefferson's role in leading it. Patrick Spero joins me now. He is incoming CEO of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. He's a scholar of early American history and he specializes in the American Revolution.

[00:01:15.5] Jeffrey Rosen: Patrick, it's wonderful to welcome you to We The People.

[00:01:17.7] Patrick Spero: Great to be here, Jeff. The National Constitution Center is one of my favorite places to visit. It's where I got my first job. It is an inspiring place and it's great to be here with a great friend and neighbor.

[00:01:30.0] Jeffrey Rosen: Well, the American Philosophical Society is one of my favorite places to visit and I'm always so excited when I get to walk across Independence Mall and have lunch with you because you have this cabin of treasures, Jefferson's original draft of the Constitution and much more. And one of those treasures led you to write this book. So tell us the story of how Jefferson's subscription list, which you found at the American Philosophical Society, led you to write this book.

[00:02:00.3] Patrick Spero: So the Michaux's subscription list was one of my favorite documents to show people 'cause it tells so many different stories. It is truly a national treasure. If you were to look at the subscription list, and you can Google it and see it online, it's a document that's written in Thomas Jefferson's hand in 1793 when he's Secretary of State but also Vice President of the American Philosophical Society, which was the nation's first learned society. And really, Jefferson's scholarly and intellectual home for a good part of his adult life. The opening of the document is, "Whereas André Michaux, a native of France but inhabitant of the United States, has undertaken a voyage down the Mississippi River, down the Missouri, and westerly to the Pacific Ocean." So what the subscription list is trying to do is raise money to pay for André Michaux to take a transcontinental trek across the North American continent, really to do Lewis and Clark 10 years before Lewis and Clark happened. And what makes this a remarkable document is that beneath Jefferson's writing are the signatures of all the people who supported this expedition.

[00:03:05.0] Patrick Spero: It's a who's who, the founding era, including George Washington, who's President, John Adams as Vice President, Jefferson, of course, Hamilton, James Madison, Henry Knox. It really is showing the weight of the government officials, of founding figures behind this expedition. And it is believed to be the only document to contain the first four Presidents' signatures on it. And what makes the story just so much fun to tell is this document was really rediscovered by the Philosophical Society in 1979 when a high school intern was going through an old vault in a philosophical hall and came across this cache of documents. And realized that it was probably above his pay grade to go through these. He brought them to the librarian at the time, who unfurled this document, and realized he had a national treasure on his hands. And so for me, during the pandemic, I had been interested in this document and I thought, "Well, maybe this is my chance to really understand the full story behind this document." And as you mentioned, I was taken on this trip across time and space in directions I had no idea I was going to go in.

[00:04:11.9] Jeffrey Rosen: So exciting to take the reader along with you. Well, Jefferson is president of the American Philosophical Society. He says it's the greatest honor of his life. You described Jefferson's presidency and the ways that the Philosophical Society is surprisingly politicized in that era, pitting Jeffersonian Republicans against Hamiltonian Federalists and how that division contributes to Jefferson's desire to have a private subscription for the expedition. Tell us more about Jefferson and his motives in supporting the Michaux expedition.

[00:04:46.1] Patrick Spero: The American Philosophical Society was founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1743. And the idea was to bring the leading thinkers together to share what they were learning in their own communities and then bring this new knowledge back to their homes so they can improve life in their hometowns. And the basic idea is that the more you can understand

the world in which you live, the better you can shape the world in which you live, but also the future. And for Jefferson and others, the Philosophical Society became really a means to understand the natural world. And Jefferson had some very particular interest in the natural world. He was interested in opportunities to develop new plants, crops, to discover crops that might be able to transform American agriculture. And of course, this is all feeding into his vision that the future of America has to be a republic founded on agriculture and small farmers. And so the Philosophical Society's scientific agenda often follows Jefferson's own scientific interest that is, of course, feeding into his vision for the national government.

[00:05:53.8] Patrick Spero: And one of the things I point out is with the subscription list, and this is a little bit of a small detail, but Jefferson writes the subscription list that raises almost a million dollars to support this expedition, in today's dollars. And, but, he had never really gotten the Philosophical Society to sign on to it. And this is part, I think, of Jefferson's own political beliefs that change has to come in a democracy from the people and that they then get approval from an association. So in other words, he's trying to show that citizens want to do this. He mobilizes it. And then it's a technicality. They then go to the APS and say, "Will you actually support this thing we just raised money for?" And in some ways, this reflects Jefferson's idea of how democracy should work, that they're led by citizens first, and then they go to institutions for support.

[00:06:41.0] Jeffrey Rosen: So interesting. And you also describe how Jefferson at this period is recoiling at Washington centralizing economic plans. He sees Hamilton's creation of the bank as betraying the democratizing principles of the American Revolution. And these are your words, "Instead of creating institutions that disperse power, wealth, and influence to the people, the banks seem to be focusing these hands in the hands of the federal government and among the few." And for that reason, he sees privately funded scientific research as an alternative to the federal support for internal improvement championed by Hamilton. Maybe another word about Jefferson's desire to prove that American natural history is better than that of Europe and respond to Buffon and other critics who are less nationalistic.

[00:07:33.4] Patrick Spero: The story behind André Michaux is that he was this botanist sent over by the King of France with the idea that you can discover all these new crops in what was British North America, which had largely been sealed off to French science, and find new crops that can be used in the French agricultural system and really improve society for France. And Michaux unexpectedly gets caught into this plot with Edmond Genêt. Genêt has these secret orders to invade Spanish New Orleans, and Jefferson, and I'm sure we'll go down this, gets sucked into this plot inadvertently. And I have to try and explain how Jefferson, in some ways, passively supports the potential invasion of Spanish New Orleans. And this goes against, of course, Washington's own foreign policy. And what this gets at is, I think, the conundrum that

Thomas Jefferson found himself in that first administration. When Jefferson and others created a new nation in 1776, they all believed that political parties were signs of corruption.

[00:08:48.8] Patrick Spero: They were the embodiments of self-interest. The reason parties existed was to serve a specific interest, not the public good. And so the idea of parties was really an anathema to their idea of how a political body should function, especially a republic. And so here's Jefferson now in the Washington administration, where he realizes Washington's policies on the economy, which as you mentioned, was about centralizing the economy, creating a national bank. Hamilton wants to fund economic projects directly, what were called internal improvements, which today we might call infrastructure. And Jefferson just sees this as going against all the principles of the American Revolution. And so he has to try and navigate in this first administration where the idea of parties is not supposed to exist. And yet he sees that he's opposed to these policies. He's an outsider, even though he's inside the administration. And this creates an enormous amount of angst for Jefferson. But also in this incident where he is trying to raise private funds, I think he's also trying to show how he believes society should work. And so how should you fund a scientific expedition?

[00:09:57.6] Patrick Spero: Well, he raised money from all these people who were in the government, but it wasn't from the government itself. And in some ways, this does embody Jefferson's idea about the role of the federal government and also the role of civil institutions like the American Philosophical Society. So if you were to think about how Jefferson saw the relationship between civil society and civic institutions and the federal government, the path he chooses to take with this expedition follows a Jeffersonian path, where through a voluntary association, not the federal government.

[00:10:29.0] Jeffrey Rosen: So interesting. And you really cast a significant light on the Genêt affair, which We The People listeners have explored before we had Carol Berkin on last year. And she describes the extraordinary significance of Genêt coming over from France, having contempt for Washington, appealing over the heads of Washington to the people themselves, misunderstanding the Constitution, and trying to drum up recruits for his attempted invasion of Spanish New Orleans by disgruntled people on the Kentucky frontier. And what you reveal is that Jefferson, who eventually had to turn away from Genêt because he lost political support, is behind the scenes secretly supporting his mission, and you even show him revising a letter in response to Genêt's importunations. You call Jefferson's conduct perhaps inexplicable, but tell us about the Genêt plot? How did he enlist Jefferson, and what did Jefferson do?

[00:11:35.7] Patrick Spero: Yeah, so Edmond Genêt is the first diplomatic official from the French Revolutionary government. At the time, the French saw the Americans as a natural ally. The French had, of course, supported the Americans during their revolution, and they expected the Americans to continue to support the French during their revolution. The French saw this as a

continuation of the American Revolution. Now Washington, as an idealist but also a realist, recognized that the United States could not support the French Revolution because Great Britain and Spain and the other European monarchies saw the French Revolution as a great threat. And in fact, Great Britain and Spain were at war with France trying to contain the spread of this revolution. And so if the United States engaged and allied with the French to give them military support during this conflict, Washington feared that the British, very easily with forts in the Northwest and the strongest navy in the world, could easily just take back the United States. There was a real foreign policy crisis for him and Washington declared the neutrality proclamation, the idea that the United States is going to be neutral in this conflict.

[00:12:53.8] Patrick Spero: It is not going to take sides. Now, Genêt arrives, first off, with the objective to try and force Washington to break the neutrality proclamation. And that's how he was appealing to the American people directly. Really, this is a clear example of a foreign interference in American politics. And Washington sees this as really a betrayal of norms, international norms of diplomatic behavior. The other thing that Genêt has are secret orders to mobilize an invasion of Spanish Louisiana by these disgruntled Kentucky frontiersmen. And they're disgruntled in the West because they see this Eastern federal government as ignoring their needs. They see the National Bank as serving Eastern elites. And their real concern is the Mississippi River, which they don't have access to 'cause the Spanish have blocked the port of New Orleans for American trade. And so they see this Eastern government as ignoring their central concern and serving their own interests. And so Genêt realizes that he might be able to mobilize these angry frontiersmen to invade and seize New Orleans so they can have access to the Mississippi River.

[00:14:00.5] Patrick Spero: And he's even received some notices from former generals in the American Revolution, veterans, who are willing to renounce their allegiance to the United States and swear allegiance to the French in this cause to seize New Orleans. Now Genêt arrives in Philadelphia with these orders and he quickly meets this botanist André Michaux who had been working with the APS on this transcontinental expedition. And he realizes, "Ah, I have the perfect person to enact this plot. This French botanist is working with this American institution. He can travel out to Kentucky to meet these angry Kentucky frontiersmen under the guise of science. And he'll tell everybody he's conducting research, but he'll secretly be implementing this plot." Now, to do this, he has to create that cover. And so Genêt, who had become very quick friends with Jefferson, 'cause of course, Jefferson, again, the outsider in the Washington administration, is very supportive of the French Revolution. He agrees that the French Revolution is a continuation of the American Revolution. He's a Francophile. And really, he and Genêt have this quick friendship, this great correspondence.

[00:15:10.1] Patrick Spero: And so finally, on July 5th, 1793, Genêt calls on Jefferson privately, and he tells Jefferson of this secret plot. And Jefferson, as Secretary of State, you

would think that he would inform his administration, but in fact decides not to tell anybody in the administration of this plot. And as you said, Genêt also asked Jefferson to write a letter of introduction for Michaux so he could travel out there with the approval of the Secretary of State, who also knows he's mobilizing this potential plot to invade New Orleans. I compare this to potentially the Secretary of State of the United States today knowing when Russia was going to invade Ukraine and not telling anybody about it.

[00:15:55.2] Jeffrey Rosen: It really casts new light on the Genêt affair which ended after the volunteers failed to materialize. Genêt is recalled to France and Jefferson writes to Madison, "We've decided unanimously," he's speaking of the Washington cabinet, "To require the recall of Genêt." He'll sink the Republican interest if they do not abandon him. But what you reveal is that before that happened, Jefferson was actually a friend of Genêt encouraging him in every way. Say more about what Jefferson's motives could have been, what can explain his conduct, and how unusual was it, at this point in American history, for foreign governments to attempt to provoke citizens to cast off their governments and to declare new allegiances?

[00:16:45.4] Patrick Spero: There's a lot packed into that. I try to explain Jefferson's decisions here in a number of different ways. I take a sympathetic approach. I think some folks who have looked at this have taken a harsher approach, in large part, because I want to understand Jefferson within the context in which he was operating. And if you go back to the idea that he is in an administration where the idea of partisanship didn't exist, and yet he finds himself as the chief leader of the opposition inadvertently. He didn't expect that when he got into this seat. He's trying to figure out what this new political environment is going to be like, just like everybody else. And so I think some of his decisions in this period are trying to figure out what is acceptable within this republic. It wasn't supposed to have parties, but now they're forming. And in fact, he's the leader of one. And obviously, you know, if he's the leader of a party, he doesn't think he's serving self-interest. He thinks he's serving the national good. So he's trying to figure out how to behave in this new environment, what's appropriate? Eventually, he decides to resign as secretary of state. And I think this episode in some ways makes Jefferson realize how untenable his situation is.

[00:17:57.7] Patrick Spero: And the right path is to resign so that Washington can appoint somebody that he knows would be serving his administration, not the opposition. So I think in some ways, Jefferson is trying to navigate this. And it's understandable if you realize that he's in uncharted waters. Now, your question about how common is something like this? Washington, in this period, you know, he really has to think almost four-dimensionally. He's got this crisis with the European powers. He also is facing a crisis with Native American groups in the West, most of whom are resisting the encroachments of the United States, often violently. And Washington had just suffered one of the greatest defeats in United States history, St. Clair's defeat. And so his army is battered at the same time.

[00:18:45.0] Patrick Spero: And he's also facing a number of internal rebellions among citizens, often in the West. And so those in Kentucky are threatening to secede from the Union. They're threatening to create a republic, an independent republic west of the Mississippi River. There are people in western Pennsylvania who are opposed violently to the whiskey tax. So Washington is really facing this incredible crisis where he's trying to accommodate everybody so he can maintain the stability of the United States 'cause its foundations in this period are so fragile and a misstep in any one of these directions could really have them crumble. And he feels that intimately. And the fact that citizens are willing to renounce their allegiance and swear allegiance to the French government, that is perhaps one of the gravest threats he faces because they could really undermine the entire government itself from within.

[00:19:36.0] Jeffrey Rosen: It's a great threat, and it's based on an idea, as you say. The idea that Genêt proposed a body of men forming voluntarily to attack a monarchical power to establish a republic, seemed to Jefferson's mind, an entirely natural occurrence and a global movement to expand Republican principles. Congress responded to this episode by passing a law in 1795 forbidding citizens of the United States from engaging in these kinds of foreign adventures. Tell us about the law and its effects.

[00:20:10.2] Patrick Spero: Yeah, this is, you know, I think this is what makes doing the work of history so exciting. I started this project based on this subscription list that we're talking about. This was a subscription list to fund André Michaux in the transcontinental expedition, and I approached the project by asking who was André Michaux, and he's probably one of the greatest scientific explorers you've never heard of, and I talk about that in the book.

[00:20:32.6] Patrick Spero: What's the story behind the subscription list? And there I talk about all the scientific agendas of the young nation. And then I say, "What happened?"

[00:20:42.9] Patrick Spero: And we've talked a lot about this. Is there a near insurrection that Washington is able to eventually stamp down. And then there's the final question, did it matter?

[00:20:52.3] Patrick Spero: Now, when I started this question with the subscription list, I had no idea that it was gonna lead to this insurrection, and even less of an idea that it was gonna lead to what I found a fundamental question, which is what is the meaning of citizenship in the United States? And that's what the episode in Kentucky raised. So all these Kentuckians had to justify their behavior.

[00:21:13.2] Patrick Spero: And what they said when they were approached by people, and they say, "How can you pretend to have the right to invade Spanish New Orleans? The United States is at peace with Spain, and you're threatening the United States' very foundations." You

know, 'cause if Spain sees a group of Kentuckians invade New Orleans, they're gonna think that's an act of the United States.

[00:21:33.1] Patrick Spero: And what many of the people in Kentucky argued, and we see this in various accounts, that if they renounce their allegiance to the United States, if they leave the borders of the country, and they haven't renounced their allegiance, but they're just outside the borders of the United States, they're no longer bound by the policies or laws of the United States. And Washington realizes this creates a huge crisis, 'cause that means that a group of Americans could, what they're proposing to do, go across the Mississippi River, 2,000 Kentuckians, and decide to launch an invasion on a nation with which the United States was at peace. And so Washington approaches Congress, and this is a divided Congress.

[00:22:15.1] Patrick Spero: This is a Congress in which the parties are beginning to cohere and form. But when he asks them, he says, "We need to clarify the meaning of citizenship, what are its limits, what are its bounds, what are citizens duty-bound to adhere to." And what they clarify is that citizens don't have the right, it seems obvious today, to mobilize an invasion of a foreign country.

[00:22:36.8] Patrick Spero: However, in the 1790s, that wasn't clear. And so this is a very significant act that does help define what citizenship means in this new republic.

[00:22:48.0] Jeffrey Rosen: So interesting. I'm gonna read from the text of the law, and then ask you, what, if any, light can it cast on the Burr conspiracy? The law, an act in addition to the act for punishment of certain crimes against the United States, says, "If any person shall, within the territory or jurisdiction of the United States, enlist or enter himself in the service of any foreign prince or state as a soldier or letter of marque or privateer, every person so offending shall be deemed guilty of a high misdemeanor and then section 5 outlaws Americans from participating in or organizing any military expedition or enterprise to be carried on from thence against the territory or dominions of any foreign prince or state with whom the United States are at peace."

[00:23:32.3] Jeffrey Rosen: The Burr episode is not one you discuss in the book, but it's the obvious question. When Jefferson attempted to prosecute Burr for treason, did he invoke this 1795 law against Burr or not? And what light does the Jefferson/Michaux episode cast on whether or not Burr was guilty?

[00:23:50.5] Patrick Spero: To the best of my knowledge, and I looked into this, I do not believe this was the law that was cited in Burr's trial. However, it was renewed annually and then made perpetual. So it is on the code of the United States.

[00:24:05.5] Patrick Spero: And it has been cited in several cases, often having to do actually with, as I understand it, letters of marque and other actions. What the Michaux conspiracy, the Kentucky conspiracy of 1793, shows is a pattern that was a part of the American political DNA. This is not the first episode in which there is a group of frustrated, often in the West, often feeling like their Eastern government is ignoring them.

[00:24:32.1] Patrick Spero: It is not the first episode of people mobilizing and threatening to secede from the Union or threatening to join Spain. The whiskey rebels threatened to do the same thing in the years that followed. There were a number of attempts to create independent republics.

[00:24:51.8] Patrick Spero: And I'd argue that there's a phenomenon in the middle 19th century that really also draws on this pattern that was very prominent in the 19th century. And it just seems so distant to us today. And that was the idea of filibustering, in which a group of Americans would mobilize and then try to set up a colony in another country under presumably what they defined as American principles.

[00:25:11.7] Patrick Spero: But there are these filibusters often coming out of California into Latin America and Mexico who are trying to do very similar things as what those in Kentucky were trying to do. So what I see is this is a very early part of a pattern in America's cultural and political DNA that continued all the way through really until the late 19th century. And what's interesting is that this episode, the Michaux Conspiracy, is not well-studied in the 20th century, but it's fairly prominent in histories of the 19th century.

[00:25:47.4] Patrick Spero: And the reason I think that's the case is because this story resonated with the world in which they were living. And to us in the 20th century, the idea that a group of Kentuckians were gonna invade New Orleans and create an independent republic, it seems so distant and unlikely that historians haven't focused a lot on it. But those in the 19th century in which this is a real phenomenon really saw this as one of the early instances that they could look back upon.

[00:26:11.1] Jeffrey Rosen: Does this broader pattern you've identified that's in the American political DNA of disgruntled settlers often in the West threatening to secede, isn't it one in which Jefferson, Burr, and Hamilton all participated? Jefferson with Michaux, as you show so powerfully, Burr in his conspiracy, and Hamilton in trying to get Congress to fund an army with him at the head to provoke a secession from Mexico. And to that degree, does that suggest that neither Burr, nor Jefferson, nor Hamilton had clean hands in those conspiracies, but all were thinking of versions of the same thing?

[00:26:51.0] Patrick Spero: I actually hadn't thought about putting Hamilton into that mix, because my own perspective has often been focusing on those on the frontier who are disgruntled, and I talk about a distinctive political culture in the West that kind of emerges as a result of this. But the Hamilton episode really does kind of cast a different light on it, because here is somebody who is coming from a very different view on politics, on governance.

[00:27:26.1] Patrick Spero: One of the things that I do talk about in the book, and that was really revealing when I studied that subscription list as its own standalone document, is that the supporters of the Michaux expedition, so this transcontinental trip to the Pacific Ocean, it was completely bipartisan. It was Federalist, and it was Republicans. And I think one of the things that emerged in the founding eras is there wasn't a lot of agreement on policies, but one of the things that they all agreed on was that the United States was gonna be an expanding country.

[00:27:57.4] Patrick Spero: They didn't know how it was gonna happen. They didn't know who was going to do it. They might have had different ideas on how to have that happen, but there was absolute agreement that western Mississippi was eventually gonna be United States territory.

[00:28:11.7] Patrick Spero: And that's why they saw Michaux, and there's these instructions that Jefferson wrote for Michaux that really were the first draft for the instructions he wrote for Lewis and Clark, in which they outline their priorities. And the first one is, "We need to find the fastest route to the Pacific," and they did so for commercial reasons. They realized that could be a great trade route.

[00:28:29.6] Patrick Spero: Then they wanted Michaux to conduct reconnaissance to understand the number of Native peoples that were there. Again, this is reconnaissance. And then, strangely, they also asked Michaux that two of their priorities are to find a living example of a mammoth and a llama.

[00:28:46.9] Jeffrey Rosen: Just incredible. And, of course, the mammoth is so central to Buffon, and the fact that he's looking for one is just amazing. Just one more question about the relationship between the Michaux episode and the Whiskey Rebellion.

[00:29:04.0] Jeffrey Rosen: You say that Washington decides to maintain the nation's security. He has to wield federal authority in a previously unwielded way. And therefore, when protest against the Whiskey Tax Rebellion turned violent and deadly, he was quick to take decisive action.

[00:29:17.5] Jeffrey Rosen: The Kentucky episode surely played a role in Washington's decision to act so forcefully against the Whiskey Rebels. Tie those together and suggest the ways that the response to Michaux established a pattern of strong federal responses to insurrections.

[00:29:32.5] Patrick Spero: Yeah, so the way in which the Kentucky conspiracy kind of dissipates is because of the federal government's decision to assert itself. They have been trying to mobilize this invasion in secret. Eventually, over 2,000 men in Kentucky and along the Mississippi subscribe. They form their own army. They have their own uniforms. They build a small flotilla of boats with the idea that they're gonna go down the Mississippi River.

[00:30:02.0] Patrick Spero: They commission the smelting of a number of cannons. There are accounts that the iron forges in Kentucky were burning brighter than ever before because of all the cannons they're providing for this invasion. So this was on the cusp of happening in the spring of 1794.

[00:30:19.2] Patrick Spero: And Washington gets word of this. And there's a debate in the cabinet. Well, what does Washington, as president, have the authority to do? And one of the questions was, can the executive officer have the US Army, the military, intercede to stop this invasion? And there is a debate. And there's somebody that's a little bit more in the Jeffersonian camp that says, "I don't know if you have that authority."

[00:30:42.4] Patrick Spero: Maybe you should come to the governor. Maybe there's a process in which the governor or the state legislature should ask for your intercession, but you don't have the independent authority to do so." And Washington says, "No, in order to preserve the Constitution, this potential invasion is such a threat to the republic. If I don't do anything about it, the entire republic may collapse. This constitutional order may collapse. So I have the authority to empower the army, if they need to, to intercede to prevent this invasion."

[00:31:07.0] Patrick Spero: It doesn't come to that, but he makes that decision. And the fact that he made that decision, I think, is really important to understanding his decision with the Whiskey Rebellion that follows quickly on the heels of this. 'cause the truth is, the Whiskey Rebellion, the protests, the controversy had been happening long before the Kentucky Conspiracy.

[00:31:26.4] Patrick Spero: Really, since in the early 1790s, 1791, there's protests rejecting the whiskey tax. So they're not accepting the tax. They're not paying it. They're violently opposing it. Washington does not take a forceful hand. I think he's afraid to use too much force, again, out of fear that it might escalate the situation.

[00:31:49.0] Patrick Spero: Well, after he makes that decision in Kentucky, and after the violence itself in Pennsylvania escalates, Washington then makes probably the most decisive action, the firmest assertion of federal authority that he ever does, where he mobilizes a militia to head out west to assert federal authority. And I really, when I look at these in chronological order, I realize, "Well, this Kentucky event, which is not usually put in the context of

Pennsylvania, really had to have an influence on Washington coming to that ultimate decision that he has to take forceful action." It was kind of the freedom to make this big decision.

[00:32:21.4] Jeffrey Rosen: It's so significant in establishing that tradition of a forceful federal response. And I checked out what happened next. Jefferson, as you said, had scruples about the use of federal authority, but he's alarmed enough by reports of the Burr plot that he asked whether the president has the legal authority to put down insurrections.

[00:32:43.0] Jeffrey Rosen: Madison says probably not under the Insurrection Act of 1793. And that's why Congress passes a bill authorizing the use of land or naval forces in cases of insurrection. That 1807 Insurrection Act, which Jefferson signed as president, becomes the insurrection act that's invoked for the rest of American history from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement to today.

[00:33:05.9] Jeffrey Rosen: So Jefferson, in other words, overcomes his scruples and eventually embraces broad use of force.

[00:33:10.8] Patrick Spero: Although that's fascinating because it was the 1793 Act that they were, I believe, referring back to. And it was Edmund Randolph who had been the attorney general and then became Secretary of State to replace Jefferson. And Randolph was, you'd say he leaned towards Jefferson, but he was very, very loyal to Washington.

[00:33:31.5] Patrick Spero: He didn't have the same issues that Jefferson had being in the cabinet. But Randolph was the voice for saying, "I don't know that you have the authority under the current law. You might need a stronger law."

[00:33:45.1] Patrick Spero: And that actually is what kind of leads to the 1795 Act. But so it's interesting that Randolph had a similar interpretation as Madison would have in 1807. And they decided to create a much clearer law that gave the authority they needed.

[00:33:57.5] Jeffrey Rosen: And yet not so clear that it's ended the debate. The debate about distinguishing between riots and insurrections, of course, continues up till today. Well, let me ask you to take a beat on your earlier book, "Frontier Rebels: The Fight for Independence in the American West, 1765-'76".

[00:34:15.5] Jeffrey Rosen: You begin with the rebellion of the so-called black boys in western Pennsylvania who are upset at the Brits for not helping them repel the invasions by Native Americans and trace that story up until the revolution. Any parallels between those revolutionary or separatist movements and the ones you discuss connected with the Michaux conspiracy?

[00:34:45.7] Patrick Spero: Yes. So this is exactly the frontier political culture that I was talking about. My earlier work was about the coming of the American Revolution.

[00:34:54.7] Patrick Spero: And I've written two books on it. One of them focused on this rebellion in 1765, the same year as the Stamp Act. So the same year that the Sons of Liberty are forming on the eastern seaport, there's a rebellion in western Pennsylvania, which at the time was the frontier.

[00:35:07.8] Patrick Spero: And a group of frontiersmen attacked a cargo of trade goods that were intended to establish peace with Native people who were then at war with Great Britain during what was called Pontiac's War. And these individuals created really an ad hoc government in western Pennsylvania. There were hundreds of rebels.

[00:35:31.8] Patrick Spero: They lined all the roads. They handed out passports. They created an inspection regime. And what I talk about is creating a real political culture. It was very similar to what was in Kentucky. Their complaints were almost identical. "We are in the west. We face unique concerns. Those in the east who govern us, we don't have proper representation. They're not paying attention to our needs. And so we have to take the government into our own hands." And this creates a real conundrum for the British Empire.

[00:36:07.1] Patrick Spero: It is kind of alighted over during the American Revolution when everybody's kind of united in a common enemy, but then emerges soon thereafter. And I think a big part of America's political DNA all the way up to the present is this divide between urban and rural. I think that has been a defining part of our politics.

[00:36:25.0] Patrick Spero: We maybe don't pay as much attention to it as possible. And you can see this same political culture in 1765 as many of these individuals moved further west and south, that they bring with them these same perceptions of government and of their responsibilities to really, when necessary, govern themselves. And so I do see a direct connection between the Kentucky plot and that in 1765.

[00:36:51.3] Jeffrey Rosen: Wow. And is that connection between urban and rural reflected in the initial party divisions between Hamilton and Jefferson, between the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans, between the party of the financiers and the merchants and the party of the agrarian South and West?

[00:37:09.3] Patrick Spero: Absolutely. And that's where, bringing it back to the idea of this expedition, Jefferson really sees the future of America as he sees America in the West. It's called the safety valve, that if you didn't expand, population would be hemmed in on the eastern seaport

and there'd be greater population, there'd be growth of more cities, growth of more industry. And Jefferson saw that as corrupting.

[00:37:36.6] Patrick Spero: He saw that as Europe. He saw Europe as this decadent area of luxury and corruption. And to avoid that, you needed to create an agrarian republic.

[00:37:46.5] Patrick Spero: You needed to expand westward and you needed limited government and you needed individuals to really govern and rule themselves. Every individual human, the idea behind a human farmer is that they own their own piece of property. They were bound to nobody but themselves. And so this absolutely is feeding into the very early partisan divides. You see Jefferson's strongest base of support in rural areas predominantly. He has allies.

[00:38:15.6] Patrick Spero: There's something called democratic societies that actually form alongside this Genêt conspiracy and the Kentucky conspiracy. These democratic societies are very often in rural areas like Kentucky, western Pennsylvania, and they're essentially creating the infrastructure for the first party system and they're supporting the Jeffersonian ideas.

[00:38:32.0] Patrick Spero: Many of these democratic societies, when they form, they do so with a proclamation outlining their political philosophy and it's directly aligned with the Jeffersonian vision. And so there is absolutely an urban-rural divide that is defining the very first party system and I think this continues all the way, really to the present day, I'd argue.

[00:38:56.0] Jeffrey Rosen: Absolutely fascinating. So much of American history dates back to that initial Hamilton-Jefferson divide and in particular this year, or these years that you're focusing on, 1790 to '93, all the battle lines are drawn. Well, take us back to the expedition and the after effect. After the plot collapses, what happens next?

[00:39:23.2] Patrick Spero: Yes, so the plot just kind of fades away, but this political culture continues in Kentucky, and we've talked a lot about that, but there are some really interesting legacies, sometimes hidden. So Michaux himself, I argue, is probably the greatest natural history explorer of his generation. When he returned to France in 1796, he covered almost all of East and North America. He travels as far north as the Hudson Bay, as far south as Florida, and all the way west to the Mississippi River. He identifies a thousand new species of plants. He ships back 50 to 60 thousand specimens to France. He also imports, for the first time, a number of plants and flowers that we see everyday in our gardens. The mimosa tree is often credited to Michaux. Michaux is really part of this international exchange of seeds, all driven by this idea that if we exchange plants and crops, we can actually improve humanity. We can eradicate the famine because we'll be able to find more productive crops that we can introduce into our own communities. So Michaux's legacy is very much around us, surrounding us, certainly hidden every day here in America.

[00:40:39.6] Patrick Spero: Michaux ends up going off to Madagascar where he dies. Jefferson, of course, never gives up this dream of a transcontinental expedition. And in 1803, he realized that with Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. William Clark is the younger brother of George Rogers Clark, who was actually at the center of the Kentucky conspiracy himself. He was one of those generals willing to renounce his allegiance and invade New Orleans. And then Jefferson sends Meriwether Lewis to the American Philosophical Society before he leaves to get trained by the greatest scientists in America and also to get instruments. So the society played a central role in the startup of the Lewis and Clark expedition. And then when Jefferson receives the journals afterwards, he sends them off to the American Philosophical Society. So we are the stewards of the official journals of Lewis and Clark today here at the Philosophical Society. And in many ways, the spirit that animated the society is still present at the APS today. The APS is driven by this idea that the better we understand our world, the past and the present, the better we can make our communities today and also shape our future.

[00:41:49.4] Patrick Spero: And just like the society funded the Michaux expedition for eventually over a million dollars of today's dollars it raised, they never spent it 'cause Michaux obviously was redirected by the Genêt conspiracy, but still the society has funded research for almost 300 years. Today we spend over \$2 million a year in small grants to young scholars conducting research across the globe. We have funded researchers in every corner of earth except for Antarctica, but we want to find somebody we can fund in Antarctica. So if you're listening to this and you are a researcher and you do research in Antarctica, check out our funds, but we continue in that same spirit almost 300 years later.

[00:42:30.8] Jeffrey Rosen: It is so moving to hear you describe the significant grants you make to young researchers across the globe in the spirit of that Jeffersonian grant to Michaux and you end the book with a galvanizing pay into the value of historical research. You say, "I hope this book might show how historical research can be its own type of expedition in the past. One that can only happen with the existence of archives that can serve the documents to tell these stories." Tell us why those archives are so crucially important in keeping the flame alive.

[00:43:06.2] Patrick Spero: Yes, I mean, I can't tell you how important it was for me to write this book. It was during the pandemic and I was trapped in my house and I had been working on a research project of Benjamin Franklin in Europe. And as the world shut down, my access to sources got smaller and smaller. And as librarian of the society, I realized I had at my hands this incredible library and I had a question about this one document, the Michaux's subscription list. And that document took me down a path that I could never have imagined. A path that led us to this fundamental question at the founding, which is: What is the meaning of citizenship? And as I think about The Society's Library that has 14 million pages of manuscripts including the papers of seven Nobel laureates, we continue to collect, especially in the history of science. We have the

materials that relate to over 650 different Native American communities. We have one of the largest collections of endangered languages. Native communities are using our resources to reawaken dormant languages. How many hidden stories are buried in our vaults?

[00:44:11.8] Patrick Spero: How many stories can help us better understand who we are, how we've gotten to where we are, and how can we use these sources to improve our future? And without archives, none of this is possible. And I have to say, being in this field as a librarian, that the support for archives is not as strong as it once was. And I worry about our ability to sustain archives, because again, you never know what is hidden. It takes a researcher to discover something and follow these paths to reveal these fundamental things about our past. And so the support for archives, I think, is a vital national interest.

[00:44:52.9] Jeffrey Rosen: It is urgently important. And I can't wait to visit you again to have one of our periodic lunches. And I wanna ask, both so you can whet the appetite of We The People listeners, what document might you show me if I come over from the Treasures Card or elsewhere, and also talk about how much of the Philosophical Society's archives are digitized. Do you think it's important to get them online so you can share them with the world?

[00:45:21.1] Patrick Spero: Yeah, right now we're supporting a major digitization effort. It's called The Revolutionary City. You can visit it at therevolutionarycity.org. We're collaborating with a group of Philadelphia-based institutions for the 250th anniversary of 1776 to digitize all of the manuscripts and an enormous amount of the printed material that relates to the American Revolution in Philadelphia. It's gonna have hundreds of thousands of pages in it. It's gonna be a one-stop shop. If you want access to the American Revolution, this will be the place to go. And we're gonna have curriculum for teachers, but it's also gonna be for scholars and genealogists. We have many different access points, this is the future of archives. This is an infrastructure project, just like in 1976 when there were a number of museums built. We're building a digital archive, a digital repository that we wanna steward in perpetuity. And this is a major contribution, not just for 2026, but for the future, we're gonna steward this. But if you come to visit me, I'm not gonna show you something digitized. I will show you Benjamin Franklin's copy of the Constitution. It's the first printing of the Constitution that contains his annotations on it.

[00:46:30.8] Jeffrey Rosen: Wow, my jaw just dropped open, and I'm just smiling with excitement. I cannot wait to see that. And it's also so exciting to hear about your digitization project for America's 250. And so wonderful that you're gonna be sharing all those documents with We The People listeners, with people across the world, to learn and grow on their own. And I'm so excited about working with you at the Philosophical Society and at the Constitution Center to create a civic toolkit of the basic principles of the Declaration and the Constitution, which we're doing at the NCC and in collaboration with your great documents, we're going to inspire We The People listeners and folks across the country to dig in and learn for themselves.

Patrick, it has been wonderful to talk to you and congratulations again on your new book, 'The Scientist Turned Spy: André Michaux, Thomas Jefferson and the Conspiracy of 1793'.

[00:47:29.7] Patrick Spero: Thanks for having me.

[00:47:35.0] Jeffrey Rosen: Today's episode was produced by Lana Ulrich, Samson Mostashari and Bill Pollock. It was engineered by Bill Pollock. Research was provided by Samson Mostashari, Cooper Smith and Yora Tyrese. Friends, there are so many exciting things coming up at the Constitution Center in September. Please join online, livestream if you can, in person even better, or check out the videos. September 17th is Constitution Day. We'll be joined by Justice Gorsuch, our honorary co-chair. We'll be launching our new Khan Academy course with Saul Khan, a Constitution 101 course. I can't wait to share it with you. And lots of other great events, including our Liberty Medal to Ken Burns on September 24th. Check it all out on the website.

[00:48:19.2] Jeffrey Rosen: And always remember that the National Constitution Center is a private nonprofit. We rely on the generosity, the passion, the engagement of people across the country who are inspired by our nonpartisan mission of constitutional education and debate. Support the mission by becoming a member at constitutioncenter.org/membership or give a donation of any amount to support our work, including the podcast at constitutioncenter.org/donate. On behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Jeffrey Rosen.