

51st | Episode 6: Greetings From Douglass Commonwealth

Mikaela Lefrak: Well, here we are, the final episode in 51st, our series on D.C.'s fight for representation. Over the past five episodes, we've covered more than 230 years of history, heard from politicians, advocates, journalists and regular people. In this episode, I want to share with you what it's been like for me to make this series and what my own views are on statehood. And I want us to imagine a potential future for D.C. What could it look like here in a decade? But first, let's recap where we've been.

We started this story in the spring of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic hit, and Congress allocated half the amount of relief funding for D.C. as it did to the states. Then, protests for racial justice fill D.C. streets and President Donald Trump sent in the National Guard.

Protester: *No justice!*

Protesters: *No peace!*

Mikaela Lefrak: [00:59] At the end of June, Congress held a historic vote on making D.C. the 51st state. It passed the U.S. House of Representatives for the first time in history.

The District of Columbia statehood bill, H.R. 51 is passed without objection. Motion to reconsider is laid upon the table.

Mikaela Lefrak: Then we traveled back in time to the very beginnings of the United States of America. Historians explained how an attempted mutiny in Pennsylvania seriously spooked the founding fathers. Remember that one? They decided the new country's capital should be independent of any state and Congress should have exclusive control over it.

Kenneth Bowling: *This was the ancient horror of the army, the military overthrowing the republic.*

Mikaela Lefrak: A few years later, three founding fathers held a secret dinner meeting. They agreed to build the new U.S. Capitol in the slave-holding South between Maryland and Virginia. The decision would shape the city and the country's culture for decades to come.

George Derek Musgrove: *Everybody kind of got a little bit of what they wanted, from the standpoint of the individuals who were in the room where it happened.*

Leslie Odom Jr. as Aaron Burr in "Hamilton": *No one else was in the room where it happened, the room where it happened, the room where it happened...*

Mikaela Lefrak: [02:12] Fast forward now to the 1960s when D.C. residents finally won the right to vote for president. Civil rights leaders jumpstarted the District's push for more local control at this point.

Walter Fauntroy: *I then began to implement what I had called the arithmetic of Black political power.*

Mikaela Lefrak: [02:42] In the early '70s, D.C. got home rule – the right to elect its own local government and create its own laws. Marion Barry became D.C. mayor for life.

Tom Sherwood: *Marion Barry was the first person to really open the doors to the Black population of Washington and say, this is your government, come help me run it.*

Mikaela Lefrak: But the District was also struggling with violence, the crack epidemic and a big bureaucracy. The city faced a major financial crisis in the mid-90s.

George Derek Musgrove: *The bills come due and effectively we go bankrupt.*

Mikaela Lefrak: [03:15] Congress came in and took control of the city's budget and the criminal justice system. It was a wake up call for locals like Anise Jenkins, who decided it was time for D.C. to become the 51st state.

Anise Jenkins: *We are the old school. We are the gangstas of the statehood movement, the OGs.*

Mikaela Lefrak: [03:34] As the statehood movement gained momentum, the lives of D.C. residents continue to be shaped by the fact that they lived in a district, not a state.

People convicted of felonies like Jameon Gray were shipped out to federal prisons across the country because D.C. doesn't have its own prison system.

Jameon Gray: *It was a time span, you know, there was about like eight to nine years where I wasn't even able to see my mother because it was just extremely far.*

Mikaela Lefrak: [04:03] For marijuana legalization activists spent years and years trying to set up medical marijuana dispensaries, despite repeated efforts by Congress to stop them.

Adam Eidinger: *We're always, you know, there demanding representation. And when you don't have it, I mean, you're kind of forced into a civil disobedience scenario. It's like, well, if you're not going to pay attention to us because we don't have a vote. Well, I guess we will resort to these tactics.*

Mikaela Lefrak: [04:29] But lots of people don't like the idea of statehood. It's a partisan issue now. Statehood will add more Democrats to Congress because D.C.'s so heavily Democratic and some people say turning the district into a state isn't constitutional. Better to combine D.C. with its neighbor, Maryland.

David Krucoff: *Retrocession is hands down, way better, OK, way better.*

Mikaela Lefrak: [04:51] And that about brings us to today. As we record this episode, we're less than two weeks away from the 2020 election. The results are going to have a major role in what happens to the statehood movement. So major that it seems kind of crazy to speculate about what could happen right now. And we'll probably drop back into your podcast feed sometime in the next month or two with a post-election update.

So instead of speculating about things that could change pretty soon, we thought we'd try something else.

[05:21] My producer Poncie Rutsch is loading me into a time machine to visit an alternate reality located sometime in the future, where D.C. is the country's 51st state. Hold on one second.

OK, hi. It's uh, let's call it 2030, and I'm here in Washington Douglas Commonwealth, the 51st state.

Seems like the new state of D.C. is still working through a lot of things in 2030. I just did a quick scroll through the headlines on my new iPhone 42. And it looks like they're about to break ground on a new prison somewhere within D.C.'s borders. It's getting a lot of pushback, though, from what I read, from prison reform advocates and homeowners who don't want to see their property values go down.

[06:11] All right. What else, what else? There's a shop here with a sign that says cannabis sold here. Looks like they can advertise it now, which means D.C. has a recreational marijuana industry. Sounds like the state is earning a lot of money by taxing the sale of weed gummies, weed brownies, all the things. Based on the signs I'm seeing on the lampposts, mid-term elections are happening in just a few weeks. From what I can tell, it seems like the biggest political debate going on right now is Douglas Commonwealth's new commuter tax. D.C.'s taxing out-of-staters for their salaries that they earn in D.C. And I would imagine Virginia and Maryland residents have some thoughts about that. I'm also seeing a bunch of yard signs for candidates for D.C. seats in the U.S. Senate, so that's exciting.

Oh, and I just passed by a flagpole and it looks like there's a new American flag design with 51 stars.

I'm really curious how big a deal it was to change that. And I know exactly who to ask about that. But I'm going to need to head back to 2020 to make that call. Also, in 2030, climate change has gotten even more intense and the humidity here is whoo! All right, time to go.

[07:28] OK, I'm back before we move on, I wanna linger on this flag thing for just a bit. I call it my friend Jack Lowe. He lives in Maryland and he's a vexillologist, a person who studies flags. He's a big fan of our show.

Jack Lowe: *I have a confession to make, which is I haven't listened to all of the 51st podcasts yet. I've only heard the first two of them.*

Mikaela Lefrak: Biiiiig fan.

Jack Lowe: *But as I say, it's unlikely that they would notice the difference in the stars if we had 51 or 52 or 53 in them as opposed to 50.*

Mikaela Lefrak: [08:01] During my reporting, I've heard so much fretting about what a U.S. flag with 51 stars would look like. So I'm actually surprised to hear that Lowe is not one of the fretters. Changing the American flag from 50 stars to 51 is not a problem for him.

Jack Lowe: *People use the idea of the flag, which is to say white stars on the dark blue field with red and white stripes. People looking at that, at the basic elements of the design know that it is representing the United States flag.*

Mikaela Lefrak: I just think of those kids' drawings of the flag and there's usually maybe like four or five stars in there and then a bazillion stripes. But you still know it's an American flag.

Jack Lowe: *Exactly. But they do get it right. They do know. If you say, draw the U.S. flag, they don't draw, you know, something in green and yellow.*

Mikaela Lefrak: [08:49] Adding a new star wouldn't even be some historic first. The American flag already changed during Lowe's lifetime when the U.S. admitted Alaska and then Hawaii as states in 1959.

Jack Lowe: *Our flag has changed more than any other country's flag.*

Mikaela Lefrak: Really?

Jack Lowe: *Oh, yeah. And that's because of the provision in the 1818 law of adding a star for each time a new state was added.*

Mikaela Lefrak: Lowe loves the idea of watching the American flag get updated. It's kind of a flag guy's dream.

Jack Lowe: [09:21] *Oh, no, it's exciting. Anything that calls people's attention to flags and encourages people to think about flags, to me is a plus. And the manufacturers, of course, will have a field day because they've got to manufacture all these new flags and sell them to people who want to replace their old ones.*

Mikaela Lefrak: Flag manufacturers of the future, you are welcome.

[09:54] Over the course of reporting this podcast, statehood advocates kept telling me that reaching that future isn't going to take a magic time machine. So many of them said it's just a simple matter of educating people. Here's how D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser put it for me.

Mayor Muriel Bowser: *When people know that we don't have a vote in Congress and that we go to war and we pay taxes, they have a different view.*

Mikaela Lefrak: Longtime D.C. reporter Tom Sherwood is also one of these "all you need is education" optimists. He stopped our interview to tell me this story.

Tom Sherwood: [10:25] *Can I tell you one story? A few years ago I was on the National Mall when statehood was being discussed in the Congress. I interviewed a couple – man and his wife, a couple of kids, and they were from Middle America, Tennessee or somewhere Midwest. And I asked him, do you think the people of the District of Columbia ought to have voting rights in Congress?*

And the guy looked at me as if I had landed from Mars and he said, "But you work for us." And I said, "I'm sorry. What?" He said, "Well, you work for us." He thought everyone in the District of Columbia was a federal government employee, including me, the reporter asking him the question.

He was a bright guy. And I talked to him. I said, "No, you know, we have a city here. We have people who live here who have zero to do with government affairs."

And he says, "Oh, I didn't know that." And I told him how many people lived here. He said, "I didn't know that."

And then he said, "Well, of course, you're American citizens. You ought to have the same voting rights as all American citizens."

[11:42] *And that gets to the fundamental issue of what this city was like then and what it's like now. The American people don't know their own nation's capital. They know the swamp of the federal government and all the fighting over that. They do not know that we are real people here. They don't know about our city. And it's the one failing of the efforts to get statehood is that we have not been able to tell American people that we are one of them.*

Mikaela Lefrak: [12:20] Part of me agrees with Tom Sherwood. Like, every time I talk to my friends in Wisconsin or Oklahoma about this, they're like, oh, yeah, if D.C. residents pay taxes and send soldiers to war and are American citizens, they should totally have full representation, just like we do.

And I'm like, see, politicians, that was so easy! But of course, it's not that simple. And Tom Sherwood's story actually leads me to my next big existential question. How do D.C. journalists like me and Sherwood handle our personal feelings when we report on statehood? It's a question that's been really difficult for me to grapple with as I've been creating this podcast. It's actually something I haven't really known how to bring up until now.

[13:05] To me, DC's fight for representation is personal. It affects my daily life. I live here and I love this city. I think me and all my fellow residents deserve the right to elect voting representatives to Congress and have total control over our local laws. And I think D.C. statehood is the best way to accomplish that.

I'm also really tired. I'm tired of congressional interference. I'm tired of hearing that D.C. shouldn't be a state because the only people who live here are government swamp monsters or they aren't smart and responsible enough to run this place on their own.

[13:39] The whole time I've been working on this podcast, I've been worrying about how my own personal feelings play in. Should I have been sharing my perspective with you all along instead of waiting until the last episode, or should I not be talking about it at all and trying to be as objective as possible?

When we come back, I get some advice from one of the wisest people I know.

Kojo Nnamdi: *We live here, goddammit.*

Mikaela Lefrak: As 51st is winding down, I want to mention one more time that the work we do at WAMU, including this show, is listener-supported. It's really a community effort to keep all these great stories and shows coming. So if you love this show, if you want more like it, please show your support. And we've even got these custom What's With Washington socks available at a discounted donation level, while supplies last. Give at WAMU.org/SupportWhatsWith. And thank you so much.

Mikaela Lefrak: [14:51] We're back and I'm still here trying to grapple with this whole idea of objectivity. Kojo Nnamdi has been covering D.C. statehood for decades. He's hosted the Kojo Nnamdi Show here at WAMU for 20 years. And before that, he was a reporter and a news director. He's also a Washingtonian through and through. I mean, he and Tom Sherwood even have matching D.C. flag tattoos. Seriously.

Kojo Nnamdi: [15:15] *You know, I have been in this city now for more than 50 years. I have enjoyed living in this community. This community has been good to me. But when I look around at my neighbors, I see the same people here who exist in the state of Illinois, in which three governors in a row have been incarcerated. I see people who pay federal taxes and people in the territories don't pay federal taxes. And so it's, I guess, somewhat understandable that they don't have a vote in the Congress. But people in the city do pay federal taxes. I know literally dozens of people in the city who have served in the armed forces, who have been injured in Vietnam, who suffer from PTSD as a result of being injured in Afghanistan and Iraq. I know all of these people. They are my neighbors. They are my friends. And I know that they are denied having voting representation in Congress. I know that's not fair, because to me, this is not some, you know, just abstract ideological issue. This is something real that we live every single day. The fact that when we pass laws, the Congress can simply intervene and do that. And they can't do that in any other states in the country.*

[16:53] *In a lot of ways, it's personal if you happen to live in the District of Columbia. And that's why people like Tom Sherwood and I kind of step outside of the line of the, quote-unquote, objectivity and neutrality that we're supposed to have. And this is one issue on which we are not neutral. We cannot have our rights taken away from us and pretend to be neutral about that. We can be neutral about all of the other issues that we cover on a regular basis. But when it comes to our fundamental rights being taken away from us, you can't—we feel—you can't ask us to be neutral on that issue because it's something that we feel, our families feel and our neighbors feel. Personally, we live here, goddamnit.*

Mikaela Lefrak: [17:56] Journalists face these issues every day. We're taught to report in this very balanced way, try to include voices on every side of an issue and keep your personal life out of it. Don't tweet about your personal opinions on news stories and don't attend political marches or rallies in your spare time. Some journalists I know don't even vote. They don't want to have a documented stance on political issues that someone could point to and say, see, this person is biased. But sometimes the stories we report on are unavoidably personal.

[18:27] Like this summer with the protests against police brutality. Lots of us were wondering, would it be OK to voice their opinions about the protests on social media, or does being an objective reporter mean locking up parts of who you are and what you believe in?

[18:43] Then there's Kojo Nnamdi out there being amazing and threading the needle. He's a trusted news source here in D.C. as well as a trusted person. And part of the reason is because he lets himself shine through on a few topics that are close to his heart. One of those is D.C. statehood. I've heard him navigate this when he's hosting live radio. When I was on the Kojo Show last month, someone called in to say that the residents of the District of Columbia are not responsible enough, and that's why it shouldn't be a state.

Kojo Show caller Marty: [19:12] *Many congressmen, when asked why, he specifically said that the citizens living in the District of Columbia are not responsible enough.*

Kojo Nnamdi: *Well explain to me, Marty, and you both seem to be about to do that, explain to me what you mean by that, that the citizens of the District of Columbia are not responsible.*

Kojo Show caller Marty: *So when you're talking about statehood, what you're talking about is the ability to handle all the responsibilities of being a state, think of it as managing—*

Kojo Nnamdi: *Allow me to interrupt for a second. You do understand that the District of Columbia has among its residents the highest level of education of just about any place in the country. Do you understand that?*

Kojo Show caller Marty: [19:55] *I look and see how the government has run. It's bankrupted the city. You've had a mayor who was a drug addict. You've had a history of—*

Kojo Nnamdi: *Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute, Marty. Chicago had several governors who went to jail. I mean, Illinois had several governors who went to jail.*

Kojo Show caller Marty: *I agree with you. Chicago should not be a state.*

Kojo Nnamdi: *No, Illinois. Illinois had several governors who went to jail. So Illinois should not be a state?*

Kojo Show caller Marty: *I think the last eight governors, if you're right, there...*

Kojo Nnamdi: [20:34] *Yes, that was indeed a moment for me, because my immediate, visceral response was vitriol. I was immediately angered by what that caller said, but I had to realize that as the moderator of a show, that I had to try to be fair. And so I said, no, I'm not going to simply call this individual a racist, even though I know that the basis of comments like that are the fact that the District of Columbia is still seen as a predominantly Black environment and that there are a lot of people who demean the intelligence of Black people. So I did not choose to respond in that way, but I was pleasantly surprised that one of our callers who was actually for retrocession into Maryland called out that caller as a racist. I didn't want to go that far, but I knew that his remarks were race-based on a perception of Black people. It's one of the things that we as African Americans still have to get over in this country, and that is that perception.*

Mikaela Lefrak: *Before he worked in news, he was a civil rights activist and he wasn't the only person in his newsroom back then with that background. There were several veterans of the civil rights movement who were his colleagues. For him, activism was a stepping stone into local journalism. Not a thing to cover up, though he did have to change his approach.*

Kojo Nnamdi: [22:09] *We all brought an activist background into the news reporting business, but they were all terrific writers and they all understood the news business and understood that we had to leave our personal ideology at the door.*

While we could no longer be activists in public life because we had to cover the news and we had to do that in a fair way, we were not going to leave our own human rights at the door.

Mikaela Lefrak: [22:35] *Maybe being a good reporter doesn't mean leaving your personal opinions at the door. Maybe it's better to invite them in and introduce them around.*

So here I am, a D.C. resident hoping for change and a curious reporter wanting to see what happens next. Now, I said we weren't going to speculate on the near future and we're not.

But looking at the long view, say, 50 years from now, I have to say the people around me are pretty split on whether statehood is actually going to happen. Here's Kojo Nnamdi.

Kojo Nnamdi: [23:13] *I try not to think about it, but I do think it's a possibility in my lifetime because in the final analysis here, we're talking politics. And depending on the composition of the Congress of the United States, it is entirely possible that if the Democrats can gain a majority in the U.S. Senate, as they already have a majority in the House, it'll take just one general election for that situation to change. And so I am hoping and I think that such a general election can and will occur in my lifetime and that it'll happen.*

Mikaela Lefrak: And here's Edwina Williams. Do you remember her from the first episode? She's lived in D.C. her entire life, votes in every election, and still she's much more skeptical than Kojo.

Edwina Williams: [23:57] *Do I think in my lifetime we will ever receive statehood? I hate to say it, but no. Because it's such a hot button topic on the Hill. Any time it's brought up, it's like, dismissed so quick. It doesn't even make the news almost, you know? I'm glad to see that the mayor pushes for. I think she's a great mayor, doing great things. But statehood, do I think I'll live to see it if I live to be 100, which is like 100 years from now? No, honestly, I really don't, because it's too political.*

Mikaela Lefrak: [24:43] There is one thing I feel pretty confident about speculating on, though. Eleanor Holmes Norton. She's held her job in Congress for 30 years and she has no plans to go anywhere else.

Eleanor Holmes Norton: *The longer I'm in the Congress, the better off the District is. Because of my seniority. Because with seniority comes power.*

Mikaela Lefrak: Well, I'm curious, too, if you could answer that question from the perspective of Eleanor Holmes Norton, the person and the mother and grandmother and professor and not Eleanor Holmes Norton, the civil servant and the person committed to the District. Like, you as a human being, like, how long do you want to keep doing this job?

Eleanor Holmes Norton: [25:30] *You know, I don't wake up every morning and say, how long do I want to keep doing this job? I just wake up every morning and do my job.*

I cannot imagine not having some important work as part of my life.

Yeah, I have to be in the Congress. It is in the Congress. You can tell me something more important than being in the Congress, if you're a resident of the District of Columbia, then I'll try to think that one through too.

Mikaela Lefrak: [26:03] So this is where we'll end it, for now. At the time of this recording, D.C. is a district, not a state. Eleanor Holmes Norton is a non-voting delegate to Congress. I'm an American citizen with no senator or voting representative in the federal government. I'm also a proud Washingtonian, one of more than 700,000 residents of the nation's capital. We are federal government workers, politicians and lobbyists. We're also musicians, trash collectors and fifth grade teachers. We hang out on the green expanse of the National Mall and by the Joan of Arc statue in Malcolm X Park. Our skyline includes the U.S. Capitol dome and the pointed roofs of brick row houses. Some say Washington, D.C. is a swamp, yes, but when we walk along the banks of the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers, we know what it really is. It's home.

51st is produced by me, Mikaela Lefrak, and senior producer extraordinaire Poncie Rutsch. Additional production comes from the WAMU podcast team Ruth Tam, Patrick Fort and Jonquilyn Hill. Patrick Fort mixed this episode. Our chief content officer, Monna Kashfi oversees all the content we make at WAMU. What did you think of 51st? We want to know. Drop us a line at podcasts@WAMU.org. Leave us a review in Apple Podcasts or find me on Twitter at @mikafrak. Seriously, I'd love to hear from you. We have a few additional people to thank since this is our last episode, Rebecca Kaufman and Alison Brody for recommending a podcast on D.C. statehood. Our tech team, especially Dave Tate and Al Reynolds, for helping us make sure this

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If you want to know more about the history of representation, race and democracy in D.C., check out the book "Chocolate City" by Chris Myers Ash and George Derek Musgrove. We relied heavily on this book while making 51st and we really cannot recommend it enough.

Also, keep an eye out for the next round of What's With Washington trivia. We'll be holding more events to connect with you before we get back to producing more episodes. Thank you so much for listening.