



The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript

July 2026 Episode

We the People (Don't Appreciate Corruption) – Book Review

Susan: Hello ethical people. I'm Susan Willeke of the Ohio Ethics Commission, welcoming you to the Voice of Ethics, the podcast where we dive into stories about ethics in government. So if you've been listening to this podcast, you know that so far, all of my stories have been relatively recent, all within the span of the two decades that I've worked here for the Ohio Ethics Commission. But I thought it would be fun every once in a while to do a bit of time traveling to visit some government ethics stories from many years ago, well before the existence of the Ohio Ethics Law and Commission, and as a voracious reader, it made sense to me to meld two of my great loves, books and ethics, into one podcast episode. Thus, today I bring to you my first ever book review of a book about someone who made some, let's say, interesting choices in government.

For our first ever book review, we are going to travel back to 1926, when the United States would be celebrating the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Author and historian Thomas Keels penned the book that we're going to talk about today. The book is called *Sesqui! Greed, Graft and the Forgotten World's Fair of 1926*. The book does provide a compelling glimpse into Philadelphia's spectacularly failed attempt to celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence at the World Fair.

Now it does make perfect sense to me that Philadelphia, being the city where the declaration was originally signed in 1776, that it would be the site of the World's Fair that year to celebrate one and a half centuries since America declared separation from England. After that, though, not a whole lot of this story will make sense to you and to me as people who believe in ethics in government.

Now, Keel's book, it provides a clear but unfortunate picture of late 1920s Philadelphia. He does not shy away from painful historical truths: things like racism, misogyny, even the promotion of eugenics. For me, though, considering my line of work in the ethics world, it really was the book's depiction of wide and unabashed government corruption that really held my attention.

So our story really begins when the wealthy founder of a then famous department store wanted to showcase Philadelphia, the city that he loved, by having Philly host the World's Fair of 1926 to commemorate America's 150th birthday. His idea was a great one until a very corrupt political machine essentially hijacked the Fair, plunged Philadelphia into massive debt, and made a laughing stock of that really cool city.

So it was Congressman William Vare who kind of takes on the role of the villain in our story. Congressman Vare was a construction contractor, but he was also known, his nickname was the Duke of South Philadelphia. And he headed up the crooked, quote, "Organization" that ran the city. That really was the name of this group of powerful men in Philadelphia that really ran the city. And they called themselves the, quote, "Organization."

So William Vare and his cronies very quickly moved the World's Fair from its proposed location near the center of the city, where extensive improvements had already been underway, that made sense for the fair to be located there because you already had some infrastructure, etc.. - yeah, they didn't like that. So

they moved that proposed location to where it made perfect sense: to a swamp land in, where? You guessed it. Congressman Vare's congressional district.

So money that had been earmarked for further infrastructure in that highly populated area of Philadelphia, where the Fair was supposed to be, was instead spent on the beginning, things like filling wetlands, construction of streets that hadn't existed, building trolley tracks, landfills, water, sewer lines, much of which already existed in central Philadelphia, where the World's Fair was supposed to be held.

To add insult to injury, most of those construction companies retained to do all that work I just mentioned were owned by, yep, you guessed it again, Congressman Vare or one of his allies. Vendors were expected to provide big kickbacks to members of the organization and they did, extensively.

When it was all said and done; in fairness, the author goes into far more detail than we have time for on this podcast, but to be more succinct, when it was all said and done, here's kinda it all shook out. The fair's buildings were half completed by opening day of the World Fair, and those buildings that did exist were built so shoddily that they were quickly torn down when the fair concluded. We're not talking about money that was spent, that these buildings could be used for many years after the World Fair - nope, they were razed very, very quickly at the end of the fair.

All told, the author is estimating around a loss of nearly \$10 million by their standards in 1926, the equivalent straight up of about \$106 million today, but when you factor in labor costs the author estimates closer to \$410 million by today's standards. Further, the city of Philadelphia had anticipated upwards of 30 million visitors. When it was all said and done, fewer than 5 million paying customers.

The city of Philadelphia ended up shouldering a debt so staggering that it took decades for even a semblance of recovery. Especially when you factor in the Great Depression that hit a few years after the World's Fair.

Now, my personal thoughts on the book is, my review, if you will: the story is fascinating. The author describes things vividly. The book is very gripping, and as a bonus, there's even some really cool illustrations throughout the book. Things of construction and locations, if any of you are graphic novel people, you may enjoy this book even more than you thought you would.

I would say one of the things that I struggled with was just how thorough the book is, especially regarding the description of construction projects, very, very detailed on measurements and things like that. And the author didn't just quote from speeches that people gave throughout that time. He would print the entire speech in its totality.

In fairness, if you're someone who loves to get deep into the details and that's your gift, you may enjoy those parts of the book. But I confess I found myself doing a little bit of skimming during some of those pages. But overall, this book is a really great read and it was a reminder to me that bad ethical decision making in government is not new.

Now, I have mentioned this before in this podcast, but I do believe there are some folks in government who have already decided how they're going to conduct themselves. I'm not sure, if Congressman Vare were with us today that he would have been eager to call the Ethics Commission and say, "Hey, how do I make sure I do this correctly?" I think that's just a given. But for all the rest of us good, hard working people in public service, please don't forget that the Ohio Ethics Commission doesn't just investigate wrongdoers. The Ethics Commission also advises people like you and like me, who want to make the right choices, and may just need a little bit more information to do so effectively.

Check out our website if you can't find what you're looking for with your particular situation. Give us a call. We would be thrilled to advise, guide and help rather than ever have to investigate people who make really poor decisions like Congressman Vare did way back in 1926.

So there you have it. My first ever podcast book review. If you have any suggestions on other books about ethics or government that you would like to hear discussed on this podcast, email me, send me book titles. Send me your own thoughts, your own reviews. You never know, you could end up on a future podcast with me. Lucky you. Right? Yeah.

Until then, thank you for tuning in. Be well. And remember, the next time someone asks you where the Declaration of Independence was signed, just remind them: at the bottom of the page. Take care everybody. Be ethical. Bye bye.