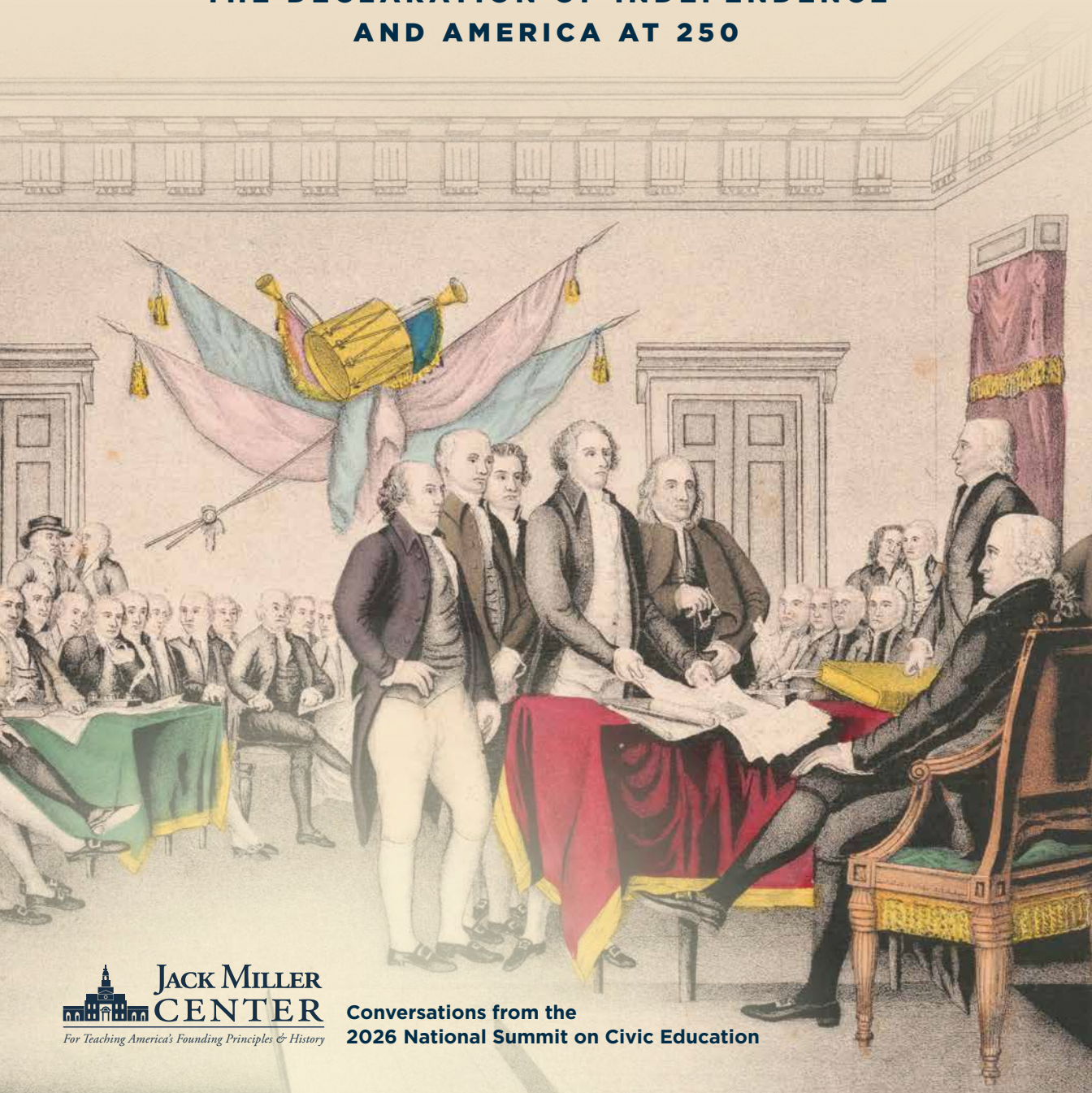
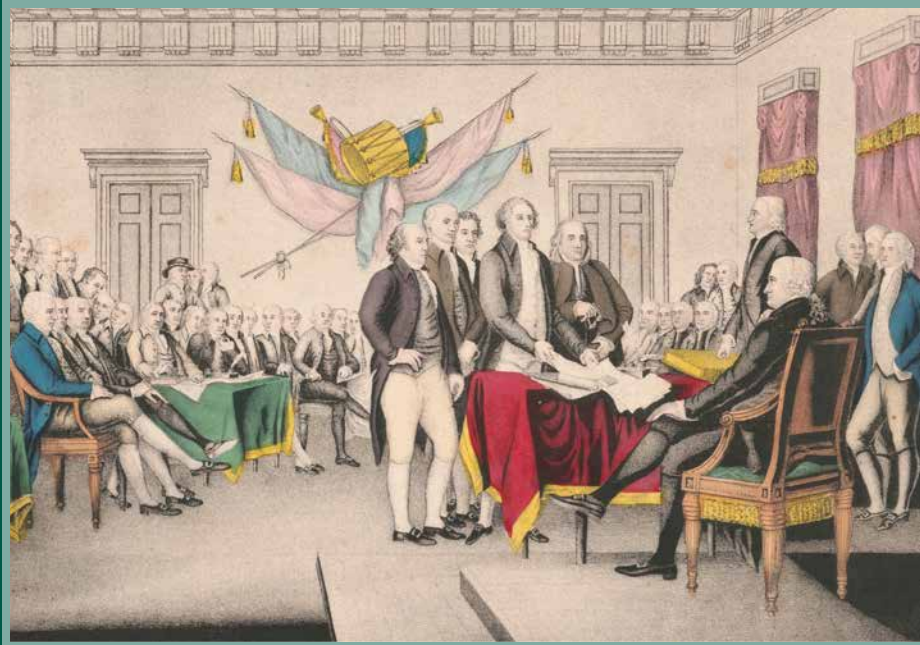


CIVICS MAGAZINE • SPRING 2026
A MAGAZINE OF THE JACK MILLER CENTER

TEACHING THE WORDS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE
AND AMERICA AT 250





COVER IMAGE *Declaration of Independence, July 4th 1776* by Currier & Ives, ca. 1835–56.

Image courtesy Artvee



The Jack Miller Center is a Philadelphia-based educational nonprofit committed to solving the national crisis of uninformed citizenship by teaching America's founding principles and history.

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jackmillercenter.org

TEACHING THE WORDS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

**THE DECLARATION
OF INDEPENDENCE
AND AMERICA AT 250**

*Conversations from the 2026
National Summit on Civic Education*

CIVICS MAGAZINE

Spring 2026

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HANS ZEIGER

INTRODUCTION

These days, Americans don't always seem to have much in common. Partisan fighting divides us from friends and family, and the digital revolution has cordoned us off into social media siloes. But this year marks a momentous occasion that can remind us what truly unites our republic: the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

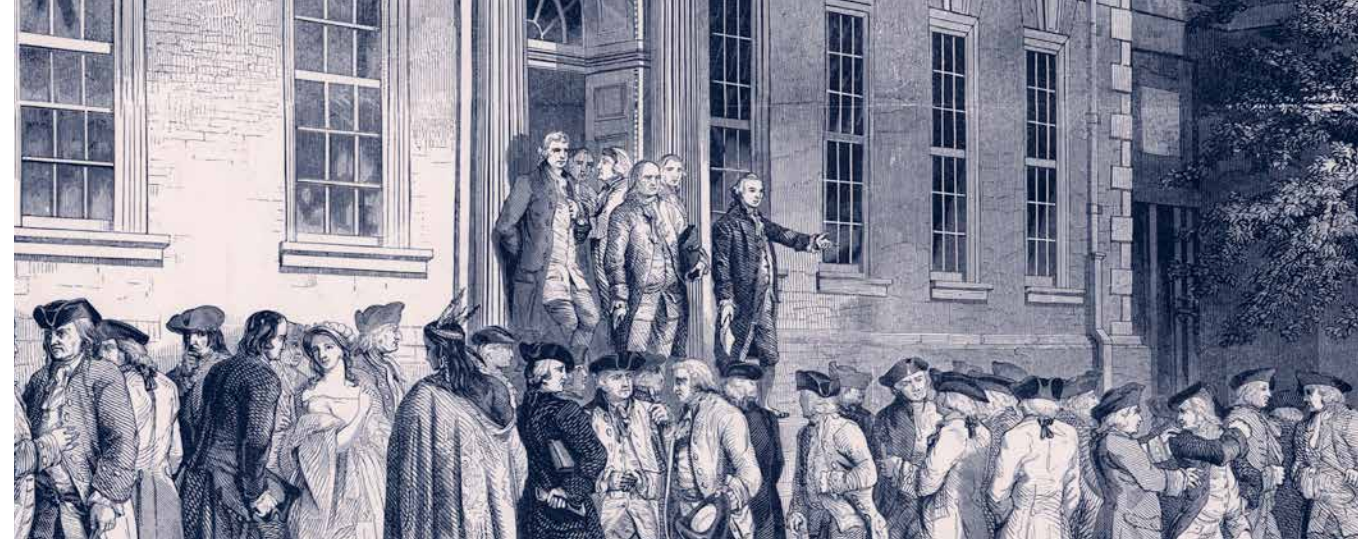
At the heart of the document is a simple idea: people matter. Our Founders threw off the despotism of a global empire to build a country rooted first and foremost in the principles of human dignity. Brave soldiers fought from Trenton to Yorktown for the promise of equality. Brilliant statesmen in Philadelphia designed a constitutional system to safeguard liberty. And countless generations from then on have been inspired by their words and deeds.

In this issue of *Civics Magazine*, we have brought together writers from a variety of perspectives to reflect on those "Words That Changed the World." Historians and political theorists, liberals and conservatives, they all agree that the Declaration is at the heart of the American tradition. Understanding it is essential to understanding who we are as a people.

Sadly, our country has not always been great at teaching young people about our principles or history. For decades, civic education has been deemphasized or even cut from K–12 and college curricula. But here's the good news: people across the country are waking up to this dire situation. State governments, philanthropists, and ordinary parents are finding innovative ways to reinvest in civics. If people

RIGHT John Nixon Reading the Declaration of Independence to the People in Front of the State House Immediately After Its Passage, engraved by Croome & Brightly, ca. 1765–1896.

Image courtesy New York Public Library



matter, citizenship matters, too. And there is no better time to rediscover America than this semiquincentennial year.

Many of the contributors to this magazine are at the forefront of that civic renaissance. Roosevelt Montás, for example, has been a powerful voice for the enduring value of the traditional liberal arts. Lee Strang is leading the Salmon P. Chase Center at Ohio State University, changing the way we think about civics in higher education. Kirstin Anderson Birkhaug and Cara Rogers Stevens are excellent historians who remind us just how important returning to the primary sources really is. Each and every one of the essays collected here brims with insight and will give cause for deep reflection.

Ronald Reagan used to say that "freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction." Here at the Jack Miller Center, we take that maxim seriously. Republican liberty can only endure if citizens choose it each and every day. Our Founders understood that—that is why, after all, they declared independence. These contributors understand it, too—it is why they have devoted their lives to the cause of civic education.

But the conversation doesn't stop with this issue of our magazine. On May 18–19, 2026, the Jack Miller Center will be convening our annual National Summit on Civic Education in Philadelphia—the city where the Declaration's eternal words were written. We hope to see you there.

HANS ZEIGER

President, Jack Miller Center



ABOUT THE SUMMIT

MAY 18-19, 2026



The 2026 National Summit on Civic Education will bring together civic educators, thought leaders, funders, and leaders in business and civil society for conversations about the Declaration of Independence and its extraordinary relevance in American education today.

This two-day conference will be a celebration of our founding ideals and their power to bring us together as citizens across differences. Leading voices from a variety of fields will discuss bold ideas for reform and concrete ideas for carrying the spirit of America250 far into the future. Set against the historic backdrop of Philadelphia—the birthplace of the Declaration of Independence—we expect to welcome some 500 guests for engaging discussion and events on “Words that Changed the World.”

Attendees can look forward to a moving naturalization ceremony for 13 new U.S. citizens, an opening luncheon featuring renowned columnist Peggy Noonan, a formal dinner capped by a live podcast recording featuring Jon Meacham on Old School with Shilo Brooks, and a “Shark Tank”-style competition for catalytic civics projects coming out of 2026.

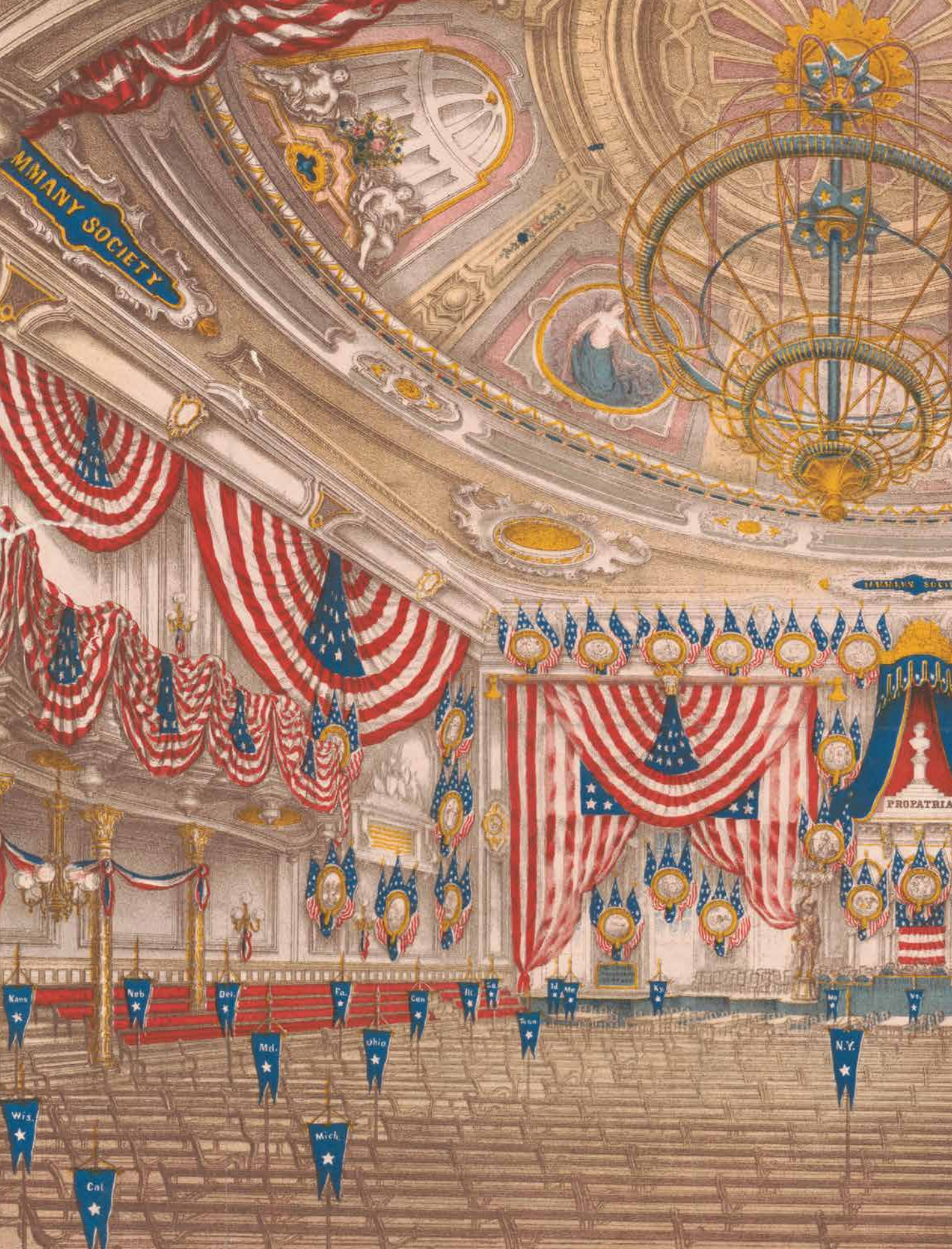
To learn more, scan the QR code or visit jackmillercenter.org/summit.



RIGHT *The Flag that Has Waved One Hundred Years—A Scene on the Morning of the Fourth Day of July 1876* by Dominique C. Fabronius, 1876.

Image courtesy Artvee; caption courtesy the Smithsonian





SUMMIT SPEAKERS

OPENING SPEAKER

Peggy Noonan is a Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for the *Wall Street Journal*, where her weekly column, “Declarations,” has run since 2000. She is also the bestselling author of nine books on American politics, history, and culture, including *A Certain Idea of America*, *What I Saw at the Revolution*, *The Time of Our Lives*, and *When Character Was King*. She is one of ten historians and writers who contributed essays on the American presidency for the book, *Character Above All*.



KEYNOTE DINNER CONVERSATION

Jon Meacham is a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer. He is the author of the New York Times bestsellers *And There Was Light: Abraham Lincoln and the American Struggle*; *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power*; *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House*; *Franklin and Winston: An Intimate Portrait of an Epic Friendship*; *Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush*; and *His Truth Is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope*. He holds the Carolyn T. and Robert M. Rogers Chair at Vanderbilt University and is a fellow of the Society of American Historians.



Shilo Brooks is President and CEO of the George W. Bush Presidential Center and Professor of Practice in the Department of Political Science at Southern Methodist University. He was previously Executive Director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University, where he taught in the Department of Politics. Brooks is host of *The Free Press's Old School* podcast and author of a forthcoming book from Penguin Random House.



LEFT *Tammany Hall Decorated for the National Convention, July 4th 1868* by Rogers WC & Co.

Image courtesy Artvee

FEATURED SPEAKERS



Danielle Allen
Harvard University



Andrew Delbanco
The Teagle Foundation



Daniel DiSalvo
University of North
Carolina at Chapel Hill



Lucas Morel
Washington and
Lee University



Michael Newmuis
City of Philadelphia



Lawrence W. Reed
Foundation for
Economic Education



Justin Dyer
University of Texas at Austin



Beverly Gage
Yale University



William Galston
Brookings Institution



Dame Louise Richardson
Carnegie Corporation
of New York



Rosie Rios
America250



Diana Schaub
Loyola University Maryland



Bryan Garsten
Yale University



Allen Guelzo
University of Florida



Sarah Igo
Vanderbilt University



Colleen Shogan
11th Archivist of the
United States



Hanna Skandera
Daniels Fund



Tamara Mann Tweel
The Teagle Foundation



Thomas Kelly
Jack Miller Center



Yuval Levin
American Enterprise Institute



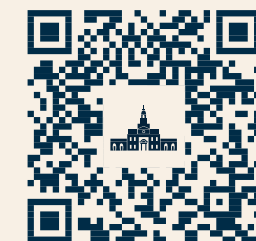
Roosevelt Montás
Bard College



Hans Zeiger
Jack Miller Center



Melinda Zook
Purdue University



**Full speaker list
available online**

POWER without time large
 world states FREE
 purpose declaration public
 absolute right
 government necessity
 USURPATIONS
 abolishing
 NEW PEOPLE ASSENT
 rights independent
 CLARE consent AMONG good
 inhabitants purpose peace
 COLONIES legislative

The Declaration of Independence BY THE NUMBERS



1,320

words, not including the title or the signers' names



119

days until there was a formal response from King George III (the king's first major address to Parliament acknowledging the event was on October 31, 1776)



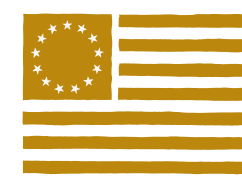
56

signers (the average signer's age was 44, the youngest signer was 26, and the oldest signer was 70)



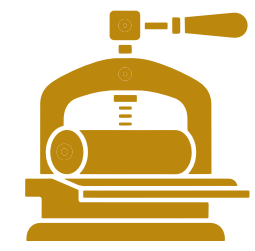
27

itemized grievances



2.5 MILLION

people, approximately, in the newly independent United States (13 colonies) around July 1776



200

original copies printed, approximately—and only 26 are known to survive to today

MICHAEL AUSLIN

THE LIVING DECLARATION

“... WE SHOULD BEGIN WITH THE ESTABLISHMENT OF FIRST PRINCIPLES ... THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, SHALL BE THE BASE OF ALL THE REST ...”

This statement was not written in July 1776, but more than four decades later, in late 1817. Hezekiah Niles, the foremost newspaper publisher of his day, wrote an appeal to Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, calling for new educational methods to build up a true “national character.” In pointing to the Declaration of Independence as the fount from which his generation should draw to create a character suited to the times, Niles revealed how the founding charter remained a living element of American society long after it announced the colonies’ separation from England.

RIGHT *Our Heaver Born Banner* by William Baully, 1861.

Image courtesy Artvee



When I began the book project that turned into *National Treasure: How the Declaration of Independence Made America*, I planned a short material history of the revered relic that now rests securely in the National Archives, in Washington, D.C. Like all Americans, I honored the Declaration, occasionally viewing it in the Archives, but I knew nothing of its story after July 1776.

I thought of the Declaration primarily as a part of the Revolutionary War. Yet it was not simply a state paper that played its role on that first July 4 and then faded into revered irrelevance. Instead, the Declaration has influenced each generation throughout our history. It has been the inspiration for almost every attempt to both preserve our freedoms and make a more perfect union. I learned, for example, that during the 20th century, through two world wars and a cold war, Americans regularly couched their opposition to fascism and communism by explicitly invoking the Declaration's principles as those for which they fought. In newspapers, presidential pronouncements, schools, and popular culture, it was the Declaration that served as a shining counterpart to totalitarian systems

abroad, while its focus on individual liberty undoubtedly helped blunt socialist critiques of capitalist democracy at home.

While the Constitution is the “battlefield” on which we fight our most important legal and political issues, behind almost every struggle has been the shadow of the Declaration.

While I found that Americans used the Declaration to maintain our deepest traditions, I also came to appreciate just how much it was the principles of the Declaration that pushed us to correct our shortcomings. While the Constitution is the “battlefield” on which we fight our most important legal and political issues, behind almost every struggle has been the shadow of the Declaration. From abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and women's rights activists such

as Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the 19th century, to civil rights campaigners like Martin Luther King, Jr., in the 20th century, the Declaration was the deep spring from which they drew their ideas of civic justice. King's 1963 “I Have a Dream Speech” quoting the Declaration is justly famous, but I discovered that throughout the Civil Rights Movement, whether in local newspaper editorials or Oval Office speeches, the Declaration's promises were repeatedly cited as the goal to which the country must move.

Along the way, I learned as well that the history of the Declaration's influence isn't always so straightforward. Our founding charter was claimed by both the North and the South during the Civil War, with Confederates like Jefferson Davis appealing to Thomas Jefferson's argument that government is only legitimate with consent of the governed, while Abraham Lincoln championed equality as the true and universal, meaning of the document. Such disagreements continue to swirl around the Declaration. Today, for example, those who read it as a call for equality of outcome over equality of opportunity misunderstand the document. Writing and teaching about the complex history of America requires not just a complete, but an honest treatment of our most famous document.

There is a reason that the Declaration has remained the supreme statement of the American ethos. It is a living covenant, speaking to each generation of Americans, whether those who trace their heritage back to the Mayflower or are new citizens. Those fleeing from oppression continue to seek individual freedom in America, while others urge the continual process of expanding opportunity and equal treatment for both the majority and minority at home. It was the Declaration that most famously expressed our “pragmatic idealism” (in the words of historian Bernard Bailyn) that kept the American Revolution from spinning off into the excesses of the French, Russian, or Chinese catastrophes. Let us hope it continues to inspire our democratic experiment for another quarter-millennium.

Writing and teaching about the complex history of America requires not just a complete, but an honest treatment of our most famous document.

MICHAEL AUSLIN is the Payson J. Treat Distinguished Research Fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution.



DANIELLE ALLEN

REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING THE DECLARATION

I've been teaching the Declaration of Independence for more than 25 years, which is 10 percent of the life of our nation, and just under half my own life. I've been alive for more than 20 percent of America's life. It is astonishing to me how young our country still is. This teaching experience has been infinite in its variety and unceasing in its inspiration. Whether it was low-income adults in a night class in Chicago, sixth graders in a pilot program in Brooklyn, vacationing middle class adults at Chataqua, or college kids on innumerable campuses, every single group has had a transformative experience with the text. The resonance and echoes between past and present cause people to catch their breath. The glowing ideal at the heart of the text—of human equality—alternately puzzles people and calls them to their best selves.

I used to teach the greatest heights of the text first—the foundation in human dignity; the clarity that we the people build institutions to deliver our safety and happiness and that they therefore also belong to us to change; the theory of separate branches of government that is implicit in the structure of the grievances. Then the questions would come, always the same questions. People would ask how we could take seriously the words written by someone who held humans in bondage, or how we could glean lessons from a text that declared men, as in males, all equal.

LEFT *Thanksgiving Day Lesson at Whittier* by Frances Benjamin Johnston, Whittier Primary School, Hampton, Virginia, 1899 or 1900.

Image courtesy Alamy



Over time, I have learned to disarm those pre-programmed responses up front. I begin by teaching people how the Declaration was drafted by five men—including not only Thomas Jefferson but also John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, and that Adams always opposed enslavement and never held people in bondage and that Franklin, by 1776, was also opposed to the practice. I teach them how the second sentence was used by free African Americans in Massachusetts before the end of the Revolutionary War to achieve the abolition of enslavement in Massachusetts. This was also achieved in Pennsylvania where Franklin was from. The text, in other words, helped crystallize the abolitionist movement. That is as much its legacy as anything Jefferson may have left us.

I show people how the word “men” in “all men are created equal,” was used in a universalizing way for all human beings. We know this because in the draft of the Declaration that the committee of the five writers submitted to Congress, they condemned slave auctions where “MEN”—and Jefferson wrote that in ALL CAPS—are bought and sold. Of course, in those auctions it wasn’t merely males who were sold, but also women and children. The word had a universalizing function in the 18th century that it no longer has for us, but when they said “all men are created equal,” they did in fact mean all people. That draft text also condemned King George III for a slave trade that violated the “sacred rights of life and liberty” of a distant people in Africa. In others, that draft the committee submitted attributed the same rights to the colonists and to Africans. That was a recognition of human equality.

These lessons in turn lead to further mysteries that have to be cleared up. If the drafters of the Declaration did have a universalizing view about human equality and human rights, how did they end up accepting enslavement and domination of men over women? I then remind people that some of the people who signed the Declaration did not accept enslavement. I remind them that the text was used immediately to end the practice of slavery in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania (and also Vermont, which was at the time its own country). The conflict that would lead to the Civil War began then, with the Declaration, because many people understood its claims to equality fully and took them seriously.

I explain that the mistake the founders made was in thinking that rights could be protected for all while power was placed only in the hands of some. The second sentence of the Declaration divides the work of citizenship into two activities:

first, laying the foundation of government on principles; and, second, organizing the powers of government. John Adams wrote to Abigail Adams, when she asked him to remember the ladies, by indicating that while women were included in the principles—the idea that all have a right to the blessings of life, liberty, and happiness—men would retain their “masculine system” for the exercise of power. It would be their responsibility to ensure that women’s wellbeing was protected. He endorsed benevolent paternalism. He thought that protecting rights for all could be achieved by placing hands in the power of some.

Abigail was not impressed and warned that power in the hands of husbands too often tended toward tyranny. She warned that women were likely to have to “foment a rebellion” to achieve “voice [and] representation.” Her insight was accurate. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The only way to protect the rights of all—the principle anchoring our government—is to organize the powers of government so that that power is shared by all. This would become plain as one generation gave way to the next, and the dynamic political struggles of our country changed American life.

After we have done this work of clarifying both how seriously the drafters of the Declaration meant the concept of human equality and the mistake they made about how to organize power, we are then able to turn back to the basics—the theory of revolution and of the social contract in the second sentence; the theory of constitutionalism in the grievances; the commitments of reciprocity and mutualism that define the decision to act together to make the world anew. That is just the beginning, but by this point my student are usually fully open to the text, and we can make great and rapid strides in unpacking its political philosophy, like harvesting honey from a hive.

DANIELLE ALLEN is the James Bryant Conant University Professor at Harvard University and Director of the Allen Lab for Democracy Renovation at the Harvard Kennedy School. She is a professor of political philosophy, ethics, and public policy as well as a seasoned nonprofit leader, democracy advocate, tech ethicist, distinguished author, and mom.



MATTHEW SPALDING

THE MAKING OF THE AMERICAN MIND

THE STORY OF OUR DECLARATION

We must know the Declaration if we truly are to love America.

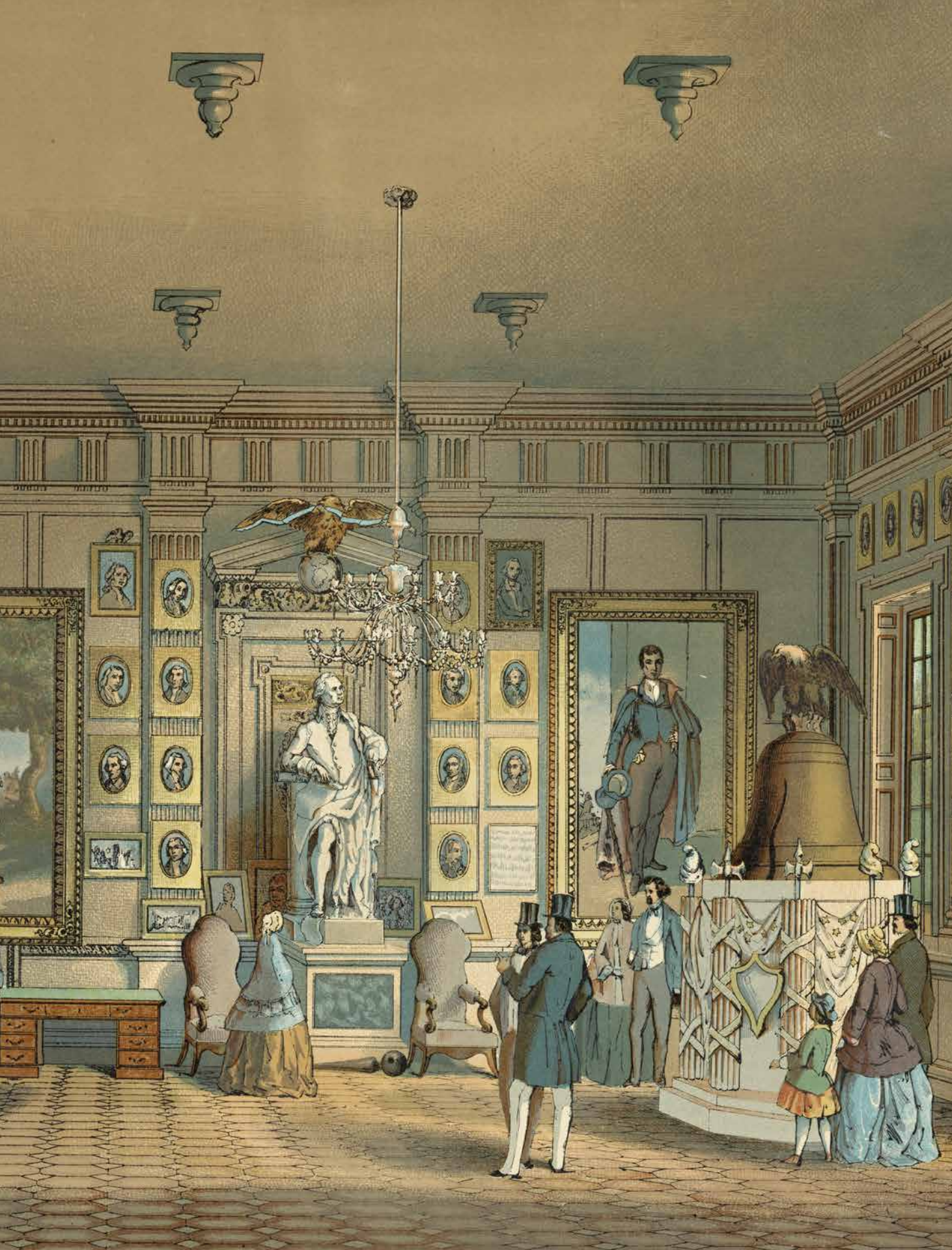
Having rejected the Old World's rule of accident and force in favor of government by reflection and choice, the American Founders understood education—heretofore an elite privilege of the upper class and often a tool of state control—to take on a new civic role in service to popular government.

In a republican regime, built on equal rights and the consent of the governed, education not only shapes the private character that allows the individual to govern the self but also imparts the principles necessary for those individuals to practice the arts of self-government. The student is transformed into the citizen through the expansion and deepening of the natural attachments as well as the cultivation of the civic knowledge necessary to perpetuate free government.

Education begins at home, when the habits and manners are established, first by parents, who have the primary responsibility for the upbringing of their children, and then by family, church, community, and the first lessons of early instruction. Like the great nations of Europe, Noah Webster maintained that the formal educational system to be adopted and pursued in America should focus on the

LEFT Interior view of Independence Hall, Philadelphia by Max Rosenthal, 1856.

Image courtesy Artvee



foundations of knowledge: reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as a basic understanding of the sciences and the outlines of geography and history.

But in republican America, Webster argued that popular education must also “implant, in the minds of the American youth, the principles of virtue and of liberty; and inspire them with just and liberal ideas of government, and with an inviolable attachment to their own country.” At a young age, this inculcation was especially to be done by teaching history.

Thomas Jefferson and James Madison concurred in a report they authored as commissioners of the University of Virginia. Beyond improving the faculties and morals, the objects of a general education should be for the student “to understand his duties to his neighbors and country, and to discharge with competence the functions confided to him by either,” and “to instruct the mass of our citizens in these, their rights, interests and duties, as men and citizens.” The objects of “the higher branches of education”—the colleges and universities scattered around the country—were “to develop the reasoning faculties of our youth, enlarge their minds, cultivate their morals, and instill into them the precepts of virtue and order” and “to form them to habits of reflection and correct action, rendering them examples of virtue to others, and of happiness within themselves.” American higher education should “form the statesmen, legislators and judges, on whom public prosperity and individual happiness are so much to depend.” Colleges and universities, too, had an obligation to make good citizens.

And the document around which this citizen education was to be constructed, the creed of America’s civic life and political identity, its temporal scripture and its epic poetry, was the Declaration of Independence.

The Declaration is the defining act of the great drama that is the American Founding. When Jefferson and Madison outlined an educational curriculum with “especial attention to the principles of government which shall be inculcated therein,” their first reading was the Declaration, which Jefferson called “an expression of the American mind.” It is what the ancients described as the prelude to the laws, meant to define the regime and animate what is to come.

Although a “merely revolutionary document,” the Declaration of Independence contains, as Abraham Lincoln wrote on the eve of Civil War, “an abstract truth,

applicable to all men and all times,” put there “that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.”

Lincoln also said once that public opinion “always has a ‘central idea,’ from which all its minor thoughts radiate.” America’s central idea is the Declaration, and everything else radiates from that.

America’s central idea is the Declaration, and everything else radiates from that.

The Making of the American Mind is the story of the making and meaning of the Declaration, of how in the summer of 1776 a band of iron men from thirteen separate colonies banded together and declared independence from—and declared war against—the most powerful nation in the world. It also recalls how the American mind, years if not decades in the making, came to be written down in that way, and expressed in the Declaration’s powerful words.

Rather than focusing on one aspect or emphasizing one person, as is usually the case, this work is a commentary on the Declaration as a whole, allowing its narrative, and its argument, to unfold on its terms, as the Continental Congress understood itself to be speaking to “the opinions of mankind.” We should approach the document like a great symphony, composed of different movements, different sounds and rhythms, yet all in harmony, forming one complete work.

It was Augustine who pointed out long ago that nothing can be truly loved unless the object of love is known, known in its nature and its very being. By defining our common loves—our native country and our common commitment to republican government based on equal rights, political liberty, and the consent of the governed—the Declaration unites our hearts and our minds in a civic friendship of enlightened patriotism. We must know the Declaration if we truly are to love America.

MATTHEW SPALDING is the Kirby Professor in Constitutional Government at Hillsdale College and the Dean of the Van Andel Graduate School of Government at Hillsdale College’s Washington, D.C., campus.



CARA ROGERS STEVENS

JEFFERSON AND THE DECLARATION

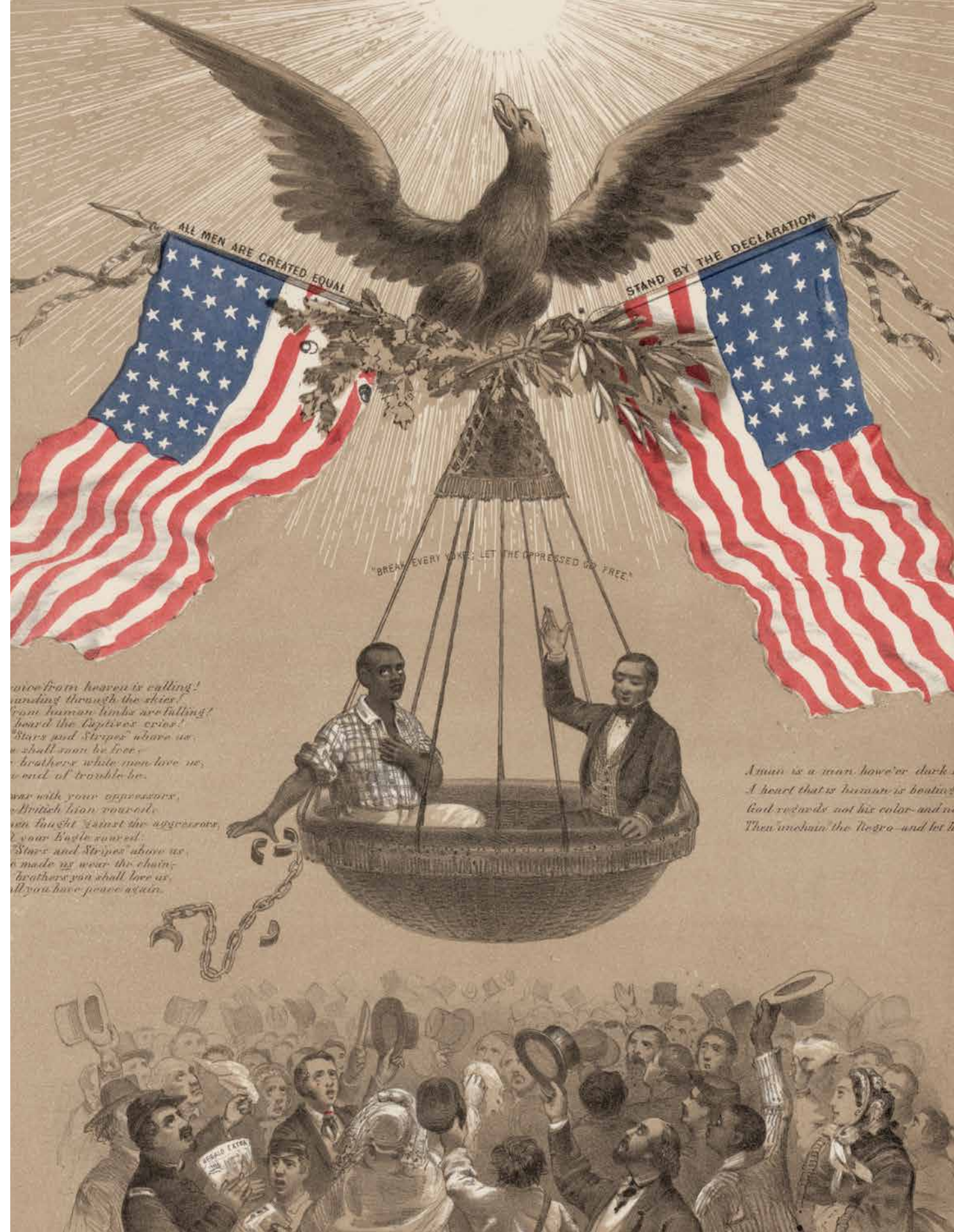
Anytime I teach the Declaration of Independence, I find that the most important question to cover is one that is not actually mentioned in the document itself: slavery. Many students already know that the document's primary author, Thomas Jefferson, owned enslaved people; and if they don't already know, they are inevitably shocked to find out. How is it possible, they rightly ask, for a slaveowner to argue that "all men are created equal"? Doesn't this blatant hypocrisy invalidate the document's most eloquent pronouncements on human rights?

This most important question can be answered in three ways, like concentric circles that each increase in scope: first, I introduce students to the original draft of the Declaration. Second, we examine the life and writings of Jefferson for more evidence of his beliefs. And finally—my favorite part—we look at the Declaration in global context.

First, my students and I look carefully at the text of the original rough draft, composed by Jefferson over the course of 17 days in the summer of 1776. It contains an entire paragraph condemning the transatlantic slave trade in the strongest terms. Jefferson refers to slavery as "war against human nature itself," a violation "of the most sacred rights of life & liberty," an "assemblage of horrors."

LEFT *The American Declaration of Independence Illustrated* by Dominique C. Fabronius, designed by R. Thayer, 1861. This lithograph linked the anti-slavery cause to the Declaration of Independence's stated ideals of equality for all. Text on the image reads, "All men are created equal / Stand by the Declaration."

Image courtesy Artvee



Most significantly, Jefferson refers to the victims of slave markets—black men, women, and children—as “MEN.” His use of that word sheds brilliant light on the meaning of the phrase “all men are created equal,” since Jefferson clearly understood the word to encompass all human beings—all “people,” not “all white males,” as students sometimes assume.

Why doesn't the final version of the Declaration contain this paragraph? Because some southern colonies wished to continue the slave trade, and compromise was necessary so the colonies could unify and defeat the British Army. In reading about this compromise, students must face a dark side of democratic government: “it takes time to persuade men to do even what is for their own good.”

Jefferson hated Congress's edits to his rough draft, partly because by 1776 he had already spent several years taking on pro bono freedom suits as a lawyer, and supporting groundbreaking antislavery legislation in Virginia. Over the next few

When students debate Jefferson's failures, they should know that this flawed man was also a remarkable leader in the fight against slavery, back when that fight was just getting started.

years, he wrote an antislavery Constitution for Virginia, planned for a future in which no slavery was allowed in new states, wrote an antislavery book, and researched ways to transition Virginia from a slave economy to a free one. At the end of his life, Jefferson only freed a few people—but because he was heavily in debt, that was all he was legally permitted to do. Perhaps because very few of his antislavery efforts succeeded, history books don't dwell on these aspects of Jefferson's life, but they are vital for seeing the whole picture of the Declaration. When students debate Jefferson's failures, they should know that this flawed man was also a remarkable leader in the fight against slavery, back when that fight was just getting started.

The final piece in the puzzle of the Declaration and slavery lies in the Declaration's global impact over the years. Most Americans (hopefully) know that the Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery in America in 1865. What most probably don't know is that the language of the Thirteenth Amendment echoes an antislavery proviso from an Ordinance Jefferson wrote in 1784 (it failed to pass by just one vote). They also likely don't know that slavery was legal almost everywhere in

the world in 1776, but Americans began recognizing the gap between their principles and their reality immediately after issuing the Declaration: northern states started emancipating their slaves in 1777, and by 1804 slavery was on the road to extinction in all the northern parts of the U.S.

Abolitionists like Frederick Douglass referenced the Declaration in their arguments against slavery, while Confederates rejected the document entirely, claiming that Jefferson was simply wrong about human equality. Abraham Lincoln famously wrote “All honor to Jefferson—to the man who . . . introduce[d] into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times.” And it's true: the self-evident truths of the Declaration have inspired not only Americans, but millions more around the globe, just as Jefferson predicted it would. The world has been changed forever by the idea of human equality, with nations moving from monarchies to republics with astonishing speed in the last 250 years.

And so, it turns out that discussing the question of slavery is one of the best parts of the Declaration of Independence, after all! In this conversation, which must be rooted in careful reading of multiple primary sources, my students and I confront the best and the worst parts of the American national character, democracy, and human nature itself. No conversation could be more worthwhile.

The self-evident truths of the Declaration have inspired not only Americans, but millions more around the globe, just as Jefferson predicted it would.

CARA ROGERS STEVENS is an Associate Professor of History at Ashland University; her research focuses on race and slavery in the Jeffersonian Age.



During my tenure as Archivist of the United States, I saw firsthand how deeply Americans of all ages and backgrounds respond to the Declaration when they encounter it. The Rotunda of the National Archives, home to the Charters of Freedom, is a place of quiet awe. But what resonates with visitors is not faded ink behind protective glass. It is the realization that the Declaration ignited a revolution whose effects can be traced across millions of histories, from immigration records

I regularly saw families and school groups reading the Declaration aloud—parents guiding children through the first paragraphs, teachers pointing to familiar lines with fresh meaning.

to military service files to patent petitions. Together, they document the complex and often byzantine progress the United States has made toward fulfilling the Declaration's ideals.

The Declaration remains our starting point, but its significance is renewed each time we read it. As citizens, revisiting the text, reading it slowly and often, reminds us of our shared heritage and sharpens our ability to hold the government accountable to its first principles.

Early in my tenure as archivist, I grew concerned about the readability of the original Declaration on display. After years of exposure, the Declaration has now faded to the point of near illegibility. To remedy the situation, we created an enlarged facsimile of the 1823 "Stone Print" of the Declaration and placed it immediately outside the Rotunda for display. The accompanying label explained the reason for its presence and invited visitors to stop and read the text.

I visited the Declaration of Independence almost every day I worked inside the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C. After observing the hundreds of visitors from across the United States waiting in line patiently to view the founding documents, I often paused by the replica Stone Print. I regularly saw families and school groups reading the Declaration aloud—parents guiding children through the first paragraphs, teachers pointing to familiar lines with fresh meaning. Those moments reaffirmed my belief that Americans are eager to engage with history when given the opportunity.

Archives make that engagement possible. They enable educators to present the Declaration not as a relic but as a living argument—one invoked by abolitionists,

suffragists, civil rights leaders, and countless others who have insisted the nation live up to its stated ideals. I often said that archives are where democracy keeps its receipts. They record not only what we aspired to in 1776, but what we chose, failed, attempted, or resisted in the years that followed. They reveal the distance between promise and practice and give us the tools to assess our progress honestly.

Teaching the Declaration in this way also cultivates habits of mind our democratic republic urgently needs in 2026: evaluating sources, distinguishing fact from ideology, and engaging in collective problem-solving. At a time when misinformation spreads faster than primary sources, these skills are foundational to citizenship.

My time stewarding the nation's records strengthened my conviction that archives are essential civic infrastructure. They preserve the raw materials that allow each generation to rediscover the Declaration, interpret it anew, and ask what it demands of us now. The words of 1776 continue to inspire, but their durability depends on the routine work of preserving and sharing the documents that make those ideals tangible.

We teach the Declaration of Independence best when we teach it as part of a larger American story—one grounded in evidence, enriched by debate, and strengthened by the willingness to celebrate our achievements and confront our unfinished work. Archives make that possible. They keep the words that changed the world alive and relevant. Most importantly, they keep the republic accountable to its citizens.

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My time stewarding the nation's records strengthened my conviction that archives are essential civic infrastructure.



KIRSTIN ANDERSON BIRKHAUG

THE LADIES, AND HOW WE REMEMBER THEM

It is no small irony that perhaps the best-remembered line written by any one woman of the American Founding era is Abigail Adams's admonition to her husband to "remember the ladies." Generations of Americans have heeded Adams's words no better than John himself, who laughed off his wife's attempts to establish a "despotism of the petticoat." Most Americans have never read past Abigail's famous line to understand what she meant by "remember the ladies," and with her exception, few ladies of her moment have been remembered at all. If there was ever a time to rectify this error, it is now, as the United States passes the 250th anniversary of its birth. In this moment of celebration and reflection, perhaps it is finally time for Americans to do as Abigail Adams instructed. As it turns out, when we remember the ladies, we learn much about the country they helped build, and about our own inheritance from them as Americans.

As it turns out, when we remember the ladies, we learn much about the country they helped build, and about our own inheritance from them as Americans.

When Abigail wrote to John to "remember the ladies," in 1776, she had a legal and political objective in mind. Left behind for long stints at the family farm in

LEFT *Mrs. John Adams (Abigail Smith)* by Christian Schussele, 1856.

Image courtesy Artvee

Her letter reveals the extent to which women developed the economic life of the new country throughout the Revolution.

Braintree, Massachusetts while John tended to the delicate business of forming the new nation, Abigail was the Adams family breadwinner. She hired and fired, sold crops and livestock, and even speculated on land. And yet, she could do none of it in her own name. The legal fiction of coverture, a facet of English common law that pervaded the American colonies, subsumed the legal identities of married women into those of their husbands. While, functionally, Abigail ran the family business, she could only do so in John's name, and with his approval. She had no legal share in the fruits of her labor.

This was the remembrance she asked of John—that he would recognize her work, and the work of other women like her, by amending the laws to allow married women the right to own property. Her letter reveals the extent to which women developed the economic life of the new country throughout the Revolution, while many men were otherwise occupied. It also reveals that women were thinking about the potential expansion of their rights during this supercharged political moment. John's comparatively elevated concern for the rights of American women reflects his wife's enduring influence on him, which is evidenced not only by this issue, but across too many facets of his political life to count. It was with good reason that, when he was in office, John's rivals often referred to Abigail as “Mrs. President.”

When Abigail received a less-than-serious reply from her husband to her deadly serious inquiry, she lamented his frivolity to her close friend, Mercy Otis Warren. Mercy was no stranger to the demands of marriage to an important man—her husband, James, was, at the time, a major-general of the Massachusetts militia, as well as the president of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress. But Mercy herself was no slouch; John Adams once told her directly that he was intimidated by her, because he felt her “attainments dwarf those of most men.”

By 1776, Mercy had begun what would become a long and storied publishing career. At John Adams's insistence, she had anonymously published a poem about the Boston Tea Party on the front page of the *Boston Gazette*, and her plays (also published and performed anonymously), “The Adulateur” and “The Defeat,” were successful and politically charged ventures that bolstered the cause of American independence. Warren would later go on to be a sharp-eyed critic of elements of

the American political order, publishing an essay entitled “Observations on the New Constitution” in 1788 amid the ratification conventions. The likes of Herbert Storing regard this essay as one of the most theoretically sound presentations of Anti-Federalist thought ever written, and it is likely to have been instrumental in securing the Bill of Rights as a part of the ratified Constitution. This essay was also originally attributed to Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts—Mercy's great contribution to the ratification conversation would only become known as hers much later.

Mercy and Abigail are just two of the “ladies” of the founding era. This is not to mention the likes of Phillis Wheatley, Judith Sargent Murray, Martha Washington, Deborah Sampson, Dolley Madison, Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton, Elizabeth Drinker, and so many others also worth remembering in their own right. If we desire to remember them better, we ought to consider what Mercy Otis Warren established in her final work, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*: remembering the past is a habit, both of mind and of action. It requires reading and re-reading what these women wrote, if indeed they wrote anything that survives today, and it requires telling their stories as part of the mnemonic fabric of our national origins.

Perhaps one of the most exciting things about the founding era was its expansiveness—that it was a moment of political energy and genius not just reserved for the men we now consider “Founders”, but a moment that pervaded every corner of American society and culture. Half of that society was comprised of women, and most of the culture the product of their work. They, too, are worthy of our remembrance. Their stories, too, are ones that we should know and tell.

KIRSTIN ANDERSON BIRKHAUG is assistant professor of political science at Hope College. Her research focuses on American political thought, with an emphasis on the contributions of women.



Remembering the past is a habit, both of mind and of action. It requires reading and re-reading what these women wrote.

ROOSEVELT MONTÁS

A NATURALIZED CITIZEN REFLECTS ON THE DECLARATION

I became an American citizen through a process called “naturalization.” The term appears in the Constitution, but it is much older. Derived from the Latin *natio* (“birth”), it was already in use by the fifteenth century to mean what it does today: to confer on a foreign-born person the same rights of citizenship as those of the native-born. In the United States, naturalized citizens enjoy the same legal status as native-born citizens except that they can’t hold the office of President. But there is one other significant difference: unlike birthright citizenship, naturalization can be revoked. Through a process with the ungainly name of “denaturalization,” citizenship conferred by law can be withdrawn by a district court. At a time when the executive branch is challenging the longstanding acceptance of birthright citizenship, it is not hard to imagine that any one of the nearly 25 million naturalized citizens in the United States could become the target of politically motivated denaturalization proceedings. This disquieting prospect does not dim my gratitude for the citizenship this country has conferred on me, nor diminish the intensity of my embrace of its founding ideals.

My naturalization happened as if by magic. I went before a federal judge, renounced allegiance to any foreign power, and swore that “I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies.” The foreign-born judge who administered the oath then welcomed me into my new

RIGHT Detail from the *Detroit Industry Murals* by Diego Rivera, 1932–33. Image courtesy Alamy



status as an American citizen. I hugged the Pakistani woman to my right and the Korean man to my left. On my way out of the auditorium, I registered to vote.

But if my naturalization was essentially instantaneous, the process that led me to it was anything but straightforward. I had grown up in the Dominican Republic under the heel of an American-backed repressive government. My father fought against the U.S. invasion of 1965 and then became a fierce opponent of the regime the invasion left in place. He was persecuted and jailed. For a time, he went underground after the local military boss issued a death sentence. Many of his comrades were murdered by government enforcers.

Such was my introduction to America. The first words I learned to say in English were “Yankee go home.” When I came to live with my mother in the United States just before my twelfth birthday, my idea of America was of a malevolent bully that imposed its will on weaker countries. It took many years of living in the United States and of studying its history, culture, and politics for me to recognize America as precisely the country I wanted to belong to, and its founding ideals as those that commanded my deepest allegiance. America, I discovered, was founded on an idea. It was a nation, as Abraham Lincoln put it, “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” I came to see American history as the struggle to realize the profound implications of that simple but all-pervading commitment.

My discovery of America, and my becoming American, were midwifed by the texts that shaped its founding and evolution. The most important of these was the Declaration of Independence. From the time I first read it as a junior in college, it has been my most important guide to understanding what America means and what it means for me to be American. I have dedicated much of my professional life to studying, teaching, and writing about the ideas and commitments that gave birth to America. The whole character of the American project, premised on equality and government by consent of the governed, requires citizens for whom these ideas are alive and whose social lives are invested in the civic experiment of self-government.

America did not emerge as a nation from ancestral tribes bound by blood and soil. To bring it into existence, the Second Continental Congress invoked not kinship, tradition, or geography, but a novel idea of “a people” as constituted by *political consent*. The Declaration of Independence is the act by which this community of consent declared itself a nation.

The first time I read the Declaration, it was in a version that included Jefferson’s original draft along with the changes Congress made before adopting it on July 4, 1776. Jefferson’s draft included an impassioned condemnation of slavery in which he castigated King George III for violating the “sacred rights of life and liberty” of Africans. Encountering this deleted passage was something of a shock for me and caused me to reevaluate what I thought of Jefferson and the place of slavery in America’s founding.

My discovery of America, and my becoming American, were midwifed by the texts that shaped its founding and evolution.

As a member of the Virginia legislature and a large slaveholder himself, Jefferson must have known that his attack on slavery would be removed by a Congress seeking unanimous agreement on its most consequential act. But he put it there anyway and then published it in his Autobiography. Congress did leave Jefferson’s grand statement in the final Declaration: “*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*”

Writing 43 years later, John Quincy Adams wondered whether Jefferson understood that these words “laid open a precipice into which the Slave-holding Planters of his Country, sooner or later must fall?” I believe that he did. The signal idea of America is political equality. This bedrock commitment gives the nation its distinctive identity; it is the cardinal principle of its political creed. Equality among people implies democracy, government by consent, the rule of law, the Bill of Rights, limited government, freedom of conscience, freedom of markets, and much more.

The Declaration articulates a vision to which America has returned to again and again to find its soul. On its 250th anniversary, we should do as Lincoln enjoined at the moment of our nation’s greatest crisis: “Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence.”

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JACOB WOLF

TEACHING THE DECLARATION IN AN AGE OF INDIVIDUALISM

Teaching the Declaration of Independence to American students presents a unique challenge. We are, in many ways, too close to the document. Its assumptions about human nature have shaped our moral anthropology, and its vocabulary of rights has become our political lingua franca. Familiar quotations are repeated so often that they lose their gravity—and with it, their moral force. Students therefore encounter the Declaration as something admirable, selectively memorized, and safely consigned to our history.

The Declaration is an education in itself, if we are willing to confront the text directly.

Because they presume to know it, they learn very little from it. Yet the Declaration is an education in itself, if we are willing to confront the text directly. Each generation brings to the text modern assumptions which blur its meaning and blunt its power—assumptions that seem obvious precisely because they go unchallenged. For this reason, a

LEFT *Colonial Schoolroom* by Charles Courtney Curran, 1900.

Image courtesy Alamy

proper education in the Declaration must begin by unsettling one's familiarity. It necessitates a reconsideration of our deepest assumptions about life and political reality.

This is immediately apparent in the classroom. When I ask students what Jefferson intended by “the pursuit of happiness,” they confidently respond: the freedom to decide what makes you happy. The more philosophically inclined suggest, in the same spirit, that government must remain agnostic about the *summum bonum*, or

The pursuit of happiness is not a license for instant gratification, but the right to practice human flourishing.

highest good. In other words, contemporary readers assume that Jefferson enshrined a right to subjective satisfaction—the idea that liberty guarantees personal preference under the banner of happiness.

Yet, this interpretation collapses upon further inspection. For one, the Declaration does not promise happiness itself, but only the *pursuit* of it, and that distinction is meaningful. As Arthur Schlesinger noted, the word “pursuit” originally meant something closer

to vocation or occupation than to subjective seeking. We retain this connotation today when we say that we are pursuing law or medicine. No one who makes such a claim means they are seeking an abstract emotional state; they mean that they are submitting themselves to a demanding course of study, discipline, and practice ordered toward a particular way of life.

Understood in this light, the pursuit of happiness is not a license for instant gratification, but *the right to practice human flourishing*. Happiness is therefore not reducible to sentiment or preference, but grounded in the human capacity for reason, effort, and virtue. It is no accident that Jefferson's reported list of sources for the Declaration included not just Cicero, Locke, and Sidney, but Aristotle, whose concept of *eudaimonia* links happiness to the cultivation of virtue and the pursuit of human excellence.

Seen this way, the liberty promised in the Declaration is not untethered or ethereal, but bound to a particular understanding of law and self-government. Yet, readers often fixate on the Declaration's lofty opening paragraphs, whose abstract truths speak to our native penchant for liberty, equality, and rights. From this perspective, it's hard to contextualize the core of the Declaration—the “long train of abuses” —

which agonizingly enumerates the particular legal violations of the crown and parliament.

Students do not know what to make of this section, except perhaps to read it as a modern catalogue of grievances or legal oppression. To the contrary, this enumeration of abuses reveals a deep respect for law and a disdain for its corruption. What strikes the students is just how stubbornly procedural are the charges: the obstruction of justice, the revocation of the inherited rights of Englishmen, and the erosion of longstanding self-rule. The Founders understood that a people's liberty rests not merely on breaking the chains of political power, but in establishing and sustaining the moral and legal conditions necessary for self-rule. Self-government, in other words, presumes the governance of the self.

The moral claims of the Declaration are buttressed by its striking metaphysical claims. It appeals to “the Laws of Nature and Nature's God,” the “Creator,” the “Supreme Judge of the World,” and “divine Providence”—all of which anchor our individual rights beyond the political. In other words, rights are not conferred by governments, they are grounded in a moral reality antecedent to political authority. It follows from this that the government rests upon the consent of the governed and is legitimate only when it protects and secures one's natural rights. When a government repeatedly violates that contract, the right of revolution follows not as an act of passion—as in the French Revolution—but rather as the sober conclusion of an inexorable moral logic.

This morally serious way of reading the Declaration was already under assault by the early 20th century, when President Calvin Coolidge gave an address commemorating the 150th Anniversary of the Declaration. He warned them—and by extension us—of the ever-present tendency of viewing the Declaration as a relic of its time rather than a statement of ultimate truth. “About the Declaration,” he argued, “there is a finality that is exceedingly restful.” If all men are created equal, if they are endowed with inalienable rights, and if governments derive their just powers from consent, then no progress can move beyond these propositions—only away from them. Regress may be possible, but progress is not. One could deny these truths, Coolidge argued, but what one could not do is improve upon them. In his reading, what made the Fourth of July momentous was not the creation of a new nation, but rather the creation of a nation *on new and enduring principles*.

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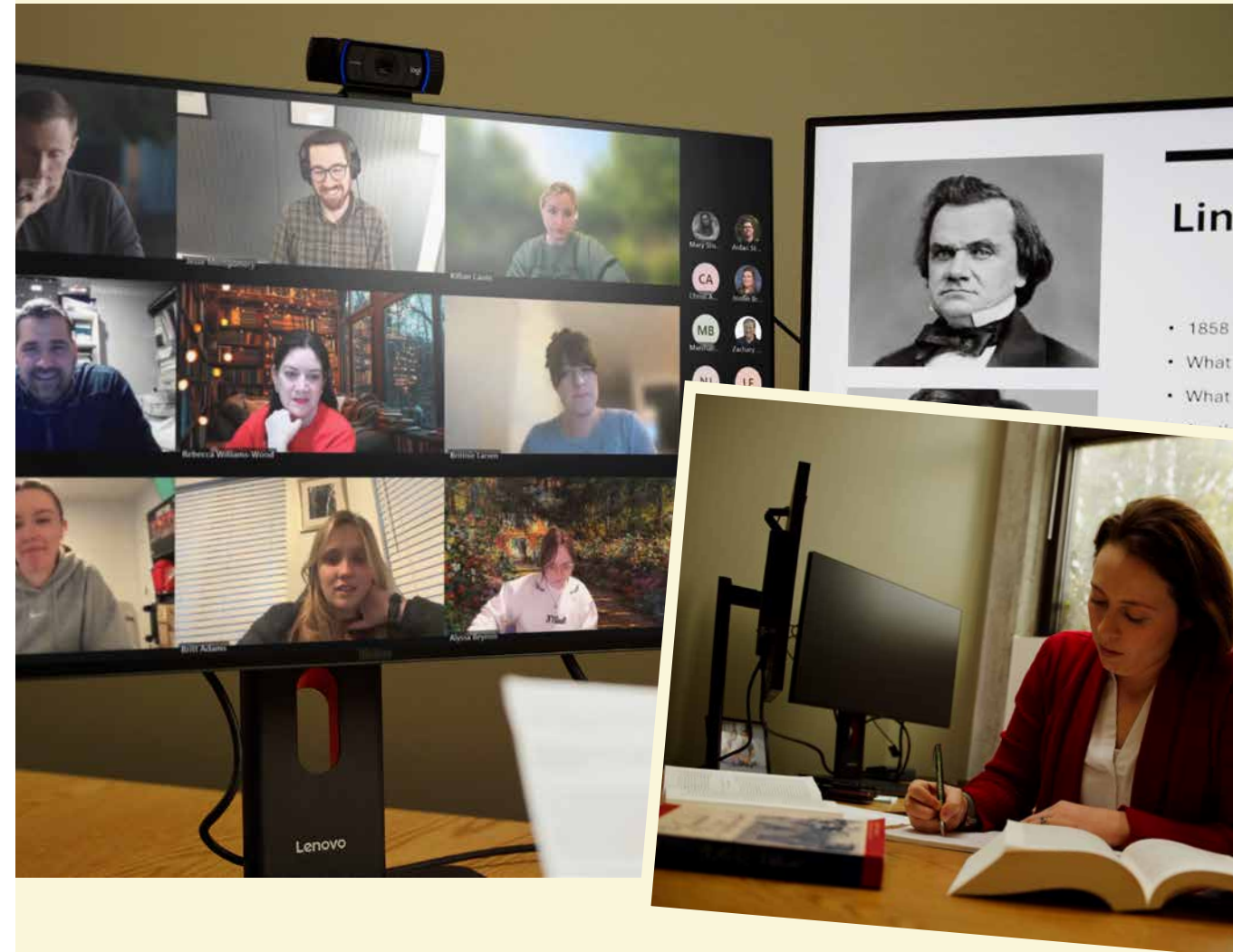
The Declaration's final lesson, and perhaps the one most foreign to modern readers, is that liberty is inseparable from duty. After asserting principles, enumerating legal violations, and justifying their claim to independence, the signers bind themselves with a solemn pledge: "with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, fortunes, and our sacred Honors." This is not a rhetorical flourish. It is a deliberate moral conclusion. While beginning with rights, the Declaration ends with duties. The above phrase is in fact an intentional callback to "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness," and it intends to demonstrate that rights and duties are two sides of the same coin. The very rights we claim are secured by our collective willingness to sacrifice our most cherished possessions. Those rights we so cherish rest upon a willingness to defend them—and sometimes at great cost.

For students, this reading can be disquieting. The Declaration does not ask for sentimental reverence or emotional endorsement, it asks for judgment and moral commitment. It invites readers to weigh its claims and decide whether they are universally and finally true—and whether we are willing to live under the obligations those claims impose. In this way, the Declaration treats citizens not merely as entitled rights-bearers, but as moral agents capable of self-government. To teach the Declaration well, then, is not a matter of mere recitation, but of moral formation.

If the words that changed the course of the world are to endure, they must be continually experienced as arguments—and as challenges to our complacency. Are we willing, like that generation 250 years ago, to meet the Declaration with the moral seriousness and sense of duty it demands? Are we willing to defend its principles against the complacent assumption that they have been rendered obsolete by time? If so, may we too pledge that which is dear to us—our lives, fortunes, and our honor—in order to secure once again the conditions of equal liberty and self-government for all.



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LUCAS E. MOREL

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

SPOKESMAN FOR THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

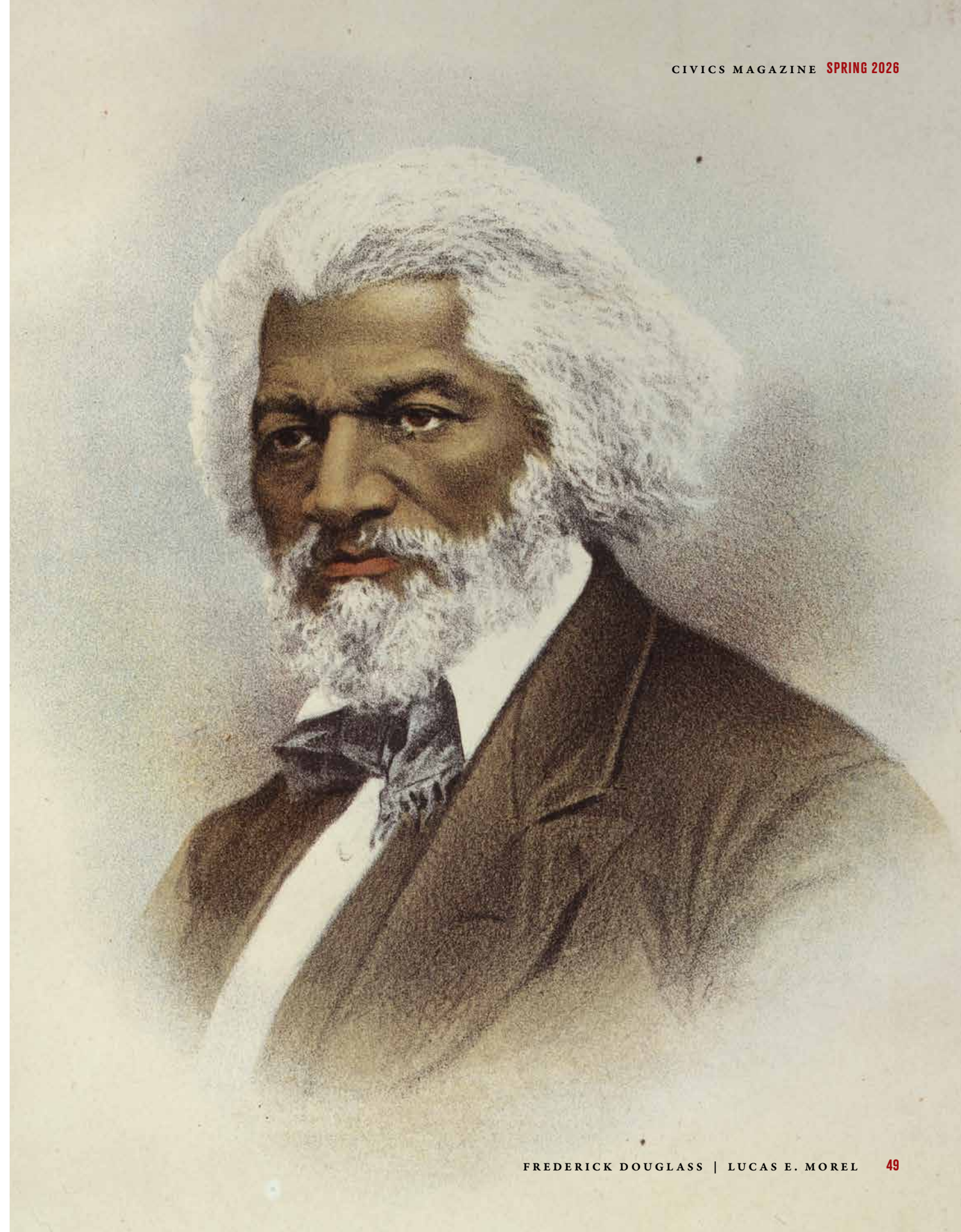
In his most famous speech, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” Frederick Douglass called America’s Independence Day “the first great fact” in the nation’s history. Its greatness was not simply the intention to become an independent nation, but more importantly the articulation of “the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice” contained in the Declaration of Independence. Douglass believed those principles were “the very ringbolt in the chain” of the “yet undeveloped destiny” of the young American republic.

Douglass tied his hopes for American progress and prosperity to “the great principles of justice and freedom” found in the Declaration of Independence. He called its “eternal principles” the “saving principles” of the nation. Because they were universal and timeless, they could serve as sure guides for the major reform efforts of his day. None was more urgent than the cause of abolition.

For most Americans, slavery was a clear contradiction of the self-evident truths of the Declaration. However, some Americans justified the peculiar institution

RIGHT *Frederick Douglass*, anonymous artist

Image courtesy Artvee



by arguing that slavery was a “positive good” for both the legal master and slave. Douglass thought this manifestly absurd: “There is not a man beneath the canopy of heaven, that does not know that slavery is wrong *for him*.” In countless speeches and editorials, he appealed to this underlying Golden Rule of American justice to direct public opinion towards the abolition of slavery and the equal rights of citizenship.

Douglass tied his hopes for American progress and prosperity to “the great principles of justice and freedom” found in the Declaration of Independence.

When the Civil War eventually produced an opportunity to free those enslaved in rebel-held states, Douglass declared that Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation would “give a fuller meaning to the Declaration of Independence, and put peace forever between the conscience and patriotism of the people.” He noted that “Mr. Lincoln has dared to apply the old truth of human liberty to this time. He has dared to declare the truth of the Declaration of Independence.”

Although Lincoln justified his Emancipation Proclamation as “an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity,” Douglass emphasized that it was “a grand moral necessity.” In his mind, the war for Union had to become a war for liberation to fulfill the promise of the Declaration.

As important as the principles of the Declaration were to justifying war-time emancipation, Douglass insisted on their relevance to peace-time security for civil and political rights. Prior to the Civil War, when Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas asserted that “popular sovereignty” empowered local white settlers to legalize slavery in the territories of Kansas and Nebraska, Douglass pronounced this a contradiction in terms. To grant “authority to enslave men” was “a hell black denial of popular sovereignty itself.” He reminded his fellow citizens that the “only intelligible principle on which popular sovereignty is founded, is found in the Declaration of American Independence.” After quoting the Declaration’s equality principle, Douglass added, “The right of each man to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, is the basis of all social and political right.” During and after the Civil War, he would continue to draw from “the great truths laid down by the fathers.”

Foremost among the rights the freedmen and freedwomen would need was the vote. A few days before Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation, Douglass

forecasted that “the slave having ceased to be the abject slave of a single master, his enemies will endeavor to make him the slave of society at large.” Within days of Lincoln’s assassination, Douglass wrote, “Without the ballot, freedom for the negro in the slave States will be but little better than a name.”

He also pointed out that “where universal suffrage is the rule, where that is the fundamental idea of the Government, to rule us out is to make us an exception, to brand us with the stigma of inferiority, and to invite to our heads the missiles of those about us.” Black Americans needed the vote not only to protect themselves from the hostility of their former oppressors in the South but also to inform public opinion of their equal status as American citizens. To deny them the franchise would reinforce the myth of white supremacy that undergirded American slavery, further delaying their full inclusion into the mainstream of American social and civic life.

Like all the great statesmen in American history, Douglass was a consummate practitioner of civic education. He believed that nothing was more needful before, during, and after the Civil War than to disabuse the public of its racial bigotry. Central to Douglass’s mission was to get white Americans “to trust the operation of their own principles,” and thereby “hasten the day when the principles of liberty and humanity expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States shall be the law and the practice of every section, and of all the people of this great country without regard to race, sex, color or religion.”

Like all the great statesmen in American history, Douglass was a consummate practitioner of civic education.

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JUDGE DOUGLAS H. GINSBURG

THE DECLARATION HEARD ‘ROUND THE WORLD

In 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote “Concord Hymn,” the poem in which he famously referred to the 1775 battle at Old North Bridge in Concord, Massachusetts, as “the shot heard round the world” because it initiated what would become the eight-year American Revolutionary War against Britain. Even more widely heard around the world was the Declaration of Independence that followed on July 4, 1776. The men who signed the Declaration could not have dreamed of the influence it would have in the founding documents of more than 100 countries, from Haiti in 1804 to Eritrea in 1993.

Many of these descendants of our Declaration invoke or refer to the “self-evident” truths “that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Perhaps the best-known example is the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789), which declares that “Men are born, and always continue, free and equal in respect of their rights,” which are “natural, imprescriptible, and inalienable.” The similarity is no accident. Thomas Jefferson wrote the first draft of our Declaration and, as our ambassador to France, was at the elbow of the Marquis de Lafayette when he wrote the first draft of the French counterpart.

LEFT *Washington and Lafayette at Mount Vernon, 1784 (The Home of Washington after the War)* by Thomas Pritchard Rossiter and Louis Remy Mignot.

Image courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art

More surprising is the Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, proclaimed by Ho Chi Minh on September 2, 1945, on the day that Japan signed the Instrument of Surrender aboard the USS Missouri. Ho's declaration quoted verbatim the passages set out above from both the American and French declarations. But Ho had by then long been a committed communist, so it is sensible to think of his declaration not as having been influenced by those predecessors but rather as showing that Ho correctly understood the appeal that the concepts of liberty and equality would have to the Vietnamese people. Indeed, it is the aspirations of people everywhere for liberty and equality that have animated scores of revolutions since 1776.

Another feature of our Declaration that has been replicated is the list of 27 grievances our Founders had against the British Crown and Parliament. They listed those grievances, they said, because "a decent Respect to the Opinions of Mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the Separation." Vietnam's declaration similarly accuses France of political oppression, economic exploitation, and social degradation in a myriad of ways. The Declaration of Independence of Brazil (1822) follows suit, addressing the King of Portugal at length about the abuses imposed by "the Brazilian government put in place by Your Majesty," many of which had to do with the practice of slavery.

The Czech Declaration of Independence (1918), known as the Washington Declaration because it was drafted there, duly recites a list of grievances against the Habsburgs, whose Austro-Hungaria Empire, of which Czech and Slovak lands had been a part for 400 years, was collapsing. President Woodrow Wilson had demanded that its peoples be able to determine their own futures. The Declaration expressly appeals to Wilson by reciting, "We accept the American principles as laid down by President Wilson [in his Fourteen Points for the post war era]: the principles of liberated mankind, of the actual equality of nations, and of governments deriving all their just power from the consent of the governed," the last clause, of course, being a direct quotation of the American Declaration.

The Czech's express appeal for American support also had its counterpart in the implicit appeal in our Declaration for the support of other nations phrased as "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind." The colonists themselves did not need to be reminded of their own grievances; they had been at war with Britain for 14 months.

In 1776, Britain not only ruled the American colonies, it also "ruled the waves" worldwide. It therefore had many adversaries, including not only France but also Spain, Russia, Poland, and the Netherlands. Following the Battle of Saratoga in 1777, where Washington decisively defeated the British, all of them came to the aid of the incipient United States. In what may properly be viewed as a world war, Britain was supported only by Hesse, from which it rented mercenary soldiers, and by many Indian tribes in the colonies. France fought Britain not only at Savannah, Chesapeake Bay, and Yorktown but also in the West Indies, South America, India, Africa, and—together with Spain—at Gibraltar. Meanwhile, Russia cheered from the sidelines, refusing British pleas for support, and figuring that Britain's defeat might be advantageous to Russian interests in Alaska and on the West Coast.

In sum, our Declaration of Independence came into being in part as an appeal to other nations and thereafter served as a model for declaring the overthrow of governments and empires everywhere. It was invoked in the Bolivarian revolutions against Spain, the collapse of the Russian, German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman Empires at the end of World War I, the worldwide decolonization that followed World War II into the 1960s, and even the breakup of the Soviet Union into 15 nations in 1991.

Our Declaration introduced into practice a new way of conceiving government, as the guarantor, not the source, of the rights of mankind, dependent upon the consent of the governed. Its influence and its appeal spread around the world from the outset, making America the very symbol of liberty and equality even in excess of its reality.

Our Declaration introduced into practice a new way of conceiving government, as the guarantor, not the source, of the rights of mankind.

DOUGLAS H. GINSBURG is a senior judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. He is a law professor and member of the Jack Miller Center's National Civics Council.





ANDREW O'SHAUGHNESSY

THE COLONIES THAT *DIDN'T* DECLARE INDEPENDENCE

We can better understand the American Revolution from the perspective of the colonies that did not rebel within the rest of the British Empire.

The study of the colonies that did not rebel can tell us a great deal about what separated the 13 mainland colonies and why these colonies alone rebelled, why they alone declared independence. I like to describe the imperial history of the American Revolution as *Hamlet* without the prince. Instead of discussing the revolution in America, we can examine the revolution in the context of Britain's other colonies: Canada, the British Caribbean (Jamaica, Barbados, the Leeward and Windward Islands), Ireland, Gibraltar, the Channel Islands, India, and Senegal.

The imperial approach to American history was popular with the first professional academic historians of the colonial period, most notably Charles Andrews. The imperialist approach culminated with Laurence Henry Gipson's 15 volume *The*

LEFT *The Surrender of General Burgoyne at Saratoga, October 16* by John Trumbull, 1777.

Image courtesy Artvee

British Empire Before the American Revolution. Despite the title, Gipson and the other imperial historians of America never wrote on the American Revolution.

The imperial approach can help us understand the causes of the American Revolution and British policy before 1776. When viewed solely from the perspective of America, imperial policy seems disjointed and incoherent, but clear patterns emerge when we look at the policies throughout the empire. There were similar new initiatives elsewhere in the empire. These initiatives were motivated by a desire to reform the empire, to obtain a revenue from the colonies, to gain greater central control, to regulate colonial trade and to improve defenses. They paralleled

similar imperial policies by France and Spain in the 1760s and 1770s. They were the outgrowth of schemes that had been meditated since earlier in the century.

As was claimed by the Declaration of Independence, there did indeed seem to be a deliberate train of events, which if not aimed at deliberate tyranny, would undoubtedly have created a more authoritarian empire.

The need to implement them became more urgent with the French and Indian War. Britain was then confronted with the acquisition of greater territory, especially with Canada and Bengal in India. It had to absorb large numbers of people of different ethnicities and religions. The war also escalated the size of the national debt. In contrast to previous imperial policy, which was often implemented through royal prerogative, these new policies were increasingly

introduced by Parliament, such as the Stamp Act. This aimed to give them greater legitimacy and authority.

It is, though, striking that these policies were more numerous relating to America. As was claimed by the Declaration of Independence, there did indeed seem to be a deliberate train of events, which if not aimed at deliberate tyranny, would undoubtedly have created a more authoritarian empire and enabled the home government to bypass the elected legislatures to tax America. In the early 20th century, the imperial school of American history were dismissive of the provocations of the British. They argued that the taxes were light and therefore not tyrannical, but they ignored the constitutional implications. It is now clear that the causes of the revolution were as rooted in British as American History.

The imperial approach also offers a means to prioritize different explanations of the revolution by comparing the rebel colonies with the loyal colonies. Sam Adams and other patriots thought that their lead would be followed by other colonies in the British Empire. They were particularly hopeful for Canada. During the siege of Boston in 1775, George Washington committed troops to invade Canada under the leadership of Benedict Arnold and Richard Montgomery. They did not receive as much support as they had expected from the Canadians.

There was some sympathy for the revolution in all the colonies, but for the most part, their views mirrored those of the American Loyalists. They wanted as much autonomy as possible but within the British Empire. They did not believe that imperial policies were irreversible or that there was a state of tyranny.

The most interesting colonies for comparative purposes were those of the British Caribbean and Ireland, and to a lesser extent, Bermuda and Nova Scotia. They each had elected legislatures like the thirteen mainland colonies. The Irish Parliament had declared independence of the British Parliament as early as 1640 and the Assembly of Barbados had denied the authority of the British Parliament in 1651. They subscribed to similar political ideas. The islands were especially similar to the southern colonies, enabling us to debate the role of slavery in the causes of the revolution.

These are few examples of how the imperial approach can contribute to our understanding of the revolution and the decision for independence. There are numerous other benefits, not least with an imperial focus on the global dimensions of the military actions which help explain why Britain lost the Revolutionary War.

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ANDREW D. CARICO

DON'T WAIT FOR COLLEGE TO TEACH THE DECLARATION

Teaching the Declaration of Independence offers a challenging yet exciting opportunity for K–12 teachers and students alike. Never had there been a declaration of independence in world history like the one announced in Philadelphia on July 4, 1776. The American Declaration instituted a new genre of political writing—one that has since been imitated by more than 100 countries. Yet teaching the Declaration does much more than introduce students to a new genre of writing.

John Adams famously argued that “children should be educated and instructed in the principles of freedom.” For Adams and virtually all the major Founding Fathers—including the Declaration’s principal author, Thomas Jefferson—the perpetuation of American independence was linked to teaching children the principles articulated in the Declaration of Independence.

LEFT *Norman Rockwell Visits a Country School* by Norman Rockwell for the *Saturday Evening Post*, 1946.

Image courtesy National Museum of American Illustration



I've had the privilege to see the Declaration taught successfully across grade levels and methodologies. I've watched as elementary students learned and memorized portions of the Declaration each day. Over time, even students in the early primary grades can memorize and recite the entire first two paragraphs. One key to such an exercise is slowing down and focusing on key vocabulary words and teaching them to students. Even if students cannot understand the meaning of every word, they are learning key words and can recite them all. Teachers can employ a variety of techniques, such as call-and-response, chants, or setting portions of the text to music to support this process. These exercises serve as an excellent way to begin the school day and cultivate an early affection for the Declaration. Ultimately, helping students think thoughtfully about their past can also help them look forward as informed citizens.

I once came across two fifth-grade students whispering in a hallway. Unsure if they were misbehaving, I approached them, only to discover that they were quietly practicing—with their teachers' encouragement—their recitation of the Declaration for an upcoming presentation before peers and parents. I was struck by the seriousness with which they approached the task, as well as by the pride they displayed upon accomplishing it.

Secondary students in grades 7–12 can—and should—engage the meaning and philosophy of the Declaration at a deeper level. Two particularly effective methods for teaching older students are seminars and simulations. Teachers must resist the temptation to rely heavily on secondary literature or to impose their own assumptions on the text. Instead, they should read the Declaration aloud with students and ask careful, probing questions in a seminar-style setting. We should seek to understand great authors and great texts—such as the Declaration—on their own terms before attempting to understand them better or differently.

I have taught students who changed their understanding of the Declaration through such an approach. Asking students as a group questions such as “What does it mean that all men are ‘created equal,’ and what is a ‘self-evident truth’?” can spark transformative discussions. I recall when one eleventh-grade student who originally believed humans were not equal changed her opinion. In conversation with her peers, she thoughtfully considered the distinction between the equality of all humans based on natural rights and the inequality humans have based on secondary differences (height, color, intellect, etc.). Seminar discussions allow

students to encounter the Declaration almost as if for the first time, assessing its meaning, logic, and key terms for themselves.

Simulations likewise provide a powerful way to engage historical events or documents after they have been studied. Teachers and students can re-create the Second Continental Congress, with students assuming the roles of key figures. In such a simulation, what kind of declaration might students draft, given what the Founders themselves read and studied? As I have learned from leading such simulations, class should conclude with a thoughtful debrief, during which students discuss and reflect on what they learned through the experience.

Finally, it is just as important for teachers to learn the Declaration as it is for their students. How can teachers teach what they themselves do not know? The task of teachers should be both remembrance and rededication to the principles of the Declaration and to teaching those principles to emerging citizens. In doing so, the Declaration can serve—in the words of Abraham Lincoln—as an “electric cord” that connects students to their noble past and “links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving man together.”

The Declaration was written, as it states, for a “candid world”—an audience willing to judge fairly and impartially. Likewise, to perpetuate the principles of the American Founding, teachers and students should approach the document candidly, thoughtfully, and joyfully. After all, there is both a great challenge and a great joy in learning our founding principles and embracing our shared responsibility to preserve them for another 250 years.

ANDREW D. CARICO serves as the Jack Miller Center's Senior Fellow for K-12 Civic Education and was a 2014 Jack Miller Fellow. He is also the Coordinator for the American Classical Lyceum at John Adams Academy, a classical charter school.



The task of teachers should be both remembrance and rededication to the principles of the Declaration and to teaching those principles to emerging citizens.

MEET THE TEACHING AMERICA250 AWARD WINNERS

In 2026, the Jack Miller Center launched an exciting new national awards program, selecting 51 teachers from across the country to receive \$5,000 grants to bring the Declaration of Independence and America’s founding story to life in their classrooms. From field trips to historic sites, to original art projects, to immersive debates and creative performances, these teachers are finding inspired and unexpected ways to connect their students with the ideas that shaped a nation. Read on to discover how this remarkable cohort is reimagining civic education from the ground up. This nationwide teaching program was made possible through the generous support of Carnegie Corporation of New York.

ALABAMA: REBECCA TOMASO
Students will combine the principles of the Declaration to essential soft skills, such as signing their name, in a school-wide “John Hancock Day” celebration, in order to define their roles as both a citizens and young professionals in a historical and practical context.

ALASKA: DONICA NASH
Through a trip to Alaska’s State Capitol in Juneau, students will

observe the founding core principles of American democracy at work by sitting in on a live legislative session.

ARIZONA: KIM ALVIN DE LARA
Students will explore the Declaration and its vital scientific and historical connections with the printing press through the creation of their own “Freedom Message Machines.”

ARKANSAS: CHERESE SMITH
Using a field trip to the Crystal Bridges Art Museum as inspiration, eighth grade students will engage with the ideas of civic duty and responsibility in the modern day by constructing their own personal “Declarations in Art.”

CALIFORNIA: LUCAS VIEIRA
Over the course of three days, students will plan a documentary project exploring the Declaration’s classical and religious influences through interactions with primary sources, local scholars, and field trips to the county seat in Ventura, the Huntington Library, and the Ronald Reagan Ranch.

COLORADO: BARBARA TAYLOR
Sixth grade and eighth grade students will learn about the connection between the values of the Declaration and the fight for Colorado statehood through hands-on analysis of 50 primary sources held by the History Colorado Center in Denver focused on Colorado’s role in the preservation and expansion of the nation.

CONNECTICUT: ERICA ZAMSKY HUNT
Through a trip along Boston’s “Freedom Trail,” a group of multilingual learning students will have the chance to explore a city at the center of the fight for independence,

before sharing their experiences to their families and community.

DELAWARE: ELIZABETH BEAR
After a visit to Independence Hall in Philadelphia, students will create auditory and visual artistic representations of the Declaration’s continual impact from its signing on July 4th, 1776 to the present day.

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA: DAETRELLE JONES-TAYLOR
Following a discussion and special guest lecture on the Declaration and its modern day applications, students will express their understanding of the democratic principles of the Declaration through the creation of a public “Voices of Independence” art gallery.

FLORIDA: BRETT SWAN
High school students and faculty will undergo training on civic education and the founding principles through a combination of guest lectures and field trips to places such as the University of Tampa and the Clearwater Historical Society, culminating in a community-wide “civics workshop” for elementary school students.

GEORGIA: CHELSEA FALK-ORR
Students will research, write first-person dialogues, design digital

TEACHING AMERICA250 AWARD WINNERS CONTINUED

exhibits, and act as key figures from the American Revolution for public “Living History Museums,” before writing their own “Modern Declarations” linking their lives to the lives of those they researched.

HAWAII: CHAYANEE BROOKS

High school students will conduct a documentary project asking “How have the principles of the Declaration been interpreted, challenged, and upheld by the people of Hawai‘i?” in an attempt to showcase how the enduring struggle for rights in Hawai‘i represents a continuation of the revolutionary spirit found within the Declaration.

IDAHO: MARK OLSEN

Students will engage with city council members, local tribal leaders, military members, and scholars from the National Constitution Center in a discussion about the values and legacy of the American experiment, before venturing to Yellowstone National Park for an overnight trip, showcasing how America’s past 250 years are only a small chapter of America’s natural and Native American history.

ILLINOIS: LUCAS ROJAS

Students will create a Wall of Honor recognizing military service members through an extensive interview, biography writing, and a

curation project, connecting current students to former students who served to protect and defend the values embedded in the Declaration.

INDIANA: SEAN SCOTT

Over a two-week period, students will explore the connection between Lincoln and the Declaration through the study of primary sources like Lincoln’s “Lyceum Address” and field trips to sites such as the Lincoln Presidential Library, before creating oral history exhibits highlighting the impact of the Declaration on Lincoln’s life for public viewing.

IOWA: KELLY STEFFEN

The America 250 History Club will offer a unique approach for students to study the Declaration through discussions about its impact on different pieces of American history during each meeting, culminating in students writing their own “revised” Declarations to share with their community in an effort to address the successes and shortcomings of the document.

KANSAS: THOMAS FULBRIGHT

The story of how Kansas’ statehood is tied to the Declaration will be told through a traveling banner exhibit brought to schools across the state, giving thousands of Kansas students the chance

“The only new thing in the world is the history you do not know.” —HARRY S. TRUMAN

to engage with the Declaration’s principles and their state’s history.

KENTUCKY: JENNIFER BROWN

Over the course of five months, fifth grade students will explore primary sources and visit Kentucky historical sites linked to the American Revolution, like Fort Boonesborough and Fort Harrod, before conducting an oral history project exploring the significance of the principles of liberty, equality, and civic responsibility in the lives of their community members.

LOUISIANA: CATHERINE WOMBLE

Students from each grade level at the school will participate in a project titled “Voices of Liberty: The Living Declaration,” where they will develop an audio-visual series, a public art showcase, and a living museum to connect their surrounding community with the story and values of the Declaration.

MAINE: CELIA MAWHINNEY

During a field trip to the Maine State Museum, students will engage with the story of the Declaration in Maine by exploring how Mainers past and present have pursued their

own, everchanging visions of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

MARYLAND: MELANEY SÁNCHEZ

Students will interact with public servants from each branch of government and visit the memorials of Washington, D.C. ahead of a “Liberty and Legacy Night,” in which students will reflect on their experiences through a combination of research and art.

MASSACHUSETTS: WILL DONOVAN

Through field trips to the Massachusetts Historical Society and the Adams’ National Historic Park, students will have hands-on interactions with primary sources led by guest speakers, culminating in the production of multiple “breaking news” segments highlighting the relevance of the Declaration during specific points in American history.

MICHIGAN: SERETTA DAVIS

Students will develop a “Freedom Through Art and Story” project to connect the ideals of the Declaration to their own personal

TEACHING AMERICA250 AWARD WINNERS CONTINUED

identities, cultures, and communities, and will showcase their work in a community-wide art show.

 **MINNESOTA: MEGAN THOMPSON**

Through the Jack Miller Center America250 Essay Contest, high school students will submit essays highlighting one ideal from the Declaration, why that ideal was important to the Founders, and how that ideal still holds true in their own lives.

 **MISSISSIPPI: MICHELLE RAFACH**

Through an “American History Festival,” students will create living exhibits spanning seven key eras in U.S. history by acting as or presenting on historically important individuals, documents, and events for a public audience.

 **MISSOURI: CHARLES YELDHAM**

Eleventh grade students will explore a proposed “St. Louis Freedom Trail” with visits to the Washington University of St. Louis Archives, the St. Louis Art Museum, and the Missouri History Museum to highlight the history of St. Louis as it relates to the values within the Declaration and the American identity as a whole.

 **MONTANA: TAYLOR OLSEN**

“The Founding Documents: Student Civic Leadership Summit” will

bring students from across Montana together to explore the Declaration and discuss how to apply its ideals to the civic responsibilities of today.

 **NEBRASKA: KENDRA SULLIVAN**

Students across grades K–8 will participate in an art show (K–3), essay contest (4–6), or community-wide mural project (7–8) centered around the Declaration’s history and ideals, serving as a catalyst to inspire their own parents to participate in other civic activities offered by the school like the Declaration of Independence Book Club and Feast of Reason Dinner Party.

 **NEVADA: ADAM LONDON**

Students will design, print, and distribute packs of “Trading History: Founding Fathers Trading Cards” across their school’s student body of 750 students, generating discussion and engagement with America 250 and the key figures who have shaped our nation.

 **NEW HAMPSHIRE: DONNA MORIN**

Students will discuss the ideas behind the American Revolution and take a field trip to walk along Boston’s Freedom Trail, culminating in a two-day “Revolutionary Party” for students to openly discuss their experience and interpretation of the Declaration.

 **NEW JERSEY: CARLOS MIRANDA**

Following a visit to Philadelphia’s Independence Hall, the Liberty Bell, and other key sites, students will develop a planetarium show highlighting the story of the Declaration through recorded footage taken during the field trip, with the goal of sharing the show not only across their community, but also with other planetariums nationwide.

 **NEW MEXICO: RAYMOND LOPEZ**

Students will be tasked with writing, illustrating, and publishing a children’s book explaining the ideas of the Declaration, titled “Our Story of Freedom,” with the project culminating in a live reading to the elementary school students in their community.

 **NEW YORK: LAUREN GOEPFERT**

Students will visit Philadelphia’s National Constitution Center, Independence Hall, and Museum of the American Revolution to collect video and audio recordings to use in a Public Service Announcement highlighting the ideals of the Declaration and the American Revolution ahead of the 250th.

 **NORTH CAROLINA: COLIN RICHARDSON**

Through the “Illuminating Ideals” project, students will conduct oral

history interviews, primary source analysis, and field trips to the NC State Archive and NC Museum of Art before creating art projects highlighting the ideals of the Declaration as they relate to the lives of North Carolinians today.

 **NORTH DAKOTA: MELISSA UETZ**

Special education students will explore what it would have been like to live in colonial America in 1776 through reading about and enjoying colonial-era food and crafts during a “Birthday Party for America,” allowing these students to engage with the values, key individuals, and way of American life at the time of independence.

 **OHIO: ASHLEY FRALEY**

Through a fine arts festival titled “250 Years of US,” students will showcase the American experience through music, poetry, and painting, as well as listen to a keynote speaker with a background in public service.

 **OKLAHOMA: TRACY ISBILL**

Following research into the Founders and their principles, students will be selected to play American Founding figures in a live theater re-creation of the debates that took place in the Second Continental Congress for a public audience.

TEACHING AMERICA250 AWARD WINNERS CONTINUED

 **OREGON: ANDY HAUGEN**

Through a semester-long course titled “History of the American West,” eleventh and twelfth grade students will discuss primary sources and go on field trips to sites such as Fort Clatsop and the Columbia Maritime Museum to develop an understanding of how the values found in the Declaration have been interpreted and debated during American expansion westward.

 **PENNSYLVANIA: JOHN CORRIGAN**

Students will simulate the debates of the Second Continental Congress, acting as delegates from the thirteen colonies, and will gain an understanding of these debates through field trips through Center City Philadelphia, musical displays, and the restoration of the Signers’ Walkway.

 **RHODE ISLAND: CHRISTINE COSTA**

Students will participate in a number of events linking themselves to the actions of colonists 250 years ago, including a reading of the Declaration outside Newport’s Colony House, a planting of a Liberty Tree, and a trip to the Rhode Island Supreme Court and State Archives.

 **SOUTH CAROLINA: TONYA MCCULLOUGH**

By visiting four key sites that highlight South Carolina’s role in the American Revolution, such as

the Cowpens National Battlefield and the Old Exchange and Provost Dungeon, students will get firsthand experience and learn about the defense of the Declaration’s values.

 **SOUTH DAKOTA: AMBER STOUT**

In a project titled “Living History—The Declaration of Independence Experience,” third grade students will research historical figures of the Revolutionary Era before reenacting these individuals in a “living wax museum” open to the public.

 **TENNESSEE: SCOTT JOHNSON**

Through a field trip to the Tennessee Supreme Court Building and the Hermitage, students will explore how civil rights and the values of the Declaration have been fought for and defended within Tennessee and by Tennesseans.

 **TEXAS: ASHLEE HAPPY**

“Voices of 1776: A Night at the Revolution Museum” will serve as a community display of revolutionary-era society, with students creating “talking portraits” consisting of a pre-recorded video message where students act as and share the stories of individuals who lived during the American Revolution.

 **UTAH: PAYTON ASHBY**

Students will participate in the designing and painting of a

community mural portraying how the Declaration’s story and values continue through lived experience and community engagement, ahead of a community-wide unveiling in May.

 **VERMONT: SCOTT DAVENPORT**

Students will create a “Living Freedom Trail” for the community of Brattleboro by using photos from a field trip to Boston’s Freedom Trail to construct a diorama highlighting the history and importance of historical sites along the route in Boston.

 **VIRGINIA: ESSIE JONES**

Students will develop an understanding of the history, rhetoric, visual culture, and modern preservation attempts of the Declaration through in-class discussion and field trips to the National Archives and the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, in preparation for a public assembly titled “Echoes of Independence,” highlighting student research and art.

 **WASHINGTON: LUCAS CLAUSSEN**

Students will explore Olympia’s local historical sites and centers of local government while connecting them to primary sources, like the Declaration and Treaty of Medicine Creek, showcasing the prevalence of the Declaration’s core principles and values in the story of Washington’s statehood.

 **WEST VIRGINIA: ADENA BARNETTE-MILLER**

Students will travel to West Virginia Independence Hall to compare the Declaration of Independence to the Declaration of Rights of the People of Virginia, and how the formation of the United States in 1776 compares to the creation of West Virginia in 1861 during the dawn of the Civil War.

 **WISCONSIN: MICHAEL KWAS**

Middle and high school students will compete in a “Declaration Decathlon,” a series of 10 activities centered around close reading and interpretation of the Declaration, participation in lectures and roundtable discussions, and engagement in a summer reading program about the Declaration.

 **WYOMING: BRYCE MITTELSTADT**

Students will research how the ideals of the Declaration have held a continuing impact and legacy through an analysis of key historical events both in Wyoming and in the U.S. as a whole, culminating in a presentation at the state capitol to share their findings and recommendations for how to continue the Declaration’s legacy with state leaders.

ZACHARY K. GERMAN

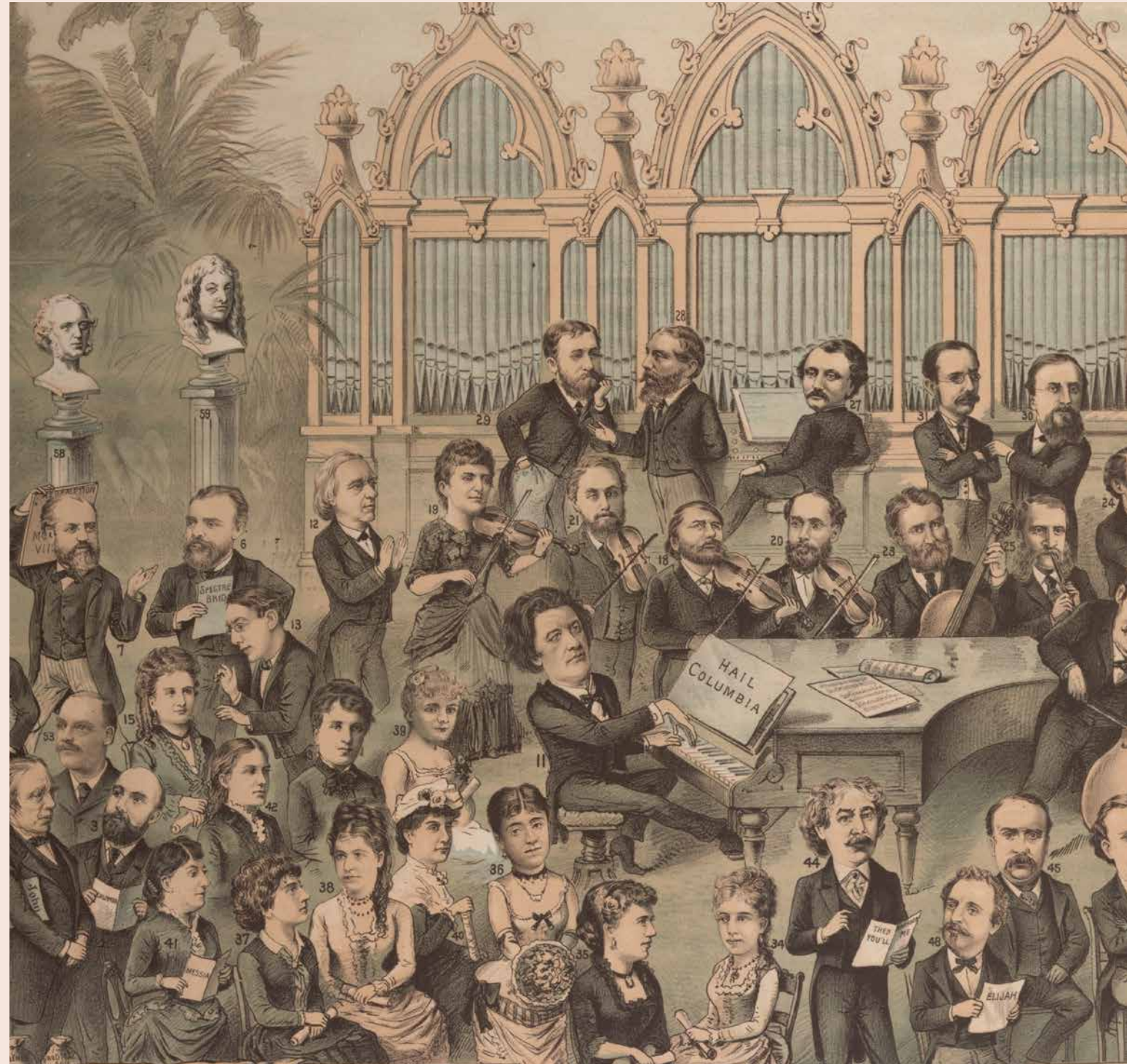
CIVICS IN SONG AND DANCE

Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton: An American Musical* celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2025. Most elementary-aged students today have thus grown up with the musical always existing (from their perspective), and many current college students may count it among the influences forming their understanding of the American founding, since they were in elementary or middle school when the musical debuted. As we celebrate America's 250 birthday, *Hamilton* remains a cultural resource for cultivating student reflection on the meaning and significance of America's founding principles.

Since Alexander Hamilton, not Thomas Jefferson, is the play's protagonist, the authorship and signing of the Declaration are not central to Miranda's storyline. We might point out to our students the consequences of such narrative choices, in both art and history. Even so, the Declaration's ideals of liberty and equality underlie much of Miranda's story. Two songs contain direct quotations from the Declaration, both of which prompt consideration of the original meaning of the Declaration and its place in the American civic tradition. First, in "The Schuyler Sisters," during

RIGHT *Our National Music* by Geo. H. Walker & Co., 1888.

Image courtesy Artvee



We might ask our students: Was the Declaration itself guilty of a substantive shortcoming in your judgment, or did the American people, instead, take time to carry out its principles in practice?

the sequel!” This line invites questions about the relationship between the meaning of America’s founding principles and political practices at the time. That theme is a thread woven throughout the musical, mostly with respect to race and slavery. We might ask our students: Was the Declaration itself guilty of a substantive shortcoming in your judgment, or did the American people, instead, take time to carry out its principles in practice?

Angelica’s statement sounds as though she may be answering the first question in the affirmative, although her remark might be interpreted in more than one way. It is worth noting, at least, that the Schuyler sisters express, in unison, that they consider themselves fortunate to be alive in an age when historic events are taking place, the Declaration prominent among them. As the song comes to a close, the Declaration, the historic significance of the revolutionary moment, and the good fortune of living during that period are tied together again.

Perhaps, then, Angelica’s statement pushes us towards acknowledging the noble character of the Declaration’s principles, their incomplete fulfillment at the time of the founding, and their role in serving as aspirations for American civic life throughout American history. In other words, we can understand Angelica as calling for a fuller application of American principles. That is how we may also understand the 1848 *Declaration of Sentiments*, with its close modeling of the Declaration and its affirmation that “all men and women are created equal.” In fact, Miranda’s Angelica seems to be a literary foreshadowing of the *Declaration of Sentiments* in this way, or perhaps a stand-in for Abigail Adams, with her plea to “remember the ladies.”

the early stages of the Revolution, Angelica Schuyler connects the Declaration’s principles with the revolutionary effort. She claims the Declaration’s commitment to equality as her own, which serves to illustrate Jefferson’s account of the Declaration as “an expression of the American mind.”

After quoting the Declaration’s most famous line that “all men are created equal,” Angelica adds, “And when I meet Thomas Jefferson, I’m ’a compel him to include women in the

The Declaration is next quoted in “Cabinet Battle #1,” a debate between Jefferson and Hamilton over the establishment of a national bank. Jefferson begins his rap with the three unalienable rights enumerated in the Declaration. He contends that the Revolution was a struggle for those ideals. Although Jefferson is one of the play’s chief antagonists, he thereby gives voice to the thesis that the Revolution was fundamentally about the principles of the Declaration, and he exemplifies the role that those principles have played in subsequent American civic thought and discourse.

In response, Miranda’s Hamilton emphasizes the distinction between philosophical principles and the practical demands of politics, a tension that America’s greatest statesmen have recognized without either abandoning a commitment to principle or rejecting the necessity of prudence. He also can’t resist taking a swipe at Jefferson for quoting the Declaration while being a slaveowner, another time the musical calls attention to the gap between principle and practice. In this respect, Jefferson’s practices, not his invocation of the Declaration, seem to be the problem. But, we might ask our students, what should that mean for how we think about both the Declaration and Jefferson today?

The musical concludes with a final reflection on Alexander Hamilton’s legacy and on the nature of a legacy more generally. What will be the legacy of the musical itself? We may hope that it will be, in part, an ongoing inspiration and resource for young Americans to think more carefully about and to care more deeply about the principles of the Declaration.

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Perhaps we should acknowledge the noble character of the Declaration’s principles, their incomplete fulfillment at the time of the founding, and their role in serving as aspirations for American civic life throughout American history.

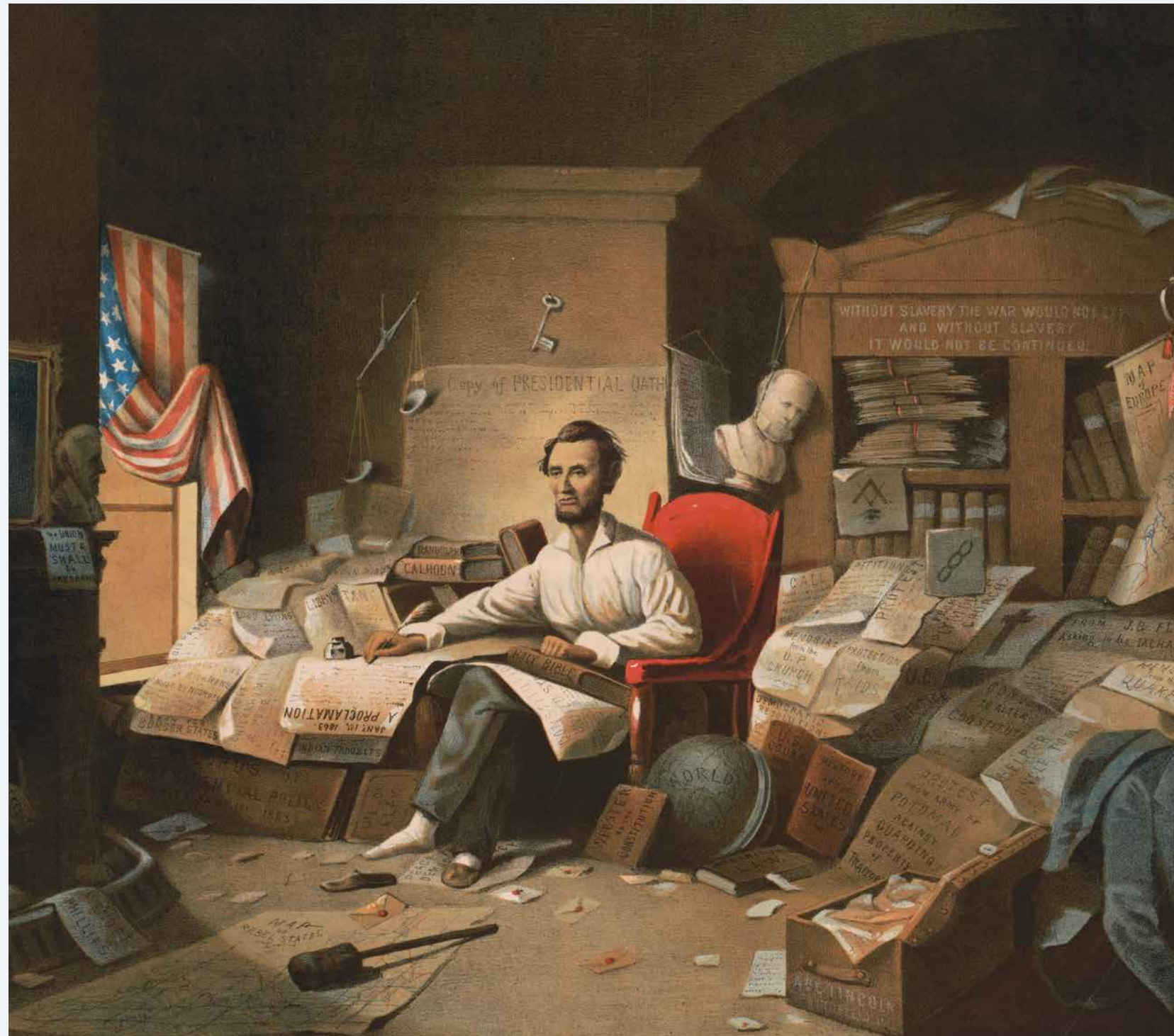
LEE J. STRANG

THE DECLARATION IN THE AMERICAN LEGAL TRADITION

The Declaration of Independence was the moment when the United States came into being, and it did so in a unique manner: justified by universal principles of political morality. It was by violating these principles, the Continental Congress argued, that the English monarch had lost their allegiance. Many of these same statesmen would become the Framers of the future government of the United States of America, as outlined in the Constitution.

RIGHT *President Lincoln, Writing the Proclamation of Freedom*
by David Gilmour Blythe, 1864.

Image courtesy Artvee



But it is important to recognize the difference between these two foundational documents. The Constitution details the federal government's powers, its relationship to the states and their relationship to each other, key rights of citizens, and constitutional principles that organized America's legal system. The Constitution is legally binding; it practically orders how American officials and citizens live well together. It is here that the two founding documents depart.

While crucial as the justification for independence, the Declaration of Independence is not constitutionally operative today; that is the Constitution's job. What the document did do was proclaim the colonies as independent from the rule of Great Britain. The men who signed it were fully prepared to defend the proclamation with action, and many Americans died for the ideas expressed within. It served as a profound expression of the colonist's desire for independence and the ability to decide their own rules for self-governance. All the same, it was not an expression of constitutional law as such.

To say that the Declaration is not constitutionally operative does not discount its central importance to the American constitutional tradition. Quite the contrary: the Declaration is essential to our constitutional tradition. Primarily, the Declaration serves as an expression of America's political principles. It

In both constitutional practice and legal academia, appeals to the Declaration show the continuing role of the Declaration's principles in our constitutional tradition.

proclaims the unalienable rights that belong to all people. Moreover, the Declaration also announces the right of citizens to reject a government that fails to secure the common good.

This is where the Declaration of Independence is most helpful, constitutionally speaking: outlining America's political principles. It was these principles that the Founders sought to implement in the Constitution. Thomas Jefferson suggested this when he wrote, "this was the object of the Declaration of Independence . . . it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion." President Abraham Lincoln likewise noted that the principle of American "liberty to all" traces back to the Declaration of Independence.

These principles persist today. In both constitutional practice and legal academia, appeals to the Declaration show the continuing role of the Declaration's principles in our constitutional tradition. Chief Justice John Roberts quoted the Declaration of Independence in the opinion for *SFFA v. Harvard*, both President Trump and President Biden employed its ideas to support their actions, and leading scholars like Professor Randy Barnett argue that the Declaration serves as the true founding document for the Nation.

Even though the Declaration is not constitutional law like the Constitution, it informs both the Constitution and Americans' political life.

The influence of Declaration's principles also extends beyond the national government to the states. Similar to the United States as a whole, states strongly enforce the rights of their citizens and the self-government by their peoples. For example, the first words in Ohio's Constitution mirror the Declaration's, declaring that "All men are, by nature, free and independent, and have certain inalienable rights." The state's highest court has even explored these similarities, noting that "language in Section 1, Article I of the Ohio Constitution, in many ways, mirrors the precatory words of the Declaration of Independence."

The legacy of the Declaration of Independence is as vitally important today as it was 250 years ago. Its principles persist in both national and state constitutionalism and illustrate what it means to be American. Even though the Declaration is not constitutional law like the Constitution, it informs both the Constitution and Americans' political life. Today, like 250 years ago, that identity holds power to shape a brighter future built on the Declaration's enduring principles.

LEE J. STRANG serves as the inaugural executive director of the Salmon P. Chase Center for Civics, Culture, and Society at The Ohio State University. He is a member of the Jack Miller Center's Academic Council.



JOHN HOOD

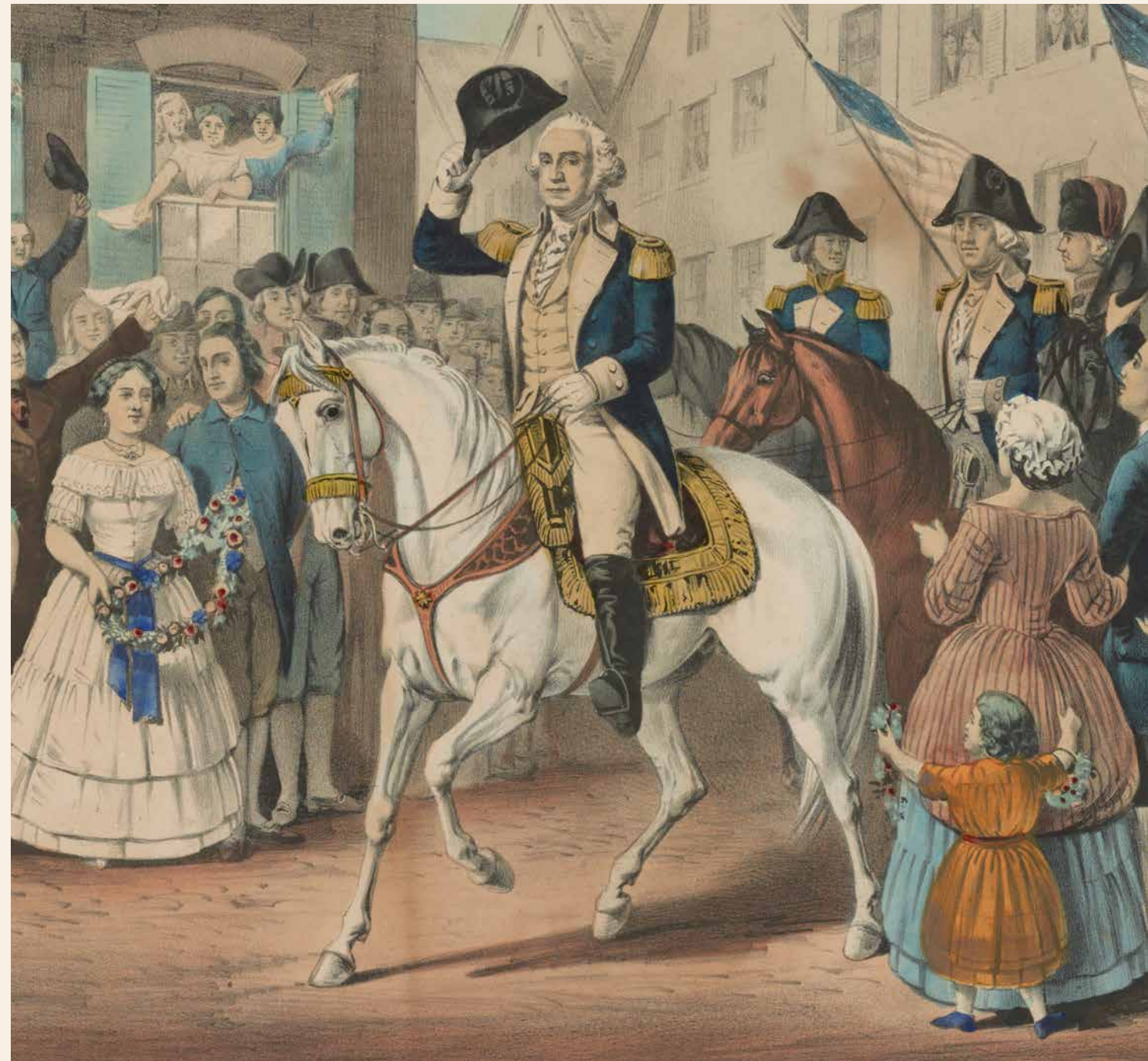
TRY NEW WAYS TO TELL AMERICA'S STORY

With the semiquincentennial of the Declaration of Independence rapidly approaching, I have good news and bad news to share. On the sunny side, most Americans still have a generally favorable view of the American experiment. A recent Cato Institute survey found that 92 percent of respondents—including 87 percent of those aged 18 to 29—agreed the Declaration of Independence has been “a force for good in the world,” with 84 percent also expressing a positive view of the U.S. Constitution and two-thirds saying they think the Founders would be disappointed with how far modern America has strayed from the country’s foundational principles.

The bad news? Polls also show that large swaths of Americans don’t actually know much about those principles. One 2025 survey found that most were unable to identify the freedoms of religion, assembly, petition, and the press as protected alongside freedom of speech in the First Amendment. More than two-thirds of Americans failed a basic civic-literacy quiz. As for the Declaration of Independence itself, when Cato asked respondents to identify the main reason 13 North American colonies revolted against British rule—to oppose taxation

RIGHT *Washington's Entry into New York, on the Evacuation of the City by the British, November 25, 1783* by Currier & Ives, 1857.

Image courtesy Artvee



without representation—most either supplied the wrong answer or none at all. Among young respondents, only 35 percent got the question right.

I don't think responsible citizenship requires Jeopardy-level knowledge of history and civics. Nor is it reasonable to insist every American share the same view of the Founders and their handiwork. But I do believe a healthy republic requires a critical mass of citizens with a firm grasp of its origins, institutions, and guiding principles. Without it, even meaningful *disagreement* becomes impossible.

This is an all-hands-on-deck problem. I favor more and better investment in civics education, in public events and memorials, and in engaging nonfiction such as the recent Ken Burns documentary on PBS. I also happen to think that engaging *fiction* has a role to play.

Humans aren't Vulcans or robots. We are storytelling creatures. Our progenitors imparted knowledge and built community by sharing tales around the fire. Our brains are wired to respond favorably to narrative. One 2015 study found that when sixth-graders read historical novels about Ancient Greece, their interest in the subject went up—as did their test scores. In another study, researchers set up an experiment. Some students were assigned to classrooms where they read novels about the Salem witch trials, slavery, and the American Revolution. Others were assigned to classrooms where they studied the same content from a textbook. The novel readers recalled *twice as much content* as the textbook readers.

Taking such findings to heart, I decided in 2020 to write a historical-fantasy series set in early America and aimed at teens and precocious tweens as well as adults. My first novel, *Mountain Folk*, was published the following year and set primarily during the Revolutionary War. Subsequent works in the Folklore Cycle include *Forest Folk* (2022), which depicts the War of 1812 and the beginnings of the abolitionist movement; *Water Folk* (2024), which depicts westward expansion, the Alamo, and the Mexican-American War; and three novelettes that tell other stories of early American history, settlement, and conflict.

What do I mean by historical *fantasy*? Well, real-life figures such as Daniel Boone, Alexander Hamilton, Davy Crockett, and Sojourner Truth are major characters in the Folklore Cycle. But so are elves, dwarves, mages, and monsters. I don't alter the basic facts of American history. Instead, I use fantastical elements to beckon my

readers and keep them engaged—as well as to help them remember key facts. For example, I depict General Washington's complicated attack on Germantown in 1777 and show, accurately, how he came close to victory before a thick fog caused the Americans to lose cohesion and fire on each other. In my version, though, the fog is magical, not natural.

As for the politics of the Revolution, I have a fairy character disobey his orders and aid the American cause. Put on trial for treason, he defends himself with extensive quotations from Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* while the prosecution quotes another historical document, *Plain Talk*, written by a Tory in response to *Common Sense*. And when Washington, Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, or other Founders speak in my books, I'm usually either using their recorded words verbatim or lightly rewriting them to fit the scene in question.

Among the thousands who've enjoyed my Folklore Cycle tales are readers as young as nine as well as parents, professionals, politicians, and even a few history professors! "Beyond the epic fantasy itself," wrote one newspaper columnist, "the best magic in *Mountain Folk* is the sorcery that will make early American history accessible to a wide swath of ages, tween to adult, who would otherwise eschew the subject. Not since John Jakes' *The American Bicentennial* series has the story of our nation's founding been so engaging and approachable."

That's what I was going for—although I am certainly no Jakes, David McCullough, or Rick Atkinson. I have no illusions of fixing America's civics deficit by myself. What I think will be required, in fact, is a wide variety of stories, told many different ways. We need to rekindle an abiding interest in the Founding era and what it wrought, including the Declaration of Independence.

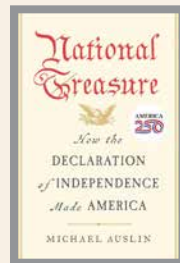
Patriotic music? Of course. Fireworks? You bet. But if that's all most Americans experience during our long semiquincentennial—from 2026 until the 250th birthday of the Constitution in 2037—we'll have missed a golden opportunity. Let's also engage, inspire, and teach.

JOHN HOOD is president of the John William Pope Foundation, a North Carolina-based grantmaker, and a syndicated columnist.

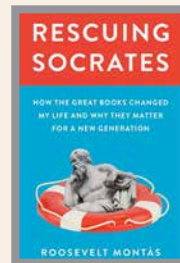


GOOD READS

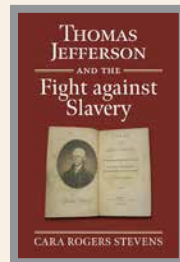
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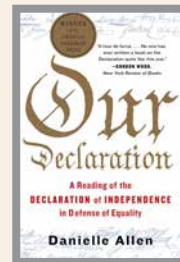
NATIONAL TREASURE
HOW THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE MADE AMERICA
 Michael Auslin



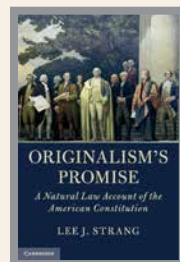
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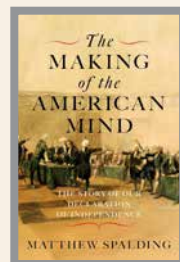
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 Cara Rogers Stevens



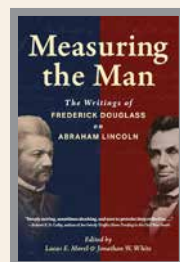
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A READING OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE IN DEFENSE OF EQUALITY
 Danielle S. Allen



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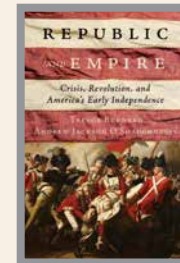
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THE STORY OF OUR DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE
 Matthew Spalding



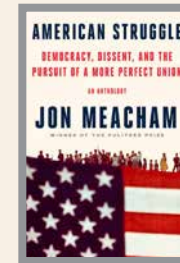
MEASURING THE MAN
THE WRITINGS OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS ON ABRAHAM LINCOLN
 Lucas E. Morel and Jonathan W. White



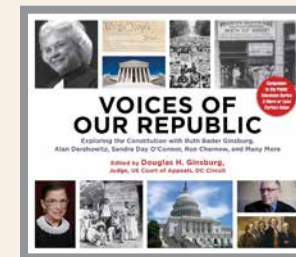
MOUNTAIN FOLK
(FOLKLORE CYCLE #1)
 John Hood



REPUBLIC AND EMPIRE
CRISIS, REVOLUTION, AND AMERICA'S EARLY INDEPENDENCE
 Trevor Burnard and Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy



AMERICAN STRUGGLE
DEMOCRACY, DISSENT, AND THE PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
 Jon Meacham

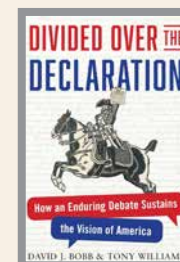


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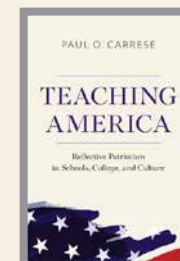
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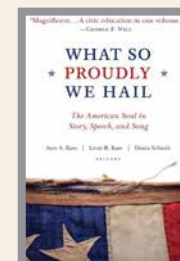
WHEN THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE WAS NEWS
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DIVIDED OVER THE DECLARATION
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TEACHING AMERICA
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 Paul O. Carrese



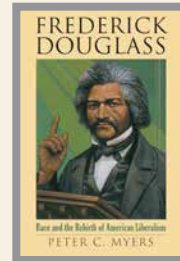
WHAT SO PROUDLY WE HAIL
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 Edited by Amy A. Kass, Leon R. Kass, and Diana Schaub

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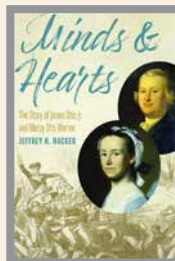
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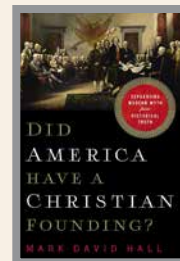
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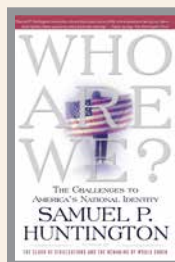
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RACE AND THE REBIRTH OF AMERICAN LIBERALISM
Peter C. Myers



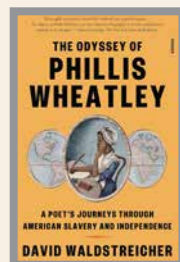
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Jeffrey H. Hacker



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SEPARATING MODERN MYTH FROM HISTORICAL TRUTH
Mark David Hall



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THE CHALLENGES TO AMERICA'S NATIONAL IDENTITY
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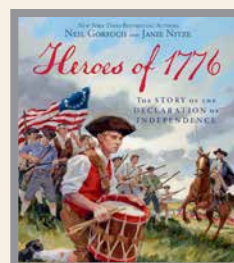


THE ODYSSEY OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY
A POET'S JOURNEYS THROUGH AMERICAN SLAVERY AND INDEPENDENCE
David Waldstreicher

FOR CHILDREN



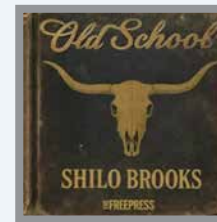
THE VISION
ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL
Jack Miller;
Illustrated by Arkie Ring



HEROES OF 1776
THE STORY OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE
Neil Gorsuch and Janie Nitze; Illustrated by Chris Ellison

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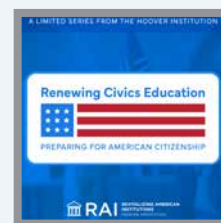
CIVICS IN A YEAR
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RENEWING CIVICS EDUCATION
PREPARING FOR AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP
The Hoover Institution

JON MEACHAM

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE STILL DEFINES AMERICA'S PURPOSE

In the beginning, no one paid all that much attention to it—and, if they did, they were not particularly impressed. Now scriptural, the Declaration of Independence's most famous sentence—"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . ."—was drafted by Thomas Jefferson and edited by Benjamin Franklin in the crowded hours of the Second Continental Congress in the summer of 1776. John Adams, jealous of Jefferson's celebrity as its main author, claimed there was "not an idea in it but what had been hackneyed in Congress for two years before". Even Jefferson admitted that the object was "not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of . . . but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject" as an "expression of the American mind". Reviews could be harsh. In England, Jeremy Bentham dismissed the Declaration as "contemptible and extravagant". Samuel Johnson put his finger on colonial hypocrisy with a penetrating question: "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?"

LEFT *The Centennial Mirror (1776–1876)* by American Oleograph Co, 1876. This poster commemorated the 100th anniversary of the United States' independence. Scenes from 1776 on the left are "mirrored" by related advancements in technology, industry, and society from 1876 on the right.

Image courtesy Artvee



And yet since its signing the Declaration has served as a kind of north star for Americans, especially in hours of strife. “I have said that the Declaration of Independence is the ring-bolt to the chain of your nation’s destiny; so, indeed, I regard it,” Frederick Douglass said in 1852. “The principles contained in that instrument are saving principles. Stand by those principles, be true to them on

Since its signing, the Declaration has served as a kind of north star for Americans, especially in hours of strife.

all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever cost.” That a man who had escaped enslavement and was not included in the Declaration’s assertion that “all men are created equal” could hail that crucial American document even amid the darkness of the antebellum order is testimony to its power and possibilities.

What explains its potency? I think Americans are drawn to the Declaration for the same reasons human beings are so often drawn to sacred scripture, which tends to be effective insofar as it offers readers and listeners an understanding of the origins, course and destiny of life. Commandment and covenant, the Declaration is the biblical base of America’s civic religion, offering precept and promise. We return to it in remembrance of battles won—beginning with the Revolutionary War itself—and to arm ourselves for battles still to come.

It is our oldest assertion of national aspiration, an articulation of the principle for which a disparate group of New World colonies chose to take on the world’s mightiest empire in armed struggle. The causes of the American revolution were varied, and not all were noble. Independence was declared after years of battles over power and money in the wake of the Seven Years’ War, when London assumed a larger burden in defending its American colonies. “The Americans have made a discovery, or think they have made one, that we mean to oppress them,” Edmund Burke remarked in 1769. “We have made a discovery, or think we have made one, that they intend to rise in rebellion against us. . . . We know not how to advance; they know not how to retreat.” By the summer of 1776—after Lord Dunmore, the British governor of Virginia, had promised freedom to any enslaved person who rose against the colonists—war had come. Yet for all of the American limitations on who was included in the Declaration’s assertion of equality, the ideal of individual liberty, an inheritance from the British tradition, was—and is—at the heart of the national experiment.

And when that experiment is under stress, the Declaration has proven useful in defining national problems and inspiring popular effort to solve those problems. In the same way the Gospel of John linked the Christian story of a divine Jesus to the familiar Genesis account of creation by evoking the phrase “In the beginning,” American leaders from Douglass and Abraham Lincoln to Franklin D. Roosevelt and Martin Luther King Jr have found Jefferson’s words essential in framing the present in terms of the past.

The ideal of individual liberty, an inheritance from the British tradition, was—and is—at the heart of the national experiment.

Lincoln probably first encountered the text of the Declaration in William Grimshaw’s popular “History of the United States,” published in 1820; in his first major public speech, to the Young Men’s Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois, in 1838, he spoke of the sanctity of the founding; and in 1859, on the eve of his presidential campaign, he described the Declaration and its major author with reverence. “All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people,” Lincoln wrote, “had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.” At Gettysburg in 1863, Lincoln brilliantly grounded the Union cause not in the prose of the constitution but in the poetry of the Declaration: “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” One could debate the constitution, which was the means of America. Lincoln’s rhetorical gamble—which he won—was that one could not question the purpose of America, which, in this rendering, was Jefferson’s “proposition.”

Eighty years later, amid a global war against totalitarianism, Franklin D. Roosevelt turned to the Declaration to clarify Allied aims. On April 13th 1943, Roosevelt dedicated the Jefferson Memorial on the Tidal Basin in Washington by linking Jefferson and the American Revolution with himself and the second world war. “He faced the fact that men who will not fight for liberty can lose it,” Roosevelt said. “We, too, have faced that fact. He lived in a world in which freedom of conscience and freedom of mind were battles still to be fought through—not

principles already accepted of all men. We, too, have lived in such a world. He loved peace and loved liberty—yet on more than one occasion he was forced to choose between them. We, too, have been compelled to make that choice.”

In our own illiberal hour, the Declaration offers a measure of hope—which has always been part of the point.

And Jefferson supplied Martin Luther King Jr with the substance of the things hoped for. “I have a dream,” King intoned at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, “that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” There, in the midst

of the 20th century, in the heat of a freedom movement, King—like Lincoln and Roosevelt before him—could find no clearer articulation, no better summary of the American promise, than Jefferson’s ancient words.

In our own illiberal hour, the Declaration offers a measure of hope—which has always been part of the point. “The assertion that ‘all men are created equal’ was of no practical use in effecting our separation from Great Britain; and it was placed in the Declaration, nor for that, but for future use,” Lincoln remarked in 1857. “Its authors . . . knew the proneness of prosperity to breed tyrants, and they meant when such should re-appear in this fair land and commence their vocation they should find left for them at least one hard nut to crack.” As it was in the beginning, so it remains.

This essay ©The Economist Group Limited, London (April 16, 2026).

JON MEACHAM holds the Rogers Chair in the American Presidency at Vanderbilt University. He has written biographies of Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and Abraham Lincoln. He is the keynote speaker at the 2026 National Summit on Civic Education.



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Senator Sasse is being recognized for his pivotal role in the development and early success of the University of Florida’s Hamilton School for Classical and Civic Education—building a model for world-class civic education grounded in Western civilization, American history, and civic principles—as well as his contributions to public understanding of the nation’s governing institutions during his service as U.S. Senator from Nebraska.

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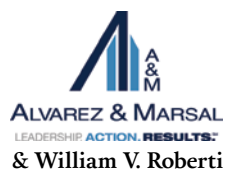


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The Jack Miller Center is a Philadelphia-based educational nonprofit committed to solving the national crisis of uninformed citizenship by teaching America's founding principles and history. Our project began in 2004 when Chicago philanthropist Jack Miller convened 50 top professors of political science and history from across the country to discuss the dire state of higher education and what needed to be done to fix it. Since that meeting, we have grown into a national coalition of scholars, K-12 teachers, philanthropists, and civic leaders who are passionate about advancing civic education in America.

There are three key pillars of our work:

- **American Political Tradition Project**—Building and empowering a network of scholars dedicated to the teaching and study of the American political tradition.
- **Founding Civics Initiative**—a national project to improve teacher education in American history anchored in primary sources.
- **National Summit on Civic Education**—Growing a nationwide coalition of leaders, educators, and funders to advance solutions that will prepare students for the responsibilities of citizenship.

Learn more at jackmillercenter.org.



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