

The View

HISTORY

THE WORDS THAT MADE AMERICA

BY WALTER ISAACSON

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.

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At the Second Continental Congress of the American colonies, meeting in Philadelphia, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia proposed a motion on June 7, 1776, that proclaimed, "These United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states." As the congress prepared to vote on that question, it appointed a committee to draft a declaration explaining the decision. It included Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston.

Because John Adams, perhaps the most zealous member of the committee, thought a Virginian author was essential, Jefferson, at 33, got the not entirely welcome honor of drafting the document, which he did in a rented second-floor room on Market Street, just a block from Franklin's home and the statehouse that would later be known as Independence Hall. He used a portable mahogany writing desk that he had designed and brought with him from Virginia, assisted by his enslaved valet Robert Hemmings.

Jefferson's writing style was graced with rolling cadences and mellifluous phrases, powerful beneath their polish. He echoed both the language and the grand theories of English and Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, most notably the concept of natural rights propounded by John Locke, whose *Second Treatise on Government* he had read at least three times. He also borrowed freely from the Declaration of Rights in the new Virginia constitution that had just been drafted a few weeks earlier by his fellow planter George Mason.

When he finished his first draft, Jefferson sent it to Franklin on the morning of Friday, June 21. "Will Doctor Franklin be so good as to peruse it," he wrote in his cover note, "and suggest such alterations as his more enlarged view of the subject will dictate?" For the next 10 days, the committee made edits and tweaks.

Most notable was the crafting of the soaring second sentence. Other nations had been born out of conquests and rebellions, usually based on tribal or religious identities. But the United States was born out of an ideal, which the final version proclaimed in the memorable words: *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.* It may be the greatest sentence ever crafted, and each word has special meaning and resonance.

THE FIRST WORD of the sentence is also the first word in our Constitution, drafted 11 years later, which begins "We the people..." The use of the word *we* signifies that our governance is based not on the divine right of kings or the power imposed by emperors and conquerors. It is based on a compact, a social contract, that we the people have entered into. Jefferson was invoking this collective will, not just the will of the 60 men gathered in Philadelphia to represent the people, when he began the sentence with the word *we*.

He went on to write, "We hold these truths to be sacred..." Franklin crossed out *sacred*, using the heavy



backslash marks he had often employed as a printer, and wrote in *self-evident*. Their declaration, he believed, was intended to herald a new type of nation, one in which our rights are based on reason, not the dictates or dogma of religion.

The phrase *self-evident* has a very specific meaning in analytic philosophy, more than just a fancy way to say "obvious." The concept was developed by Franklin's close friend, the Scottish philosopher David Hume. Hume developed a theory, later known as "Hume's fork," that there are two types of truths. "Synthetic" truths are statements whose veracity is contingent on empirical evidence and observations. "Analytic" truths are so by reason and definition. For example, "All bachelors are unmarried." To confirm a synthetic truth, you have to observe real-world facts. But that is not the case with analytic truths. To know that all bachelors are unmarried, you do not have to go around surveying bachelors to see if any of them has a wife. "Propositions

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of this kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought," Hume wrote. Their truth is self-evident.

The statement that men are created equal did not arise from observing different people and determining whether they were indeed equal; it instead derived from the fact that they all are autonomous individuals who were "created equally free and independent," as explained in the Virginia Declaration of Rights, written a month before the Declaration of Independence.

But let's be honest. Labeling their assertions of "these truths" as "self-evident" was not entirely correct. They were, in fact, quite controversial, even revolutionary.

JEFFERSON WENT ON to use the phrase *all men*. That seems, on the surface, to be very inclusive. And so it was, in theory. But in practice it was, in fact, very restrictive, and its eventual expansion, in fits and starts, is a key element in the narrative of America.

The words *man* and *men* have often been used, historically and to some extent today, to refer to humankind in general. Is this what Jefferson and the committee meant when they used the phrase *all men*?

Yes, in a state of nature, but not in the social and political world that existed. Even if the rhetorical flourish of *all men* conveyed a broad scope, they consciously and intentionally did not mean in most instances to include women, slaves, Native Americans, and in some cases even non-property owners.

The lengthy passage in Jefferson's draft of the Declaration denouncing the slave trade was edited out by the delegates before it was approved. Of the 56 signers, 41 owned slaves. When independence was declared, all 13 of the rebellious colonies permitted slavery.

But the moral arc of American history, during the subsequent 250 years, mirrors the personal narrative of Franklin's life. Abraham Lincoln opened his Gettysburg Address in 1863 by referring directly to the second sentence 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." At a cost of close to 700,000 lives, including 7,058 buried in the cemetery he dedicated that day in Gettysburg, the Civil War brought an end to slavery. "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice," Martin Luther King Jr. said a century later, echoing an 1853 sermon by the abolitionist minister Theodore Parker. But it's important to remember that the arc did not bend itself. It was, and remains, a constant American struggle to make the phrase *all men are created equal* truly inclusive.

THE SENTENCE CULMINATES with the resounding famous phrase *life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*.

In John Locke's original development of his contract theory, he identifies three fundamental rights:

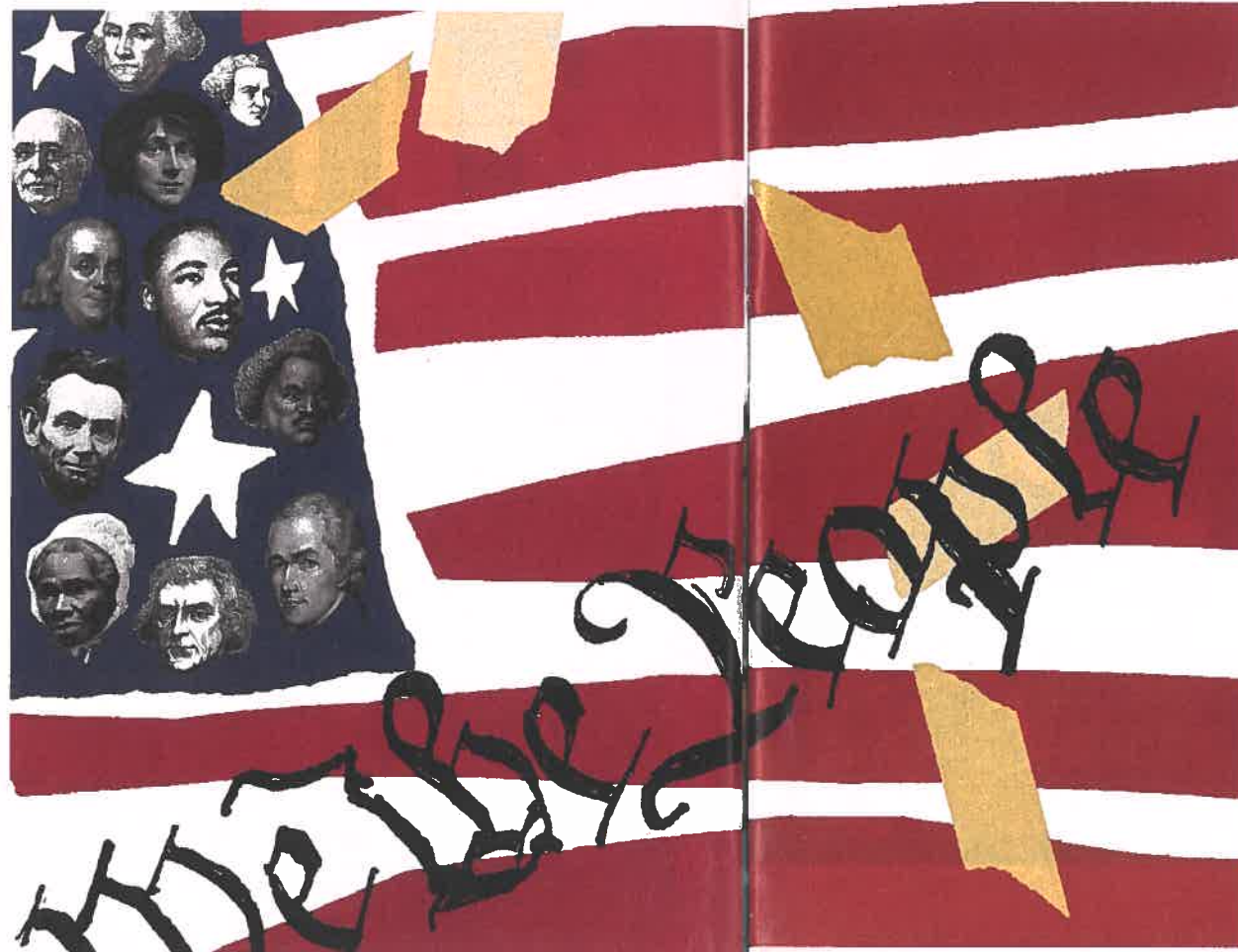
life, liberty, and property. When men enter into a social contract to empower a government, he writes, it is done "with an intention in every one the better to preserve himself, his liberty and property." Property is a cornerstone of Locke's theory of justice. By owning the fruits of their labor, people preserve their liberty and individual rights. Jefferson's formulation "the pursuit of happiness" is just a more aspirational, expansive, and breathing way to say all of that. It is your right—and your opportunity—to seek fulfillment, meaning, and well-being however you personally see fit. In other words, it defines what became known as the American Dream.

At the official signing of the parchment copy of the Declaration, John Hancock, the president of the Continental Congress, wrote his name with his famous flourish. "There must be no pulling different ways," he insisted. "We must all hang together." Franklin replied, alluding to what would happen to them if their revolution failed, "Yes, we must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately."

As Franklin pointed out, our life-or-death challenge as a nation, whether it be in 1776 or 2026, is this: When there are so many forces dedicated to dividing us, how can we best hang together?

One way is by reflecting on our fundamental principles, the ones proclaimed in the Declaration's great sentence. These truths became the creed that bound a diverse group of pilgrims and immigrants into one nation. For a people with many different beliefs and backgrounds, it defined our common ground and aspirations. That is what our founders were fighting for 250 years ago. And that is what we must continue to fight for today.

Isaacson is the author of The Greatest Sentence Ever Written. This essay is excerpted from Declare: A Civic Gospel, from Arion Press and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello



The United States was born out of an ideal