Things Worth Remembering: The Greatest Sentence Ever Written

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE IS SIGNED. (PAINTING BY SARA PAXTON BALL DADSON)

The crossed-out words and penciled-in phrases in the early drafts of the Declaration of Independence tell a story of how our core principles were crafted with fragile edits.

By Walter Isaacson

11.23.25 — Things Worth Remembering

Welcome to Things Worth Remembering, our weekly column in which writers share a poem or passage that all of us should commit to heart. This week, we hear from Walter Isaacson, author of the new book The Greatest Sentence Ever Written, who recently sat down for a conversation with The Free Press's Rafaela Siewert. As we approach Thanksgiving, Isaacson reflects on the fragile beginnings of our country's core principles—and why that fragility makes them ever more worthy of gratitude.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, one sentence became our common creed and mission statement, binding a diverse group of pilgrims and immigrants into one nation.

> *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.*

In this era of poisonous and sometimes violent political polarization, when even discussions of our history threaten to divide us, we must find a way to put differences aside and celebrate, with gratitude, who we are. One way to achieve this would be by appreciating anew that sentence, the second of our Declaration of Independence, which may be the greatest ever written by human hand.

But it was by no means guaranteed. In June 1776, the Continental Congress appointed a committee to draft the declaration. It may be the last time that Congress created a great committee. Its members included Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams.

The committee went through four drafts of the Declaration. The first, which is in Jefferson's handwriting and filled with edits from others, is in the Library of Congress. The final version is in the National Archives rotunda. If only these two institutions, often competitive, could agree to have these two versions displayed side by side. Maybe President Donald Trump can broker a peace deal to make that happen.

"We hold these truths to be sacred. . . " Jefferson wrote in the first of the drafts. Benjamin Franklin crossed out "sacred," using the heavy backslash marks he had often used during his years working as a printer, and wrote in "self-evident." The declaration they were writing 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.

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But then the sentence invokes the "Creator." In Jefferson's first draft, he wrote that men are created equal and "from that equal creation they derive rights." That phrase is crossed out, this time with a different pen, and replaced with "endowed by their Creator" with rights. That was probably an edit by Adams, who favored a more conventional public role for religion than did Jefferson.

Thus we see, in the editing of the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence, our Founders balancing the role of divine providence and that of reason in determining our rights.

Franklin, Jefferson, and Adams understood balance. They were part of an Enlightenment era that embraced the scientific method of testing and

revising beliefs based on evidence. All of them studied Isaac Newton, whose mechanics explained how contending forces could be brought into equilibrium. Their goal on contentious issues was not to triumph but to find the right balance, an art that has been lost today. Compromisers may not make great heroes, Franklin believed, but they do make great democracies.

By writing about "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," they helped define what became known as the American Dream, which is that we should be a land of opportunity for all. If you play by the rules, there should be good jobs at good wages, decent schools, safe streets, and—most important—the prospect of an even better life for your children.

The phrase was popularized by James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book, *The Epic of America*. "The American Dream," he wrote, "is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position."

What is the purpose of an economy? To increase wealth? Yes, that's good. Growth? Yes, also good. But the purpose of an economy is also something deeper. Its purpose is also to create a good society.

For the past 50 years we pursued economic policies based on a belief in free trade, free markets, free movement of capital, and free movement of people. These policies led to a fast-growing globalized economy that produced more overall wealth and consumer goods.

But some of those benefits came from offshoring jobs, closing factories, and having immigrants do low-paying work. The economy's rewards flowed to those who went to college, leading to the rise of a meritocratic elite based on educational credentials. Those who never finished college ended up feeling resentful, or were made to feel it was their own fault that they were left behind. Their grandparents, on a single income, could have a house, a car, and two or three kids. But they can't afford even a house.

Most problematic, people could no longer believe that their kids would be better off than they were. It used to be easy for Americans to climb the economic ladder. Eighty percent of kids born in 1950 would go on to earn more, in inflation-adjusted dollars, than their parents had. But for kids born in the 1980s, there was less than a 50 percent chance. *Less than 50 percent*. No wonder there was resentment and populist backlash.

Franklin saw the danger of creating a meritocratic elite. His proposals for a school that later became the University of Pennsylvania were designed to provide opportunities and enrichment for all young people to succeed as best they could, whatever their level of talent. He aimed at what he called "true merit," which he defined as "an inclination joined with an ability to serve mankind, one's country, friends and family, which . . . should indeed be the great aim and end of all learning."

The resentments and polarization that afflict us today should lead us to ask a basic question: What is the purpose of an economy? To increase wealth? Yes, that's good. Growth? Yes, also good. But the purpose of an economy is also something deeper. Its purpose is also to create a good society. A good, stable society where individuals can be free and flourish and live together in harmony. That requires nurturing the sense that we share common rights, common grounds, common truths, and common aspirations.

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Take any issue: healthcare, housing, schools, zoning, or whatever else is being debated. What policies and attitudes can we adopt, what balances can we strike, that will strengthen the American Dream?

In an era without universal military service, what institutions can instill a sense of shared patriotic service across class lines? What policies can help give every kid an equal opportunity? And when it comes to our media and our daily discourse, how can we create news outlets, social media platforms, civil discussions, personal conversations, algorithms, and chatbots that seek to connect us to our common ground rather than inflaming our resentments, engaging us through enraging us, and harvesting clicks through sensationalism?

At the signing of the Declaration, John Hancock wrote his name with his famous flourish. “We must all hang together,” he is said to have insisted. 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 to do it is by reflecting and giving thanks for our fundamental principles, the ones proclaimed in that sentence worth remembering.

Things Worth Remembering will be back in your inbox next Sunday. In case you missed it, last week, Spencer Klavan reflected on the "Iliad," a tale about finding shared humanity in an age of great division.

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George Wallace George Wallace 8m

What an excellent article. It points a way forward to correct the understanding of the enlightenment. Because we can do something does not mean we should. Balance would have kept many jobs in the US instead of simply pursuing wealth at the expense of people. The scientific method is not everything.

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