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WHAT DOES THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE MEAN TODAY?

TUESDAY, JUNE 30, 2026

PANEL ONE

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PANEL TWO

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GALSTON: Folks, time to begin so that if people can take their seats, unless it's standing room only, which it's pretty close to, in which case there are no seats for you to take, but perhaps some will be provided. I'm Bill Galston, a senior fellow in Brookings Governance Studies program, and you know, it's a genuine pleasure for me to welcome you to our

second meeting convened to celebrate our nation's 250th anniversary by exploring the Declaration of Independence.

Last week, we looked back, focusing on the relationship between Jefferson's claim that the document represented, and quote, "expression of the American mind" and the facts on the ground then and throughout our history. Today, by contrast, we're focused on the present and the future. What does the declaration mean for us now, and how might it guide the next phase of our nation's development?

To help us better understand this question, our first panel brings to Brookings two renowned scholars who have focused on the declaration intensely and at length. And now I'm about to follow my own stricture, silence my phone and to express the hope that you will all do likewise. Okay, my silent mode is on.

So Danielle Allen, who will offer the first set of framing remarks, is the James Bryant Conant University Professor at Harvard and the former director of Harvard's Edmond and Lily Safra Center for Ethics. She previously served as dean of the University of Chicago's Division of the Humanities from 2004 to 2007.

As you'll see, the University of Chicago is a through line through this first panel. She's the author of numerous books, including, most relevantly for this afternoon's discussion, "Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality." I lost count of the number of books that Danielle has published. I think it's something like nine now, but she's a hard woman to keep up with because I turned around and there was another book reviewed in The New York Times very recently called "The Radical Duke: How One Aristocrat and the American Revolution Transformed Britain." Now, there's a title that makes you wanna read the book.

Allen is not only a scholar of democracy, but also a practitioner. Together with Stephen Heintz and Eric Liu, she chaired the bipartisan Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship convened by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. The commission, which was launched, and I quote, "To explore best how to respond to the weaknesses and vulnerabilities in our political and civic life, and to enable more Americans to participate as effective citizens in our diverse 21st century democracy," issued a report titled "Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century." They did that in June of 2020, I think. And the report included institutional and policy recommendations designed, and I quote again, "To help the nation emerge as a more resilient democracy by 2026." It may be time to adjust the timeline just a little bit, but, you know, certainly we applaud, you know, the spirit as well as the letter of the document.

In 2021, Professor Allen declared her candidacy for the Democratic nomination for governor of Massachusetts and campaigned largely on democracy issues before leaving the race a year later.

If Michael Zuckert, our second presenter to lead us off, has directly engaged in practical politics to any significant extent, he has prudently concealed the fact. Rather, he's devoted his life to scholarship with remarkable results. In my view, which I believe is widely shared, no one has done more to illuminate the theory of natural rights that stands at the heart of the Declaration of Independence. He's the author of nine books, including "Natural Rights and The New Republicanism," "Launching Liberalism: On Lockean Political Philosophy," and

most recently "Natural Rights, The Common Good, and the American Revolution," crafted in collaboration with Princeton University's Robert George.

An emeritus chaired professor at the University of Notre Dame, Zuckert is the founding editor of the journal *American Political Thought*. The nation's go-to journal on that subject. I should also add that like Danielle Michael Zuckert is a hard, hard guy to keep up with because as I walked in to greet him, he handed me a copy of his latest, entitled "The Cambridge Companion to the Declaration of Independence," which he co-edited with Mark Graber.

And a glance at the table of contents shows that it's a real intellectual feast and well worth the attention of everybody who's interested in the declaration from various points of view, you know, including what it means for African Americans, women, and a host of other groups and issues.

So here's a brief sketch of what to expect this afternoon. Professors Allen and Zuckert will lead off with their presentations, after which they'll join me for a moderated conversation, followed by Q&A from you, the audience, both those present in the auditorium and those joining us online. After a brief break, we'll reconvene our discussion with a panel of marvelous and diverse Brookings scholars chaired by Kathryn Tenpas, my colleague in the Governance Studies program.

So Danielle, the floor is yours. Please get us started.

ALLEN: Thank you so much, Bill. I appreciate it. And it is lovely to be here with all of you. I mean, this is a special occasion, the chance to celebrate the semi-quincentennial, and, you know, doesn't come around so often. I'm glad we're taking a moment to pause and appreciate it. I have been studying and working on the Declaration of Independence for more than 25 years at this point.

When I say that, I always surprise myself by needing to recognize that means I've been working on this text for 10% of the life of the nation. That then makes me realize that I've been alive for more than a fifth of the life of the nation. And then that makes me realize that there are probably some people in this room who have been alive for a quarter of the life of the nation, or heading that direction, yeah? I say all that just to call to our attention how young we are as a country. We are still that close, actually, to the founding. It's really quite a remarkable thing.

Thomas Jefferson said a chilling thing. He said that the tree of liberty needed to be watered with the blood of tyrants every generation in order for it to be sustained. A terrible idea. I still, you know, if I could find him and shake him about that one, and other things, too. But I do think there is a certain important insight to that, that the tree of liberty does need to be watered each generation, and the way we water it is by returning to some of the core ideals and principles that anchored the founding effort and initiative.

So again, I'm very grateful to you, Bill, for setting up the conversation in this fashion. So Abraham Lincoln described the declaration as the golden apple set in a frame of silver. The Constitution was a frame of silver. Its entire job is just to hold the golden apple in place.

What did Lincoln mean when he called the Declaration of Independence the golden apple? He meant very specifically that the proposition that all people are created equal, that first proposition to which this country was dedicated, that's the golden apple. The Constitution has the job of realizing that ideal, making it practical in its force. I've come to believe that

Lincoln was absolutely right in that description, and I'm gonna tell you a little bit about how I've come to believe that, and then what it means for our efforts to consider our contemporary circumstances in relationship to the Declaration of Independence.

My journey studying the Declaration of Independence started accidentally. I am a child of generations of people who have loved and fought for democracy. My granddad helped found one of the first NAACP chapters in Northern Florida in the '40s. My great-grandparents helped fight for women's right to vote. My great-granddad marched with suffragists on Boston Common in 1917. So speaking of the generations and the watering that's needed with each generation, there is a concrete example. When I was watching my own generation come up in the world, it was a more complicated landscape. I grew up with a certain kind of just inherited sense of the value of democracy.

But in my big spread of cousins in my extended family, there was a huge range of life experiences, and I'm afraid I stand here having lost too many of my cousins to addiction, to severe mental illness, to gun violence, to incarceration. And I lost my baby youngest cousin to prison in the 1990s, and felt this sort of crisis of confidence for myself in our democracy, but also found myself in a moment where I was struggling to help him reconnect to our institutions, get on a positive and productive path.

I spent a lot of time trying to help him get education inside of prison. During that period of time, I was also an assistant professor at the University of Chicago. I found myself one day with the accidental opportunity to help build a night program for low-income adults in the city of Chicago. This was a program that was the joint enterprise of the Illinois Humanities Council and the University of Chicago. And I leapt at the opportunity because while I was having such difficulty helping my cousin get an education. You know, we had to, you could only send it in classes where there were no hardback books, for example, because of the prison rules and so forth. I leapt at the opportunity to try to have a chance to educate people like my cousin. Talented, smart people who, for whatever reason on life's journey, had made a mistake or fallen off the path of opportunity and were now trying to find their way back on it.

Our goal in this course for our night students was to give them the same caliber of education that we were giving to our day students at the University of Chicago. That produced a puzzle because many of them hadn't finished high school. Many not have had a GED. They had multiple jobs. They were balancing childcare and terrible public transit and the like. So we puzzled over this question, how to deliver on that promise, and we realized that we were not gonna, we were not gonna compromise in any kind of way the quality of the pedagogy we offered or the quality of the materials we were going to provide, but we were willing to compromise on the length of the texts that we assigned.

And for that purely tactical instrumental reason, we assigned the Declaration of Independence, all right? 'Cause it's 1,337 words. Nobody was gonna complain about the length of the reading. So we assigned it in the history unit, in the philosophy unit, in the literature unit, and in the writing unit, and it was an explosive teaching experience, the most explosive teaching experience of my career. Why? My students, my night students, without the fancy educations of my day students at the University of Chicago, they went to the heart of the text.

The text is essentially a story of human agency. It begins, "When in the Course of human events..." That's people diagnosing their circumstances, trying to understand the world

around them. They find the world wanting. They decide to set out in a new direction. They lay out some principles to orient their action, and then they choose their action steps, they link arms, and they move forward.

All of my night students were in that class because they wanted to change their lives, and so they recognized the story of human agency in the declaration immediately. They gave me the text, in effect. They helped me see its philosophical significance. They weren't sort of weighed down by concerns about when exactly is the Stamp Act passed and how many pounds of tea went into Boston Harbor.

They didn't care about those details, and that actually let them see the core. And that core takes us to that idea of the golden apple that Lincoln articulated. What is it that makes us all equal? It is precisely that capacity for agency that makes us equal. They saw the golden apple in the Declaration, and they saw it instantly.

It immediately led them to ask questions about employment. What was life like on the job with their employers? Were they being treated fairly? What could they do about it if they weren't being treated fairly? Immediately, they had a slew of questions about the city of Chicago and the like. So I share all of this just to say that in that small story, you can already see the immediate relevance of the Declaration beyond context that we normally think of it as being associated with.

At the same time that the teaching experience was electric because of how quickly my students connected to the text, they also taught me and showed me that there'd, something terrible had happened on their way to that classroom. Most of them had never previously encountered the Declaration of Independence. And I was stunned by that. And as I listened to them and watched its power with them, my experience was of recognizing that people had been robbed of their inheritance.

Now, I want you to imagine that golden apple again. Imagine I had an apple that was worth its, you know, it was fully gold, right? An apple of pure gold. If I tossed it to you, you'd want that for a part of your inheritance, yeah. You wouldn't turn up your nose at it. Yet we have actually withheld the declaration and we've withheld its philosophical content from many generations of students. Key reasons we have done that are that people are skeptical that a document drafted by Thomas Jefferson, a slave owner, could say anything real about equality.

So I want to address the skepticism for a moment, the skepticism around issues of race, the skepticism around issues of gender, and then I will come back around to the full weight of the meaning of the golden apple and how it can help us today. So first of all, when you think about the Declaration of Independence, it's really important to know that it was drafted by a committee. All right? There are many things that we can learn from Thomas Jefferson, and they include how to get credit for something. All right, because his tombstone says, "Author, Declaration of Independence," and that has given us the idea that this was a solo enterprise, one person. Nothing in democracy is ever a solo enterprise, and indeed, this wasn't either.

This was drafted by a committee that included Jefferson as chair of the committee, therefore first drafter, lead drafter. John Adams, man from Massachusetts who never held people in bondage, was always against enslavement. Benjamin Franklin, who had held people in bondage earlier in his life but had repudiated that practice by 1776 and had embraced abolitionism. Roger Sherman from Connecticut and Robert Livingston from New York. So

the language of the declaration, the language about all men being created equal, was in fact used very quickly, within months, to begin moving the project of abolitionism forward.

A free African-American in Boston, Prince Hall, used the declaration to submit a petition to the Massachusetts assembly to end enslavement. That wasn't successful, but then the Constitution for Massachusetts, drafted by John Adams, that used the same language, was the basis for ruling enslavement unconstitutional in Massachusetts before the end of the Revolutionary War. Okay. Slavery was also abolished in Pennsylvania before the end of the Revolutionary War.

It was also abolished in Vermont at that time, its own country. Okay. Still kind of its own country. Not a state. So that's why you gotta be kind of careful how you describe how many. Two states, but plus Vermont, abolished slavery before the end of the Revolutionary War. So the story that the declaration is just the voice of the slavocracy or the story that the Revolution was somehow about protecting slavery is false, okay. Yes, there were people who sought to protect slavery, and their fingers are evident in the declaration too, and we can talk about that during the Q&A if you want. But there were also the voices of people who were ready to end slavery in the declaration, and it started to do that work immediately. So we have always had multiple traditions of contestation in this country, and a true commitment to equality is a part of the story of the founding.

Now, with regard to gender, people will often say, "All men are created equal. What does... You know, what about the women? Doesn't that mean just the guys?" The short answer is, in fact, they did use the word men in a universal sense at that point in time, and we know that from the document itself. There's a passage in the draft that the committee submitted to Continental Congress in which they criticize King George for the continuation of the slave trade, and when they criticize him for violating, quote, "The sacred rights of life and liberty of a distant people in Africa," and they object to the markets where men, in all caps, are bought and sold.

Now, the men in those markets being bought and sold were not males only, right? It was women as well as men, children as well as adults. So that's how we know they were genuinely using that word man in a universal sense for human. We don't use it that way anymore, okay? I grant you that, and when I quote or recite the declaration, I will often say all people are created equal, acknowledging the change in our language.

But when I say all people are created equal, I am actually saying what they were saying with the word man. All humans are created equal, and they meant it for that distant people in Africa as much as they meant it for themselves. Now, I'm sure that will leave you with many questions 'cause you're thinking, well, if they really meant all that, then why did the world look the way it did?

And we should talk about that in the discussion. I'm not gonna address that right now, but there is a lot to say about that, and I would love to address it. But I wanna come back to the golden apple, all right? What its real meaning is, why it's our inheritance, and why I hope when I toss it to you, you'll want to catch it.

So let me just remind you what the golden apple is. It's the second sentence of the Declaration, the all-important second sentence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people 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. That to secure

these rights, governments are instituted among people, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

Now admit it, did you remember it was that long? It really is that long, so I hope this Saturday you will read the whole text out loud, but take the time to read that whole sentence. Some of you might get distracted because there are some versions that put a period after pursuit of happiness. That's a mistake.

It's a typo that came in early on, and many versions now have that, but it's a mistake. All the way to safety and happiness is one sentence. Read the whole thing. Okay? That's the golden apple. Now, it has in it that core proposition to human equality. What does it actually mean? It does not mean that we are all the same. It means that we are all the same in being creatures with purpose and agency and a striving to make tomorrow better than yesterday. That's the pursuit of happiness, and that striving is an expression of our natural claim on freedom. And the argument is that because we have that equality, that shared striving, that shared ability to judge whether tomorrow is indeed better than yesterday, have that shared capacity for political judgment, because of all of that, we have to protect the freedom that we need to exercise in order to fulfill that potentiality we have inside ourselves. And the project of a structure of rights is to protect that freedom.

Now, I've just given you a long, wordy explanation for what that golden apple means. Abraham Lincoln was far more economical than I have been. All right? He gives us the most efficient gloss on the declaration, and I think the tool that we can use for, using it to think about our circumstances now in the Gettysburg Address. So you all remember that the Gettysburg Address, of course, is given after a battle with the highest casualty rate in the Civil War. There have been thousands of bodies across the field months before Lincoln arrives to dedicate it in honor of the people who have sacrificed themselves there. And so he says of these people who have died there that they have dedicated themselves, and he now calls all Americans to rededicate themselves to this core proposition that all people are created equal. Right? The nation is dedicated to this proposition. Those men who gave their lives had dedicated it, rededicated it, and now Lincoln dedicates the field to them by calling the nation to dedicate themselves to this proposition. And he concludes the short address by really detailing the consequences of that proposition when he says that he hopes that "never will perish from the Earth a government of the people, by the people, for the people."

And it's really the last two phrases that matter there. What he is communicating is that a government is for the people only when it is by the people. It's a deep, profound point, and it's the same point the declaration's making. He is truly summarizing the Declaration of Independence. That long sentence I recited for you, right, grounded all legitimate government in the consent of the governed. It made the point that it was the job of the people to evaluate how well things were going, and if things aren't going well, to make the changes necessary to achieve their shared safety and happiness. Government is for the people when it is by the people.

Now that, those two phrases taken together, those are an evaluative framework for democratic citizens at any point in time. Lincoln was using them in the middle of the 19th century. So that speech is Lincoln saying, "Here's how the declaration's relevant today. We have to ask the question of whether we have a government by the people in order to figure

out whether it can be for the people." So we can do the same thing now. We can ask ourselves the question, do we seem to have government for the people?

If you ask that around this great land, I think you'll find many people who say no. They will say, "I do not see responsiveness on problems that I really care about, like housing," or, "I do not see responsiveness on problems I really care about, like economic opportunity and mobility, or prices, or how technology is extracting our time and attention and really doing damage to our kids."

We can see all kinds of ways in which we do not think right now that our government is for the people. And so what Lincoln teaches us, what the declaration invites us to consider, is whether or not that failure of responsiveness to what the people needs, to the safety and happiness of the people, flows from the fact that our government is no longer by the people. Is that possibly the case, that our government is no longer by the people? Has it been captured by other interests other than the people?

Now, what can we look at to consider that? There're some basic things. We can look at voting, for example. If you look at voting and you look at the combination of gerrymandering, closed primaries, and low-turnout primaries, you will observe that 60 million Americans no longer have access to a meaningful vote in federal elections.

Both parties. This is not a partisan thing. And the decision in Calais around race and representation, the Voting Rights Act, that matters. It factors into that, but it's bigger even than that. 60 million Americans, that's a quarter of the electorate, no longer have a meaningful vote in federal elections. We do not have a government by the people.

You can also consider the question of money in politics. This is an issue where broadly across the political spectrum, Americans are in agreement that money has come to dominate our politics, and those with moneyed interests are, have an out-of-proportion degree of influence over political decision-making. And I would agree with that. So that is another place where we don't have government by the people because we have lost control over that aspect of our election system.

There's an important constitutional amendment effort moving forward led by an organization called American Promise. The amendment they're working on is called the For the People Amendment And they are moving state by state getting state legislatures to pass resolutions to call on Congress to pass a law to change the consequence of Citizens United, to legislate such that corporations no longer count as people for the purposes of political speech and considering political speech. They have now passed these resolutions in 25 states. They need to get to two-thirds of the states in order to have the amendment process activate, but they've gotten to 25 already. And the two most recent states to sign on were Oklahoma and Idaho. And the Oklahoma legislature voted unanimously in favor of this resolution.

Again, this is a cross-partisan analysis that we don't have government by the people because we have allowed corporations to have an inappropriate role in the universe of political actors and speakers. All right?

I would also point to problems of technology, the concentration of capital and control and surveillance power that is emerging in our major AI and social media firms and companies. There too, they are making decisions rapid fire that are dramatically transforming the architecture of our world, and we, the people, do not have control over those decisions. Should we have control over all of them? No. We should protect and respect space for

markets. But do we need to consider when the rules of the game for the markets are actually helping our safety and happiness or harming them? For sure, we do. So that would be another place where I would say we, the people, do not currently have control.

So there's a slew of reforms across the board that we could use to actually strengthen government that is actually by the people. I pointed to one, the For the People amendment. In the space of elections, I would say we should get rid of party primaries and have what are called all-party primaries in every state. This is a primary system in which all voters see all the candidates all the time, and all candidates face all voters, meaning instead of having separate Dem ballots and R ballots, you've got one ballot with all the candidates, so all the choices all the time. You could take a certain number of finalists forward, two in Washington, California, and I hope my home state, Massachusetts, soon if we vote for this in November, or four in Alaska, which then uses ranked-choice voting. But that reconnects the electoral decision to the whole electorate as opposed to just connecting it to the tiny partisan base that determines a primary in the gerrymandered districts that already is, has an outcome predetermined.

We could also do with a federal law to get rid of gerrymandering. There are a few different approaches to that which I would recommend.

And then in the technology space we do have burgeoning cross-partisan interest in regulation and regulatory frameworks to try to get tech companies back under the control of the people and I would encourage people to you know, lean into that, consider that if it's a place that you're not yet engaged.

So I go through those things to say, look, that's what it means to use the Declaration of Independence to analyze our current moment, okay. What it means to use the Declaration of Independence is to ask the question of where do we not see government for the people, how is that connected to failures of our achieving government by the people? That basic analytical structure can yield an entire renovation agenda for our democracy. All right?

So the golden apple then again is this core principle about human equality, the recognition of a powerful agency inherent in every single one of us, the recognition that we can best unleash human flourishing both for individuals and for all of us collectively if we respect that equality, protect it with a structure of rights, and protect it with institutions that genuinely deliver government by the people.

So to conclude, I'm just gonna go ahead and give you the golden apple one more time in the hopes that you'll catch it, put it in your pocket, carry it around for a spell, and reflect on it the way I've had the good fortune to do for the last more than 25 years. All right, so get ready to catch.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among people deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to us shall seem most likely to affect our safety and happiness."

Thank you.

ZUCKERT: Good evening, or good afternoon, I should say. I'm also happy to be here, and it's nice to see all you out there. I'm gonna talk about a different part of the declaration today, actually, so it's good that Danielle left you with that golden apple in your head. I'm gonna talk about the part of the Declaration called the grievances.

Most of the text of the declaration is given over to a long list of repeated injuries and usurpations. Injuries, harms to the colonists, and usurpations, the use of illegitimate or extralegal force upon them. And if we consult that formidable list of 26 injuries and usurpations, it's difficult not to be struck by how often the word law or related words like legislature appear.

In some cases, the complaint is that the king has failed to use powers lawfully his to do good for the people. In other cases, he has misused powers that the colonists concede he lawfully has, but he uses them to impose injuries on the people. In several other places where the declaration does not mention law per se, the king is accused of violating the law, violating rule of law principles, for example, by making judges dependent on his will alone.

The list of injuries shifts towards usurpations when the king's practice of keeping up standing armies in America without the legally required consent of our legislatures, as they put it, is condemned. The usurpation charge perhaps reaches a peak in the central charge, which is, "he has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution and unacknowledged by our laws, giving his assent to their pretended acts of legislation."

"The king has abetted," it turns out... Oh, thank you. That's, yeah, that's just what I need, thanks. "The king has abetted the usurpations committed by Parliament when it passed taxes and internal regulations of the colonies." So according to the Americans' understanding of the reigning legal order, not Parliament, but only the colonial legislatures have legal authority to pass such laws. The king, together with Parliament, took positive action to prevent the colonies from exercising their own legislative powers by suspending their legislatures and declaring themselves with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever, referring back to the point Danielle was making about government by the people.

Finally, in an act of usurpation, the king – that it really goes beyond usurpation, the king, it says, "has abdicated government here by declaring us out of his protection and waging war against us." The king was the one, they say, who abrogated all legal ties and treated the colonies as enemies. In effect, the Americans are saying the king is the rebel. He's the one who leaves the Americans with no choice but to recognize the usurpation, the separation affected by the British, and to take action accordingly.

So the Americans were so attached to the rule of law that they are putting for the – not the full weight, they're – Sorry, let me – They're not putting the full weight of their justification for what they're doing on that golden apple that you just heard about, but rather on the, rather on the king's actions in severing the ties of law with them.

At this point, it would be commonplace to turn to the famous passage that you've heard about already this morning about all men being created equal. However, it seems to me today another approach seems at least as much to the point. Those words of Jefferson's, partly of Jefferson's, of course, speak to us today just as they speak to all men everywhere, as Abraham Lincoln put it.

But today, the somewhat less golden words of the list of grievances speaks to us and holds just as much wisdom, I'm going to say, as the better-known parts of the declaration. The list of grievances is based on and expresses a deep commitment to rule of law principles. The centrally important grievance is that one I mentioned. "He has combined with others to subject us to jurisdictions foreign to our Constitution and unacknowledged by our laws," et cetera. The real complaint is against Parliament for legislating over them when it has no authority to do so, the King merely cooperated with them in their pretended acts of legislation.

But this complaint stems from a fundamental principle of the domestic constitution, the British domestic constitution and the American, that this, that the legislative power in this case belongs to Parliament. For the British, with the king possessing only at most a veto power, he had no power to legislate on his own. The king was denied legislative power because lawmaking should be conducted by a body with multiple members representing the community being governed. This requirement derived from several sources for the colonists, first of which was their conviction that political power ultimately resided in the people and government authority derived from their consent.

That is to say, they understood popular sovereignty to be the basis of political authority. Thus, the famous slogan, "No taxation without representation," to which they would add and did add, "No legislation without representation."

Now, beyond this, the colonists also realized that assemblies of many people operate differently from individuals or small groups. For one thing, large groups must, all things equal, work to build majorities, which means there must be an attempt to gain support from different individuals and different personal interests, different public interests, different opinions and goals. Personal grudges, self-dealing, passing whims, these and other such things are far less likely to emanate from a legislative assembly than from a single lawgiver or a very small group.

The need to garner the agreement of many ironed out the idiosyncrasies and goals of individuals. The Americans conceived of rule by Parliament over them as subject to many of the same disqualifications that the British themselves thought monarchical legislative power had. Indeed, they thought of Parliament as standing to them in precisely the same way in which the king stood towards the British.

The central issue again was the responsibility to the governed that representation induces. The king is not only a single actor, as I said, but he is unelected and irremovable. He has no institutional structures preventing him from acting against their interests, the Americans' interests. The British concluded that the monarch is unsuited to possess the legislative power, so they gave their legislative power to Parliament.

Now, Parliament stood toward the American colonies in a very similar way. Since Parliament represented British people only, it had no institutional incentives to take American interests seriously, no disincentives to prevent them from ignoring American interests and desires, and from even prioritizing British interests over American interests.

One of the very influential American pamphlets leading up to the revolution called attention to the fact that some members of Parliament ran for election by promising to shift some of the burdens of financing British government onto the Americans. That's a good idea.

Moreover, many of the salutary effects of the majority formation process in legislative bodies were absent in Parliament.

Instead of the multiplicity of interests present in a normal representative bodies, Parliament, when facing America, had a much more uniform interest, us, Britain, against them, the Americans. The colonists' point then was that Parliament should not and could not have legitimate legislative and taxing power over them because structurally, it was just like a monarch.

Now, so when the Americans came to write their constitution, they carried over the rule of law thinking from the Declaration of Independence to their new government. All legislative power of the new government was vested in a reg- a legis- representative legislative assembly. The president holding the executive power was granted an overridable veto power similar to, but weaker than the power the British monarch possessed vis-à-vis Parliament Now, let us consider governance in America today.

We find presidents of both parties guilty of rule of law violations. But as Abraham Lincoln said in his early-- one of his early major addresses, "There is a dangerous contagion to breaches of the rule of law. Each serves as a precedent for successors, and the prevalence of lawlessness ratchets up until there's no longer a reliable presumption that rule of law will continue to rule."

I believe we are now reaping what previous presidents have sown, and it is not a pretty harvest. Past presidents have sinned against the law, admittedly, but our present administration has far surpassed in number, intensity, scope, and importance these past lapses. If we tolerate violations of rule of law, we can no longer take it for granted that our democratic institutions will last for another four score and seven, to say nothing of another 250 years.

We find our president claiming a power to, in effect, tax by executive order in laying tariffs, to ignore and set aside congressional laws by his own, as in ignoring the ByteDance divestment law, to fail to spend money appropriated by Congress for, say, basic research or clean energy, whatever, to use money allocated by Congress for other purposes than Congress intended, such as to build a wall, to abolish governmental policies, programs, and agencies by his own dictate He has even made war without consulting, much less deferring to Congress.

It is time, fellow citizens, for us to prepare our own grievance, or rather to revive the declaration's central grievance. It fits our present situation pretty well. He has combined with others-- Elon Musk comes to mind, Heritage Foundation comes to mind-- to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our Constitution and unacknowledged by our laws, and that jurisdiction, again, being legislation by executive fiat.

There were also grievances in the declaration that the king has made judges... sorry, about the judiciary. One of which was the king has made judges dependent on his will alone. The king, it says, has also refused his assent to laws for establishing legislative powers. He has agreed to parliamentary acts of pretended legislation depriving us of the benefits of trial by jury.

A genuinely independent and operative judiciary is perhaps the most important element of rule of law governance. The basic idea is to guarantee that it is law rather than will that determines when the coercive power of the state may be applied to individuals. Law is made

in advance and is stated in general terms, neither aiming at nor mentioning particular individuals.

The achievement of these goals requires that the agents of law enforcement not be beholden to any authority who could interfere with the application of the law, and only the law, to legal cases. The king, the executive head of government, should therefore have no power, they thought in Britain, should have no power to sway the judgment of the judges in particular cases through, for example, control of the conditions of their employment.

This, to the minds of the colonists, was an elementary feature of the rule of law system. And there were other features that comprised that, that system. Just as the king should not be able to just dictate or even affect the outcome of particular cases, so the legislature should not be able to do so either. And so ex post facto laws and bills of attainder and such were also abolished.

Now, a further feature of rule of law governance that found expression in both the Declaration and the Constitution is trial by jury. Accused persons have a right to trial in which a group of their fellow citizens, chosen more or less at random for this occasion only, decides on the guilt or innocence of the accused, and that decision based on the law and the facts of the case only. It is of some importance that the jury be composed as it is. It is not an established body like the legislature or the executive branch bureaucracy. The members of the jury have no ongoing relationships with each other or the defendant or the government other than as citizens. Other than making a decision in the case before it, the jury has no abiding interest of its own.

Now, over time, it became ever clearer that there were yet further implications to the idea of an independent judiciary. Paradoxically, it seems, the elective presidency brought, brought these problems to light in a way that were less visible, the problems, in the hereditary monarchical system. What we might call the pre-judicial apparatus, the system for charging individuals with crimes, is part of the executive branch and formally subordinate to the president. This arrangement proved to be problematical within the system of an elective executive headship. The hereditary monarch comes to his position in a natural way, born into it, and in the normal course of things, retains it until he dies.

This arrangement limits the amount and shapes the kind of competition for the position. The elective president, however, exists within a competitive atmosphere all the time. In such a situation, the temptation to use the judicial apparatus as an instrument in the political competition is very strong. In response to this obvious challenge to the rule of law, certain conventions arose within the executive branch.

The president is to have a very light touch with regard to decisions made within that apparatus. The bureaucracy developed strong norms of professionalism and remained distant from the political side of the executive. These developments were themselves a direct outgrowth of the thought behind those grievances in the declaration aimed at maintaining judicial independence.

Once again, we may ask, how do things stand today with regard to judicial independence and rule of law? We presently have an administration in which the president takes quite the opposite of a light touch. He openly tells his subordinates in the Department of Justice to go after named individuals who he claims are guilty as hell without knowing or suspecting exactly what they are guilty of, other than crossing him somehow.

He insists that his targets be indicted even after the professionals in the department, using legal norms developed over a long period of time, conclude there's not enough of a case to warrant bringing it to trial. And on top of it all, if any of the professionals in the department fail to follow orders, or rather attempt to discharge their duties to the rule of law rather than to whim and resentment, they are promptly fired.

That is to say, the very same challenge to judicial independence the drafters of the declaration decried when they condemned the king for threatening judges with loss of their position or salary. Moreover, the administration has been none too sensitive to maintaining the rock bottom right underlying law, rule of law in America, which is the right to trial by jury.

One example that we all probably remember, the administration sent off to prison in El Salvador a group of immigrants asserted to be the worst of the worst; criminals, drug dealers, gang members, and perhaps they were. But the label was applied without the least scintilla of public legal process to establish the facts alleged. Most assuredly, there was no trial by jury. And recall, these were not merely deportations of illegally present immigrants, but these were a consignment to an ultra-high security prison for an indefinite term. This was not by any stretch a matter of rule of law.

An even lesser degree of law is present in the administration's deploying of lethal force against small boats off the coast of South America. They too are alleged to be gang members headed for the shores of America to make a drug delivery, and perhaps that's true. But if true, the legal established penalty for selling drugs is not capital punishment, and we have no idea actually whether the claims are true.

The declaration of course contains many grievances aimed at the king's actions as executive head. Many of these grievances concern his actions as in effect, commander-in-chief, as commander-in-chief of the British military. The king is, for example, accused of keeping in America standing armies without the consent of our legislatures. The next grievance finds the king attempting to render the military independent of and superior to the civil powers of the powers of the locale in which they are stationed, I should say. The king has moreover gone along with Parliament in quartering large bodies of armed troops among us, and then in protecting them by a mock trial from punishment for any murders that they should commit on the inhabitants of those states.

These grievances also concerning the military present definite rule of law issues. The military, except under specific conditions, are reserved for conflicts with foreign enemies. That is, with those whom, over whom the domestic law cannot rule. The injection of the military into a domestic scene threatens rule of law by introducing a force no longer subject to the domestic rule of law and its authorities, a force able to overrule the home forces and to intimidate the local population.

The authors of the declaration understood that the military is not normally to be deployed for domestic policing, and when it is to be deployed, it is by the invitation and approval of the local authorities. Once again, we find the administration acting quite contrary to the spirit of the founders and the rule of law. National Guard and even regular military have been deployed in American cities and at the border, trumping the law and even more, the spirit of the law. And we have a whole new force called ICE operating, a military but without the discipline and ordering of a military. So far from the, coming at the invitation of the local authorities, these forces are being deployed against the express wishes of those authorities.

Now, the king, Yeah, let me skip that. Let me skip a little bit more. It is striking how little-- no, let me skip that too. I want to move on to the pardon power. Now this admittedly is a power granted by the Constitution to the president without specific legal guidelines as to how it is to be used. So it's hard to be, to move outside the rule of law with regard to it. But it's possible to miss the spirit of the pardon power. In this case, as you all remember, it has been used wholesale to pardon all participants in the January 6th uprising, to pardon somebody like George Santos, a man who it is difficult to find reason for deserving a pardon. More recently, to pardon the founder of a cryptocurrency exchange, an act for which there is reportedly good reason in the bank accounts of the president's family.

The pardon power is an instrument of where the law recognized the failure of the law to always do justice. One of the qualities of law that makes it so good is its generality, but sometimes its generality leads to injustice. The pardon power provides a lawful way to make up for the occasional failings of rule of law, a rule of law way of correcting rule of law, we might say. But use of the pardon power in the ways just mentioned has quite the opposite effect. If you violate the law for the sake of and in the name of, or if you praise or profit the president sufficiently, the rule of law can be bent for you. Doesn't this undermine the rule of law?

Now, just what the president has in mind in these myriad instances of flouting the rule of law, and thus the Declaration of Independence's guidance for our future, is much debated. There are those who believe the goal is the institution of an authoritarian regime in place of the constitutional order of, that the American patriots set in place and has lasted for 250 years. Others believe it is mostly presidential fecklessness or greed that has gotten us to this place. Personally, I'm uncertain of what the administration's ultimate aim is, but whatever its aim is, we are not in a sound place. The rule of law is not an optional commitment for a people who would be free.

What can be done to put us back on the right path? Difficult question it might seem, but perhaps not. Here's the answer: Everybody in the government and out should just do what the Constitution would have them do. The Constitution is sound. Those running it now, less in particular, this means Congress should legislate and oversee. The the judicial system should consistently act to apply the law, especially the law of the Constitution. The Constitution sets up institutions of checks and balances. The people who staff them are mostly failing to do their duty, or to the dismay of the founders, failing even to serve their own institutional interests. If the governing branches do as the Constitution mandates, and if we, the people, take to heart what James Madison said not quite 250 years ago, all can still be well.

Here's what Madison said: "In framing a government, which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this. You must first enable the government to control the governed and, in the next place, oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is no doubt the primary control on the government." That's the end of Madison's quote. Madison is saying that the end of the day, as at the dawn of the day, it is up to the people to hold, it's up to the people to hold their governors to their duty to the Constitution. Therefore, let us people get to it. Let us remember that the only kind of law of rule fit for a free people is rule of law. The American founders may have been flawed in various ways, but they knew well the chief imperative: no king but the law. Thank you.

GALSTON: Well, two comments. First of all, if anyone in the room doubted that the Declaration of Independence had light to shed on our current circumstances, I trust that

those doubts have been fully dispelled. You know, what a feast for thought we've gotten from our two visiting scholars.

Here's my second point: These were two very different talks in style and in, and in content, but there emerged a key agreement, and I'd put it this way. If government is not by the people, it is very unlikely to be for the people. And boy, that's a proposition to put in the bank.

To get us started I have an observation. Danielle focused on the famous second sentence of the declaration, the golden apple. Michael focused on everything that followed the second sentence. You may have noticed that leaves something out, namely the first sentence, which I submit, in its own way, is just as golden as the second sentence, though less memorable.

So in Danielle's spirit, though without her capacity for remembering words without paper in front of her, let me read it. "When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind request that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation."

Wow. The most important early word in that sentence is the word necessary, right? This active agency, you know, to quote Danielle, was not an option, right? It was not a choice that a bunch of people happened to make. It was necessary.

Now, why was it necessary? I think in-- towards the end of the section that Michael focused on, the necessity comes from the fact that the acts that the monarch has committed in the offenses, a prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Okay? In short, our bill of particulars proves that the king is not a monarch, he's a tyrant, right? And it's tyranny, tyrannical government that makes us necessary, makes it necessary for us to separate. So here's question number one. Could the colonists have made their case that the king was a tyrant without the golden apple sentence?

ALLEN: I mean, the short answer is I'm gonna say no. And but the more important thing is why, you know, why not? The definitions of monarchy and tyranny require understanding the purpose of governance.

The purpose of governance is the safety and wellbeing of the people, or as the Romans put it, *salus populi suprema lex esto*, let the health and wellbeing of the people be the supreme law. The way you get to that idea that's what defines governance and allows you to have a definition that distinguishes between a monarch and a tyrant is by recognizing that people deserve something from government, and they all deserve that equally.

So they are providing the theoretical foundation for that distinction between a monarchical and tyrannical regime with that second sentence.

GALSTON: Michael?

ZUCKERT: I, yeah, I would add to that what, what the golden apple adds here is not merely, is not at all the definition of the king as a tyrant. That does come from the list of grievances and the recital of all the things the king has done that are illegal and usurpations, et cetera,

et cetera. But what the golden apple supplies in this context is the claim that justifies a revolution or justifies overthrowing the, the existing government.

Because it had been held throughout most of Western history that the people didn't have a right to overthrow a tyrant. That was just the, that was the major idea. So the declaration is introducing a different idea: yes, if he's a tyrant, if he's not serving the needs of the people, if the rights of the people are not being recognized and all that, then the people have a right to overthrow the king and institute a new government.

So I think it adds, at the very least it adds, not really what Danielle said, a kind of set of criteria of what makes for a good or bad government, but it also adds this notion that if it's a bad government, you have a right to get rid of it.

GALSTON: So second question from paragraph one. Right after the word, right after the word necessary, we see the words "one people." Okay. Now, you know, let's, you know, switch our minds to the second sentence, the golden apple, for just a minute. The language speaks of rights that all people have. That's not just all Americans. That's all people everywhere. That's certainly the way Abraham Lincoln understood it, and it's certainly the way foreigners who've read the Declaration of Independence have understood it. You know, this applies to us, too.

It follows from that, I think, that it is not equal possession of individual rights that makes an aggregation of individuals one people, right? That can't be it, because if that were the case, then, well, the entire human race would be one people. But this first sentence talks of separating one people from another. There're lots of peoples.

So the first sentence doesn't answer this question. Maybe you can. What is it that makes a people? What is it that made Americans a people? And they were a people before the Declaration of Independence was written, by definition.

ALLEN: So I would offer a slightly different account of what's occurring. I mean, I would say actually the declaration is the moment when they, in fact, establish their status as a people, and that it's been a question before that. Before that, they were part of the British people. And if they weren't part of the British people, you know, they refer to the separate colonies as their countries, they, you know, were 13 separate homes, essentially.

I do think the second sentence gives us a part of the answer when, you know, first we have the expression of individual rights and some examples of them, and then the second premise of that syllogism, it's a philosophical argument that has a necessary conclusion. That's why it's called self-evident. The second premise is that governments are instituted among people to secure their rights. And so it's that instituting of government to do this work of securing rights, that forms a political people, right? And so I think in that regard that's, you know, what the, the first sentence is really doing, is saying it's come time for us to reorganize the government that we are organized into.

And so they become a people precisely because they are making this point about government, and those are the interacting things. I'm sure there's more to say, and I don't wanna sort of foreclose, and maybe Michael will go this way, there's sort of other questions about what did they share, et cetera, that could give them a kind of conception of being a people. That's a part of it, too but part of it is simply saying, "We are going to self-organize a government." The moment you choose that, you've formed a people.

ZUCKERT: Well, let me complicate the question a little bit, Bill, or your lead-up to the question anyway, by calling attention to another part of the text that we actually haven't talked about today, well, most of it that we have, at, towards the end of the Declaration, they, the colonists say, "And therefore, we, the United Colonies declare Ourse—" now wait, how's it go now?

ALLEN: --Ourselves free and independent states.

ZUCKERT: Yeah. "Declare ourselves," ready? "We are and of right ought to be free and independent states." We're not one state, we're states. Not, we're not, and I would argue they're not claiming to be one people. They're, they're, what, the that first sentence of the declaration ought to read like this. Whenever one people wants to separate from another people, they ought to do X. And they're just saying, "We're an instance of where some people are declaring independence from other people." And so that "when" should mean whenever, and the "one" should just be a general reference to people in this situation. So that's how I'd read it.

But as far as what makes peoplehood, it seems to be joining together under one government. That seems to be the key thing.

GALSTON: So you are a people by becoming a people.

ALLEN: Exactly. Yeah. By, and which means choosing a government, self-organizing a government. There's another really important moment of transition from the draft to the final version. And this is actually even before Congress's edits, you know, in Jefferson's own drafting. Again, forget which sentence it is exactly. Michael, you may know. But he originally makes a comment about the, you know, the challenges faced by the subjects. And he changes it to citizens which you can -- the Library of Congress has made that, you know, they used UV to sort of see what was underneath the word citizens. It was subjects originally. And so that, it's exactly that transition which that first sentence is also marking, in which, yes the Lee resolution at the end, the declaring of themselves as free independent states is also marking.

GALSTON: Third and final question, you know, from the very first paragraph of the declaration. It goes on to say that, you know, the, these people, you know, who are separating themselves are doing so to assume, and I quote, "The separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitled them."

So this sounds like a principle of one people, one state. If you are a people, then you have a right to a state of your own. You know, I guess this is why the Kurds love the Declaration of Independence so much because it makes their point. But more broadly, this is an argument against multi-people imperial governments, or at least that's the way it reads, that multi-people governments are inherently unstable because each one of the components of that government has a natural right to separate. Am I getting this right?

ZUCKERT: I mean, the criterion they emphasize is not so much peoplehood is giving them a right, but rather whether their rights are being respected properly or not. So it's not is my peoplehood being denied, but rather are my rights being denied? That's the inherent claim.

I mean, I don't think they were as-- your question in a way reflects the, the, a later development of a kind of nationalism that we don't see so present in that period. They knew

many multicultural nations and didn't condemn them as such, so, yeah, I'm not sure they would agree with you.

GALSTON: Correct. Well, the, I would just add a gloss to that, and that is that, you know, as historical circumstances have changed, the declaration has been received and read differently. And as nationalism grew in the 19th century, this idea that each people is entitled to its separate and equal station among the nations of the earth became a very unexpectedly powerful notion.

ALLEN: Yeah. Yeah. But, I mean, importantly though, I mean, that, yes, that's a huge 19th century shift, right? Where in this 18th century moment, this notion of peoplehood is defined through the construction of political institutions. It's not a cultural concept of peoplehood. And then in the 19th century gives us the cultural concept as well.

Now, there's always a sort of a tension between those two things. There was a tension even in the 18th century between those two things, but there was a dominant meaning in the 18th century, and then that flipped in the 19th century till we got to the early 20th and we got sort of self-determination principles, sort of Woodrow Wilson, League of Nations and things like that. And that's where you can sort of see what happens to the principles of the declaration after they've been kind of passed through the 19th century sort of ethno-nationalist developments.

ZUCKERT: Another example of how Woodrow Wilson changed the meaning of the founding.

GALSTON: I wonder, I wonder whether he changed the meaning of the first paragraph, or whether the meaning was changed by circumstances.

ALLEN: So I'll say, I mean, there's another interesting detail there. I mean, I think at some level these tensions were always there underneath them because of the, what the word people has meant, and because of the kinds of questions about what does it mean to form a community.

And then another way you can see those tensions kind of implicit is the phrase "separate and equal station on this earth." I mean, it is a precursor to the "separate but equal" idea. And so in the context of the US this is where Jefferson's voice honestly I think kinda comes through the most strongly. I mean, he does think of a white people and Black people as separate peoples. The way you could understand Jefferson's ability to articulate universal human rights and also to, you know, perpetuate the institution of slavery is simply that he did think that Africans had rights, and the colonists had rights, and the Africans should exercise their rights back there in Africa and the colonists should do it here in the US. So the kind of separate but equal concept was born with Thomas Jefferson, and it's actually born in that phrase.

So that's the sense in which it is really complicated. I mean, it's, although in the declaration its intention is the political-institutional definition of the people, it does have lurking in it also the kind of cultural, ethno- definition of the people.

ZUCKERT: Could I add one well, maybe quite some modification of that? What you left out, though, in what Jefferson said was these peoples have a history between them which will make it very difficult for them to be fellow citizens. That--

ALLEN: That's fair, yeah.

ZUCKERT: So some people are used to being masters here, other people are used to being slaves, there's a lot of resentment, et cetera, and that's going to be the source of let's say not a harmonious people.

When thinking about the Native Americans, he thought differently. He thought they could easily be assimilated into the civilization that they had there, because they didn't have the same kind of history that the the Black people and the white people had with each other. So.

GALSTON: All right. Now let us shift gears if we may, you know, to the famous second sentence.

ZUCKERT: Oh, we're gonna go through it sentence by sentence.

GALSTON: Or shift back to it. And Danielle, in a way you've already – no, not just in a way, very directly, you've already addressed this question at least by implication, so I'm going to shoot this one to Michael, but there's going to be something left over at that point. You come in. When the declaration asserts as self-evident the proposition that all people, all human beings are created equal, what does that mean? In what sense are we equal?

Now, Abraham Lincoln, in a, you know, in a well-known series of remarks, answered that question. You know, of course we're different in all sorts of ways. But we are equal in the possession of the individual rights laid out in the Declaration of Independence. That is the essence of our equality. Is that your answer, or is that a piece of an answer, or is that the wrong answer?

ZUCKERT: I would say that's a piece of an answer.

GALSTON: Ah.

ZUCKERT: I don't think, I mean, I think it is, since the declaration says well all people have the same rights, therefore they're equal in having those rights, I think that's... so therefore Lincoln's answer is not incorrect.

But I think Lincoln is really missing the specific tone and sense of the phrase, "All men are created equal" in that, in that sentence in the declaration. If you look at the structure of the, of that golden apple, turns out there are pieces to it, is, you know, you know, slice, one slice, another slice and so on.

ALLEN: It's true, yes, four slices.

ZUCKERT: So there's, there, there's a situation in which human beings are declared to be equal at their creation, some sort of beginning point, and to have rights. Then there's the next thing. Because their rights are insecure in the original situation, they can create government. And then it talks about, well, what happens when government goes bad? Then you can do such and such about it.

So there are three stages: pre-government, government-making, and then post-government. And what I would argue is that actually the first claim, when all men are created equal, means by nature nobody has political authority or authority over other people. All people are free and nobody is subject to the authority of another.

There's no, there's no quality of a human being that gives them natural authority over other human beings. All authority derives from their consent. That's what I take that to mean.

ALLEN: Bravo.

GALSTON: Yeah. Very well said. Well, we seem to have-- you know, by the way I would just add an additional gloss. A friend of ours, a political philosopher by the name of Tomer Persico has just published a book called "In the Image of God." You know, and in which, in which, you know, he argues that there's something even prior to that idea of no natural authority, and that is the equal inherent dignity of human beings deriving from their kinship to the creator. And that means that even individuals who are less capable or entirely incapable of agency, as we define it empirically, are endowed with that same dignity, which means that there are certain things that you can't do to them because they're human beings.

And I think-- so we now have sort of three strata or maybe four strata. We have dignity, we have rights, we have, you know, independence of natural authority, and we have agency, individual and collective. The point that Danielle I think underlined in her remarks.

So I think that unpacking the full meaning of the idea of equality and then seeing how that resonates, not only in government and in public policy, but how we treat each other is really quite, you know, quite important and fruitful for practical purposes, or so I would argue.

Shifting again to another fateful turn of phrase in the second paragraph. By the way, last time I checked, apples have cores. You know? So that would be an interesting way to tie things up, namely what's the core of the apple. But let's not go there right now. Okay? You know, I think we're all familiar with the declaration's triad of rights, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We could go into the history of that particular triad, the substitution, you know, of pursuit of happiness for property, et cetera. That's a familiar line of inquiry. Let me do something less familiar. Preceding the triad are the words "among these." Okay? Yeah. So life, liberty, and the pursuit of rights are among the rights we have, but they do not exhaust the rights we have, a point that reemerges in the Constitution.

So frequently, you know, members of the Supreme Court are charged with inventing new rights. Okay? But the language of the declaration itself explicitly directs our attention to the fact that there are other rights not named, but just as real as the rights that are named. Well, how on earth do we begin to find out or think through the question of what these other rights are?

ALLEN: Yeah, no, it's a lovely question, and what, that's a detail of the text that I love because it makes the text an invitation--

GALSTON: Yes

ALLEN: --to all of us to consider the question of what are the basic rights? We are given some examples. That's what life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is. It's just a list of examples. So I take the project of citizenship to be to enter into that conversation and I take our political debates often to be working our way through that question.

I would say, for example, that health, sort of basic right to health, is earning its place in that list. That's definitely a question still of debate in our society, but I just lift that up as an example of a place where we are collectively working on our understanding of basic rights, and when we do that, we are doing that, I think, very much in the spirit of the declaration.

ZUCKERT: One of the things I would, a couple things I would add to that. One is the Constitution carries forward that idea in the Ninth Amendment when it identifies that the list

of rights here in the Ninth, in the Bill of Rights does not exhaust all the rights. There are other rights. It's not meant to disparage the existence of other rights.

So they clearly believe there are other rights, and one example that they were pretty universal about was the right of freedom of conscience or freedom of religion, however you wanna describe it. The right to property, they're very, there's a little debate about this, but in my opinion, they're pretty universally committed to the right to property. The right to alter or abolish governments, that's another one that they have a natural right to.

I, I'm trying to think of a good way to present what I've presented in an hour long on other occasions, so I, could I just recommend to you, I have a book. You don't have to read the whole book, but called "The Natural Rights Republic," in which I try to explain what Jefferson, how he understood the generation of rights, how we can tell what a right is. And so that's a, that's, I think, one of the very good accounts. I have another book in which I try to explain what Locke thought about that but I won't recommend that. Just the Jefferson volume.

GALSTON: Okay. This is my last question before we go to Q&A and I'll paraphrase here. My memory was never as good as Danielle's, not even 30 years ago when I was her age and it certainly isn't now. I will paraphrase. Ronald Reagan once said, "You can go to France, but you can't become French. You can go to Germany, but you can't become a German. But you can come to the United States and become an American." And I take it that what he meant by that is that by believing what Americans believe and pledging your allegiance to that set of beliefs and the documents that derive from those beliefs, that is both necessary and sufficient for becoming an American. That's what he meant.

And I have to say, at first blush, I find that proposition entirely unobjectionable, and it sums up a very substantial portion of our history. Here's the catch, and I wouldn't have asked this question 20 years ago, but I must ask it now In what sense can you be an American if you reject the proposition that we're all created equal? Or if you think that legitimate political power is not based on the consent of the people but on something else? Because there are more and more of our fellow citizens, including some prominent voices who say those things, right? Does that make them un-American?

ZUCKERT: I mean, I guess the question partly what's at stake in being pronounced un-American? I mean, does it mean you could be deported or something? You don't have the right views. I don't think so. But yeah, we often speak of views people hold as un-American, and I don't know that there's anything necessarily wrong with that. I mean, as long as you recognize this is a you know, a legal, not a legal offense exactly. So I would go along with you. I mean, I think that's a good, it's a good definition, what Reagan said.

But on the other side there's room—you know, it's a free country. That's one of the things to being American. It's a free country, meaning you don't have to believe all the same things that everybody else believes.

ALLEN: Yeah. I mean, so it's a great question to sort of flip it around that way, and obviously you're thinking about the vice president's arguments about heritage Americans.

GALSTON: You said it, not me.

ALLEN: Yes, exactly. And you know, is this a creedal nation or not? And maybe I'll comment on that first and then try to answer your question.

So I mean, yes, I do think this is a creedal nation. I mean, you invoked Reagan, I invoke Lincoln always. You know, Lincoln made the sort of powerful argument about the declaration as an electric cord connecting all Americans, but also connecting all people, and that was, and that's exactly the point, really, right? And he's, he says this at a point in time when German and Irish immigration were very high, and his point is it doesn't matter how long you've been in America. As long as you can connect to this electric cord you can be American.

Now, I think when you hear it that way, though, I think you also realize it's not actually an exclusive argument. It's not saying this is the only way to be an American. I think we probably have to keep that in mind. So I think that, you know, anybody who is here and who's grown up in the culture has grown up in the culture built around those creedal principles. They may, they have it even if they haven't affirmed it, just to say that, right?

So in other words, the creed brings a culture with it. You enter into it. You may enter into it through the creed. You might enter into it through the culture. You might have that culture without even recognizing its value or appreciating it. So in that regard, I think we could have a kind of capacious understanding of what it means to be American, but the kind of key anchor for that understanding, you know, is the idea that access to that is through the creed if you don't have other access points.

So that's to say there is no way of excluding people as long as they are connecting to the creed. Does that make sense? Are you guys following me?

ZUCKERT: I think that's a good, a good reason why you, we should have more education about the creed or about the declaration, for example.

GALSTON: Well, I'd just point out in conclusion before turning to your questions that this very morning the Supreme Court handed down a decision reaffirming the principle of birthright citizenship. So therefore--

[audience applause]

GALSTON: It was a closer decision that I'm comfortable with, but that's another point. But it follows from that, that your legal status as a citizen of the United States, if you're born here, has nothing to do with what you believe.

So that, that suggests an important distinction between aspects of membership in the American community. There's the simple, there's the legal proposition. And then there's something alongside or underneath or on top of or whatever your topological sense leads you to say, with, in addition to the purely legal definition. And I think we will continue to argue about what that is.

But it's now your turn. We have about 15 minutes and I was handed a list of online questions shortly before. You know, because there are hundreds of people watching these proceedings online in addition to a full house here. So before turning to the raised hands, let me use one of these questions, online questions. And here it is.

Should the declaration be cited as evidence that the founders believed they were founding a Christian nation?

ALLEN: So the, you know, that first sentence that we lingered on is a really important one for answering that question. When they rest the moral argument on the laws of nature and of nature's God, they're offering a belt and suspenders approach to the question of moral justification. You may be a person of faith, and in that case it's the laws of nature's God. Or you may be a deist or an atheist or many of the other things that existed at that point in time, in which case the laws of nature can provide you access to the moral grounding for the document.

Without any question, many of the people who developed the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were Christians and understood Christian culture to be an important part of the culture of the country that they were founding. At the same time, they also had very strong commitments to toleration, in fact, and recognized the multiplicity of views, the importance of freedom of conscience and so forth.

So in that regard, in the form that people are currently using the idea that they were trying to found a Christian nation, I think that's inaccurate, and the declaration can't be used to support that. Did they think that they were founding a culture where questions of virtue mattered and where questions, and where faith was an important resource for sustaining virtue? Yes. But those are two different accounts, I think, of what they were doing.

ZUCKERT: Amen.

GALSTON: All right. So hands, please. Yes, there's a gentleman right here in front, and then I'll move to the back and the other side. Yes, sir. And when, please stand up and identify yourself by name, by affiliation only if you care to.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: My name is Tezjan from the Rumi Forum, and my question's as follows. In a nation where citizens increasingly hold competing visions of the country's future, is the two-party system still the best vehicle for the government of the people, by the people, for the people? If not, what reforms or alternative democratic models should be considered to better represent diverse viewpoints while preserving national cohesion?

GALSTON: Thank you. Did everybody hear the question? Good.

ALLEN: So maybe I'll jump in on that if that's all right.

ZUCKERT: Yeah, that's fine.

ALLEN: Thank you for the question. Now, the two-party system was not something that was created with the founding of the country. So of course, our institutions have always evolved, and they should always evolve. So in that regard, the question is really, you know, is the current two-party system as it has evolved, in fact delivering on this commitment to a government for the people because it's by the people? And the answer to that, I would say, is no.

That doesn't answer the question of, like, what kind of party system we should have. From my point of view, over the course of the 20th century our parties have developed a certain kind of, as Lee Drutman calls it, duopolistic control. I think he's one of your colleagues here sometimes, Lee Drutman. Actually, it's New America is where he's based.

GALSTON: Yeah, but he was here for a while.

ALLEN: He was here for a while.

GALSTON: You're quite right, yes.

ALLEN: Yeah. And, you know, that was partly laws that the parties drove through that make it very hard to form new parties, and other features of the election system. And yes, there are reforms that we need to open that up. I, I mentioned already getting rid of party primaries, replacing them with all party primaries. That is one piece of the equation.

All that said, I think it's unlikely that we would sort of end up in a world where it were never the case that two parties emerge in kind of equilibrium state. Like in the 19th century, there was dynamism. You'd get more parties, it would resolve back to two. Then they would factionalize, it would break up, and then resolve back to two. The federal system has a certain kind of set of mechanisms and incentives in it that push in that direction of two parties.

What's different in the 20th and 21st century is that it got locked in, right? It doesn't have the dynamism any longer, and we need that dynamism back so that actual people can form agendas, and form groups, and then push an agenda in politics and the like, et cetera.

I hope that was responsive, but okay.

ZUCKERT: Well, I think the one sign of the problem is as Danielle said, the, at the founding they didn't really anticipate a two-party system. In fact they were, there was a kind of hostility to parties. I mean they had some experience with parties but they had a kind of hostility. And I think the Constitution was not designed for a party system because the main device of the Constitution is the separation of powers. And we see in our present politics how the party system is ruining the separation of powers.

So to take a good example, we just had some Supreme Court decisions based on the theory of the unitary executive, a very strong executive. And arguably, the founders had something like that in mind. Arguably, I'm not gonna say they definitely did, but arguably they did. But they had it combined with a very strong impeachment possibility, and therefore, there was control for this unitary, on the unitary executive. But the party system has made that impossible. It, it's either made it too partisan or it's made it just impossible to do.

ALLEN: Yeah, just numerically impossible.

ZUCKERT: And therefore, it's not, it's not checked. So the Constitution, wonderful, it's a wonderful Constitution, but the party system and the Constitution don't exactly fit together.

GALSTON: No.

ZUCKERT: And I think some things that Danielle's mentioning are important. We have to try to think of ways to adapt the party system to the Constitution or, or the Constitution to it, but one of the problems that I see is the people who have to make the changes that we're looking for are the very people who are in charge where they are by the party system.

ALLEN: Except if you run a ballot initiative in the half of the states that can do that. So we really need everybody who's in a ballot initiative state to take this very seriously.

GALSTON: The reformer comes out.

ALLEN: Yeah. Like, I'm wearing my button, you know, people, all right? More choices in elections.

GALSTON: Okay, now a question from the center section here, but I don't see any hands in the center section.

ALLEN: Right in the second row.

GALSTON: Ah, yes. I'm sorry. Yes, of course.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Hi, my name's Jasmine. I'm with the School of Public Service and I'm from Memphis. I was wondering, Professor Allen, would you be willing to speak to the stains of slavery that you alluded to, and specifically why the world did look how the way it did. And specifically considering how the stains of blood, and how do we hold America accountable while still appreciating the Declaration of Independence?

ALLEN: Yeah, okay. Thank you. Was it Jasmine? Thank you, Jasmine. All right. Coming back to that second sentence, right? I mean, what you have already at the time of the declaration is contested politics around slavery. So everything we're familiar with at the time of the Constitution and in the Civil War, it already pertains in 1776.

There's two major compromises in the Declaration, one around slavery and one around religion. The slavery one I alluded to, right? They took out the passage critiquing the slave trade, but preserved the passage that said life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, which was the abolitionist moment. And so at that moment, you get a politics that does start to organize into the slave interest from the South, and then the anti-slave interest, mostly from the North.

So it's interesting, in the period of the founding, many of the founders, including people like George Washington, you know, thought slavery was on its way out, thought that they had designed the Constitution to move slavery out. The cotton gin arrived and changed the economics of slavery, and then re-entrenched it despite the actual initial intentions.

But it's really striking when you get to the point of the Civil War that the Confederacy, Alexander Stephens gives this speech and says, you know, "Look, we had to write a new declaration because the Declaration of Independence was wrong." All right? He says it was wrong because it said people are equal. Like, we are the only nation founded on the actual truth, he says, that actually white is better than Black. So the Confederacy that explicitly rejected the Declaration of Independence, which is a good way of understanding that people really did understand the declaration as a commitment to equality.

So, at the time... So this is a bit of a long answer, I apologize. But I just need one more, to, in 1776 you know, people already had questions about the relationship between the principles of equality and the realities of politics. So Abigail Adams, for example, wrote to John and said, "What about women?" Other people wrote to John Adams and asked about free Blacks and, like, would they have the chance to participate, and about working people without property. And Adams gave an answer that had the same structure to all of them, which to me is the best window in to precisely where the errors occurred.

So if you think back to that long second sentence again, the last phrase, the right of revolution phrase, right? It says, "right of the people to alter or abolish." And then there's a two-part job that people have: "lay the foundation on such principles or organize the powers of government in such form as shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

John's answer back to people was like, "Yes, the principles apply to everybody. Everybody have rights, and the government needs to protect their rights." But with regard to the powers of government, you know, what he said, for example, to Abigail was, "We will retain our masculine system." So there was this kind of... I mean, what Annette Gordon-Reed has nicely called and Peter Onuf have nicely called a paternalistic understanding of governance, this idea that you could protect the rights, the natural God-given rights of all, while reserving power to some.

And Abigail wrote back and she was like, "Well, I don't know about that." Right? She said, you know, "Husbands have a history of tyranny, and it's unlikely that we women are going to agree to abide by laws," to your point, "in which we had no voice or representation. And I think we'll have to foment a, you know, we'll give you one more chance, but if it doesn't work, we'll have to foment a rebellion for a voice and representation."

And that to me sort of captures the whole story there. They thought that you could protect everybody's rights while reserving power to some, but you can't. If you're gonna, the only way to protect everybody's rights is to make sure everybody is sharing in power. And so the history of our country, 250 years, has been contestation over how to achieve that full sharing of power and responsibility across all segments of our population.

So that's a contest that continues to this day. This is, you know, King's vocabulary as well. He said, you know, the goal is a full sharing of power and responsibility. And that was basically where the mistake was made, that sort of separation of, like, rights versus powers. And that's what we still continue to contest. So I hope that's responsive to your question.

GALSTON: Oh, yes. In the back. Gentleman in the back in this row here.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Danielle, I guess my question is sorta similar. I'm 78 years old, and in 1963 while in high school, I was arrested for going to the all-white library in my hometown of Columbus, Georgia. This was 187 years after the Declaration of Independence. Notwithstanding the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the 13th, 14th, and the 15th Amendment, and Brown versus Board of Education, and my family had been in Columbus, Georgia for more than 100 years. My great-great-grandfather, Fed Porter, was brought here as a slave. So I don't, respectfully, share your rosy view of the Declaration. And I, in fact, I think I'm probably closer to what Frederick Douglass said in 1852, "What to the slave is your celebration of the Fourth of July?"

ZUCKERT: Yeah.

ALLEN: Yeah. No, thank you. I appreciate that. My dad was prevented from entering the library in his northern Florida town where he grew up, and he had to sit outside. There was a librarian who sneaked him books out the window and he would sit outside on the lawn and read books. So I recognize the story, I recognize the history, and it's my family's history as well. I share that fully.

I think that's partly why I invoked the Confederacy and the nature of its declaration. This country has always had more than one voice in its shaping, and it's the Confederacy voice that's responsible for the experiences of my father, and I would submit, for the experiences of your family.

ZUCKERT: Can I just say that it's worth remembering what Lincoln said about the declaration, that it was not-- they did not believe that the principles of the declaration were

fulfilled in their own moment or perhaps would ever be completely fulfilled. But it was set up as a standard to be looked at and, as he thought, progressively achieved. And at least, whether progressively achieved, you know, over time, it's a little more uneven maybe than he was hoping for. But nonetheless, it stands always up there. And it, we have, I think, in some matters, gotten closer to it, but it's always there as a, as something to aspire to.

And I think that's, you know, that's, it, that's its function. Its function transcends its reality at any given moment.

ALLEN: I guess what, if I could say one footnote on-- 'cause what I'm also trying to say is that, you know, the declaration did not make the fact that the Confederacy and its declaration disappear. And the spirits, commitments, beliefs that gave birth to the Confederacy existed from the beginning of the nation. So I would never say that the declaration was the whole of the story of the American republic or experience, right?

That's why I made the point about contestation from the beginning, multiple voices from the beginning. So what I, the main thing I would, the case I wanna make is that the abolitionist perspective, the genuinely egalitarian perspective was there from from the beginning. The perspective of the Confederacy was also there from the beginning.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: [off-mic]

ALLEN: Yeah, I'm not saying it was.

GALSTON: Let me step out of my moderator's role for just a minute to say two things. First of all, your question points straight to the contest which is raging as we speak about how to interpret American history as a whole, right? When you step back from it, is it a case of two steps forward, one step back, which over 250 years have brought us closer to the realization of the ideals of the declaration, but still imperfectly in all sorts of ways?

Or is that a story we tell ourselves, you know, to cheer ourselves up and to gloss over the fact that it is the gaps, the very sizable gaps that remain that ought, we ought to be focused on. And there is some truth, I believe, to both of those ways of telling the story of America.

Let me end this panel with a remark. I had very high hopes for this panel going into it. Those hopes have been exceeded.

ALLEN: Oh.

GALSTON: And I hope very much that you will join me in congratulating our two visitors.

ALLEN: Thank you, Bill.

GALSTON: Thank you. We will reconvene after a 15-minute break for our panel of Brookings scholars to continue this conversation

DUNN TENPAS: Welcome, welcome. Thank you so much for staying for the second act. Special thanks to Michael Zuckert and Danielle Allen for making the trek to Washington, D.C. today to be with us and really do an incredible job of sort of educating us about the history of the Declaration of Independence.

Today -- well, first, I should say I'm Katie Dunn Tenpas. I'm the director of the Initiative on Improving Interbranch Relations in Government and a visiting fellow in Governance Studies.

I'm pleased today to be joined by three of my colleagues. Melanie Sisson is a senior fellow in Foreign Policy and also affiliated with the Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology. Andre Perry is a senior fellow in Brookings Metro and the director of the Center for Community Uplift. And Bob Kagan is the Steven and Barbara Friedman senior fellow in Foreign Policy and also affiliated with the Strobe Talbott Center.

So today what we'd like to do is think about the Declaration of Independence through the lens of their respective areas of research. So what I'd like to do first is start with Melanie and Bob, and ask you the question, what principles in the declaration have featured prominently in US foreign policy? Does it shape debates about military spending, whether to engage with other countries, or can it be used as justification for military intervention?

And why don't we start first with you, Melanie?

SISSON: Sure. Well, thanks. It's really nice to be up here with these gentlemen, with you, Katie. I appreciate it, and glad to see everybody here today. I am actually—I'm gonna leave the early period of American history and foreign policy to Bob, who is far superior in his knowledge of that than I am, and I'll focus more on the post-World War II period of US foreign policy.

And I have to say, during that era, it's really impossible for me to separate the principles of the declaration from the practice and professions about our foreign policy. So I think our political leaders very frequently explain to the American public that their foreign policy agenda is designed to defend the American way of life and to promote American values. And I don't see anything other than a direct reference to the principles of the Declaration of Independence in those phrases, the American way of life and American values. And those values being the principle of natural equality, individual agency, and government by consent.

So in that sense, how our government behaves in its foreign policy, how much military capability it buys, what it spends that money on, what it does with that military, at their core are often justified as the means necessary to prevent external actors from degrading those really core principled features of the American nation.

One of the enduring tensions in that, enduring tensions in that foreign policy, however, is whether direct defense of the principles as they are instantiated here in the United States is enough, or if it's enough for the United States to be an example, or if it also needs to be a missionary. Do we have a moral obligation to spread those principles from the Declaration of Independence to other places and other peoples? Or is it simply in the interests of American democracy to have more countries around the world who believe similarly in those foundational principles? Will that keep the United States and its ability to retain its own practices here at home well into the future?

Given the current state of our domestic politics, I think though that it's worth pointing out that one of the arguments against that outward pushing and that missionary approach to securing American principles is that doing that requires that our government have particular tools and that it organize itself in particular ways. And that those things might, those very adjustments in order to be that missionary for these principles abroad might distort or corrupt our own ability to practice and refine those principles here at home. So that's the critique that an America that goes abroad in search of monsters might then cease to be the ruler of her own spirit.

DUNN TENPAS: Great. Thank you. Bob, what about you? What do you think?

KAGAN: I mean, let me just say a few things about the declaration in American foreign policy 'cause there's no question that the declaration has been, just as it's a contested issue at home, it has had a contested effect on American foreign policy. I mean, its effect is contested.

But go back to the very beginning. I mean, one thing-- I, I don't know whether this was mentioned in the first panel, but, you know, the, the Declaration of Independence was first and foremost, a foreign policy document. It was a legal document. Its purpose was to get recognition by other nations of America's independence, and they needed a rationale to explain why it was okay that they were doing this. And in the course of coming up with this rationale, they actually invented a whole new way of thinking about—they didn't invent it, but they certainly actualized it in a way that it had never been done before.

But because, as was mentioned in the previous panel, at the time even of the declaration, it was far from being a universal opinion in the United States that the principles of the declaration were right, and and this affected American foreign policy, especially as the slavery issue grew, particularly, I would say, following the Missouri Crisis of 1820. At which point then the United States basically becomes two nations at war with each other, and with two different foreign policy approaches.

So that the North, for instance quite consciously looked out at the world. Because at the same time, there is a struggle between liberalism and autocracy happening in Europe right then. That's when you had the sort of three emperors, the Holy Alliance of absolutist countries who were trying to impose absolutism in Europe and also potentially in the Western Hemisphere. So this battle was ongoing, and if you were in the North, your sympathies were with those liberal revolutions that were occurring in Europe at the time, whether it was the Greek Revolution in the 1820s or later, you know, when Kossuth visited the United States, hundreds of thousands of people came to see him in city, in northern cities like New York.

And so people in the North, and particularly along, you know, the closer you got to abolitionism wanted to support as much as they could these liberal revolutions abroad on the theory that it mattered to liberalism at home. Whereas the people of the South were the realists of that time, and they did not want morality to be playing or ideology to be playing a role in American foreign policy, precisely because they knew that part of the North's motive in supporting these liberals overseas was to turn that against the people of the South and go after their regime.

So you have these two regimes struggling. And so that's why the Civil War is a turning point in American foreign policy. Because up until the Civil War, you basically have these two forces canceling each other out. When the South loses and the Republican Party becomes the party, the Republican Party is an inherently moralistic party. It was founded against slavery. It was founded against the idea of hierarchical government. It was founded, if you believe Lincoln, to sort of recapture the essence of the declaration. And American foreign policy going forward will henceforth always have a more moralistic content because of the defeat of the sort of Southern realism.

And so if, and then if you look through the history of American foreign policy since then it's true that American policy was oscillating back and forth between intervention and non-intervention for other reasons, having to do with disillusionment of one kind or another. But there's also a clear connection between periods of what I would call anti-declaration

sentiment dominating and a more isolationist foreign policy on the one hand, whereas in periods where you had what they, what you would call progressives or a more liberal dominance in the nation, you tended to be more moralistic and internationally engaged.

And so for instance, in the 1920s, it's not just that Americans are disillusioned by World War I, America's also entered a heavily conservative period in its politics because of immigration. You know, eugenics is popular. The Klan is running rampant in that period. And that came together with all kinds of xenophobic policies having to do with anti-immigration, anti-trade, et cetera, et cetera.

And so it's clear that we, in our history, have vacillated back and forth. And what we saw-- i'm sorry this is a very long discussion, but I'm gonna end it quickly. What we saw as a result of the Depression and World War II was a triumph of the liberal attitude. America's World War II, Cold War, post-Cold War policy was a liberal policy fundamentally. And what we're seeing now in the turn against liberalism, we have an overtly anti-liberal administration that is anti- the Declaration of Independence. They are specifically seeking to recreate a Christian, white, hierarchical society, hierarchical of the sexes, hierarchies of the religions, hierarchy of the races. And so naturally, they are hostile to the liberal world order that was created by the liberal consensus in America.

And so we've gone through this evolution again and wound up at this end. At a time when the sort of support for the declaration is at a low ebb, so is support for American global involvement.

DUNN TENPAS: Yeah. It's almost a, an inopportune moment for it to be the 250th birthday. You might have wanted to get it at a high-

KAGAN: It's unfortunate, yeah.

DUNN TENPAS: Yeah. And Andre looking through the prism of sort of domestic policy, housing policy, things like that, how do you see features of the declaration emerging?

PERRY: Well, there's two areas of my research where the declaration really resonates. First one is around wellbeing, the second is education.

I'll speak to the first one, wellbeing. Wellbeing is a social science concept that encapsulates the question, how are you doing, politically, socially? All the different things that revolve around in your world, and you can respond at, how am I doing? That really tracks nicely with this concept of the pursuit of happiness.

And what we, what my research shows is that wealth is a significant component, infrastructure for the pursuit of happiness. So what I will argue throughout this presentation, right, that the declaration did do significant good in terms of the securing of civic rights throughout this time period. Hard fought, lives lost, no question, but you don't get 13th, 14th, 15th Amendment. You don't get Civil Rights Act of '64, '68. You don't see this progression, what I do, what I believe is progression in civil rights, without the declaration, right? But what didn't come along with it is the economic foundation that will enable people to have the happiness that they're pursuing. And so a lot of my research revolves around that.

And then the, in addition, you mentioned housing. Most people know me through my work on housing devaluation. The wealth extraction that came in the form of redlining, blockbusting, transportation policy, you name it, led to, had an impact on today's housing market, in which

you see homes in Black neighborhoods underpriced by 23%, about 48,000 per home. Cumulatively, that's about 156 billion in lost equity. That translated to about 4.4 million Black-owned businesses, based upon the average amount Black people use to start their firms, would've paid for more than 8 million four-year degrees, would've covered Hurricane Katrina damage. It's replaced the pipes in Flint, Michigan 3,000 times over. It's a big number.

People had the rights, the civic rights. They just didn't have the resources that were extracted. And so a lot of my research is, what's that next moral document that we're gonna hold to? We need the declaration and and certainly we will bring this up a question in the back earlier on talked about the declaration. I think it's the, it was the most powerful tool to get the civic rights we currently have. With that said, rights without resources gets you where we are. And that's where a lot of my research falls.

DUNN TENPAS: Okay. You all did an incredible job to sort of, relate the types of policy with, and the features of the declaration that sort of emerge within that policy.

But I'd like to sort of ask a more specific question, which is, can you cite specific historic events that maybe are the best illustration of the declaration at work? Melanie first and then Bob, and then we'll go back to Andre.

SISSON: Well, when I think about in foreign policy specific projects or events oriented around the principles of the Declaration of Independence, it's hard for me not to think of, as Bob mentioned, the end of World War II, and most specifically, the occupation and reconstruction of Japan and Germany, where those constitutions were directly informed by the founding principles of the Declaration of Independence.

And we were really committed to it. Those were long-term efforts, non-trivial in every sense of the word. The outcomes and results were not preordained but there was a real commitment to the United States to seeing that project through. And in that sense, I think about it as the Declaration, literally-- it didn't just change US foreign policy or the environment in which the United States needed to work to implement foreign policy in service of the nation. It's a another time when I think the principles of the declaration literally changed the world.

DUNN TENPAS: Yeah. Not just, it's not just sort of its impact on foreign policy just has so many repercussions around, across the entire world. That's a profound statement. Bob, why don't you take it from there?

KAGAN: Well, I mean, you know, it's hard to separate out the principles of the declaration from American foreign policy because even when the United States was not... by the way, I'm, Melanie and I may disagree about how much of a missionary approach the United States has taken. Usually we regarded ourselves as defending democracy where it was under assault. There was very little effort to implant democracy anywhere else, and by the way, that's not what Iraq was about. But the but the, that those principles were there guiding policy.

I mean, Roosevelt didn't have to turn World War II into an ideological conflict. There was plenty of security reasons, especially after Pearl Harbor, to say we need to go to war. Yet he went out of his way to make it an ideological conflict, with the Atlantic Charter and the Four Freedoms, et cetera which he wrapped into a whole foreign policy package. And I think that's because it was an accurate expression of why Americans had wound up at war themselves, which was that, and this is before Pearl Harbor, they were increasingly unhappy

that liberal democracies around the world were increasingly under threat, and they did believe, just as the people of the early 19th century believed, that it mattered to them whether liberalism and democracy were surviving abroad.

They did not go to World War, go into World War II in order to spread democracy. They went into World War II in order to defend democracy, and most of the Cold War was about defending democracy, not about spreading it. But I think therefore in that sense the principles of the declaration have infused our foreign policy, both in terms of our ignoring them, but also, but definitely as a driving force.

SISSON: And just, can I quickly, I don't disagree with that assessment of US foreign policy that it hasn't been primarily the missionary zeal. But it is that belief that the world in which there are more democracies is a world safer for the American democracy.

KAGAN: Absolutely.

SISSON: So that's an element.

KAGAN: And you know, absolutely. And every time there was an aggressor out there in the world, whether it was the king of England or the absolutists of the 19th century or Hitler, it was because they were opposed to liberal democracy that made them aggressors. We had a theory that, I mean, we had a kind of quasi enlightenment concept that if we were all democracies, we'd have no reason to go to war with each other. So part of the reason for transforming defeated countries into democracies was you were basically curing them of their aggressive instincts.

DUNN TENPAS: How would you characterize Vietnam?

KAGAN: In what, in what respect?

DUNN TENPAS: Well, sort of pushing democracy, missionary, like...

KAGAN: It really wasn't about democracy. It was more about, it was more about anti-communism, obviously. Now, those two things are related, obviously, at least in some people's minds. But, you know, I wouldn't say there was a whole lot of—they would say supporting democracy, but I don't think anybody was too concerned about whether, like, South Vietnam was actually a democracy.

So I think that was part of the what the Brzezinski would call the grand chessboard kind of approach to foreign policy, rather than it being primarily ideological. It was, may have been wrong, but that was the approach.

DUNN TENPAS: And you mentioned Iraq, but what about that?

KAGAN: Iraq? Well, Iraq was also, again it's been portrayed wrongly as an ideologically driven policy. It definitely wasn't—the people who made this policy were not particularly ideological, I would say, other than in a normal sort of American sense. And it was mostly a security concern, rightly or wrongly.

But then and this is the way it has happened in multiple instances, we didn't invade Iraq in order to promote democracy, but having invaded Iraq, we weren't gonna promote dictatorship, which was the alternative. And and that's frequently happened, and by the way, caused us all kinds of trouble. Because if you wanted to just go in, take out some guy, and

wipe your hands of it, and say, "I don't care what happens to the country after that," a perfectly reasonable thing to do, but that's not the way we ever thought about it because we thought we had a responsibility.

And let me just say one final thing, which is there is a huge and insoluble tension between wielding power and having the beliefs that we have. Because by nature, using power means depriving other people of their agency, of their right to make their own decisions. That's what power is about. As Niebuhr would've pointed out to us many times, it is impossible to use power in an entirely moral fashion. And by, what you mean by that is you're also violating our own principles. And the great tension of American foreign policy since World War II has been the problem of being a great power, a hegemonic power, exercising power, while at the same time holding these basic principles.

DUNN TENPAS: Melanie?

SISSON: Just to note that in the presentation of making these cases to the American people about why we engage in these military actions abroad, it, there is something that clearly resonates with the American population about the American way of life, these principles. Even if the conflict is not primarily about that, there is something that politicians understand about the American identity that makes this tension that Bob was talking about more palatable to say, "But it is for the good of people in this particular way that we are doing this." And it's not just at risk of being pedantic. We use democracy as a shorthand a lot, but they're really the liberal principles- is where the real weight of it should go.

KAGAN: And no one goes to war saying, "We're going to war for the blank way of life." Only we say that. No one has ever said that in the history of the universe, okay? So that is a special thing.

DUNN TENPAS: And politicians may use that sort of approach to kinda sell it to the American people 'cause they think it resonates, is what you're saying, right, Melanie?

SISSON: Yeah. And I think it, it's important that it resonates. I mean, it does evidence something about an American identity that says these, we find these principles so important that they are galvanizing to action in particular sorts of ways. I mean, I think that matters.

DUNN TENPAS: Yeah. So Andre, shifting gears, I'm sorry about this. But you did mention the Civil Rights movement and different historic events. But can you elaborate that on, on, on civil rights?

PERRY: Yeah, and I missed a beat on the first question, so I'll answer that and respond to the second. I remember I talked about education. And one of my favorite philosophers, John Dewey, famously said, I might get this wrong, that democracy's born anew for every generation. Education is the midwife. That we must learn these foundational documents in school. I can easily argue that the discord, the tensions, the political strife is somewhat a result, a result of us not understanding what's in these documents.

Now, when I push civics education, it's not in this flag-waving patriotic sense. It is patriotic, but in a sense of a idea of a mother country where different entities can exist under this framework. But going to the second question, you know, when, as soon as the declaration was authorized, even before that, you had abolitionists influencing the document. You don't get life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness without abolitionists.

And then from them, from then on, almost every racial justice movement latched on to the those words in the Declaration of Independence. You can, I mean, obviously if you wanna include Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, you can get to Martin Luther King Jr., obviously, liking it to a promissory note. You can get to Fannie Lou Hamer. Even Black Lives Matter is morally an argument of equality.

And so you don't, and going back again, you don't get to understand that unless you're learning these things in a structured way. And so for me a civics education requires the kind of factual accuracy that oftentimes the, the education wars tries to remove. That they want to paint this, what, a picture of America that I don't know what it is.

And then, but also it must be balanced with this democratic coherence. Like, why are we doing these things? For what purpose? And I was a former school educator when I was a professor, and I remember the squeezing out of civics education in pursuit of higher math and reading scores, as if you can't learn how to read by looking at the declaration or the Constitution. But we would squeeze those topics out. And we are seeing, in my opinion, some of that bad fruit as a result.

So there, you can't, you can't pass up any kind of major legislation statute around civil rights without pointing to the Declaration of Independence, and that's why we must teach it, but in a way that is accurate, whatever that means, a way that is authentic, but also remembers that the purpose of this is for, to advance a democracy. And so that's what I think is missing ultimately.

DUNN TENPAS: Yeah. And Bob's earlier comment about the Declaration of Independence essentially being a treaty almost, and yet it's become this profound document that has been used throughout history to advance civil rights movements.

So I'm gonna switch gears a little bit to sort of just get kind of your opinions about the declaration itself. What do you think is the most important sentence or part of the declaration? What do you think believes deserves the most highlighting for future generations?

We'll start with you, Melanie.

SISSON: Sure. You know, I think for me it's this conceptual progression from this idea of equality to the consent of the governed. When I, in my sort of amateur armchair political philosopher role, what I understand this to be is a, an attempt by our founders to solve one of the most vexing of human problems, which is that it's really hard to get people to live together sociably and productively.

Turns out that there have been a lot of ways that have been tried, a lot of them end violently, it doesn't go well, and the founders recognized this. They were in a situation in which they were unhappy. They were gathering up as a people to try to establish a different way for this new collection of human beings living in the States to be able to do that in a way that that again, could be sociable and productive.

And so the call to equality, which is to say a baby is a baby, and that the accidents of its birth and the circumstances of its arrival doesn't make it subservient to any of the other babies around it, right? There, this is the human condition.

But it's also, and we know this is nature's law. We know it's nature's law that there's not this natural hierarchy because you can look at how humans acted in the absence of an authority. People are probably well familiar with the Hobbesian phrasing of, you know, that in the absence of overarching authority, life can be solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short, right? Because there's no natural hierarchy, so the babies can all go after each other and nothing is there to stop them, and that's an unhappy way to live.

And so they identified equality as the necessary precondition for self-government, and self-government as the necessary method for devising a society that addresses two fundamental facts about humans. The first is that it's really hard for us to live sociably and constructively if we each can do whatever we want, and the second is that people generally, human beings generally disdain being told what they can do and what they can't do. We don't like that, right? Right. So you've got a problem there.

And so the hope of the principles that are embedded in the declaration, it seems to me, is that equal people equally interested in having the maximum agency over what they can do, the maximum of individual agency, the ability to act, to flourish, to be what it is that they are capable, have the potential of being, and the minimum of limitations on what they can do could together and over time be able to identify only the set of necessary and sufficient rules to guide social behavior. And then they would design institutions to implement them, right?

So I think when I hear the golden apple and the silver frame, that's, the core logic unfolding is that golden apple, and the Constitution is the implementation, the method by which these rules are to be devised. And really importantly, I think, about the phrasing is there's nothing in it, in the, that logical connection of the principle to the method, that's static or fixed or can't be changed, right?

So the scope of how we understand equality can, and I think happily has, changed over time. The rules can be renegotiated. Implementation can be done differently. It's the "my country, right or wrong, if right to be kept right, if wrong to be set right." So there's no claim that we've achieved perfection on these things but we have a method, we have a mechanism for redressing those wrongs.

The only thing that's really immutable in the principles of the declaration is the logic connecting equality to the individual agency to self-government. That's the only thing that I think is immutable.

DUNN TENPAS: Great. That's a great answer. Bob? You probably hate this question, but-

KAGAN: What was the, the question is what's the most important line?

DUNN TENPAS: What do you think is the most important sentence or part of the Declaration?

KAGAN: I mean, obviously the, the statement that--

DUNN TENPAS: And this is just your opinion, like what, what do you really value, that you think future generations--

KAGAN: I'm gonna read... I'm gonna, I'm gonna tell you what I find most interesting and most significant in some ways, which is the, "We hold these truths to be self-evident."

And that is why—I think that's really important, because everything that Melanie just described about the way things are, that's a very new concept in human existence. I would say the number, the percentage of people who have held the view that you described in the course of human history is so infinitesimal, I don't think I could find a number to attach to it. That is not the way most people thought about, have thought about the world.

That's not the way certainly most Europeans felt about the world at the time of the Revolution. It was not the way the British felt about the world at the time of the Revolution. British, English rights were inherited rights. They were not, they were not natural rights. And so what's funny about the declaration, if you could say it's funny, is this assertion, and when they say, you know, among the truths that we find self-evident are that governments are formed for the purpose of defending—No, they're not. Not at any time in history, ever until right now. Not Athens, not anybody. That was never what this was about.

So you can easily lose sight of what a novel and aberrational concept this is, and most... The reason I focus on "we hold these truths to be self-evident" is that it's an assertion. It's an assertion about how you wanna live. It is a belief system. It is not The Truth, and a lot of the problem that American people have is in thinking that what they're articulating is the truth, and it's just the rest of the world needs to catch up and figure it out, whereas what they are articulating is a view, and it is not a universally held view.

And so that has created a lot of tension, and that gets back to the problem of power and ideology, because sometimes you're gonna make people be democracies for whatever reason, that they didn't wanna be democracies. I do think Americans need to remember that what, they are holding a belief system, and either they believe it or they don't, and if they do believe it, they have to defend it, and they have to defend it against everybody, including overseas and at home.

And the only thing I wanted to mention in, in, in response to what Andre said was, I don't wanna lose sight of the fact, which we have lost sight of, that no matter how much you educate people, there are going to be people in America who do not agree with the principles of the Declaration of Independence, okay? 100 years after the Civil War, the South did not believe in the Declaration of Independence, and I'm not sure that many people around the country today believe in the Declaration of Independence. And the people who don't really believe in the declaration are the main supporters of our current administration.

And so this is not just a matter of everybody understanding. The thing we need to understand is that we are in a fight, as we have been since the founding.

PERRY: Yeah, and I would agree with that, that and not to push back on that, but when I say people should learn it, they should debate it, they should deliberate it, they should disagree. But they should have a foundation to do so, for me.

But I wanna echo two words in that phrase that mean everything to me. One is called "we hold." It speaks to our ongoing commitment, our current-day commitment, our willingness to engage, our, our the demand that we hold. And that, for me, has been transcendent.

There's another poem by Langston Hughes, "Hold Fast to Dreams." This idea of holding something has always meant a lot to me. That I, too, can hold this idea today, just the same way that those men did years ago, 250 years ago. So for me, we hold says a lot in itself about our ongoing commitment. With every passing generation, democracy must, is born anew. And we must be committed to some principles, and that's why, for me, education, I do

believe that if you don't insert these principles, you will lose your moral compass. You will lose those virtues that, you know, people will agree or disagree, but I wanna see a moral compass.

I would also like to see and like I mentioned this earlier, economic bill of rights. My good friend Darrick Hamilton, economist at The New School, who talks a lot about the right to, to work and live in the same place, income, we should save certain, shelters, and other basic economic principles. Where you've, where you're starting to see a, a clear divide in this country is around material goods. Some people simply do not have the material goods to exercise the rights that they have.

And so the, for me the, again the declaration is insufficient. I mean, Roosevelt said that in the State of the Union speech in '44, that it's insufficient. We need a bill, an economic bill of rights to go with it, but we hold. That, for me, keeps us going.

DUNN TENPAS: And can I follow up to ask you how hopeful you are about this economic bill of rights?

PERRY: No, I think right now the conversation on affordability is getting to that. We just released a study that showed about 44% of Americans can't afford the basic cost of living. 30% of the middle class can't afford the basic cost of living in this country. 30%-- and the, the middle class is supposed to be our standard of who, who has the good life, then we are in trouble.

And it's right now because I believe, because so many middle class Americans are now struggling to make ends meet, they're now sympathizing with others for the first time. The engineer understands what it means to be a teacher. The, your, your middle class white American now understands what it means to be Black. It, it has the potential to unify the country. That's what I'm hoping will happen, and I am hopeful for that. That an economic bill of rights will emerge.

We're having this debate around democratic socialism, corporatism, capitalism, what will survive. What is clear that if we don't figure out a way to provide people with the basic goods and services like housing, healthcare, some post-secondary education, childcare, people simply won't be able to live out their pursuit of happiness.

DUNN TENPAS: Melanie?

SISSON: I just, I wanna say that, you know, we absolutely need and should be really appreciative to have revolutionaries still pushing implementation, right? To correct things that are not being done properly and consistently with our evolving understanding of what these principles of the declaration require of us.

And we also have to attend to what I think Bob raises, which, there is a revolt against the principles themselves. And the movement there is away from that very prizing of individual equality and the absence of hierarchy, and the imperative of not constructing our society in ways that some people are subservient to others on whatever basis, whether it's complexion ethnicity, it's gender, any of those things. There is a movement afoot that rejects that premise and is instead looking to supplant it with a much more communitarian orientation that is hierarchically defined, that there are some people who are subservient to others, and that is the right and proper way for us to exist. And then again, there's people who either coupled with that conception or independently think that authoritarianism is okay. Right?

And so we, you know, we are in a position right now where I think we have to be able to acknowledge that both of these real challenges exist and find a way to motivate ourselves and move ourselves to act on, on both sides of that equation.

DUNN TENPAS: Yeah. So you led me to my next question. Thank you for that segue. And Bob talked earlier about sort of America's wavering commitment to the declaration over time. There are periods where we are sort of more committed to some of the principles in it, and periods where we have not. And Melanie just cited one of the, sort of a prescriptive idea about how we can move forward.

So I wanted to move that question to you too, Bob, which is, are there any prescriptions for how the country can deepen its commitment to the key principles laid out in the declaration? And I know that right now is not the great, not the best time, but at times like this, maybe we need to think about prescriptions for, or ways or solutions to advance the principles in this document as opposed to where we are right now. Do you have any ideas?

KAGAN: Well, in a way you're asking for what the post-war settlement should look like before we've had the war. And unfortunately, we have to have this fight first because right now the forces that are against the principles of the declaration are in the ascendant in terms of controlling power in this country.

We have means of changing that. We have means of you know, through elections of pushing back against this direction. And so now we have to make sure that we can have elections. Because I'm very concerned that 2026 elections are gonna be fiddled with in one way or another by this administration precisely 'cause they don't want that backlash. So I'm much more interested in the fight that needs to happen right now.

I think, by the way, you know, if you... It is interesting because the consensus in the United States in the late 1930s was a conservative, anti-liberal consensus. Fascism was actually in vogue at, in, in many quarters. But more importantly, the idea in, of the inherent inequality of the races was the ascendant view at that time. You know, Sam Huntington's father was president of the American Eugenics Society, okay? That was how deeply it ran. And then we had, because of the Depression and because of the World War II, we had a -- particularly World War II-- we had a reaction entirely against that. And then all of a sudden it was unacceptable to talk about the hierarchy of the races, et cetera.

Well, I'm sorry, now we're back to talking about the hierarchy of races. Stephen Miller is very clear about the hierarchy of the races. This anti-immigration sentiment is not just about illegal immigration. It's about the complexion of the United States. When Donald Trump talks about poisoning the blood, you know what he's talking about. And so we are, in fact, back to a real philosophical challenge. These people call themselves post-liberals, but what they really are is trying to undo the degree to which the declaration is the underpinning of our society.

DUNN TENPAS: And your view is that by having these kinds of arguments, we could advance sort of the principles in the future.

KAGAN: I think it's important for people to remember why they care about the Declaration of Independence. And by the way, there's a lot of people who have been incredible beneficiaries of the declaration who are now against it because they've already gotten what they need. And this is another pattern in American society, you know? The Irish and the

Germans were on the outs. Boy, did they care about rights in those days, but now they're on the in, they don't care about rights anymore. I don't mean that. I'm sure.

PERRY: Don't wanna offend.

KAGAN: Making a broad statement here, folks. But I'm just saying that there has been this transition of many white ethnic groups that with themselves were at the bottom of the ladder, who used the declaration to climb back and get as the previous panel was talking, have a chance to contest, who then once having accomplished it, are no longer interested in everybody else making it.

DUNN TENPAS: They've moved on.

KAGAN: And that, maybe that's the education process. Yeah.

SISSON: Right. I mean, I think it's hard for people to, to engage a fight unless they have a really good understanding of what it is that they're fighting for. And so I don't mean to say this in a glib way, but it came to mind, like, there is an element here of an education piece where we need to make political philosophy cool again. You know? Where we need to--

PERRY: I agree.

SISSON: Right? So the people understand the why of all of this, and understand that what's under assault is what, weirdly, those assaulting it are using as the language of liberty. It's this weird reversal using the words freedom and liberty to assault the principles of the Declaration of Independence that instantiate the, those, that very sort of basis of liberty.

KAGAN: It's Sinclair Lewis's fantasy

SISSON: Yeah. Right. So education and the fight. And so maybe the 250th actually is coming at exactly the time when we need it most, right, to reinvigorate this kind of discussion.

PERRY: You know what's interesting about today's context is that we are structurally a much different country. We did a survey, and you can look at this up after the panel, of course. The title is "We Ask Americans How They Feel About Racial Cooperation." We asked people to rate their interactions across race in family, business sectors, and social sectors. Americans by far and away are much more positive on racial cooperation than the social media headlines, than the news reports suggest.

That, and then even structurally, 11% of the people surveyed, which are national representative sample were, their parents are multiracial. 23% of their children are multiracial. This, this blending in itself, and I'm not saying that demographics are destiny, but it's a much harder argument to make around this racial hierarchy now than it was then.

But it, herein lies the opportunity. We can see our connectedness, and that fight's going to happen. It is going to happen. We will lose if this sense of pluralism does not emerge. And if we don't find cooperation, opportunities for cooperation in our public policymaking-- you have a housing bill on a, bipartisan housing bill that's on the table. on the table. We can't pass that right now because of this Save America Act, right? We need to push back. There is an opportunity there. We can go on many different fronts: childcare, higher education, housing. There are opportunities for this multiracial co-op, coalition to emerge, this rainbow coalition that Fred Hampton, that Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson Jr. sought after.

That, with that fight, it'll, and it, and there will be bloodshed, there will be hurt, there will be pain, but the victory will be had.

DUNN TENPAS: Yeah. Thank you. So interestingly, this is the second event we've had for America's 250th. Last Tuesday, my colleague Bill Galston hosted another one, and the fundamental theme of that was also contestation. So we've mentioned that over and over again, so that should be, it's a thread that's connected both of these events.

And instead of sort of grilling these guys with questions they don't wanna answer I'm gonna let you all ask questions. And so we have some interns that'll have microphones going around. So why don't we first start with you in the middle with the baseball cap, I think, and then I'll come back over to the right side. And if you could say your name, and if you would like to say your affiliation.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Sure. Adam Khan. I'm running for mayor of Washington, D.C. as an independent. Thomas Jefferson's first draft did not include the word self-evident. He actually used the phrase sacred and undeniable for these rights, and he passed it to Benjamin Franklin, who crossed it out. And, you know, I thought that was an interesting bit of trivia.

But my question is, according to recent 2026 data, roughly 80% of Americans report being satisfied with their personal lives, yet only 20% report being satisfied with the direction of the country. When there's a 60% gap between individual contentment and national despair, what does that mean for the long-term stability of American democracy? Does that high level of personal dissatisfaction act as a stabilizing buffer that keeps the republic intact, or does the deep macro level cynicism towards our national institution leaves the country dangerously vulnerable to populists?

DUNN TENPAS: Anybody want to take it?

PERRY: I mean, I generally have always thought that the, our focus on individual rights and individual agency sometimes skews matters a bit. And I know in terms of African American progression, many people have then blamed individualism as a way for not achieving certain economic or social goals, that they have completely ignored the policies that extracted wealth and opportunities.

But I wanna get to the point. I do think we need to see our shared fate, so to speak, that we need to instill this idea that we are better together, that we're in this together, that kind of principle, which I do think the declaration holds. So for me, it gets back to those moral principles.

We don't talk about virtue. I mean, this is the first panel I've been on where I've mentioned the word, except for one on civics education, where I utter the word virtue. Moral document. We just don't have those conversations anymore. And what, the, what this 250th does for me is give at least me the license to evoke these conversations in everyday policy conversation. Why are we doing this?

DUNN TENPAS: Yeah.

KAGAN: I just wanna know who the 20% of the people think the country's going in the right direction. That's—I'd like to meet them.

DUNN TENPAS: You're distracted by that.

KAGAN: I mean, I just wanna say, I consider myself personally satisfied, and I think the country's going in the wrong direction, so I don't—is that an irrational response on my part? I mean, it seems to me perfectly rational.

SISSON: Well, I, and to that end, I guess I don't know the specifics of this survey, but sort of the methodological question is bias in the sample. I mean, who's answering these surveys? They may be people who are very comfortable in their personal lives because the things that they're uncomfortable about in the direction of the nation are not happening directly to them. Right? So I'd, I'd wanna tinker a bit under the hood.

DUNN TENPAS: Yeah. And I would just like to add a little plug here, just like Michael Zuckert did for his books that season three of the podcast that I host called Democracy in Question is all about parsing the lines in the Declaration of Independence, and there is an entire episode dedicated to sacred versus self-evident and sort of the Benjamin, Benjamin Franklin- influence. So if you listen to that podcast I think you'll learn even more. Thank you for your question.

And anybody else? Yes, and could you stand and give your name and ask your question, and we'll get you a microphone here.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Hey, I'm Tezjan with the Rumi Forum. So my question is if the ideals of the Declaration of Independence are no longer shared, what should unite Americans? And what, if anything, should be non-negotiable?

KAGAN: The Declaration of Independence should be non-negotiable. I mean, it's, as we've said, it's not new that many Americans don't agree with the principles of the Declaration of Independence and and that's why—and it's always been a struggle. We had, we solved this struggle once with a civil war in which hundreds of thousands of people died. I hope we don't have to solve it in that manner the second time, but we do have to address it. We are in a, we are in a kind of civil conflict. I think we really need to be clear about that. So that's—we need to fight it and that, the principles of the Declaration are what should be non-negotiable.

DUNN TENPAS: Yeah. Next question right here. Second row.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thank you. My name is Makinnai Mele. I'm a legislative intern for the Alliance for American Leadership., We're a political action committee focused on foreign assistance and bringing that back.

And so today my question is today the Supreme Court ruled six to three that the 14th Amendment protects birthright citizenship, striking down the administration's executive order that sought to deny automatic citizenship to children born in the United States. The the majority reaffirmed that any change to birthright citizenship would require a change in the Constitution, not simply an executive order. And so my question is, if the United States bases much of its foreign policy on the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, how does today's decision affect America's credibility when promoting democracy, the rule of law, and constitutional governments around the world?

DUNN TENPAS: You thought my questions were hard. It's a comprehensive exam question for you. Anyone wanna take it, a stab at it?

SISSON: Well, I'll just say, I mean, I think that the extent to which the United States has actually endeavored to embody its liberal principles in the international arena is a debatable proposition. And you know, there's, there are... you could go through a catalog of reasons for, and times and places for where you see it more pronounced, where you see it less pronounced, and all of those things.

But the question of credibility of the United States right now is more fundamental. It's not so much this particular Supreme Court decision or this sort of contestation around birthright citizenship per se, as I think it is really the contestation about whether or not we are going to remain a nation that identifies itself on the basis of these foundational principles that are articulated in the Declaration of Independence. And while we're in the midst of that battle, you know, I don't know what kind of America we're quite looking at, and so I can't imagine that any other watcher in any other part of the world understands or can possibly predict what kind of America it's looking at today, much less tomorrow.

DUNN TENPAS: Okay. Thank you for your question. Over here maybe.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Hi, my name is Aaron Pinkus. I'm also an intern for Association for American Leadership. And I wanna talk about the recent shutdown of USAID and how that can be understood in the context of the Declaration of Independence. So if the Declaration says that all people have a right to life, liberty, and freedom from tyranny, does the United States have any responsibility to support those principles abroad through humanitarian aid and diplomacy, or are those ideals meant to stop at our borders?

DUNN TENPAS: Bob, you wanna take this one?

KAGAN: Well, I mean, if you wanna ask what the reality is, those principles have never, we've never, as a country, we've never regarded those principles of stopping at our borders. I mean—and by the way, the Civil War itself, in a way, was a test of this because—the argument of the South and people in the North who didn't think we needed, that there needed to be a civil war was that, "They're over there. They can do what they want. We're over here. We'll do what we want." And Lincoln's attitude was, "No, that, that doesn't work." And to some extent, I think we carried that out into the world.

There is a certain house divided sentiment that you can find in American foreign policy. So I, I think, you know, it's always gonna—as I, as we've said before, it's always going to, it's always gonna be there. The turning against USAID is more of a—No, the United States does not have an obligation to provide foreign aid. It does not. Why has it? It gets back to, again, what kind of world do Americans wanna live in? And that is a deciding factor is that what kind of world do we wanna live in?

But that's what Franklin Roosevelt, by the way, explicitly appealed to in January 1940 at the, his speech in the University of Virginia, which I strongly recommend to you. Because what he said was, "We may actually be able to survive in a world in which Japan is dominating East Asia and Germany is dominating Europe, but we don't wanna live in that world, and it's gonna be a worse world from our point of view." So I think that is always there.

DUNN TENPAS: Anyone wanna add? Are you good? Okay. Yes. Up here in the second row, please.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Hi, good afternoon. My name is Baktawar. I'm a director of Institutional Affairs at the Alliance for American Leadership. I have a question for Dr. Kaye,

and thank you for your remarks. You made the distinction that the United States has historically sought to defend democracy rather than spread it.

So given the recent reductions to USAID democracy and governance programs, do you think that we're simply changing the tools we use to defend democracy, or are we moving away from the idea that defending democracy itself is an American interest?

KAGAN: This, in this administration, we have definitely moved away from the idea that defending democracy is a, is an American interest, and have actually reversed the picture now.

And that's ironic because when the administration first came in, you felt that they were kind of selling a kind of realist approach to the world, where the big error that America made was trying to export democracy and support and therefore the National Endowment for Democracy was meddling in other countries' affairs, et cetera, et cetera, which was true, by the way.

So you might have thought, "Okay, we're gonna cut all that off now because we're realists and we don't think about those things." Except what they've done is replaced the support for democracy with the support of anti-democracy. So we are now actively supporting-- we supported Viktor Orbán in Hungary. Thank goodness he lost. But every right-wing populist movement from the AfD in Germany, to Reform and Nigel Farage in Britain, to Le Pen in France has the support of this administration.

So they've not have nearly, they've not merely abandoned support of democracy, they've turned support of democracy into support of what for them are like-minded governments. They want right-wing, anti-democratic, anti-liberal populist governments around the world because that makes them more comfortable.

DUNN TENPAS: Yeah, back right there. Thank you.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thank you. I'm Wilson. I'm a student right now at the St. Albans School at the School of Public Service near here. And I'd like to return to the foreign policy conversation, Dr. Kagan, from the beginning. Because all of our presidents and all our politicians kind of wrap our military operations in terms of defending democracy, supporting freedom fighters, defending the declaration, how can we kind of discern when America is truly engaging in that and when we are just kind of doing great power politics that's happened since the beginning of history?

KAGAN: Well, first of all, we're always doing great power politics, too. It's never, you know, we're just out there trying to promote the good and the decent in the world. I mean, that's not a, the primary action of any government.

So much of what we're doing is sort of normal great power politics and in some respects, normal security concerns. Although the United States is strange 'cause we don't really have any security concerns to some extent. But at the same time, it is a misunderstanding of international relations and human existence to think that what a nation believes is not also informing its foreign policy decisions in addition to great power considerations.

So China has a view of the world and China's place in it that is different from America's view and America's place in it, and they're pursuing that. They're also being a great power, but

they're also being a great power towards some end. And so it's the interaction of power and belief that makes the world tick.

And so that's why it matters whether the United States is in a pro-democratic mood or in an anti-democratic mood. And other nations similarly are gonna be shaped by their worldview to some extent in foreign policy. So it's never an, a simple either/or.

DUNN TENPAS: So we're coming to a close, but I just wanna ask my panelists if they have any final thoughts before we break up. And I wanna also extend a sincere thank you for spending your afternoon with us today to think about the declaration and think about contestation and hopefully these principles now are foremost in your mind as well.

Anyone, any final thoughts? Melanie?

SISSON: I would just, I mean, for people interested in this, if you haven't already seen, I really commend the sequencing of these convenings that Bill Galston and the Governance Studies team put together. It's been a good civic education for me and, you know, I think this is, as we've said, a time when everybody could use a, at least a refresher if not an introduction to these principles.

DUNN TENPAS: Thank you for that. Yes, the last one was on June 23rd and then today's the 30th. It's the second in it. So and and these are available online, so you can see them. Thank you so much and have a good afternoon.