

COMMENTARY

AMERICA 250



This scene of the Second Continental Congress working on the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia is from an upcoming exhibition about the American Revolution at the Historic New Orleans Collection. The augmented reality experience is produced and designed by Histoverly, a French technology firm. The image was created in collaboration with art historians, period experts and developers.

We still hold these truths

To mark country's 250th birthday, let's look to our roots

By Walter Isaacson

We've got a big birthday coming up this year. Our 250th. Here's my birthday wish: Let's use this anniversary to unite our nation around our shared values.

We have become so polarized and poisonous in our politics that we are not in the best mood for a party. Everything seems to divide us, including our views of our history.

But perhaps we can use this opportunity, the way a fractious family might use an important birthday party, to come together like we did for our bicentennial after the fraught years of Vietnam, Watergate, urban riots and assassinations.

One way is by reflecting on our fundamental principles, the ones proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence's great second sentence that serves as our nation's mission statement: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Many of us know that sentence almost by heart, but rarely do we stop to savor and appreciate what each word means to us.

In June 1776, the Continental Congress appointed a committee to draft the declaration. Back then, Congress knew how to create great committees. It had Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams on it.

I've just written a little book, "The Greatest Sentence Ever Written," that looks at how that committee went through four drafts of this great sentence.

"We hold these truths to be sacred ..." Jefferson wrote in the first of the drafts.

Franklin crossed out "sacred," using the heavy backslash marks he had often used as a printer, and wrote in "self-evident." The declaration they were writing was intended to herald a new type of nation, one in which our rights are based on reason, not the dictates or dogma of religion.

But then the sentence invokes the "Creator." In Jefferson's first draft, he wrote that men are created equal and "from that equal creation they derive rights." That phrase is crossed out, this time with a different pen, and replaced with "endowed by their Creator" with rights. That was probably the edit of Adams, whose views on religion were a bit more conventional than those of Jefferson.

Thus we see, in the editing of the

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

These truths became the creed that bound a diverse group of pilgrims and immigrants into one nation. For a people with many different beliefs and backgrounds, it defined our common ground and aspirations.

The concept of "common ground" has always been part of humanity's struggle to create a good society. Its simplest manifestation was a physical space: the land that was designated as "the commons."

In England, that was the land where the commoners — yes, that's where the word "commoners" comes from — could all graze their herds. When the first English settlers came to America, this space was set aside in their towns, such as Boston Common and the Cambridge Common.

The idea of the commons was not just about land. Societies have always put certain basic goods into the commons: schools, libraries, parks, some health care, police, national defense and fire protection. These are called the commoner bona, the goods in common.

Both freedom and economic growth require that we allow individuals to reap the benefits that comes from their labor. Our system does, and should, give ample rewards to builders and entrepreneurs and those who work hard, take risks and even just have good luck.

But in doing so, we should keep in mind the moral and practical value of the commons. Having a robust common ground can help stabilize a society with disparities of wealth by giving people a stake in the social order. The benefits and services and rituals that we share help temper resentments and political polarization.

In New Orleans, we recently celebrated our tricentennial. So perhaps we have some wisdom to impart to our nation on its mere 250th. Bred into our town's DNA is the creative culture that arises from its racial and ethnic diversity. Ever since Bienville set up a French outpost among the Chitimacha Indians, New Orleans has been enriched by waves of new arrivals: Americans and Creoles of varying hues, slaves and freed slaves and gens de couleur libres, Spaniards and Hispanics, Irish and Italians and Jews, Haitians and Vietnamese. At its best, New Orleans was not so much a melting pot as a gumbo pot:

each group blended with the others while retaining some of its own texture and flavor.

Across Louisiana, hurricanes remind us of a basic fact, which is that we are all in the same boat. At our best, we know how to share what we love and to nurture common rituals: catching go-cups at parades, celebrating or suffering with our Saints, sucking the heads and eating king cake after Twelfth Night.

This makes our politics and civic discourse (usually) a little less poisonous and divisive than exists in Washington and the rest of the nation these days. We can disagree, but we know how to share the neutral ground, literally and figuratively.

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

As Franklin pointed out, our life-or-death challenge as a nation, whether it be in 1776 or 2026, is this: When there are so many forces dedicated to dividing us, how can we best hang together? What policies can we adopt, what balances can we strike, that will strengthen our common ground?

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

One way to do it is by reflecting on our fundamental principles, the ones that define our common aspirations to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That restoration of our common ground is not, alas, going to begin in Washington or at the national level. It will have to arise from people who love their communities. Louisiana in 2026 can be among those that lead the way.

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ABOUT THE IMAGE

The image above features a scene from "American Revolution," which makes its United States debut at the Historic New Orleans Collection on March 20. This free, interactive experience utilizes 360-degree augmented reality to immerse visitors in 20 defining moments of the nation's founding, from the sparks of the Boston Tea Party to the victory at Yorktown.

Developed by leading historians and scholars, this exhibition celebrates the figures who shaped the United States and shares the Revolution in a fresh way that speaks to the hearts and minds of the American people today. The exhibition will serve as a focal point of the Louisiana America 250 commemorations and coincides with HNO's 60th anniversary.



ABOUT THE HNO

Over the last six decades, HNO has become a vital community institution, preserving the world's largest collection of materials related to New Orleans and the Gulf South. Located in the heart of the French Quarter, its campus spans 14 historic buildings which serve as a catalyst for dialogue and historical understanding.

"American Revolution" is produced and designed by Histoverly with promotional support from New Orleans & Company and Louisiana America 250. The exhibition offers a fresh, technologically driven way to explore the American story. Plan your visit at hnoc.org.

For more information on events near you commemorating America's 250th birthday, visit america250la.org.

