



**The Greatest Sentence Ever
Written
Book Review**

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The Greatest Sentence Ever Written

Walter Isaacson

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“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.”

This is the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence, written by the U.S. Founders 250 years ago this year. Walter Isaacson, who authored a best-selling biography of Benjamin Franklin, calls it the greatest sentence ever written. In this slim book of 80 pages, he provides insight into the creation of this sentence. From the original draft of the Declaration by Thomas Jefferson through its edits by Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and others, he shows how the passionate writing of one author was turned into a statement that reflects the more universal core values of the United States, the right of individuals to freely pursue happiness.

In the first 35 pages of this book, Isaacson dissects the words of this sentence, devoting short chapters to “We,” “Self-Evident Truths,” “All Men,” “Created Equal,” “Endowed by their Creator,” “Certain Unalienable Rights,” and “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” For example, Thomas Jefferson wrote that these truths are “sacred,” but Benjamin

Franklin crossed out “sacred” and changed truths to be “self-evident.” Sacred leads one to think of religious dogma, while “self-evident” refers to our individual reason. Isaacson suggests the Founders were balancing the role of divine providence and reason in determining our rights. This edit also reflects their desire to replace institutional control over people with individual moral agency.

The word “We” implies that the authority of government comes from the people, not from the divine right of kings or the power of conquerors. It is consistent with the idea of a social contract, in which government officials protect the rights of the people and administer their will. While social contract theory can be traced to Ancient Rome’s Twelve Tables of Law, it was popularized by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*, as the Protestant Reformation implanted the idea that people are responsible for their own lives, and ultimately accountable to God—not kings or popes.

Isaacson quoted Jefferson’s writing on the relationship of the individual to society: “Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will.” It is not clear what Isaacson thinks about Constitutional checks on the “general will.” It must be limited to the protection of the freedoms and rights declared in this “greatest sentence.” He explains that “all men” did not necessarily include women, slaves, or Native Americans when it came to a vote but that this sentence is part of a “moral arc” in the 250-year history of the United States that parallels Benjamin Franklin’s own path to inclusiveness.

“Endowed by their creator” is a phrase Isaacson discusses as a product of deism, the religious worldview of Jefferson, Franklin, and many Enlightenment thinkers. It provides the reason for the “unalienable rights” given to every individual by the creator, and why they not be infringed by any other individual, prince, or king. Everyone should have the right and the opportunity to pursue happiness as they personally

see fit, so long as that pursuit does not impinge on the rights of others to do the same.

The next three chapters in this book move beyond “the greatest sentence” to reflections on “Common Ground,” “The American Dream,” and “Going Forward.” Isaacson says the heart of that great sentence is two ideals: “common ground” and “the American Dream.” Here is where things get murky for me: Does common ground and the American dream imply what some philosophers call “positive rights,” like a right to health care? “The greatest sentence” declares what we call “negative rights.” This topic needs clarification because it is at the heart of many of the political divisions related to the role of government today. Particularly, should a government be limited to the role of a referee that provides a framework for everyone to pursue happiness, or should it be a “player” that provides economic or cultural goods through the use of force because it knows best what people need for their happiness?

In his conclusion, Isaacson points to the life of Benjamin Franklin as a metaphor for the way forward:

He organized police, fire, and street-sweeping corps; a public library, hospital, and school; a widows’ pension fund and a mutual insurance cooperative. He ran a newspaper that was dedicated to publishing a wide variety of opinions and following no party line. He bequeathed a revolving loan fund for young people to start enterprises. He donated to the building funds of each and every church in Philadelphia, and he helped lead the fundraising for a new hall that would provide a pulpit to visiting preachers of any belief.²

This idea of “common ground” in Franklin’s life is based on individual service to others, not schemes of government taxation and redistribution. It is the moral duty of individuals to support other people’s

pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness, either directly or through the voluntary creation of other organizations to serve common needs. As John Adams wrote, "Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people."³

The book contains several appendices that cover nearly half the pages in the book. They include a description of the drafting process, excerpts from John Locke, Rousseau, and the Virginia Declaration of Rights. Finally, there are copies of both Jefferson's original draft and the Final Declaration of Independence that enable readers to understand the significant impact of others in improving the universality and lasting power of the document.

In *The Greatest Sentence Ever Written*, Walter Isaacson has done a great service to understanding the importance of the core values of the United States and how the Declaration of Independence was drafted to have such lasting power. The statement provided a moral arc that led to an inclusive understanding of human rights, which led to the abolition of slavery and the enfranchisement of women. Benjamin Franklin was the most senior of the founders and most fully embodied this American Dream.

However, in addition to the "moral arc" that moves America forward, I want to add that we must be aware of how unscrupulous people have created a negative moral arc in that same period. The founders were concerned about this as well. Franklin has been quoted as saying, "We have given you a Republic, if you can keep it."⁴

The states reflected this concern in their ratification statements. For example, New York included ratification language similar to the Declaration, "that the Powers of Government may be reassumed by the People, whensoever it shall be necessary to their Happiness."⁵ Virginia and Rhode Island included similar language. Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and South Carolina recommended amendments, but did not

include resumption-of-powers clauses in their ratification document. Their concerns were justified.

From the beginning, political parties have steadily replaced the government of the people with the government of parties. George Washington warned of Parties in his Farewell Address. In the years since then, the federal government has steadily eliminated the power of the states, notably by denying states the right to secede, by using force in the Civil War, and in the Supreme Court decision *Texas v. White* (1869). This reversed the founding idea that the Republic should be a voluntary union of the states. In *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad Co.*, in 1886, corporations were said to have rights as persons, leading to massive corporate influence over the government. Today, political parties, corporations, and NGOs—institutions that should serve individuals—control the political system with their larger financial and lobbying power, rather than treating individuals as sovereign.

The U.S. Constitution was intended to be the legal framework for “the greatest sentence” to be realized, but many of its Amendments have interfered with those rights. The Sixteenth Amendment modified Article I, Section 9, Clause 4 of the Constitution, eliminating the requirement that federal income taxes be apportioned among the states by population. This allowed a top-down imposition of taxation and the creation of the Federal Reserve, wresting economic autonomy from individuals. It enabled the federal government to tax people for wars, and unelected bureaucrats, lobbyists, and financiers to determine how taxes could be spent on their institutions. This lies at the heart of the funding of the “deep state,” and the rampant NGO fraud we witness today. The Seventeenth Amendment removed the power of the states to have a voice in their own union by saying that people would directly elect Senators. The Constitution said that Senators were to be appointed by the States. This removed an important check and balance between the two houses that the Founders had considered essential to

protect the rights of the people. By 1914, other institutions, not American citizens or the states, effectively controlled the destiny of the country. Presidents who tried to reverse this have been threatened, shot at, or assassinated.

In conclusion, on the 250th anniversary of “the greatest sentence ever written” we should not only reaffirm it, but reflect on its implementation. Changes in the U.S. Constitution and government reveal both a positive moral arc that aligns with this sentence—the more inclusive rights of slaves and women; and a negative moral arc that deviates from this sentence—restrictions that political parties, Supreme Court decisions, financial elites, and institutions have placed on individuals’ rights to pursue life, liberty, and happiness.

Notes

¹ Author of *Philosophy of the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness*; *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness 4.0*; and *Integral Society*.

² Walter Isaacson, *The Greatest Sentence Ever Written* (Simon & Schuster, Kindle Edition), 40.

³ President John Adams, Letter to Officers of the First Brigade of the Third Division of the Militia of Massachusetts, October 11, 1798.

⁴ According to early accounts, as Franklin was leaving the Constitutional Convention in 1787, a woman (often identified as Mrs. Elizabeth Willing Powel) asked him what kind of government the delegates had created. Franklin reportedly replied, "A republic, if you can keep it." Julie Miller, Library of Congress Blogs, January 6, 2022, <https://blogs.loc.gov/manuscripts/2022/01/a-republic-if-you-can-keep-it-elizabeth-willing-powel-benjamin-franklin-and-the-james-mchenry-journal/#:~:text=Share%20this%20post,Photographs%20Division%2C%20Library%20of%20Congress>

⁵ Ratification of the Constitution by the State of New York, July 26, 1788, The Avalon Project, Yale Law School, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/ratny.asp