****TRANSCRIPT****

National Constitution Center 2024 Liberty Medal Ceremony

September 24, 2024
National Constitution Center, Philadelphia

Vince Stango, National Constitution Center executive vice president and chief operating officer: Good evening everyone. It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the 2024 Liberty Medal Ceremony honoring America's storyteller Ken Burns. It's been 21 years since the National Constitution Center opened its doors to the public. In more recent years, as we've opened our virtual doors to online audiences, we have witnessed firsthand the incredible power of storytelling. Storytelling allows us to bring the Constitution to life, to a hundreds of thousands of families and students, visitors from all over the world each year. Storytelling provides the educational framework for the millions of students we reach through our online classroom resources. Finally, storytelling gives learners of all ages the context and understanding to watch, listen, or participate in civil dialogue debates as we convene thought leaders for Town Hall programs, podcasts, and in-person convenings all across the country. While we're honoring Ken Burns tonight, this occasion also provides us an opportunity to reflect on the past year and to offer our heartfelt thanks to all of you are friends and supporters who make this meaningful work possible. There are so many wonderful friends of the National Constitution Center whose dedicated support, helps to make evenings like tonight possible on behalf of Jeffrey Rosen and our entire team. Please help me thank Doug DeVos, chair of the National Constitution Center Board of Trustees. Mike George, our Vice Chair. Bill Sasso, Chairman Emeritus Stradley Ronon and NCC trustee. Dan Fitzpatrick, president Citizens Mid-Atlantic Region and Don McCree, vice chairman and head of commercial banking and NCC trustee. This is their 20th year supporting the event. Ira Lubert and Pamela Estadt. This is Ira and Pamela's 15th year supporting the Liberty Medal Prize and we're so very grateful for their commitment to the NCC. Finally, the Board of Trustees and the remarkable staff of the National Constitution Center. As we get ready for the formal program to begin, please silence your mobile devices and please refrain from recording the ceremony. We look forward to sharing with you a video of the program in the coming days. Please enjoy.

Voiceover: Good evening and welcome to the National Constitution Center and the 2024 Liberty Medal ceremony. Please welcome to the stage. The president and CEO of the National Constitution Center, Jeffrey Rosen, and our 2024 Liberty Medal recipient, Ken Burns.

Jeffrey Rosen, National Constitution Center president and chief executive officer: Hello friends, and welcome to the National Constitution Center. It is so meaningful to award the 2024 Liberty Medal to Ken Burns. Friends, let's begin as always, by feeling the electricity of American history that unfolded on this sacred ground. Please gaze at the words of the First Amendment that are shining in front of you. Now, please turn your gaze to Independence Hall, where the Declaration and the Constitution were drafted. Think about the human stories that gave rise to the big ideas, the American ideas reflected in those documents: liberty, equality, and democracy. For most Americans, the best way of learning about the human stories behind the American idea. In the years leading up to Americans 250th birthday will be Ken Burns' new series on the American Revolution. It's a riveting 12-part series. I've had the privilege of screening it. It brings to life stories of the Revolution as only Ken Burns can by combining quotations from primary texts, personal narratives by Revolutionary soldiers, Native Americans, enslaved people, and commentary from leading historians, as well as unforgettable images. Like all of Ken's work, it teaches us that the fight for freedom is full of contingency and complexity and always dependent on the courage, self-discipline, and virtuous choices of individuals. In college, I had a great English professor, Walter Jackson Bate. He was an inspiring humanist and a biographer of Samuel Johnson and John Keats. Professor Bate pointed out that in every age there's a different popular media technology that's the main platform for distributing great art, including the art of narrative storytelling about history. In the age of Shakespeare was the theater, and thousands flock to the Globe to learn about Henry IV, V, and VI from Shakespeare's multi-part history plays. In the age of Dickens, that was the serialized novel, and thousands flock to the docks of New York to get the latest installment of the Old Curiosity Shop and to find out what happened to Littlenow. In the age of Spielberg, it was the Hollywood movie, and millions turn to *Schindler's List* to understand the human tragedy of the Holocaust. Ever since the late 20th century, we've lived in the age of television, and millions turn to Ken Burns' documentaries to learn about the human triumphs and tragedies at the heart of American history. We are in short living in the age of Ken Burns. For Ken Burns, the story of America, like the story of each individual, is ultimately a spiritual quest to become more perfect. For the past few years, I've had the privilege of being part of an email list with Ken. Every morning, the folks on the list receive a snippet of wisdom from the great philosophers of history compiled by Leo Tolstoy in his Calendar of Wisdom. Everyday, Ken responds within minutes of receiving the daily selection. Let me share with you now some of the recent daily selections and Ken's responses over the past few days. September 20: "All good things can be achieved only with effort." That's from Dhammapada.
Ken's response: "Choose the path of most resistance; It is training for the most important work: overcoming the idleness of ordinary existence, offering a chance to escape the specific gravity of that which keeps us down. Discipline and sacrifice or the virtues which allow conditions for real progress to occur. Take the stairs."
September 21: "Work toward the purification of your thoughts. Without bad thoughts, you will be incapable of bad deeds." – Confucius
Ken's response again, within minutes: "Bad thoughts, the precursor of bad actions, are like flies around a horse's head. We need to learn the method whereby a shake of the head or a whisk of the tail and they are dispersed. Rather than an automatic mindless gesture, which the horse employs, we must cultivate an intentional action to dispel those thoughts which would, without this rigorous attention, take root."
Just this morning, September 24th, the selection was Plutarch on Vegetarianism. This is the selection actually that briefly inspired Ben Franklin to become a vegetarian until he smelled cod off the coast of

Cape Cod and gave it up. But this is Plutarch: “What nature or struggles for existence or kind of madness forces you to shed blood with your hands in order to eat animals?”
And Ken’s response again 10 minutes later at 6:33 AM this morning: “Reasonable people may disagree. Many Native American people used every part of the buffalo for their subsistence—material and nutritional—and in return for killing it, revered it, centering their spiritual rituals around the animal that sustained them, reciprocity incarnate.”
That represents only the past few days of the spiritual wisdom of this great prophet, and great historian and great teacher. Imagine learning from Ken everyday over the past few years. As you can see, Ken’s responses reflect his daily, hourly quest for self-discipline, self-government, and self-improvement. It’s a quest he’s on everyday of the year, year after year, decade after decade, always striving to become deeper, wiser, more self-mastered, more empathetic, more tuned in, more present, more perfect. Like the great sages with whom he’s in daily conversation, Ken recognizes that happiness is something to be pursued but never finally or ultimately obtained. That’s because the pursuit of happiness, as he puts it so perfectly, is a quest for lifelong learning, and everyday is an opportunity to learn more. For Ken, the quest to become more perfect through lifelong learning is not only a personal quest, but a civic responsibility, a civic duty. That’s the central lesson of all of his films: Unless citizens take the time to learn about history, we risk repeating its errors and losing or liberties to dictators or mobs. In telling the story of America through the personal stories of those who struggled to realize the American idea, he emphasizes the complexity of the daily quest for personal and political self-government. There are setbacks and there are failures and no guarantee of success. But in his unforgettable accounts of all the inflection points of American history—the American Revolution, Ben Franklin, the Civil War, the New Deal, the Roosevelts, LBJ and the Great Society—the arc of justice bends upward and the quest to become more perfect continues. The National Constitution Center’s sacred mission is to inspire Americans to learn about history so they can become more perfect and keep the Republic. In his life and in his work, Ken Burns, the storyteller of American history, has done more to advance that mission than any other American. That’s why it’s such a tremendous and unique honor for the National Constitution Center to award the 2024 Liberty Medal to Ken Burns.
To learn more about him, we’re so fortunate to be joined by the co-director of the American Revolution, Ken’s longtime collaborator at Florentine Films, Sarah Botstein.
Sarah has produced some of the most popular and acclaimed documentaries on PBS, working with Ken Burns and Lynn Novak, she’s worked on *Jazz, Prohibition, The Vietnam War, College Behind Bars,* she also co-directed *The U.S. and the Holocaust*. Sarah will tell us more about what it’s like to work with Ken and she’ll introduce a selection from his films, please welcome Sarah Botstein.

Sarah Botstein: This is really crazy. I have worked for Ken for almost 30 years, so I’m just going to take a second to take this all in. Good evening, thank you, Jeff, thank you to everyone at the National Constitution Center. This is a really wonderful occasion in a really special place, and it’s an honor to be here, the work that the National Constitution Center does is so important now more than ever and we look forward at Florentine Films to working with everyone here on outreach and education for upcoming series on the American Revolution, which Ken and Jeff are going to talk about more this evening. How fitting it is though to be here in Philadelphia in this incredible room and this magnificent and historic city to celebrate Ken, an accomplished filmmaker, colleague and mentor, a terrific father, a wonderful boss and probably my best friend. When Jeff asked me if I would speak, he said he wanted the audience to get a sense of Ken the person, and also talk a little bit about his work. It’s fairly obvious, but Ken is really brilliant and very thoughtful, he’s also really funny and he has an infectious sense of humor. His favorite jokes derive from puns and word play. He’s a crossword puzzle fanatic and does it every day without fail after the Tolstoy trio, correct? Yes, that’s the order. He’s a really good dancer and he loves The Beatles. His first job was in a record store and he has an incredibly encyclopedic knowledge

of all music. He's detail-oriented and exacting. He has a really unique ability to get down in the weeds with us and then lift up and find the larger meaning in almost anything. He listens, he's open to new ideas and he loves to find new ways of seeing. He studies philosophy and loves poetry. He hates lying. He is never late and when I say he's never late, what I also mean is that he is always early. We sometimes have to fib on our call sheets to say something will start much later than it will because we know he's going to be waiting for us even if it's pitch dark in the middle of the night and we have a dawn shoot or we're all going to sleep in the airport for a morning flight. He's obsessive about directions and could work for Rand McNally. If you go somewhere with him once, he can get there again, if you go in a hot air balloon and fall down on the ground, he will get up and find true north. He loves to walk and I don't mean getting your 10,000 steps a day, he usually does that before lunch. He will pace around on endless phone calls and hope to get to 20,000 or 30,000 steps in a day, making us all feel extremely lazy. Maybe most important in his life is that he is a remarkable father to four extraordinary daughters, two of whom are here tonight, Sarah and Lily. He's fiercely protective of them, he's a wonderful all-around dad, but he's also a champion of each of them in the unique ways that they are unique and these women have become among the most important people in my life. Just wanted to thank you for that. For so many of us now, I think life and work are intertwined and it's not that we don't have time off—though we don't—but we are always looking and listening, reading and talking, thinking of new ways to tell our history, new ways to tell stories. We share notes about the news and current events, art, books, film, music, family, life. We talk and work all the time, that's part of the power of Ken's art, his way of storytelling. He's able to knit together these personal and political moments, the intimate and the vast. There are a few guiding principles to the work that we do, basic tenants of how we make these films. History is a conversation. Never be too sure, you're right. Listen to one another. Years ago, Ken had a sign made for our editing room in neon cursive that says, "It's Complicated." Facts matter and the interpretation of those facts matter too. An image can tell 100 stories. Live in a photograph, take your time and don't rush. We obsess over every word, every comma, every sound effect, every music cue, every frame of film. Ken loves to pace a story. Not just the narration and the images and the music and the things you're familiar with, but the speed and timing of every single cut. There 24 frames and a second to fill. Ken can tell when the pacing is off by two frames or four frames, he calls it a scoach, or six frames a tad, and it will actually really surprise you how much that fraction of a second matters to telling a story. He's a master at it. What might also surprise you is that whether we are working on a big series on the history of the Vietnam War or jazz music, baseball the 10th inning, biography of Leonardo da Vinci, Muhammad Ali, Ernest Hemingway, a film about the Brooklyn Bridge or the American Buffalo. The process stays remarkably the same and Ken will talk a lot more about that tonight. Our band sticks together and has for nearly five decades, Buddy Squires, Trisha Reidy, Jeff Ward, Paul Barnes, Lynn Novik, Sarah Burns, David McMann, Dayton Duncan. Partners outside the company, in public television, Paula Kerger, Jonathan Barzilay, Sylvia Bugg, and DKC, Joe DePlasco, so many of whom are here tonight. In addition, the musicians, the actors, the colorists, the sound effects people, the mixers, the list goes on and on, he has created a family of people that come together to work for him every day. We believe deeply in public media and public television. We would not make our films anywhere else and all of us are lucky. I am lucky. The country is lucky. This American story is filled with so much promise and possibility, but also failure and betrayal but it's our story and how fortunate are we as a nation to have a master like Ken, committed to telling are hard truths and our great triumphs. What Ken has created, I think is truly unique and deserves to be celebrated. His work helps us understand what it means to be an American, how we got here and how we, all of us, might do better to protect what is most important in our legacy. I get to now introduce a highlight reel that includes almost all your films spanning nearly 50 years, so thank you, and I hope you all enjoy this.

Jeffrey Rosen: Ken Burns, for nearly half a century, you have pioneered the art of historical storytelling through documentary filmmaking. Your life and your work exemplify the daily quest to pursue happiness through virtuous self-mastery and lifelong learning. As America's storyteller and history teacher, you've inspired Americans to learn about our past in order to avoid its errors and preserve its best ideals. Your exploration of the American Revolution illuminates the struggles, setbacks and triumphs of the Revolutionary generation in their battle to secure the ideals of liberty, equality and democracy at the heart of the American idea. For inspiring Americans to learn more about history so they can become more perfect and keep the Republic, it is the greatest honor for the National Constitution Center to award you the 2024 Liberty Medal.

Ken Burns: Good evening and thank you, Jeff for this honor. Thank you to the NCC as well. I am humbled by the list of previous recipients. My heroes, John McCain, John Lewis, Malala, Muhammad Ali, Mandela, Steven Spielberg. I hope my addition brings something to the extraordinary work of this great institution. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thank you to my best friend, Sarah Botstein, for her extraordinary words and secret portrayal of our process. We want to share it with the world and I've never seen anyone do it as well as you have. Thank you so much. I love you. Thank you too to half of my girls who are here, Sarah and Lilly, the most important co-productions that I will ever be involved in. They are, as Sarah said, magnificent women. Thank you for recognizing them.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am in the business of history, the often complicated task of trying to decipher the evidence of the past into a coherent narrative that sheds some light on not only where we've been, but where we are now and where we may be going. That is to say, our mysterious and unknown future. That future, particularly today, is not always predictably and comfortably assured. In these fraught moments, it is often the past that provides us with the tools and the inspiration to reinvigorate our sense of ourselves as a machine, as was said of our Constitution and the remarkable republic born from it: A machine that would go of itself. In the course of any historical investigation, one is bombarded with myriad words, ideas, and voices. Those voices for me provide the foundation of any good history and helps us separate the wheat from the chaff. What was meaningful then can often be filled with even more import today. "Listen, a voice from a small spark kindled in America, a flame has arisen not to be extinguished. Without consuming, it winds its progress from nation to nation and conquers by a silent operation. Man finds himself changed and discovers that the strength and power of despotism consist wholly in the fear of resisting it. That in order to be free, it is sufficient that he wills it."
As Sarah said, for much of the last eight years, I've been working with my talented colleagues on a series about the history of the American Revolution. That quote opens the introduction of our first of six episodes totaling 12 hours. It was written by one of the most important political writers of the 18 century and in the land of Franklin and Jefferson, Madison and Adams and Hamilton, that's saying a lot. His name was Thomas Paine and his spectacularly vivid prose electrified the Revolutionary movement. He provided the momentum that leads to the Declaration of Independence. He enspirited the Patriot cause during its darkest days, and he helped provide the confidence that leads to the miraculous operating manual that gives the National Constitution Center its mission and this moment so much meaning.
In January of 1776, 37-year-old Thomas Paine was a recent newcomer to America. The son of a Quaker corset maker and his Anglican wife, Paine had failed at his father's profession, lost his first wife and their child in childbirth, been fired from his post as tax collector, endured the collapse of a second childless marriage and had seen all of his possessions auctioned off to pay his debts. During his nine-week voyage from Britain, he'd contracted typhus and when his ship reached Philadelphia, he had to be carried off half dead. But in January of 1776, he'd published right here in Philadelphia, just a few blocks from here, a pamphlet called *Common Sense*, the most important pamphlet in American history. It was signed

simply “an Englishman.” Paine was a master with words, skillfully weaving the latest enlightenment philosophy with biblical references that everyone knew. Most important, he was a violent foe of authoritarianism and monarchy. Paine understood that it was possible, as he said, to begin the world anew, to start over again, and we did. He also said there’s something very absurd in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island.
I’ve had the privilege for nearly half a century of making films about the U.S. But I’ve also made films about us. That is to say, the two-letter lowercase plural pronoun. All of the intimacy of us and also we and our, and all of the majesty, complexity, contradiction and even controversy of the U.S. If I have learned anything over those years, is that there’s only us. There is no them. Whenever someone suggested to you, whomever it may be in your life that there’s a them, run away. That’s my fundamental understanding. That’s my fundamental understanding, my best idea, run away. The National Constitution Center is a place, but more importantly, an idea too; the essential idea that we can improve our democracy by studying our past, our founding, the women and men of all backgrounds who gave birth to this complicated and glorious republic. As we say in the introduction of our new series, the American Revolution was not just a clash between Englishmen over Indian land, taxes and representation, but a bloody struggle that would engage more than two dozen nations, European as well as Native American, but also somehow came to be about the noblest aspirations of humankind. The American Revolution was the first war ever fought, proclaiming the unalienable rights of all the people. It would change the course of human events. It was the opening signal for more than two centuries of revolution: first in Europe than in the Caribbean, South America, Asia, and Africa. As a nation, we’ve often forgotten that this history was made by everyone. The stories of those forgotten entirely and those whose stories have been historically ignored or undervalued are critical to our larger American story. You cannot understand the U.S. without understanding us, all of us. The National Constitution Center reminds us daily through exhibitions, education, engagement, and outreach, through the work of scholars and teachers that our founding documents are not materials to be left in some distant, dusty past, but central to our ongoing story now: the story of us. It’s because these documents and ideas are a manifestation of what it means to be human. I could not be more humbled for the extraordinary recognition that you bestow on me tonight. The Liberty Medal recognizes that the desire for liberty, for freedom is a universal human trait that requires our constant attention against the perpetual threats that assault these virtues. I’d like to thank the Board of the National Constitution Center and its president and chief executive, Jeffrey Rosen. I’ve known Jeff for many years now, but recently as we’ve started what will be a national conversation about the American Revolution, I’ve come to appreciate even more the wisdom and scholarship he brings to these issues. Surpassed, perhaps only by his love of the ideas themselves. I very much look forward to our conversation this evening. Finally, let me leave you with one more voice, also by our Thomas Paine. “The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Oh, receive the fugitive and prepare in time an asylum for mankind. The birthday of a new world is at hand.” Thank you for this extraordinary honor.

Jeffrey Rosen: That was just beautiful Ken, and you so inspired us by bringing us to Thomas Paine, and the words and the ideals perfectly crystallize the struggles for liberty, equality and democracy. Why did you choose Paine tonight?

Ken Burns: Tonight, I think it’s because as I was explaining to the Board earlier, that somehow in the course of our investigations, in our studies, what bubbled up all the time was the centrality of his words. We are familiar with the Declaration and Thomas Jefferson’s amended by Benjamin Franklin’s words, we know the Constitution. We think we know it. There was something so direct and ordinary in the best sort of way about Paine that he kept floating up within each episode that we were struggling. Finally, we

ended up labeling every single one of the six episodes after a quote, a phrase, a handful of words by Thomas Paine because it felt like he was representing the us that I was just talking about. There was the bigger U.S., which the men here, the statues in the next room that you and I were talking with. He had a sense that as he put it, the soul of America was not just in Philadelphia. Europeans thought the British thougt that if you capture Philadelphia, capture New York, you've got them. The soul of America was dispersed by the very act of our improvisatory gesture out into the world. That we could be a nation in the process of becoming, that we could actually be trusted with governing ourselves, that we could, as you know, in every daily catechism of your own, that requires that denial, discipline, and virtue attempt at a virtuous life. There's something in his backstory, the unbelievable failure that out of it comes. You cannot imagine what his words did. Words matter as we know, no other country on earth do words matter the way they matter here. His words could lift us up, move us towards independence. Something that even at the beginning of 1776, most we're not sure we wanted. He could lift us up in the darkest moments, the times that tried men souls, as he put it. He could articulate what we might be creating an asylum for mankind. He understood the military thing that we could only conquer by a drawn game. That is to say, Washington didn't have to win every battle. He just couldn't surrender, he couldn't lose. That eventually time, geography, and weather would make this the worst battle for the British. He understood about the soul of America and he understood finally, in our last episode that the most sacred thing is the union. I think that maybe what all of us share, I know that you and I share. That all of us here share is just a sense that we are so much stronger, bonded together. That this republican experiment is a spectacular and joyous things despite the fact that we have to always acknowledge that quite often there is a toxic byproduct to all of these stories as Sara pointed out, that sometimes it doesn't bring everybody along at the same time and that, that's part of the story too. You cannot, in no way, do you diminish the beauty of the tapestry by lifting up the rug and sweeping out some of the so-called dirt. That dirt is central to the definition of who we are, as much as the beauty and the interweaving of that tapestry, the warp and woof of our story.

Jeffrey Rosen: It's extraordinarily powerful. You spoke Paine's words, the still, small voice, we all leaned in and wanted to learn more. Now you've used him to exemplify the entire struggle. It's riveting. Of course he had a messy backstory as we all do. He published that follow-up book on *The Age of Reason*, which Jefferson told him not to publish because it was blasphemous and he ended in distress. But that's part of how you draw us in. All of your work is the story of American history, as we saw from the highlight reel. But the American Revolution involves intellectual, political, military, cultural history. How did you approach this sprawling project and what are you trying to achieve in the film?

Ken Burns: The latter question is almost impossible to answer in terms of achievement. Because I think a good story is an end in and of itself. That any reasonably free and curious, perhaps ignorant but curious, human being will find in it what they need to find. The first part of the question is something I can address with slightly more confidence, which is that the name of this film, in this case is *The American Revolution*. We're talking about a war. The skeletal structure is a sequence of battles that begins in protest, massacres in Boston, Tea Parties, this event off Rhode Island, all of this stuff that culminates in Lexington and Concord and ends in Yorktown. Lots of battles. The same structure as the Civil War, the same structure as our film, the War and the Second World War, the same structure of Vietnam. It's like the big mistake that we make when we think that American history is merely the sequence of presidential administrations punctuated by wars. It's a good skeletal structure, but that can't be it. Too often we just leave it at that, walk away, and think that what happens in our Revolution is just 55 white guys thinking great thoughts here in 1787, boom, done. It's much more complicated than that. What a good history requires is a bottom-up approach as well. You have a military narrative that forms a skeletal structure to which you can adorn not only the top-down but the bottom-up stories.

In this you will understand why despite incredible failings and feats of clay, there is no one more important to the success of this experiment than George Washington. You will also understand what it is like to be a man named John Peters from a little village in Vermont who is sent by his neighbors out of respect for his intelligence, wisdom, and sense of self, here to the First Continental Congress. He gets here and he goes, whoa, I'm not interested in this. He's arrested four times on the way home. He's run out of town, he escapes to Canada, he forms a loyalist regimen. His wife and kids are also put out. One of them is an infant in arms. They make it to a frozen Lake Champlain where a British patrol boat picks them up and reunites them. He comes back down. In the Battle of Bennington, part of Burgoyne's strategy to divide New England from the Mid-Atlantic states. He ends up in a losing battle as a loyalist regiment, part of a mostly German-controlled led force against what they think is only a handful of patriots and turns out to be a significant force. He ends up as somebody is putting a bayonet in his breast, stopped by his ribcage. Ends up, as he says, destroying him. His best friend growing up in New Haven. That's the American Revolution. It's the story of Quakers in Philadelphia who aren't buying into this new arrangement and are harassed and sometimes arrested and sometimes executed and sent out of here. It's about a kid who watches the British when they're first dispatched to Boston as an occupying police force, is mesmerized. Young kid, not even 10 years old, mesmerized by the black Afro-Caribbean bands of the British Army and the drummers and particularly the fifers. He learns to play the fife, John Greenwood does. It ends up a few years later in Falmouth, Massachusetts, which is actually Portland, Maine, today because Maine was a department of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Hears about Lexington, Concord and rushes down to try to help his parents who are trapped in Boston and ends up joining the Continental Army and serves through all of this stuff. And you can't make this up, ends up becoming a dentist whose most famous client, for whom he provides teeth, sometimes made of ivory from hippopotamuses, for George Washington. There is Betsy Ambler, who is from Yorktown, Virginia, whose family is very well-to-do, is impoverished by the Revolution and their stand, and end up as refugees traveling all over the place. Of course, the war will end on her front doorstep. It is an important story to tell. There's James Forten who hears the Declaration read publicly here on July 9th, 1776. He is a free Black person who never for a second doesn't believe that the words weren't meant for him and spends his whole life working for the creation of the United States, working afterwards and makes himself well-to-do and helps support the abolitionist movement. When someone suggests that he applies for a pension that are available to Revolutionary veterans, he said, ''No, I've volunteered to fight.'' There are Native Americans who choose to ally themselves with the British or choose to ally themselves with the Americans. This is a such a compact story that if you were pitching it to a Hollywood studio, they would see this as the cast of thousands and the "How the West Was Won." But this is all true. We have spent the last six or seven years gathering those stories, and 10 times as many, along with the familiar people, you'll hear from John Adams. He loves Philadelphia. He loves the way it's laid out, Front Street and then there's First, and Second, and Third, and they're named after trees and he goes on and on about Philadelphia. He's having fights with his wife, who says, he comes down to us now and in the most superficial way, remember the ladies. This thing we always attribute to Abigail? She basically, we do that like okay, that's cute. But she goes on to basically say, the husbands have messed things up so badly that if you don't clean up your act, we're going to take over. I'm for that. Four daughters. I'm for that. I'm happy to have a female boss. It goes on and on and on. I think that that's the stories that we're trying to tell and Sarah's absolutely right. We will just worry over a comma or a semicolon, or a shot or a 12th of a second. It's really important that we frame this. Wynton Marsalis said to us that music is the art of the invisible, it's the only art form that isn't visible. If you think about it, it's therefore the fastest. I think the metaphors that we use while we're editing are always musical metaphors where some of us are trained, most of us, including me, are not trained. But we understand that there is a music to life, there is a music to narrative, there's a music to ideas and that, that music ought to somehow be represented in addition to the music that we might employ and we feel that that

component is perhaps the most sacred part of the film, even though it is often by the time it gets to your TV set, not as present as it could be. It is so central to what lifts up and carries our message and it's the way the news is delivered to us. All of these things go into this process of how you do it so that at the end, I am just when we finish and we lock this and we look at the last episode online and we send the masters to PBS. It's your film. It's your film and we're already deep into other films and are right now. But it's your film. What the purpose of it is is what you can get out of it. I just wish to engage the incredible gift of your attention to what we're going to do, and we hope to reward that gift of your attention with something that is satisfied.

Jeffrey Rosen: The stories are riveting. I know the whole audience is rapt hearing you talk about them. When combined in the film with the music and the structure, it's an extraordinary work of art and it is based on the stories from the ground up. At the same time you're telling the story of the American idea. Some have described the American idea as liberty, equality, and democracy. Lincoln distilled it in his famous fragment about the Declaration to the words of "liberty for all." Emerson called the American idea emancipation. I'm just as good as you can be. Ken, what is the American idea?

Ken Burns: All of those things attract me. I think when you brought it up in your speech, and I've said it. We tend to think in binaries about everything. We also forget that it's all process, what Sarah was describing as process, and not only subscribing to it, but succumbing to it, honoring it and following it through. When you say pursuit of happiness, we're all focused. What does happiness mean? We know, we believe most of our audience knows that it's not the acquisition of objects in a marketplace of things, but as we describe lifelong learning in a marketplace of ideas. That's what they all met. If you think it's things, you've missed the point, but it is lifelong learning. The keyword is pursuit. Just as "a more perfect Union" implies a process in which there may not be an end thing. Perfection is impossible. The Shakers said it put your hands to work and your hearts to God, and then you know which way. We've had long discussions about deism, which is a religious philosophy subscribed to, most notably by Thomas Jefferson and at times others of the founding group. It essentially believes that God is disinterested in the affairs of men. He has not, or she has not, or whatever has not had you hit into a game-ending double play or hit the game-winning grand slam homerun. It just doesn't work this way. It is our obligation as human beings and as citizens in this new improved version of how human beings configure themselves to make ourselves worthy, to move towards that light. Still a disinterested supreme being, architect, divine providence, supreme architect of the universe. However you want to do it and it's a wonderful, almost existential thing. It forces it back on me, not my thing or being determined by someone else, but what do I do? It is, why am I here? What is my purpose? How will I leave things? And then that has its own animating spirit. That's to me, the United States, we have that Declaration, we understand its failings. The guy who wrote it distilled a century of Enlightenment thinking into one sentence: We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal. He owns hundreds of human beings. On November 19th, 1863, in the now-quiet fields of Gettysburg, Lincoln travels there, listens to Edward Everett speak for two hours, and then speaks for two minutes and it's 2.0. He's saying, look, we really do believe this, and helped give us, as he said, a new birth of freedom out of 269, 272, whatever you believe the correct count is, words. Jefferson's is only a little bit over 1,300 words. It's spectacular. Our Constitution is only four pieces of parchment. I think still this shortest constitution in Earth. Its just fantastic to think about the concision and the brevity and the preciseness of our attempts at this self-governing business and the liberation of individuals to pursue happiness.

Jeffrey Rosen: Beautifully put, the right and the duty of the individual to pursue happiness through virtuous self-mastery and lifelong learning is the American idea as you express it. Personal self-

government is necessary for political self-government. I shared your remarkable morning practice of reading from Tolstoy's *Book of Wisdom* and deeply engaging.

Ken Burns: I felt like the Roberta Flack song reading my letters out loud. That was really.

Jeffrey Rosen: They're worth reading and it's very much in the Ben Franklin spirit of moral self-accounting and self-improvement through taking stock of your attempts to become more perfect. Were you inspired by Franklin? Tell us how you came upon the practice of Tolstoy and what are other parts of your daily practice for self-improvement?

Ken Burns: Well, the work is the thing. My girls are the thing, not necessarily in that order. That's the most important aspect of daily life is just feeling a sacred responsibility and the best obligation to four beings I've been part of creating, and then the work, the process, the ongoing work. As Sarah said, we don't take breaks. We work all the time and it's glorious and frustrating. I was approached by a man in New Hampshire who asked me if I'd read *The Calendar of Wisdom* by Leo Tolstoy, I had not heard of it. I'm a great admirer of Tolstoy's novels. He sent it to me, and I looked at it and I saw what it was and it's basically January 1st, and then there are five or six, sometimes seven paragraphs. If they're unsigned, that means that Tolstoy himself wrote it. If they're signed, you know who wrote it, and he draws from everything as you heard, Confucius, Schopenhauer, Jefferson, the Bible, the Talmud, the Quran. Marcus Aurelius, who never wrote a bad word in his life. Then there's an italicized paragraph which is a signal, I think, to the central theme of the page. My friend let me know that his son was dying and that he and his son were reading it every day. The son had moved to the West Coast for experimental treatment, and he wanted to know if I'd like to join this. I said yeah, but I'm traveling all the time. I'm not schlepping this book around. Somewhere towards the end of January or early February of 2015, Robert, photographed the page and sent it to me, which was such a lovely thing to do, and I responded to it, and then he responded back to me, and then when his son, Greg, woke up in Seattle, he would respond and sometimes the father and son would engage in something and then I might try to reconcile it all at the end of the day. Then the next day—he gets up really early—it comes in, 5:30, 6:00 today was a little bit late. In fact, I wrote them. I said did you send it. That's why, What did you say today?

Jeffrey Rosen: 6:33.

Ken Burns: 6:33. That's pretty late for the two of us. Greg died either April 30th or May 1st. We missed one day. He said, Would you like to continue? I said I need to continue. His wife had called us the Tolstoy Trio, and so that's what we still call it among ourselves. We continue to run and we got to the end of the year. He just said, What do you think about doing it again? I said, let's do it, 365 entries, 366 entries. You can't memorize them all. You can't but help have a completely new reaction every single time, and so we've just continued it. After a while he started adding people. I don't know how many are on the list. He's got the list. I get mine, and I respond and he publishes mine and three or four people might respond that day or one person, no other person. My friend Joe, responded this morning with an even funnier thing about eating meat. It just goes on and we just continue. He's got another parallel book, which for a couple of years we worked on that, and now it's nine and a half-plus years and I can't imagine it. It's part of that daily discipline, like walking and like work, which is a salvation.

Jeffrey Rosen: I know that our friends will be as inspired as I am by the rigor and spiritual seriousness of your daily quest and the obligation that each of us has to use each minute productively to learn and grow and improve ourselves. I couldn't watch that highlight reel of your work without, first of all, wanting to watch all of those shows. Thomas Hart Benton, Jefferson. There's so much to learn from, and

when you look back on the corpus of your work of telling the story of all of American history from the founding till today. You know abstractions are difficult, but what are some of the most important lessons that you want everyone to learn?

Ken Burns: I made a film about the Statue of Liberty pretty early on. I think it's No. 4 in that list. Vartan Gregorian, his voice, he used to be the head of the New York Public Library. When I interviewed him, he was, and he said It's not an actuality, but a potentiality. I think I'd like people to think about us as that potentiality. He said that you need to see ourselves to follow what you just said. Not as economic units, but as spiritual beings. That would be a good lesson to have. Betty Carter who says there wasn't a Saturday night when we didn't talk about killing Huey Long. Later on, as Long has grotesquely gotten into this power-hungry grab in both Louisiana and the United States Senate, people are referring to him as evil and she goes, evil's a difficult word, we all have the worm in our apple. I'd like us to all remember that we have the worm in our apple. Jeff Ward, who has been our principal writer for so many years, sent me something at the beginning of this year. He was reading a book, I can't remember what but somebody referred to I.F. Stone, the journalist who published a weekly. He was fairly liberal, but it was read by conservatives back in the time when everybody listened to everybody else. He had an acolyte who was extraordinarily disappointed in Stone's admiration for Thomas Jefferson. Stone just said to him, "history is tragedy, not melodrama." In melodrama, all heroes are perfectly virtuous and all villains are perfectly villainous, but it is not like that. Later on in *The Statue of Liberty*, Sol Linowitz, the former ambassador, said, quoting Judge Learned Hand. I can't think of anybody better name for a judge. Sorry. Michael, than Learned Hand. That liberty is never being too sure you're right. That has reverberated down every film that I've made, I think, and that I came to an understanding that I coalesced in a speech I gave earlier this year, in which I said the opposite of faith is not doubt. Doubt is central to faith. The opposite of faith is certainty. We live in an age in which nearly everybody is in a hardened silo with a position that is immutable. There's this great existential threat right now because of the certainty of a position, and we have to find ways and I believe still that the only way to do that is with story, to dissolve these silos of suspicion between us. That's the unifying thing that I've come to think. l also like what Karl Marlantes says about an ambush, which is a shit sandwich. There's no ambiguity about what he means in that.

Jeffrey Rosen: Well, I'm so glad I asked the question and I learned so much from hand and humility, that's a central lesson. The spirit of liberty is the spirit that's not too sure it's right.

Ken Burns: Henry Adams said, in mid-19th century, said there are grave doubts at the hugeness of the land and whether one government can comprehend the whole. He's expressing the anxieties of a former collection of Eastern Seaboard colonies as they contemplated a continental expansion. It's so interesting that that expansion happened and that the government could comprehend it at great cost to lots of people. Yet that same anxiety exists today, less in a geographical sense, than in an interior and psychological and spiritual and aspirational sense. Grave doubts at the hugeness.period and whether one government can comprehend the whole.

Jeffrey Rosen: Of course, you never know the future and so much comes to temperament and Adams, so stung that he wasn't given the due that he thought his patrimony entitled them to, wondered if he could come back to America 100 years in the future and contemplate a world that's sensitive and timid natures could regard without a shutter. He didn't have faith in the American idea. I never want to end our conversations because I learned so much and each moment is precious, but we need to I'm going to let you take it home. Are you optimistic or not about the future of America and why is our work so urgently important, leading up to 2026 and beyond, to inspire Americans to learn about history?

Ken Burns: Historians generally are optimistic because we've seen it all before. Ecclesiastes said what has been will be again, what has been done will be done again. There's nothing new under the sun. Human nature doesn't change the same quantities of generosity and greed, of self-discipline and selfishness of whatever it might be. You feel in everything an echo of something that's happened before, history doesn't repeat itself, but you feel those echoes, rhymes, Mark Twain as supposed to say. But it's the unprecedented nature of the crisis right now that is so disheartening and so worrying. I felt myself at times in the past couple of years—I'm not despairing—but having the usual optimism checked by something. I think that's still there and I think it's there for everybody. I think though, that we just have to have some faith. It requires—this is not a passive experiment—it actually requires people to get up and have conversations and to knock on doors and to say, yes, as I mentioned before, there are toxic consequences to our form of government, to our history. But that every other form of government has been worse. That this temptation, which many countries have succumbed to at various times, never worked out well for them. You want to be in the most cosmopolitan place on Earth in 1932, where everything is changing and ideas in music and painting and architecture, in film. Everything. There's no better place than Berlin. Next January. Not so much. The fragility of these institutions is another huge thing so that we don't have the luxury right now of passively saying, it'll just be okay. You've got to actually make it okay, and to realize that the siren's song of the cynical has a way of enticing us to some entropy that is existentially dangerous. That discipline requires activity and purpose. We just need to be dedicated to these democratic and tepublican values. Both small letters. Lincoln said it, and then we will save our country. We cannot escape history. "The fiery trials through which we pass will light us down in honor or dishonor to the latest generation." Then a second later, he says, "the dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. As our case is new, we must think anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, don't make as a slave, and then we can save our country." Same sentence. It's just like the Old Testament stuff of the Second Inaugural, "and then with malice towards none," and very New Testament "charity for all." We have to have that twin power to see and distinguish. Then also remember as my political yard sign in my home in New Hampshire of 45 years says, love multiplies.

Jeffrey Rosen: What a treasured, sacred time with you here on this spot. What an honor it is to award you the 2024 Liberty Medal, and how fitting to end with the words of Lincoln. It was in 1861 that Lincoln stood in front of Independence Hall. He was on his way to Washington to be inaugurated. He'd heard of the plots against him and had to disguise himself to make the train, and he stood in front of the hall and said, "I have never had a thought that did not stem from the Declaration of Independence. I would rather be assassinated on this spot than abandon those ideals." Let's together, in honor of Ken Burns and all he's done to inspire Americans to learn about history, take those ideals of the Declaration, the Constitution, and keep this conversation going and inspire this light across America. Please join me in giving gratitude to Ken Burns.