Eric Slauter on The Declaration's Promises

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[0:00:00.2] Julie Silverbrook: From the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, this is We The People.

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[0:00:08.7] Julie Silverbrook: I'm Julie Silverbrook, Chief Content and Learning Officer. The National Constitution Center is a nonpartisan nonprofit chartered by Congress to increase awareness and understanding of the Constitution among the American people. This month, the National Constitution Center published, in partnership with Simon & Schuster, *The Promise of America: Reflections On Our Enduring Ideals*, a keepsake collection of essays bringing together leading thinkers from across perspectives to reflect on the ideals at the heart of the American experiment and what those principles have meant across generations of American life. Contributors include NCC Honorary Co-Chairs, US Supreme Court Justices Stephen Breyer and Neil Gorsuch, along with scholars and writers including Walter Isaacson, Akhil Reed Amar, Gordon Wood, Danielle Allen, and many more. Our guest today is Professor Eric Slauter. Eric is Deputy Dean of Arts and Humanities at the University of Chicago, where he teaches a class on the Declaration of Independence. He is the author of *The State as a Work of Art: The Cultural Origins of the Constitution*, and the forthcoming book, *The Promises of the Declaration*. In this episode, we discuss Eric's essay in *The Promise of America*, which explores the enduring promises and tensions at the heart of the Declaration of Independence. Eric, welcome back to We The People.

[0:01:26.4] Eric Slauter: Thank you so much. Great to be here, Julie.

[0:01:28.0] Julie Silverbrook: Your essay begins with a powerful argument that the Declaration we celebrate today is not exactly the same document Americans encountered 250 years ago in 1776. You write that generations of readers have transformed it from a Declaration of Independence into a charter of liberty, equality, and rights. What do you mean by that transformation, and why does it matter?

[0:01:52.1] Eric Slauter: Yes, it's an open question. Do we have the same Declaration that we had in 1776? I think that Americans over a very long time have remade their Declaration across the last two and a half centuries. We took a document of international law, essentially a severance note directed to the British Empire, and turned it into a founding document of domestic politics. First and foremost, the Declaration of Independence was an instrument of international law. It was designed to be a declaration of independence, an assertion of national sovereignty, a manifesto that

was Tom Paine's phrase, designed to sever connections between the United Colonies and Great Britain. But that's not how many of us, I think, see it today. We don't see it as the death certificate for the British colonies. We see it as the birth certificate for the United States of America. We think of it as an American creed or America's mission statement. And many of us know one phrase of it very, very well by heart. I remember having to memorize it as a schoolchild, we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they're endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

[0:03:25.9] Eric Slauter: One of the other contributors to this book, Walter Isaacson, has just released a fantastic book in which he identifies this as the greatest sentence ever written. And I think that would shock the men who wrote it and put it out to the country and to many people who read it at the time. The framers would have hardly recognized that as the most important sentence. They probably wouldn't even have recognized it as the most important part of that much longer sentence that goes on to describe the ways in which governments are instituted and the ways in which they can be altered or abolished in order to institute new governments. So the fact that we recognize that now as the greatest sentence in the document, is a historical curiosity and ripe for our trying to understand how we moved from thinking about these philosophical premises in this document. How did those philosophical premises become political promises? I think it was an incredibly important transformation. The document we're celebrating this year, we're all celebrating, it is the same text for the most part, although we can talk a little bit about the different versions that circulated in 1776, both the printed versions and the parchment versions, because there are minor differences, and some major ones, I would argue. But the document that they saw as a charter of national freedom and independence, a Declaration of Independence, we now routinely embrace as a charter of equality, liberty, and rights. And so, yes, my essay is designed to sort of set the stage for helping readers to understand that transformation.

[0:05:28.3] Julie Silverbrook: One of the things your essay does so well is to help us see the Declaration not just as a timeless statement of ideals, but as a working political document created for a very specific moment. Today, we are often so familiar with the Declaration's language that we forget just how dangerous and shocking some of its words were in 1776. How did people in Britain and the colonies react to the Declaration's list of grievances against the King?

[0:05:54.7] Eric Slauter: Yeah, just imagine how electrifying it was to hear this indictment of a sitting monarch. When you look at a printed copy of the Declaration, the great kind of trunk of it is these charges against the King, the long list of grievances. One of the most divisive words in the Declaration, and a word that John Adams later said, he had sort of regretted using, was the word tyrant, which was a word you couldn't use without risking seditious libel prosecution in Britain. And so, in fact, when the Declaration of Independence reached Britain and British printers in newspapers and in other settings wanted to reprint it, they thought long and hard about whether they were going to include the King's name on the indictment and whether or not they were going to use the words tyrant and tyranny. So you see these really incredible, almost like mad libs where it will say, the history of the present blank of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute T space, space, space, space, space over these states. So tyrant, King, these are words that you were not to use in such close proximity.

[0:07:30.5] Eric Slauter: And the fact that the Declaration did that made it a hard text for British

printers to publish. But it must have been an absolutely electrifying thing to hear. It was a phrase that Thomas Paine had popularized, the idea that the King was not just a butcher, but a tyrant. So I think those charges really do repay our close attention for the way in which they kind of negatively present what a positive political program would look like. But even that, I think, paled in comparison to the final paragraph. And we tend to say there's a preamble and a list of grievances and then a Declaration of Independence. But in fact, everything about the Declaration, with the exception of the reproduction of the July 2nd resolution that Congress had approved, is preamble. And the enacting clause is one that I think relatively few of us are familiar with. It's the phrase that Richard Henry Lee uttered when he rose in Congress on June 7th. It derived in part from the Virginia Convention on May 15th, from them recommending to their delegates in Congress to propose independence. And what Lee had said was that these colonies, United Colonies, are and of right ought to be free and independent states, that they're absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain is and ought to be totally dissolved. That is the resolution that passed through Congress, some said unanimously, but we know that one, at least one colonial delegation was unable to vote. New York could not vote on that day. They didn't have authorization from their provincial legislature. But that was the Declaration of Independence. And every printing, beginning with the first by John Dunlap in Philadelphia on the evening of July 4th, the morning of July 5th,

[0:09:54.5] Eric Slauter: The newspaper that picked it up on July 6th, every printing of this printed those words free and independent states in all caps, because that was in many ways the headline for the document. We now see it as just buried beneath all of the very important philosophical premises. But that's the actual Declaration of Independence. When the delegates decided, once they had unanimous consent from all of the states, when New York came in a little bit later in July and they authorized a parchment version of the Declaration, when Timothy Matlack, the scribe who produced that text, when he got to that part of the Declaration, he changed his handwriting. He changed it from what's called a round hand or a normal cursive hand to a Gothic letter. So if you visit the National Archives and look at the scroll of the Declaration, one of the few things you can actually still read is the phrase free and independent states, because it is inked in very large letters. Many of our transcripts don't make much of that. So if you look at the National Archives transcript of the Declaration, it won't appear that those words are any larger or more important. But Matlack thought they were, Dunlap thought they were, Congress thought they were. So I think it's part of the story, part of the story of this document is the way in which its political purpose at the time has been eclipsed by its use and invocation over time.

[0:11:50.5] Julie Silverbrook: When do you start to see that pivot away from the political realities that the Declaration effectuated to the broader philosophical aspects of the Declaration?

[0:12:04.3] Eric Slauter: I think you start to see it almost immediately. So while we know that the Declaration was designed to help pave the way for a treaty with France, hopefully, that's what Tom Paine thought, a manifesto to a foreign court was designed to do. It was designed to allow a foreign power to come in on the side of the colonies or the new United States and to announce that they were open for business, two things that the Declaration says that the free and independent states can do. But you start to see almost immediately within the British press, a kind of fixation on that second paragraph, often very sarcastic and often with an acknowledgment of the prevalence of slavery within the colonies. So a writer in a London newspaper will say, “Do these folks even know

what the word unalienable means? Anytime you have slavery, liberty is alienated." And so you start to see this kind of fixation on the philosophy in a way that you didn't really see in the United States. Loyalists also pick up on this. But I would say within months, the Declaration is being used to make domestic arguments on behalf of enslaved people.

[0:13:40.7] Eric Slauter: And that's no accident, and the essay tries to provide a kind of grounding for why that was. But yeah, I think it starts very, very soon. So there's a traditional narrative that says the Declaration changed its meaning over time, and Jefferson's Declaration... Understanding of the Declaration was not the same as Lincoln's, which was not the same necessarily as Martin Luther King's, but that there were sort of broad ways in which the Declaration changed meaning. I think the Declaration had multiple meanings from the very start. I think that members of Congress themselves were unclear about just what the document was designed to do. They had this guidance from Tom Paine, who had been telling everyone there's kind of four parts of a declaration of independence. You need to tell the world the miseries you've endured. You need to suggest the peaceable ways you've tried to resolve these things with petitions and forth. You need to say that that's all failed and you're not able to live safely or happily under the British and you're breaking off your political connection with them. And then you need to say to foreign courts that you are peaceable with them and that you're open for trade.

[0:15:16.5] Eric Slauter: And you can sort of hear in those four things, there's not a need for a philosophical statement about the origin of government or about the right of revolution. And the fact that Congress and the committee that drafted it felt that there was a need for that proved incredibly generative for the history of the Declaration. Without that, I think you would have just the kind of documents from the Continental Congress that were printed, the resolutions that were printed that nobody reads, or very few who are not professional historians read now. That could have been the fate of the Declaration of Independence, but from the beginning, there were people who held it up and saw that the principles and the practices were not in alignment and made it their mission to try to bring about that alignment.

[0:16:28.0] Julie Silverbrook: I wanna talk a little bit more about that because clearly the tension between the Declaration's soaring language on equality and the existence of slavery was acknowledged from the very beginning, and it prompt a question that you raised in your essay, which, does the Declaration actually mean what it says? And so it's interesting in tracing this history that, in a way, the statement of political philosophy at the top, the part that has become, I think, the most important and quoted part of the Declaration, right, our national aspiration, was sort of incidental to the document when it was first written. And so talk to us more about the tensions, and what I'm hearing you say is, in a way, the tension or contradiction at the heart of that preamble language is how people perhaps started engaging with that philosophical statement in the Declaration itself.

[0:17:32.6] Eric Slauter: Yeah, I think we are very familiar with looking at this document and wondering, what did they declare? What did they really mean? Could they have possibly meant what they say? And that's been a topic ever since 1776. It's not a 19th century, 20th century, 21st century preoccupation. I mean, to take your listeners back to the moment where Congress votes on independence, July 2nd, the day that John Adams thinks will be forever celebrated, there is a newspaper that publishes in the evening on July 2nd, the Pennsylvania Evening Post. And the editor

of that journal, Benjamin Towne, gets this news, this world-shattering, empire-shattering news, world-breaking news, and he puts it in the only place he's got space, and that's on the fourth page of four, where it is surrounded by advertisements. So often printers would keep some space left over to insert ads because through subscriptions and ads, that's how they make their living. And so there it appeared, This day the Continental Congress declared the United Colonies free and independent states. And free and independent states was in all caps. So major news appearing on the back page of it, but surrounded by ads of goods for sale, the busy kind of commercial marketplace of Philadelphia, but also notices of runaway servants, white runaway servants, and sitting right across from the first announcement of the Declaration of Independence.

[0:19:31.7] Eric Slauter: The first announcement of Congress's vote, was a notice of a reward, a monetary reward for the return of a man named Ishmael who had left his purported owner. And I was shocked by that, and I think some readers at the time would have been shocked by that. But just as a material reality, I looked at the 31 printings of the Declaration in newspapers between July 6th, when Towne again got the scoop and had the first publication of the newspaper, and August 2nd, when it appeared in South Carolina. And of those 31, I believe 19 of them also included ads for the return of fugitive men or for the sale of men. And that was the reality, no matter where the Declaration circulated in 1776. But I think it was not uncontested. There was a small movement, a small abolitionist movement. It included signers of the Declaration like Benjamin Rush, who had published a pamphlet against slavery in 1773. That same year, a group of four men representing other enslaved men in Massachusetts had a petition for freedom published in a number of different venues, arguing their case in the language of the imperial conflict and in the language of natural rights.

[0:21:28.1] Eric Slauter: They said they had a natural right to their liberty. And I think one reason why you see abolitionists jumping at the Declaration is because there had been a lot of groundwork laid for understanding a phrase like, all men are created equal, and a phrase like, with the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. So I think had Jefferson had his way, the Declaration would have included a final charge against the king, holding him accountable not only for the slave trade, for what he called waging cruel war against human nature itself and violating the most sacred rights of life and liberty, but also held him responsible for selectively emancipating or strategically emancipating enslaved people in Virginia. So I think from the moment it began to circulate, readers are aware of the tension between the principles upon which the Declaration is being articulated and the reality, the practices. And I think we do them a disservice if we don't acknowledge that ambiguity.

[0:22:55.2] Julie Silverbrook: It's pretty stunning today in 2026 to think about encountering the Declaration for the first time in the same publication as notices for the return of enslaved persons. I think that that would shock the conscience of all people today.

[0:23:16.2] Eric Slauter: And just imagine the publisher John Holt of a newspaper in New York, the New York Journal, when he published the Declaration, the Declaration was read in New York on the 9th. That's the night that it's read at the head of the army under Washington's orders and the statue of King George is brought down. On the 11th, the publisher of the New York Journal prints the text and he says, “I've printed it as a separate sheet because I know some of my customers want to put it up, tack it up, and show their pride in what their representatives have done.” But all one of

those customers would need to do would be to turn over the sheet. And they would see notices of runaways named Jack, Sampson, and Prince, these men who had freed themselves, emancipated themselves by running from their would-be masters. So that's a very material way of thinking about the sort of two sides of this. It's two sides of the same sheet of paper at that moment. But I think we do them a disservice if we don't hold that tension and try to investigate it a little more.

[0:24:52.2] Julie Silverbrook: One of the most compelling parts of your essay in this book is that you focus on readers and interpreters outside of the political elite. In particular, you highlight figures like Reverend William Gordon and Lemuel Haynes, who saw promises in the Declaration that many founders themselves may not have anticipated. Can you tell our listeners more about Gordon, Haynes, and their understanding of the Declaration?

[0:25:19.6] Eric Slauter: Yeah, these are both men in Massachusetts and both deeply religious men. So Gordon was a minister in Roxbury, Massachusetts, just outside of Boston at the time, and he had come from England only recently, but he had said that he had embraced the cause of liberty in the colonies. He was a budding historian and ultimately ended up writing one of the first histories of the American Revolution. He had been a chaplain to the Massachusetts legislature. And so he knew the members, he knew them well, and he knew that they were working, as many new states were, to produce a new constitution. And he said, "I've been sitting and reading these documents from other states. The state of Virginia says that all men are born equally free and independent. The Declaration of Independence says that all men are created equal." And so Gordon is able to get a typesetter to help him make the Declaration look a little different. So when it appears in print in October in a Boston newspaper called the Independent Chronicle, it's, all men are created equal with life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. So you get the first sort of which words do we emphasize in this text.

[0:27:00.6] Eric Slauter: And ultimately what he says is, "I've been reading these things, and I'm just sort of wondering, if we hold these truths to be self-evident, what does that commit us to?" And he says, "Are these our genuine sentiments?" is his phrase. "Are these our genuine sentiments, or was Congress provoking the deity by acting hypocritically to serve a turn?" So we tend to think that... I have students who tell me immediately that the founders were hypocrites because they said one thing and did another. But Gordon is using the word hypocrite in its 18th-century meaning. It wasn't just that Congress had said one thing in the Declaration and some of them were practicing another thing. It was that they had appealed to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of their intentions and that they were relying on divine providence. So these two invocations, these two invocations of God in the Declaration were seen to make that a binding statement. Right? And so it's not enough to just say one thing and privately mean another, but if you say something publicly and you appeal to God for the rectitude of your intentions, then at least according to Gordon, you need to follow through with that.

[0:28:38.5] Eric Slauter: And so what Gordon said was, "Let us apply earnestly and heartily to the extirpation of slavery from among ourselves." And some listeners will know that Massachusetts is among the first, a court case in the early 1780s based on the phrase, all men are born free and equal, which begins the Massachusetts Constitution and its Declaration of Rights, that slavery thus can't exist. But yeah, I think this is a really important essay and a really important representation of how the Declaration is being read. But again, I don't think he's necessarily on the vanguard just because

he gets it into print first. In fact, we know from a just astonishing document that was discovered in the early 1980s, about more than 200 years after it was written, by Lemuel Haynes. He was born to a white mother but with a black father. He was abandoned shortly after his birth in 1753, and he lived as an indentured servant until he was about 18 years old. He was a very religious person. Ultimately, he would become an ordained minister. He had been a farm laborer, but he just, he had never been an enslaved person. And he marched with other free men in his town when Lexington and Concord, when those battles happened, he went to try to protect Boston.

[0:30:23.2] Eric Slauter: He joins the Continental Army and heads towards Ticonderoga. Gordon was also in Ticonderoga very... I tried to map if they ever interacted, but I'm not sure that they were in the same space at the same time. But they held very similar views of what the Declaration was. But Haynes had been at work, we think, on an anti-slavery tract based on some other readings that he had read, but really an original work. We have the manuscript of it. We think he was working on it before the Declaration began to circulate because he refers to the colonies instead of the states. But it was a pamphlet he wanted to publish called Liberty Further Extended, or Free Thoughts on the Illegality of Slave-keeping. And right there on the manuscript title page, he put the words that we all now know, the words that Gordon also wanted to emphasize, we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they're endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. So what I discovered was that abolition may have been something of a fringe movement in only a few locations.

[0:31:51.3] Eric Slauter: But the majority of people who cited the most famous words, the words we now all know by heart, were abolitionists. And I think they effectively cornered the market on that phrase. So when pro-slavery readers looked back in the 19th century, they said, “Oh no, they couldn't... The founders could never have meant all men.” But there were plenty of readers in 1776, loyalists, abolitionists, ordinary people who read that as as expansively as it seemed to be. And there were many ways in which Jefferson might have phrased the famous sentence. He had originally wanted to say, we hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable. He loved these kind of balanced constructions, sacred and undeniable, that all men are created equal and independent. Congress edited most of these double constructions down, but what they left us with is just an incredibly powerful short phrase. So it's more succinct than, all men are born equally free and independent, which is what Virginia said. They revised it to, all men are by nature equally free and independent. Massachusetts, all men are born free and equal. But all men are created equal turned out to be an incredibly powerful tool for abolitionists and for others across American history who were interested in expanding liberty and equality.

[0:33:34.8] Julie Silverbrook: One of my favorite parts of your essay is when you talk about the fact that words need readers who absorb, animate, and apply them. Documents alone do not change history. People do. The people who read and absorb the Declaration of Independence, they invoke it to change history. So you draw this incredible through line in your essay from the early antislavery activists who we just talked about to Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Why did the Declaration become such a powerful moral touchstone for Americans across generations seeking to expand liberty and equality?

[0:34:17.9] Eric Slauter: Yeah, I mean, it's a lovely, complicated story of how what is essentially

the same document came to be understood in different ways at different times. And it's not an uncontested story, but it's a story that I do tell in this forthcoming book that really tries to center ordinary people's voices in making that profound change. The Declaration we have all inherited is a profoundly different one, I think, than the one that they might have expected they were editing in July 3rd, July 4th, 1776. So the most important thing to say is that, yes, extraordinary politicians and spokespeople like Lincoln and Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr., exercise sort of incredible sway over how we understand this document. But they were hardly alone in doing it. I think there is a general trajectory between something like sacred and undeniable truth to self-evident truth, to a proposition, as Lincoln refers to it in the Gettysburg Address, or a promissory note, as Martin Luther King referred to it in 1963. But the idea that it would be the reading and rereading of these documents that might help our nation perpetuate, as Lincoln said, the political institutions, I think is just a really astonishing thing.

[0:36:11.9] Julie Silverbrook: In the essay, you talk about Lincoln's claim that the Declaration's equality clause was included for future use. How do you understand Lincoln's reading of the Declaration, and how transformative was it in shaping modern American constitutional culture?

[0:36:27.4] Eric Slauter: Yes, think back to that list of four things that Paine thought a Declaration of Independence needed. It did not include a declaration of rights, a claim about equality. And I think Lincoln is writing or speaking, he's delivering a speech in 1857 in the wake of the Dred Scott decision, which he finds a kind of abhorrent decision. And he says... I actually think that Lincoln probably would not have spent as much time writing about, thinking about the Declaration of Independence if Chief Justice Roger Taney hadn't made it a centerpiece of his case in the Dred Scott majority opinion. It's really at that moment, I mean, there are mentions of the Declaration in Lincoln's writings before that, to be sure, but they begin to really bubble up, they become much more meaty and interesting at that point.

[0:37:40.2] Eric Slauter: So what he says in 1857 is, “I think the authors of that notable instrument intended to include all men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal in all respects. They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness in what respects they did consider all men created equal, equal in certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This they said and this they meant. They did not mean to assert the obvious untruth that all were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact, they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the right so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as the circumstances should permit. They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society which should be familiar to all and revered by all, constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere. The assertion that all men are created equal was of no practical use in affecting our separation from Great Britain. And it was placed in the Declaration not for that, but for future use. Its authors meant it to be, thank God, it is now proving itself a stumbling block to those who in after times might seek to turn a free people back into the hateful paths of despotism.” It's just an incredible analysis of the Declaration and of the disjuncture and the acknowledged disjuncture between principle and practice. I think when it came time to give a eulogy, the Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner gave a eulogy for Abraham Lincoln, which he

called the Promises of the Declaration of Independence. It's a title I have stolen for...

[overlapping conversation]

[0:39:49.8] Julie Silverbrook: It sounds very familiar, Eric.

[0:39:51.7] Eric Slauter: Sounds familiar. I stole it from Sumner because he was really the first to try to tell Lincoln's life story as a story about the attempt to constitutionalize the Declaration of Independence, to bring those two great liberty documents together. So he was really, I would say, among the first to collect every quote that Lincoln had made about the Declaration. All the famous ones we now know were assembled in a short space and read aloud by Sumner. But I think one of the things my book is trying to do is to take us along that very long journey of how the Declaration becomes enshrined in some sense within the Constitution.

[0:40:54.4] Julie Silverbrook: Let's talk about the future use that Lincoln refers to. Bring us up through modern day, who is the future from Lincoln's time forward who uses the Declaration to impact constitutional change?

[0:41:14.2] Eric Slauter: Well, it's hard to think of a group that has not used the Declaration. So you could begin even earlier than Lincoln with anti-slavery activists who are also women's rights activists and who are employing the Declaration. So someone like Elizabeth Cady Stanton taking on and expanding or clarifying what the Declaration is meant to represent. You could look to the 1870s and the use of the Declaration in the suffrage movement all the way up through the 19th Amendment in 1920. You could look at the kind of quest for human rights that is represented by something like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Declaration in the 1940s, and members of the NAACP like W.E.B. Du Bois, who are trying to bring a kind of indictment of the United States through an appeal to the world about the condition of black people in the United States, whether there are human rights violations and violations of the Declaration. We've already talked a little bit about the use in the civil rights movement. I think, again, it has often been religious leaders who have thought about the disjuncture between principle and practice or what we say and what we do. And as I said before, I think hypocrisy is a big concern within theology. And you certainly see the use of the Declaration not just in the Southern leadership, but also within the Black Panther Party. It has certainly been an inspirational document or a document that could be used to help expand ideas of liberty and equality for gays and lesbians in the 1970s, 1980s, all the way through the present. So it is very hard to find a group that has not in some way taken up the Declaration.

[0:43:59.4] Julie Silverbrook: After spending so much time tracing the history of how Americans across generations have interpreted and reinterpreted the Declaration, what most surprised you personally while doing this project?

[0:44:17.3] Eric Slauter: That's a great question. I'm inclined to say, this is a year in which we are talking a lot about how revolutionary the ideas in the Declaration of Independence were. And there's no question they were revolutionary for all the reasons that we've been talking about, but they were not new. They were not new ideas. Almost every word of the second paragraph, the political philosophy of the second paragraph of the Declaration could be found in documents produced

between, say, 1625 and 1690. I would really say that's the heyday of natural rights. And what was so revolutionary in 1776 was not these ideas, but who was speaking them. And I think that's the really... That's what made it revolutionary. The idea that enslaved black men might cite their natural rights in a petition for freedom, that women like Judith Sargent Murray might talk about their equality in a magazine essay. That, to me, is what was really revolutionary about this moment. So I think we should absolutely be celebrating these revolutionary ideas while also just acknowledging that for the history of political thought, they weren't new, but their application in this way, their expansive reach, that was what was new and revolutionary. The idea that just ordinary farmers were speaking the language of natural rights, and that they were going to use that language to express their own grievances, that was new, right? It was one thing to have read Locke's Two Treatises at Harvard College. It was another thing for ordinary people to begin to speak this language. And that, to me, is I think, was the most surprising thing.

[0:46:45.3] Julie Silverbrook: It's such an extraordinary part of the Declaration's history, and something that I hope people will reflect on, is that it's not a document frozen in 1776. There's this incredible history of people, American people, throughout history, invoking it either for change or invoking it to better understand their own place in the world. Everyone from a farmer to Abraham Lincoln. And I hope as we celebrate this 250th moment, people will look at the various ways that people have engaged with the Declaration over time and really better understand both the promises of the Declaration itself and the overall promises of America. Eric, thank you so much for joining us on We The People today.

[0:47:34.2] Eric Slauter: Thank you, Julie. It's been a pleasure.

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[0:47:38.1] Julie Silverbrook: This episode was produced and mixed by Bill Pollock with production support from Charles Sahm. Research was provided by Anna Salvatore, Trey Sullivan, and Tristan Worsham. Please recommend We The People to friends, colleagues, or anyone anywhere who's eager for a weekly dose of constitutional education and debate. If you would like to purchase a copy of *The Promise of Americ*a, you can do so via the National Constitution Center's website at constitutioncenter.org/promiseofamerica. And while you're there, check out all of our upcoming events in celebration of America's 250th, including a special Independence Week Town Hall on July 1st with Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and National Constitution Center Semiquincentennial scholar Jon Meacham, 11th Archivist of the United States Colleen Shogan, and Harvard University Professor Danielle Allen. Robert Costa of CBS News will moderate a wide-ranging conversation on the shared principles at the heart of the American idea and the many ways the nation is marking this milestone anniversary. And as always, remember that the National Constitution Center is a private, nonpartisan nonprofit, and we rely on your generosity, passion, and engagement for all of our programming, including this podcast. Please consider donating today at constitutioncenter.org/donate. On behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Julie Silverbrook.