

Liberty Medal

October 27, 2023

JEFFREY ROSEN, PRESIDENT AND CEO, NATIONAL CONSTITUTION CENTER

Welcome friends to the National Constitution Center and to the 2023 Liberty Medal.

We've gathered here on Independence Mall—the birthplace of American liberty. And we're fortunate to have the greatest view in America of Independence Hall, where the Declaration and the Constitution were written. So, as we prepare to honor David Rubenstein and Judy Woodruff for their contributions to liberty, let's inspire ourselves by gazing out at Independence Hall and thinking about the words of the Declaration.

In 1776, We the People declare the following self-evident truths: That all people are created equal, that we are endowed by our creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these rights are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

Three big ideas: equality, natural rights, and government by consent.

Eleven years later, on September 17, 1787, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention fulfilled that promise, assembling once again in Independence Hall, to institute “a more perfect Union,” in order to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.

The Constitution achieves its purposes with three more big ideas: creating a democratic republic founded on separation of powers, popular sovereignty, and the rule of law. Now, as it happens, today is the 236th anniversary of the first *Federalist Paper*, which Hamilton wrote to defend the Constitution, and which was published on October 27, 1787.

Two years later, as extra security for the blessings of liberty, we the people adopted a Bill of Rights. Now, unfortunately, the Bill of Rights was proposed in New York, not in Philadelphia. But fortunately, we've spared you the need to interrupt this program by bringing the words of the Bill of Rights to Independence Mall. And now friends, I want you to gaze on the words of the First Amendment, which are shining behind me and in front of you and reflect on them.

The five freedoms of the First Amendment are all aspects of freedom of conscience, which Thomas Jefferson said in the Virginia Bill on Religious Freedom, was the first of our unalienable rights. In other words, the Declaration of Independence recognizes liberty of conscience as an unalienable right. The Constitution protects it by creating a limited government with no power to infringe it. And the Bill of Rights reminds all Americans,

including judges, of the urgent need to preserve, protect, and defend it. From the Declaration, to the Constitution, to the Bill of Rights, the blessings of liberty have come full circle.

It just blows my mind every time we begin a program here that we feel the electric connection between Independence Mall and the shining words of the First Amendment. There is no more inspiring space in America to be reflecting on the connections between the Declaration, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.

To paraphrase Franklin Roosevelt: 'This is a place of national consecration.'

And that's thanks in part to the first of our Liberty Medal recipients, David Rubenstein.

The First Amendment Tablet, as many of you will remember, used to hang at the Newseum in Washington, D.C. And when the Freedom Forum was looking for a new home for it, it was David Rubenstein, who suggested to Jan Neuharth, that the tablet should come to Philadelphia, with philanthropic support from Judge Michael Luttig, who is here with us, this vision became a reality.

The NCC is not the only historic space that David Rubenstein has transformed through patriotic philanthropy, which is a term he coined to describe his efforts to preserve historic documents and buildings in order to educate Americans about their history and heritage. David Rubenstein has made transformative gifts to preserve other historic spaces, including the Washington Monument, the Jefferson Memorial, the Lincoln Memorial, Monticello, Mount Vernon, Montpelier, the Library of Congress, and the Holocaust Museum. In addition, he's brought historic documents, including the Declaration, the Constitution, the Bay Psalm Book, the Emancipation Proclamation, and lent these documents to institutions including the State Department, the National Archives, the Smithsonian, and the National Constitution Center. You can see his Stone copy of the Declaration of Independence next to *Signers' Hall*, and his 13th Amendment is downstairs in our gallery of the *Civil War and Reconstruction*.

He has conducted interviews with American historians and thought leaders about the American idea, which have been broadcast on PBS and collected in his best-selling books. All of David Rubenstein's patriotic philanthropy is based on the idea that as he puts it, those who remember the past are condemned to repeat it—well, that's the Harvard philosophy professor George Santayana, and David quoted Santayana and then adds his own true observation that a knowledge of history is likely to help individuals and perhaps especially policymakers, to avoid the mistakes of the past, and make better decisions about the future.

We're also here to honor a great American journalist, Judy Woodruff. Judy Woodruff has set out to understand the causes of and potential solutions to polarization in America. She was named White House correspondent for NBC News in 1976, America's 200th birthday.

In 1982, she wrote a book about her experience, *This is Judy Woodruff at the White House*, and the same year she joined PBS, where she continued White House reports for the *NewsHour*. She spent the 1990s at CNN, where she hosted inside politics, anchored the documentary series *Democracy in America*, and then returned to PBS in 2006, where she spent nearly two decades as anchor of the *NewsHour*.

And just last year, she decided to step down from PBS and the *NewsHour* to take on the inspiring PBS project we're here to discuss tonight, "America at a Crossroads." She's conducting interviews across America, trying to understand the urgent question of why Americans seem so divided and whether or not our divisions can be healed. During the past year, Judy has interviewed scholars, public officials, local journalists, historians, and citizens of diverse perspectives, to explore what unites us and what divides us, and whether or not we are still committed to the American Idea in these perilous and challenging times.

As Judy put it: I want to listen to the American people themselves, in cities, small towns, and rural areas from one end of the country to the other, and to ask them about their hopes and fears, how they see their role as citizens, and to have long conversations with people who've given these questions careful thought.

We're here to award the 2023 Liberty Medal to David Rubenstein and Judy Woodruff, for their inspiring work in modeling and promoting conversations about the shared values of liberty that unite Americans. Later in the ceremony, Sharon Percy Rockefeller will join me here on stage to present David and Judy with the Liberty Medal. But first, I'd like to have a conversation with David and Judy, about what they've learned from their conversations across America, about what unites and what divides us. Please join me in congratulating David Rubenstein and Judy Woodruff.

CONVERSATION WITH JUDY WOODRUFF AND DAVID RUBENSTEIN, MODERATED BY JEFFREY ROSEN

ROSEN: David and, Judy, you are two of America's greatest interviewers. So my main job here is not to mess it up.

But I want to begin with the obvious question to you, David, do you think it's important for Americans to learn about American history? What are some of the big ideas from the Declaration and the Constitution that you want Americans to learn about?

DAVID RUBENSTEIN

Well, the reason I think it's important is this: Jefferson said many times that a representative democracy only works if you have an informed citizenry. Sadly, we don't have as informed a citizenry as we would like, in part because we don't teach civics and American history very much anymore. So as an example of this, are there any naturalized citizens in this room? Anybody a naturalized citizen? Okay.

A naturalized citizen has to now be in this country for five years, and then you take a citizenship test—100 potential questions, you're asked 10, you have to get six correct. If you're 65 or older, they tell you which 10 they're going to give you. The questions are things like, 'how many branches in the federal government are there?' and so forth. Well, 91% of the people who try to become citizens in this country pass that test—91%. We have 50 million immigrants in this country, not all are citizens, but of those who try to become citizens, 91% pass that test. The same test essentially was given to native-born Americans in all 50 states about two years ago. And in only one state, Vermont, could the native-born Americans pass the basic citizenship test. That suggests to you and to me, that we don't really know much about history and civics. So if we don't know much about it, what's the problem? Well, as Jefferson said, if you don't have an informed citizenry, you're not likely to hold on

to your democracy very long. And it wasn't far from here, that Benjamin Franklin uttered his famous words, when he left the Constitutional Convention was approached by a woman and she said, he said, 'What have you done for us, Dr. Franklin?', and he said, 'I've given you a republic, if you can keep it.' But up until recently, people have thought, 'Well, that was a quaint way of expressing what we've got, a republic.' And there was no thought that anybody would say we would lose it. But increasingly, I'd begun to thought think that if we don't have informed citizens, we aren't going to have the republic that the Founding Fathers gave us, and we're going to have a different form of government, one that all of us probably wouldn't like as much. So what I've been trying to do in my efforts, is modestly to kind of let people know more about history, more about our country's background, more about how the government works, on the theory that an informed citizenry will make the country a better country.

ROSEN: Judy, in your conversations across America, do you have a sense that citizens still know about and care about the American idea as expressed in the Declaration of the Constitution or not?

WOODRUFF: Well, before I answer your question, Jeffrey, I have to say, what an incredible, exciting moment this is to be sitting here in this place to be receiving this honor. And to be sitting next to my longtime friend, David Rubenstein, I have to just say, a point of personal privilege. David and I have known each other a long time. We both are baby boomers. We both went to Duke University. We both came to Washington with President Jimmy Carter. So we have a lot in common, but there are some differences. When it comes to resources, you know about the Aaron brothers, Henry and his brother Tommy, they together 768 all-time record number of homeruns. Henry had had 755. Tommy had 13. He's Henry.

So no, it is such a privilege to be here. But you asked me about whether people know what is, what it is that we're trying to preserve? And I would say, you know, in the spirit of what David just said, yes. In many cases they do. But clearly, in too many places, they don't. I've crossed the country—I've now visited 12 states, just over the course of the last seven or eight months, we've been to rural areas, we've been to cities—and we've talked to Americans across the spectrum. And you find that some people are worried, desperately worried about the state of our democracy. They worry about how their children are going to grow up in a country. They worry about whether we're turning into an authoritarian place. And there are others who, frankly, I think, unfortunately, take our democracy for granted—who don't think about the foundation, who don't think about some of these foundational principles. And so for me, it's been an eye-opening experience to go out and talk to them, about what matters to them, and what do they think divides them from other people. And that has produced frankly, some of the most eye-opening reporting, we've seen.

ROSEN: I'm eager to ask you about what you're learning about the causes of polarization. And I want to ask David, on that score, you say the point of studying history is so policymakers can avoid the errors of the past. And the biggest error of the past the Founders were afraid of was demagogues and mobs. And they thought the whole experiment might fail when people were moved by passion rather than reason. And they had in mind Shay's Rebellion, where the debtors in Massachusetts are going after the creditors, and they designed the whole system to slow down deliberation to stop people from making snap judgments and stop them from retreating into armed camps. And now of course, we're living in Madison's nightmare with a world of social media and greater polarization.

And then in any time since the Civil War. Were the Founders correct that too much democracy might lead to the fall of the Republic?

DAVID RUBENSTEIN

Of course, the Founders were brilliant in many ways, but they gave us a Constitution that has 27 amendments. So not perfect. And as we know, that system, even with 27 amendments doesn't work perfectly. They were not gigantic believers in democracy, to be honest. They were privileged people. They were all reasonably wealthy people. And they were worried about mob rule. And they're worried about true democracy, which really hadn't existed anywhere. So we have democracy under the Constitution pretty much only in the House when the Constitution was drafted. The Senate was to be elected by state legislatures, and the president was to be elected by the Electoral College. So it wasn't as if they said, 'Please, people vote and you can, whoever wins, the highest number of votes will win the office involved.' I think that the other thing I often worry about in the Constitution and think about it, is that we had a Constitution that was developed by 50-some white privileged men—wasn't really representative of that country, and isn't representative of this country—that it survived this long with 27 amendments shows that it had some really great features in it. And it's a document, a Constitution, that other countries around the world really emulate, and really model much of their government after.

I think we have a reasonable facsimile of a representative democracy, but I worry increasingly that some of the forces in the country are not as happy with the representative democracy and are trying to take things in their own hands. On one example was the one that's obvious to everybody.

In the Revolutionary War, there was a flag called the Gadsden flag developed by a man named Christopher Gadsden, a Slovak slave owner from South Carolina. And it said, 'Don't tread on me.' And this was a takeoff on something that Benjamin Franklin had earlier put in one of his newspapers. It had a snake, and basically, it was a rattlesnake. And rattlesnakes are native to United States and not to England, and to the rattlesnake was designed to say the British, 'Don't tread on me or a rattlesnake will come and bite your head off.'

That same Gadsden flag was used in the events of January 6, if you go back and look at the films on January 6, the irony is that the same flag used to throw off the yoke of British tyranny on us, was now used by people in our country to say, we want to get rid of the tyranny of the federal government or the things the federal government's doing. And so, I do worry that many people in this country are thinking the country is not working the way they want it to work. And they're prepared to take things in their own hands. And I do wonder whether, if we were here, then 100 years from today, the Constitution would still be operating the way we want it to if we continue down a certain path, I do worry about that. Hopefully, it will be reasonably close to what we have today and 100 years from today. But who knows?

ROSEN: Well, that's an amazing detail about the 'Don't tread on me' flag at January 6. On that score, I just the other day came across Jefferson's greatest fear about the Constitution, which he sent to Madison, when he got it a month after it was ratified. And he said, 'I'm worried about a minority demagogue who might lose a presidential election, cry false votes, refuse to leave office, and seeking the supports of the states that voted for him, install himself for life...

RUBENSTEIN: —can't imagine that would ever happen.

ROSEN: ...never, never happen in America. But history always speaks for itself. Judy, what do your conversations with Americans about the causes of polarization tell you about whether this is more like the Civil War than we've ever been at any point in our history?

WOODRUFF: Well, as you probably know, there are people who are comparing this period to the period immediately before the Civil War. In fact, I had the privilege of interviewing one of the members of your board, Judge Michael Luttig, and was one of the one of the points that that he made that his fear is that this is a period very much like what we what we experienced in the 1850s.

What I'm seeing is a combination of things. I mean, there, there are, there are forces at play in this country, which we're all familiar with: economic inequality is one of them. There are parts of this country that are not experiencing the great growth and the great wealth that other parts of the country are. I just spent a few days this week in Steubenville, Ohio, a place that used to be a thriving center of the steel industry back in the early part of the night of the 1900s, and well almost up until the 1970s, and then things started to change.

Steel and other industries moved overseas, jobs started to go away. That community has lost population. And it's lost hope in many ways. There are some bright spots, and I can talk about those as well. But it's a reminder when you're in a place like that, where there's, there are a few relic buildings of what was there 50 years ago, but then there are many vacant lots there and the jobs are just not what they were. It is not the same place. They're trying to bring it to life again.

But America is, we're divided that way. We're divided economically, we're divided over the question of race. There's no question the great problem—dilemma—that America was trying to solve with the Civil War, or trying to settle with the Civil War—over slavery. Yes, it was resolved in the short run. But we haven't resolved it over all these years. We are still very much a country where race is at the center of so much, so many of our conversations. And you add to that, Jeff, the news media, the fact that with social media, the fact that people get their news and information from so many different places, there is no more Walter Cronkite. And you can pick and choose where you want to get information that does not lend itself to people coming together to work together on finding solutions. It certainly doesn't. It isn't happening in the Congress, we've witnessed that. In recent weeks, months, and years. They're getting their news and information from completely different sources. So, we have a lot of work to do. And there is effort to address it all. But right now, we are at a very difficult moment, I'm stating the obvious, in this country. And it requires, I think, the attention of everyone in this country who can possibly think about it, as we think about: What do we do? What do we do? It's what you're doing here at the Constitution Center. You've spoken about that. But it's on the shoulders of everyone in this room to think about how can we as Americans—every one of us—can make a difference. And I'm seeing that as I travel around the country.

ROSEN: David, let's think about possible solutions. Madison put all his faith in a news media that would refine and cool public opinion. He imagined the literati like journalists for *The Atlantic* publishing the *Federalist Papers*,

and that slowly diffusing reason across the land. And obviously, as Judy just said, a world of social media and rage to engage and identity politics seems like the opposite of that. What can be done to resurrect that Madisonian deliberation through public education?

DAVID RUBENSTEIN

Well, if I knew I'd be in Iowa, New Hampshire, there's no easy way to do it there, because I'm probably too young to run for president. I'm only 74 and you need to be older so I'm going to wait a few years. But the media has changed dramatically from the days of Madison. And those days, a very small percentage of Americans actually were literate. And in those days, a very small percentage of Americans were allowed to participate in government.

In 1776, for example, we only had 3 million people in the country, 3 million people. And of those 3 million, half a million were slaves in 1776. They couldn't be in government. And then you had one and a quarter million remaining white women and they weren't allowed to be in government. And then you had 10,000 Jews and they couldn't be in government. And then you had about 500,000, non-Christian, non-property-owning men, and they couldn't be in government. So, you had about 500,000 Christian property-owning men. And those people were reasonably literate and as pretty well-educated as the Founding Fathers and it is amazing that out of those 500,000 people, white, Christian property-owning men, we got George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin. Today, we have 350 million people. And we have...something less than that. So where did all the great people go? Well, like it's easy to say they went into private equity, but I don't think that's...[laughter]

I think it's very, it's a sad situation that the most talented people in the country today often don't want to serve in government. Because the media is so vicious. The need to raise money is such a relentless effort. And the vitriol is so bad that people just don't want to put up with it. Now the vitriol was bad in the early days, too. We know that and it was worse in the Civil War. But I just think that we are now heading down a slippery slope, where it's seen as nothing wrong with vilifying people, for senseless reasons only to raise money for your cause. And sadly, in the in the House of Representatives, now, most of the members are spending about 40 or 50% of their time raising money, and they raise money, not by saying to people, 'I want to do something right down the center, that's good for the country.' That's not how you raise money—you appeal to the far left and the far right. And the result is the division is so great, that I don't know where we're gonna easily build a bridge to get back to the case where people can actually talk to each other from different sides.

And it's not as bad as the Civil War yet. The year before the Civil War, we had roughly 60 fights on the floor of the Congress, where people were physically hitting each other. Now, we haven't come to that stage yet. But people are doing the same thing with verbs and words. And, and I really worry about the future of the country's ability to operate in a very bipartisan way, in a way that's likely to have the kind of principles that we have in our Constitution and Declaration of Independence honored in any meaningful way.

WOODRUFF: And Jeff, you know, partisan primaries are a big part of what David is talking about. Partisan primaries have helped to drive people in the Republican Party who are running for office to the right, and people

running for office and the Democratic Party to the left, farther apart, harder to come together, harder to find compromise.

ROSEN: That's such a central and constructive solution. And scholars on both sides have suggested that ranked-choice voting which would end the need to pander to the extremes in the primaries would be the greatest thing we can do to get moderate candidates. In our final moments before we award you the Liberty Medal. Judy, your interviews have been so illuminating, you have identified a range of possible solutions. Sidney Milkis, the UVA presidential historian said, 'Rebuilding trust in institutions, including the primaries themselves, and their ability to choose candidates outside the primary system,' is one. You've interviewed local journalists, tell us about a few of the most constructive solutions that you've encountered.

WOODRUFF: Some of the most constructive things that I hear, or I see going on out there, come from the so-called bridging groups, I'm sure you've heard of many of them. They're called Braver Angels, Common Ground, there's one, Listen Up—efforts at the national and the community level to get people to come together to do something as simple as sit across the table from each other, have a cup of coffee, or maybe a beer, just to talk to each other. And they're exploring ways: Do you do you start with the most contentious issues? Do you start with immigration and abortion? Or do you start by having a conversation like, 'Well, where did you grow up? You know, Where do you like to take vacation? Tell me about your family?' The kinds of things that you would have a conversation with someone you're just meeting for the first time.

But there are all these experiments going on. We visited the Polarization Lab at Stanford University, where they are literally looking at it. Their graduate students are coming up with ideas for how to get people to listen to each other people who have diametrically opposed political views. And some of it is very straightforward. It's 'Okay, do you start with the, with the with the contentious politics? Or do you start with the things you might have in common?' But these groups are working, it's one person at a time, but it is making, I think, it will make a difference. It's going to take time, there are a lot of people in this country who don't like where we are, and they're trying to do something about it.

The other thing I would say is that there are parts of the country, where are my good friends, and many of you know who they are Jim and Deb Fallows, who traveled around in his little Cessna to different communities across America, they did this a few years ago, even before some of the most current divisions have arisen, and they've identified communities where people are working across partisan division. And in many instances, in fact, I think in every instance is a result of kind of inspired local leadership, people who are willing to overlook the opinions of people on the other side and say, 'We need to come together to think about the future of this community and not be so focused on whether you're an R and I'm a D, and whether you think this and I think that on an issue.' So that is happening. It's not happening in enough places. But the fact that it's happening at all, I think is something we have to we have to be inspired by.

RUBENSTEIN: Let me just comment, if I could have the division in the country of when John Kennedy ran for president. He campaigned in roughly 40 states. Richard Nixon famously campaigned in all 50 states probably a mistake to do so. But why did they do that? Why did they campaign all those states? They did because they didn't know how these states were necessarily going to vote. Today, there's no need to do that. We know how

40 states are going to vote, for certain. 40 states have voted exactly the same the last four presidential elections. Forty states have voted either Republican or either red or blue. It's only 10 states left. And the election is down to those 10 states. And that's how the presidential election campaigns are. But it really shows that we become almost a red country and a blue country. If you go to Texas and talk to people about some of the things that people in New York are interested in, or feel is the right thing, people will laugh at you. And if you, you know, if you were in New York, and you try to talk to people about certain things, people in Texas would laugh at certain things that people in Texas or New York think is appropriate. In other words, the country is getting so divided, that we really are almost a red country and a blue country with about 10 states, maybe balancing in between. And I think that's unfortunate. And I don't think it's getting better anytime soon.

I host a dinner once a month for members of Congress. And it's a free dinner so they come, and it's held at the Library of Congress, a neutral site. And I usually interview a historian or somebody like that. And I do it, thinking that, who should know more about our history than the people making the law—seems obvious. And the members of Congress say they'd like the interviews and so forth. But they say this is the only time, the only time in Washington that they can be with somebody from the opposite party and the opposite house without fear that they're going to be criticized for fraternizing with the enemy. And there is no press there. And it's a sad situation, they don't really have.

They used to be things called conference committees, where you, the House and the Senate would come together and figure out how to fix legislation. There's no legislation anymore. And if there is, it's all done the leadership. So there's no conference committee, so they don't get to know each other from the White House from the other end, they have no, hardly any congressional delegations going abroad anymore, because they get criticized for that. So there are members who don't know each other. And it's, and most of the members are only there three days a week, as well. So, it's a sad situation, the members of Congress don't know each other, they don't like each other. And if you're in a different party, they don't talk to you. And this is not a prescription for a successful democracy going forward.

ROSEN: Judy, your suggestion of inspired local leadership and David's suggestion of a space where members of both parties can set aside their tribal labels and actually talk to each other is so constructive. Judy, you should have the last word. Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of democracy?

WOODRUFF: Well, as you travel the country, and you see the divisions over everything from book banning to what to teach in schools, to certainly over immigration, the list goes on and on. It's easy to fall into pessimism. But I am at heart an optimist, I hope a realistic one. And I have to have faith in the American people, I have to believe that the American people are not going to let this continue. It may be another generation.

Before we see the kind of improvement that we all know we've got to have if we're going to solve our toughest problems. But this remains the most remarkable country on the planet. Yes, there are many important parts of the world, but the United States is this extraordinary experiment. And I have to believe that the American people are not going to let us go down a dark, dark path. And so, I put my faith in them. And I have to believe it's going to be better.

JEFFREY ROSEN

Beautiful.

LIBERTY MEDAL PRESENTATION DELIVERED BY JEFFREY ROSEN

It's now time to award the 2023 Liberty Medal and I'd like to invite Sharon Percy Rockefeller to join me in making this award.

Sharon, you are the president of WETA in Washington, D.C. You are a dear friend of David and Judy, and it is appropriate that you are here to help me award them the 2023 Liberty Medal. David and Judy, if I could ask you to stand.

Judy Woodruff, you have been an inspiring advocate for civil dialogue in America, serving as a model of reasoned discourse throughout your broadcast career. You have dedicated your work as a journalist to understanding the divisions facing our country and exploring ways to heal them through civil discourse. You've contributed to public education by interviewing a wide variety of public figures from diverse perspectives. You've demonstrated that thoughtful, objective journalism, coupled with intellectual curiosity, and love and optimism about the future of America can inspire an informed citizenry to preserve and protect American ideals. For your inspiring service to American journalism, by modeling and promoting conversations about the shared values of freedom and democracy, that unite Americans, it is an honor for the National Constitution Center to award you the 2023 Liberty Medal.

David Rubenstein, your patriotic philanthropy has inspired Americans to learn about our history, with transformative gifts to preserve national monuments and historic documents. You've interviewed American historians, leaders, and citizens of diverse perspectives to increase the public's awareness and understanding of American history. You've convened members of Congress to learn from historians based on your conviction that those who study our history can avoid its errors and defend its best ideals. You've traveled across America to tell the story of our national monuments and historic places, through conversations with Americans of diverse perspectives. For your service to the United States, and inspiring the American people to learn about the declaration, the Constitution and the American idea, it is an honor for the National Constitution Center to award you the 2023 Liberty Medal.

JUDY WOODRUFF LIBERTY MEDAL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

I, I feel this is a little after the fact. So I'm going to try to abbreviate what, what I prepared. But what I mean, there are no words that can do justice to how I feel. What an incredible honor to be in this historic neighborhood. After earlier this month, I had the privilege of doing an interview from President Lincoln's cottage in Washington. So clearly, I've peaked, Jeff, I mean, that's what's happened. But to you, Jeff, and to members of the National Constitution Center Board, I accept with humility and enormous gratitude. And at the same time, I do feel overwhelmed. There's no one who's cared or contributed more to revitalizing the early American experience than David Rubenstein. No one is more deserving of this recognition than David. And to Jeff, I'll just say you do such a remarkable job leading the Center, bringing to life and celebrating that extraordinary collection of philosophers and politicians and thinkers and writers and rabble-rousers who literally changed the history of the world.

You asked me to speak briefly about the importance of a free press, and engaging people to talk from different perspectives, and we've already discussed a lot of this, I'm going to try to keep these remarks truly short. But my "America at a Crossroads" project has given me these incredible opportunities to travel around the country, as we've been discussing, to see what people are thinking and what they are feeling. And what I've seen in talking to people, one of the things that has struck me as deeply as anything else, is what's happened to the press.

We know that three weeks before July 4, 1776, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison's Virginia declared, 'freedom of the press is one of the greatest bulwarks of liberty, and can never be restrained, but by despotic governments.' Of course, the First Amendment, the opening lines of the Bill of Rights, protects freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

Today, 236 years later, the press is in trouble, not only with the dramatic decline of trust on the part of the public, but also with the explosion of new technology. News coming out of from all directions vetted and unvetted at the speed of light. All this has upended the business model. Of one-quarter of the nation's daily and weekly newspapers, more than 2,500 of them have shut down. The number of journalists in this country has declined by over 60% of newspaper journalists in the last couple of decades. Take *The Chicago Tribune* as an example: 15 years ago, had almost 800 reporters. Today, fewer than 150 to cover that sprawling city, the suburbs and the state capitol in Illinois: Springfield.

Other papers have been taken over by hedge funds that are frankly more interested in downsizing journalists and selling properties than in informing citizens. What's concerning is that this loss of so many papers, dailies and weeklies in small towns and rural America, that were the life blood of these communities, creating a more informed and engaged citizenry, which is what we've been discussing over the last few minutes.

I'm just going to tell you quickly about one place that I covered this summer in the Texas panhandle. In a small town with a unlikely name, Canadian, lives Laurie Brown, who had run the *Canadian Record*, a weekly newspaper. She ran it for decades, she inherited it from her father, who had run it for decades until he died at his desk. She's advocated for an assisted living facility, a stop sign at dangerous intersection, reported on countless births, deaths, and marriages, on high school sports games, and holding public officials accountable. With dwindling classified ads, however, she couldn't continue. She shut the paper down last spring. A rancher who told me he didn't always agree with Laurie Brown's progressive editorials had tears in his eyes when he spoke to me about the loss of the *Record*. He called it the glue that held the community together. And when a wildfire burned 300,000 acres of his property, killed scores of his animals, the paper reported on it. It was picked up across the country. Pretty soon, he was getting gifts of hay and feed, and even cattle from strangers. What does that tell us? Studies show unmistakably that when a local news outlet dies, accountability and voting go down with it, while taxes and polarization go up. What is clear, is something that we've been discussing this evening. An uninformed citizenry is a serious threat to democracy.

Now there is some good news: The American Journalism Project, which is an amazing organization, has already raised over \$40 million to help new sites and startups. An organization or paper they started, a digital site in

Mississippi, *Mississippi Today*, has already won a Pulitzer Prize for exposing corruption, a scam where politicians took millions of dollars of welfare money to give it to their friends. Just last month, a national consortium of 22 donors led by the MacArthur Foundation announced an initiative to support struggling local news outlets with an infusion of more than a half-billion dollars over the next five years. And I just want to quickly recognize somebody here who's been a stalwart in trying to protect journalism. He's sitting on the front row here, dear friend Norman Pearlstine, former top editor at *The Wall Street Journal*, *Time Inc.*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and so many others. Thank you, Norm, for all you do for journalism.

But every option, every option, needs to be explored for profit, maybe a patriotic owner with deep pockets, nonprofits, print, digital, broadcast, narrowcast, local specialty sites, more college newspapers, like the ones that Arizona State and Louisiana State, they're helping to fill the void and covering state capitals. And we might at least explore the possibility of government assistance with no strings, perhaps with tax breaks. And with my fabulous boss, who you just saw up here on stage—Sharon Rockefeller, CEO of the Washington, D.C., public television and radio stations—we cannot overlook public media, which relies on contributions from viewers like you. Tote bags and coffee mugs not far behind.

But my main message, my main message as I accept this wonderful honor as someone who has reported on American politics across the country for more than 50 years, and who has seen the collapse of so much of the journalism infrastructure that I too long took for granted. I am more certain than ever that our democracy depends on—indeed is built on—the foundation of a free, robust, and vigilant press. We look around the world, we see most countries don't have what we have. But our Founding Fathers recognized it, the men who wrote the Constitution. And there's no better time than now to rededicate ourselves to fulfilling the vision that they laid out here in this city near this place. Thank you very much.

DAVID RUBENSTEIN LIBERTY MEDAL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

I'd like to thank several people, for making this possible. Tonight, in addition to all the sponsors and all of you attending, I certainly want to thank Sharon Rockefeller. Sharon is a great educator, as well as a great broadcaster, some of you may not know. She has been the head of the public broadcasting station in Washington for roughly 30 years, I think it is 30. How many? 36? Okay, 36 years, as I said. And during that time, she came up with some programs that no doubt many of you have seen. One of them is a set of series by Ken Burns. If you like Ken Burns, you owe it to Sharon Rockefeller, but she put him on TV before anybody ever heard of Ken Burns. And all these years all the Ken Burns shows really come through because of WETA and Sharon Rockefeller supporting him. So, she's not only a great broadcaster, but a great educator, and a great American, and someday whoever the selection committee is here for this medal should certainly give one to Sharon Rockefeller. Thank you very much, Sharon.

Jeff Rosen, I remember when Jeff was selected for this position, people said 'He's a law professor, how can a law professor really run a museum or something like the Constitution Center?' And everybody who said that was, of course, wrong. Jeff has shown the incredible intellect that he brings to any matter in running this incredible Center, but also, he's become an inspiring educator for so many people, and his enthusiasm for the Constitution and the Declaration as nobody, no peer. And if he had been at the Constitutional Convention, I think it would have been even better than it is today. So Jeff, thank you for making this possible.

Three brief points, and then we can all adjourn for dinner. First point is, it wasn't very far from here that Benjamin Franklin had his experiments with electricity. And people laughed at him because people thought he was a little crazy, and didn't know what he was doing. And it turned out that he had more or less discovered electricity and discovered certain principles about it and became the most famous American in the country, and the most famous American in the world. Not until George Washington came along much later, that anybody in the world knew any prominent American other than Benjamin Franklin. And he was engaged in another experiment and participated in the experiment of the Constitution. And that was even a crazier experiment than some of his electricity experiments. The idea was, you're going to get 50-some white men coming together in Philadelphia, during the summertime, no air conditioning, windows are closed, so nobody can hear anything, so no leaks occur. And these 50-some people came together and developed a document that has stood the test of time when you think about it.

More than 200 years later, we're still operating largely under the principles of that document. And it's incredible that it has survived this long. And it has so few amendments, relatively speaking. And it's incredible that we didn't have a Constitution Center until this one was open, to educate people about more and to celebrate it.

Now we're celebrating the 250th anniversary soon of the country. But when you think about what we're celebrating, we're celebrating the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. It's a great document, more or less a propaganda document. It had no legal effect. It was to say, here's why we're breaking away from the British. And it's wonderfully written by Thomas Jefferson, and so forth. And it was edited heavily. And he didn't like the edits. And he refused to admit he was the author for many years, because he thought it was too heavily edited. But we should be celebrating and we will in time, but the thing we should really celebrate his 250th anniversary of the Constitution, because the Constitution is what governs us, not the Declaration of Independence. So happy to celebrate the 250th of the Declaration. But I really look forward to the 250th of the Constitution, if I'm around to celebrate it. And I do think that's a much more significant document.

And I think this Center does a wonderful job of educating people about the Constitution, because we need to have people know more about it. Now, in my own case, I have tried in a modest way to educate people about it. And the way I tried to do it is to preserve documents and buildings. And why is that? Why do we need to preserve the Declaration of Independence? Why do we need to preserve the Constitution? We know what's in those documents. You can put it in a computer slide. Why do we need to have all these documents preserved? So people can see what they looked like 200 years ago? Why? What's the point of it? We know what the words are. So why not just throw away the old documents? In many cases, we throw away our old clothes, we throw away our old cars, we throw away a lot of old stuff, why don't we just throw away these old documents? Well, the reason is, when you see a historic document, and you know you're going to see it, you're going to likely get more educated.

Let me explain what I mean. The human brain is an incredible device. Unbelievable. When we came out of caves as homo sapiens 400,000 years ago, it probably wasn't apparent to the other animals in Africa that we were going to dominate the world because we weren't as fast as other animals, we weren't as strong, we weren't as big, but we had a brain. And the brain evolved in incredible ways that created enormous cultures and wonderful

things that all of us have benefited from. But fortunately, the brain has not yet evolved to the point where you see something on a computer slide that it's exactly the same as seeing it in person. So when you see that, that the Declaration of Independence, or the Constitution, or a replica of it in person, or a historic copy, you're more likely before you go see it to be educated and read about it, you're more likely when you go there to have a curator tell you about it. And you're more likely when you leave to read about it. And therefore, you're more likely to get educated about it.

The same thing is with historic buildings, why preserve the Washington Monument and Monticello or Montpelier. We know what they look like and let them fall apart when they're done and build new buildings. Why go preserve the old buildings? For the same reason. Because when you go see something like that, you're going to be prepared for it, you're going to be educated about it, when you get there, a curator will tell you about it. And then when you leave, you're more likely to read about it. And that is more likely to make people better educated about our country and our history in a way that I think is necessary. And I think it's very important that we do that.

And the final point I wanted to make is this: I accepted this award because I'm honored to get it and I'm happy to be given it. But the truth is, I'm only accepting it on behalf of other people who are doing the educating much more than I am. And I accept the award on behalf of high school teachers and civics teachers, and people who are preserving documents and preserving buildings, working in the Park Service, doing other things, to make sure that Americans know as much about our history as possible. So, I'm really their representative tonight. And so, I think, while I'm honored to get the award, I really think I'm accepting it for other people who are engaged in educating Americans about our history. So hopefully, we can have a more informed citizenry. And all of you by the virtue of the fact that you're here tonight, are, I think, showing your own interest in preserving history and making sure Americans know more about our Constitution. And I urge all of you, when you go home tonight to think about what more you can do, to educate Americans, educate your children, your grandchildren, and to educate your neighbors and other people about American history and what you can do in a way that helps people learn more about our country's history. We can only do this if people like you go back educated; think about what you can do to make this country a better place. And one of the ways I hope you can think about doing so is educating people and making certain they know more about the Constitution, more about the Declaration of Independence, and more about how our government works.

And so, I ask all of you to think about this tonight. When you go home, what more you might be able to do in your own ways, and try to do things differently than anything I've done. But come up with a different way to do it. Perhaps better than anything I've done. But just think about it tonight. Because I know that if all of you participate, other audiences around the country, are doing the same kind of thing, we will have a much better country and a much better democracy. Thank you very much.

SPEAKER

Thank you for attending the National Constitution Center 2023 Liberty Medal ceremony.