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DANGERS OF REWRITING OUR HISTORY

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In this life, all humans will die. That is an unfortunate reality none of us can avoid; humans do, however, possess a unique ability to learn from the mistakes of those who come before us to increase the quality and longevity of the lives that come after us. To borrow the [words](#) of English scientist Isaac Newton, we can improve the lives yet to come because this generation “stands on the shoulders of giants.” In fact, the framers of the U.S. Constitution operated on this very premise.

In [Federalist 9](#), Alexander Hamilton drew upon examples of failed governments throughout history to argue for the Constitution in lieu of the failure of the Articles of the Confederation to secure the common good:

It is impossible to read the history of the petty republics of Greece and Italy without feeling sensations of horror and disgust at the distractions with which they were continually agitated, and at the rapid succession of revolutions by which they were kept in a state of perpetual vibration between the extremes of tyranny and anarchy. If they exhibit occasional calms, these only serve as short-lived contrast to the furious storms that are to succeed... From the disorders that disfigure the annals of those republics the advocates of despotism have drawn arguments, not only against the forms of republican government, but against the very principles of civil liberty.

Writing as Publius, Hamilton said that the “science of politics ... like most other sciences ... received great improvement” over time by the political discovery of the “distribution of power into distinct departments.” In the mind of the Federalists, the nature of American federal government, its separation of powers and system of checks and balances, would not exist but for the unique lessons of history. **American law was not inscribed onto a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate. It was produced by the circumstances of the time and informed by the reality of history.**

Imagine, for a moment, that the Constitution’s framers despised this history so much that, instead of learning from it, they attempted to erase it from the minds of their people. At best, American political science would regress to ignorance, unaware of how to confront the issues of the past. At worst, new life could be breathed into the dark ages; barbarism and despotism could be justified as “novel” by virtue of an erased, rewritten history. **History is not exclusively filled with stories of virtue and goodness.** History records the actions of fallen people, whether they be wicked or the result of doing the best one can given the circumstances. Just as one cannot erase or re-write human nature, no one can truly erase history. Nevertheless, this truth doesn’t stop people from trying.

In the summer of 2020, America witnessed national violence and civil unrest in reaction to the death of George Floyd, which major media outlets characterized as “[fiery but mostly peaceful](#).” Left-wing activists used the occasion to promote tearing down statues of [historical figures](#), including those commemorating President George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Ulysses S. Grant. Some significant political leaders agreed with this left-wing iconoclasm, even when it called for removing a statue of Abraham Lincoln as the “[great emancipator](#).” These left-wing calls to erase history did not end with defacing or removing statues of American figures. Eventually, the movement revealed its more sinister nature; their target was Jesus.



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Activists [demanded](#) that statues of Christ be removed from churches because they represented “white supremacy;” mainstream television anchors justified those calls by [claiming](#) that Jesus “was not perfect when he was here on this Earth.” It even caught the attention of then-President Donald Trump, who [pledged](#) that removing these statues was “not going to happen.”

The turmoil of 2020 sparked many people to defend America’s founding ideals, who largely argued that they remain important concepts for the nation to unite behind. Though these efforts were noble, they were all too often devoid of any conversation about religion, needlessly opening up their arguments to vulnerabilities. For instance, defenders of American history often cite the [Declaration of Independence](#) as an example of a unifying idea: “We hold these truths to be *self-evident*, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights....” As patriotic as this appeal may be, it doesn’t answer the underlying questions that our culture is wrestling with – *are these truths really self-evident?* And if they are, are they worth unifying around?

“Evidence” is something that supports the truth of a conclusion. If an assertion is “self-evident,” as our Declaration states, the assertion’s truth is supported by its very existence, which is not quite the same as saying, “This truth is obvious.” If one says “the day sky is blue,” they are asserting an undeniable truth to anyone who is not blind. We know that this statement is true because we can look at the sky and verify that it is, in fact, blue. Our declaration not only claims that equality is objectively and eternally true (an assertion of a thing’s existence and nature); it claims that humans can know it is true because it exists. That logic ostensibly leads to an impasse. Either we can agree with the sentiment of our declaration, that something is capable of being self-evident, or reject it, because a claim of truth must possess independent authority. **Knowledge of history empowers us to make an informed decision.**

Many people know that Thomas Jefferson, a founding father and the third president of the United States, was the one who penned the first draft of the Declaration. But what many don’t know is that his draft did not call these truths “self-evident.” Instead, Jefferson [wrote](#) the following:

“We hold these truths to be *sacred & undeniable*; that all men are created equal & independant, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent & inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, & liberty, & the pursuit of happiness”

When Jefferson called the principles of the eventual Declaration “sacred and undeniable” rather than “self-evident,” he presented the earliest formulation of American Christian political theory. Because all men are created *imago Dei* (“in the image of God”), they equally share a divine entitlement to certain forms of respect, including respect for one’s God-given life and free will to pursue “happiness.” The authority to his argument that all men were created equal, in other words, rested not only upon the faith that the Christian God exists but that principles aligning with God’s word are special, distinct from and superior to all others. If these principles are “sacred,” it is because they are divinely inspired, not because they prove themselves.

After Jefferson completed his first draft of the Declaration, he sent the document to Benjamin Franklin, among others, for feedback. Franklin [changed](#) Jefferson’s proposed “sacred and



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undeniable" to "self-evident," which [historians understand](#) was likely influenced by Franklin's sympathy for Enlightenment rationalists who divorced "reason" from its religious tradition. The HBO series *John Adams*, a historical drama, even [portrays](#) that editing process in a scene with Jefferson, Franklin, and Adams. The depiction of this fictional conversation gets to the heart of the matter.

In the HBO series, after Franklin reads Jefferson's draft, he states that Jefferson's "sacred and undeniable" language "smacks of the pulpit," likening it to a religious message from a pastor. "These truths are self-evident, are they not?" Franklin asks. "Perhaps," Jefferson responds. "Self-evident, then," Franklin remarks before editing the document. "Every single word was precisely chosen. I assure you of that, Dr. Franklin," Jefferson then emphasizes. Franklin tells Jefferson that he shares his sentiments but that the change is necessary to avoid a situation where others "mangle" the meaning of the document. Despite Jefferson's insistence, the change is made, and Jefferson ends the discussion with one comment: "Well, it's what I believe."

Historical context gives substantive meaning to the principles in the text of the declaration. Even if Jefferson's proposed language had more specifically established the authority for the principles in the Declaration, the American people would still know the authoritative essence of the Declaration's "self-evident" language. In other words, the society for which the document was written would have understood its meaning in a Christian context.

Though historians largely understand [Jefferson](#) and [Franklin](#) to have been deists, a belief not expressly Christian like the faith of George Washington or John Adams, American society operated within a [Christian framework](#). Even if American colonial elites like Jefferson and Franklin were influenced by Enlightenment thinking, they arguably were equally influenced by the "[Great Awakening](#)" of the 18th century, which marked a revival and diversification of America's religious culture. The American people, for whom the founding fathers spoke, were overwhelmingly Christian, and their declaration was for them.

In this Christian context, the Constitution was born. John Adams [said](#) that "[o]ur constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." The same is true for our declaration. If one is to defend the principle that all men are created equal, one must have the courage to defend the axiom upon which that principle operates: the existence and authority of the God of the Bible justified the principles of both documents. **Their truths are only self-evident, and therefore unifying, to those who recognize the righteous authoritative reality of God over all things.**

If America forgets the historical context that justifies her system of self-government, then the principles of the declaration will fail to unify the nation. But if America preserves that history, the appropriate meaning for the declaration's assertion, our culture and country can prosper.

