Historian explains why ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident’ is the greatest sentence ever

Walter Isaacson discusses innovation, democracy at ASU lecture

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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Story highlights

Historian Walter Isaacson spoke Wednesday at the 2026 Flinn Foundation Centennial Lecture about his book, “The Greatest Sentence Ever Written.”

He believes the beginning of the Declaration of Independence — "We hold these truths to be self-evident" — is the greatest sentence ever written.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among those are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

The beginning of the Declaration of Independence is the greatest sentence ever written not because it handed a blueprint to Americans but because it is a perpetual challenge, according to historian Walter Isaacson.

“We have to remember our values, our values as humans and our values as Americans,” said Isaacson, a biographer and history professor at Tulane University.

“That’s why, for the 250th anniversary of this country, I wrote a book called ‘The Greatest Sentence Ever Written’ about that ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident’ sentence, because that sentence gives us the values that in a time of polarization, we can all, if we took a deep breath, realize we can rally behind and help heal this country.”

Isaacson spoke Wednesday at the 2026 Flinn Foundation Centennial Lecture, sponsored by Barrett, The Honors College, at ASU Gammage. The event is part of a series of conversations on “America at 250: Past, Present, Possible,” led by Arizona State University President Michael Crow, that explore what our country’s history can teach us about the choices ahead.

Isaacson told the crowd that one reason the sentence is great is because it was a collaboration among Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams. Jefferson originally wrote, “We hold these truths to be sacred …” and Franklin changed it to “self-evident.”

“He's saying, ‘We're trying to create a new type of nation based on rationality, not to dictate religion,” Isaacson said.

Then Adams added “endowed by their Creator.”

“So you can see this notion of balance, collaboration and finding common ground between the role of divine providence and our good Lord in helping create our rights and the role of rationality and reason,” he said.

But when the founders said “all men,” they really meant men.

“Abigail Adams,” Isaacson said, “in a famous letter to her husband, John, says, ‘Remember the ladies, make sure that you don't deny them of the rights too.’

“And John Adams, who's not my favorite founder, … said, ‘We cannot but laugh. We're not going to repeal our masculine systems.’ So we're beginning to see that this sentence is an aspirational sentence, but it doesn't get us to who we want to be.”

At the time, one-fifth of the people in the colonies were enslaved. Jefferson owned 200 slaves.

“They left it to future generations to say, ‘How are we going to take this sentence and use it as an aspiration, use it as a mission statement, use it as a forcing mechanism so that each new generation can bring more and more people into the values of America?’” Isaacson said.

Finding common ground was a core goal of the founders. The concept of a “common,” like the centuries-old Boston Common, originally referred to a practice wherein land was made available to people who didn’t own property so they could graze their herds and plant gardens in a shared, communal space. Then other things were added to the idea of “commons,” like libraries, schools and fire departments.

“So to me, this notion of believing in individuals, believing in individual property, but also believing in common ground, is this perfect balance that we have to do to get our society so that it's fair to everybody,” Isaacson said.

“It allows individual freedom and it makes sure everybody feels they have some stake in our society rather than that they should pick up a pitchfork and have a populous rebellion.”

Now, our nation is debating how much health care, education and other services should be part of the commons.

“And the moral purpose of that is not simply to be generous and nice to other people, it's to form the foundation of the American dream, to make it a land of opportunity in which each new generation has the chance to succeed better than the generation before them,” Isaacson said.

Isaacson has specialized in writing biographies of innovators, including Franklin, Steve Jobs and Elon Musk. After his speech, he and Crow talked about the role of innovation in preserving democracy.

The Constitution itself is an innovation, Isaacson said.

“It was one of the greatest innovations in human history — building a government and a society based on individual rights and on common ground, common values, rationality and reason. Because it had never happened,” he said.

“… They didn't just do it and give it to us. They started the process in which each new generation has to innovate.”

Crow and Isaacson also discussed how to better teach civics.

“My own view is that it's taught too simply to (inspire action),” Crow said.

“How do we get this notion that the country is in fact an innovation of unbelievable importance, unique in the history of our species, and that we've got this responsibility to take this little license that they've given us here with this sentence and how do we teach that?”

With more storytelling about innovators, Isaacson responded. Some historians believe history is created by “great forces” that cause things to happen, but he believes narrative-driven biographical history is more interesting — going back to the story of Adam and Eve.

“I think we should teach history as if people touch the surface of history and it makes ripples, because people like to read narratives about other people,” said Isaacson, who is working on a biography of Marie Curie.

Innovators are the people who affect our lives, he said.

“People are going to forget who was president … but they're not going to forget that they have an iPhone or that they have a TV set.”

This story originally appeared on ASU News.

Main image



Author and journalist Walter Isaacson speaks during the 2026 Flinn Foundation Centennial Lecture at ASU Gammage in Tempe on Oct. 8. Photo by Samantha Chow/Arizona State University

Text image(s)



Historian Walter Isaacson speaks about his book "The Greatest Sentence Ever Written" during an event held at ASU Gammage in Tempe on Oct. 7. Photo by Samantha Chow/Arizona State University



Wednesday's event was part of a series of conversations on “America at 250: Past, Present, Possible,” led by ASU President Michael Crow, who spoke with author and journalist Walter Isaacson about what our country’s history can teach us about the choices ahead. Photo by Samantha Chow/Arizona State University