

Keeping the Declaration Alive: A 2026 Bill of Particulars

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On July 4, 1914, on the 138th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, President Woodrow Wilson delivered an address at Independence Hall in Philadelphia. He offered a sentiment that, to me, perfectly represents how I view the Declaration and how I believe we ought to approach it as a country. Speaking about the Declaration, Wilson stated, “There is nothing in it for us unless we can translate it into the terms of our own conditions and of our own lives. We must reduce it to what the lawyers call a bill of particulars. It contains a bill of particulars, but the bill of particulars of 1776. If we would keep it alive, we must fill it with a bill of particulars of the year 1914.”¹ To keep the Declaration alive, we must fill it with a bill of particulars for the year 2026 and every year thereafter to protect and defend the future of democracy in America.

Personally, the Declaration of Independence has taken on different meanings for me throughout the years. During my childhood, I was patriotically decked out in red, white, and blue for Fourth of July parades, lighting sparklers, and watching fireworks, as the Declaration stood as a symbol of victory. Now, as the 250th anniversary of its signing approaches, I lack the celebratory spirit I had as a child and feel a bit more disillusioned. Part of this is simply growing up and learning, realizing that Christopher Columbus is not a hero and that America is not always the good guy. However, in a time where divisions run deep and news headlines detailing tragedies and injustices seem never-ending, a larger part of my disillusionment stems from fears about where our country is headed. With this distress, I recognize my position of privilege and the protections I have, which stand in stark contrast to what many other Americans and immigrants are facing right now. The founders were flawed men, preaching equality while holding others in bondage. Jefferson himself owned over 610 slaves over his lifetime, serving as a powerful reminder that projecting these values is not nearly enough.² To me, the Declaration means nothing in words alone but everything in practice.

The Declaration of Independence is constructed around the core principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These terms have become so familiar that they risk becoming platitudes, making it necessary to revisit the intention behind the ideas to truly appreciate their value. These were not rights granted by a government but rather natural rights inherent to everyone simply by virtue of being human. In writing the Declaration, Thomas Jefferson drew on Enlightenment philosophy and inspiration from similar preceding documents, such as the Virginia Declaration of Rights of 1776, written by George Mason. Through this document, Mason identified inherent rights of men to include “the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.”³ Jefferson’s eventual specific decision to use “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” reflected a belief that the government’s role is to protect pre-existing rights rather than grant them, a belief he continued to express throughout his life. In his 1801 inaugural address, Jefferson applied this philosophy, stating, “a wise and frugal Government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned.”⁴ To the founders, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” served as a roadmap, where the purpose of the law is not to control and restrict but rather to protect and ensure the freedom of its citizens. In this way, the Declaration was a justification for creating a system that protects the opportunity

for people to thrive, establishing a standard against which all future government action could be measured.

If we are to keep the Declaration alive by filling it with a bill of particulars for our current circumstances, the principle of life and the accountability of the government in protecting it remains an ongoing battle. A direct modern parallel can be found in the fifteenth grievance listed in the Declaration: “For protecting them, by a mock Trial from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States.” This point was raised in response to the murder of two citizens of Annapolis, Maryland, by British Marines in 1768.⁵ King George III shielded his troops from punishment after killing colonists, allowing them to evade genuine accountability for their offenses. Just as colonists saw their communities face violence without accountability, we are watching the same thing unfold in our modern landscape, witnessed through the outcome of Operation Metro Surge, the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) crackdown in Minnesota. The deployment of 3,000 federal agents spanning from December 2025 to February 2026 resulted in the fatal shootings of two U.S. citizens, Renee Good and Alex Pretti.⁶

The objective realities of these two cases are alarming. Good was killed in her vehicle by ICE Agent Jonathan Ross on January 7, 2026, sustaining three gunshot wounds to the head. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) released a statement on social media calling Good a “violent” rioter who “weaponized her vehicle,” but this claim is undermined by video evidence showing Good turning the car’s steering wheel away from the agent before the first shot was fired.⁷ On January 24, 2026, Alex Pretti was recording federal agents on his phone before being pepper-sprayed, held down by three officers, and then shot ten times over the course of five seconds. In this case, federal officials claimed Pretti approached agents with a gun and “attacked” officers carrying out immigration duties.⁸ In both cases, the evidence contradicts the DHS’s accounts of agents acting in self-defense against instances of domestic terrorism.

Notably, a third, non-fatal shooting occurred when two federal immigration agents wounded Venezuelan immigrant Julio Cesar Sosa-Celis during a traffic stop. DHS initially claimed that the officer who fired the shot was “ambushed and attacked,” but this was later proven false. A DHS spokeswoman admitted that the testimonies of the officers were fabricated.⁹ In all three instances, no agents have been held accountable for this blatant, unjustified violence. On March 24, 2026, the state of Minnesota sued the Trump administration to access investigation materials on the killings of Good and Pretti, as federal officials have not granted them voluntarily.¹⁰ The same dynamic of shielding federal agents from accountability after perpetrating acts of violence against communities echoes across time, from the British Marines in 1768 to federal immigration agents in 2026. The fundamental grievance remains unchanged and must be remembered: a government that arms its officials but refuses to hold them accountable when innocent lives are lost threatens the very principles the Declaration rests upon.

While the deaths of Good and Pretti serve as high-profile examples of death at the hands of the government, these are not isolated incidents. Instead, they reflect a much broader crisis of government accountability and adequacy. A comprehensive bill of particulars must account for other systemic failures for which people suffer the ultimate consequence. In ICE detention centers, failures to comply with health and safety standards have contributed to the deaths of 46 people in custody or detention since January 2025, with the start of the second Trump administration.¹¹ Police violence is another area of concern. While there are circumstances that justify the use of lethal force to protect people, it is important to acknowledge that many deaths at the hands of police are avoidable. In 2025 alone, 67 percent of killings by police, totaling 760

deaths, occurred during traffic stops, responses to mental health crises, or situations where the person was not threatening anyone with a gun. Out of all the deaths caused by police in 2025, less than 1 percent resulted in criminal charges against the officer.¹² Prisons and jails are another area of concern, where medical neglect can lead to preventable deaths. A recent study from the Leonard Davis Institute of Health Economics found an increasing rate of cardiac deaths among prisoners, which is concerningly coupled with low treatment rates. Many prisoners who die from cardiovascular disease never receive diagnostic testing or medication for the conditions that caused their deaths.¹³ These are just a few illustrative examples of a recurring pattern of systemic injustice and a lack of accountability. Protecting the future of democracy requires a government that is as committed to safeguarding the lives of its citizens as it is to shield its institutions from the consequences of their failures.

Liberty is the second foundational principle the Declaration puts forth, and it is now more important than ever to defend it to ensure a lasting, healthy democracy. In his 1690 *Second Treatise of Government*, John Locke contends that “the end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom.”¹⁴ This captures the essence of liberty and the existence of government as a protection of autonomy and opportunity. The colonists took issue with King George III’s arbitrary authority, as they were subjected to searches and seizures of their bodies and property with no real justification. Through the use of general warrants and writs of assistance, for example, the British were free to enter their homes and search their personal belongings in the absence of any wrongdoing, often in search of anonymous authors of pamphlets that criticized the King. Concerning the invasive power of writs of assistance, in 1761, a prominent lawyer named James Otis declared, “It is a power that places the liberty of every man in the hands of every petty officer.”¹⁵ Government overreach is nothing new, as it existed in the colonies and still remains a major issue in our modern bill of particulars.

The tenth grievance listed in the Declaration, “He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people and eat out their substance,” addresses the frustration with the intrusive and overreaching actions of the British, but it also draws many modern parallels. Today, we see this concern through the example of *United States v. Chatrue*, a privacy case set to be heard by the Supreme Court in late April 2026. The legal challenge concerns the government’s use of geofence warrants, which the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has labeled “a novel and invasive dragnet surveillance technique.” Geofence warrants require Google and other tech companies to turn over the location data from the cellphones of all users estimated to be in a certain area during a given time frame, regardless of their involvement in a crime.¹⁶ This case represents a modern manifestation of the same indiscriminate overreach into the private lives of colonists centuries ago, raising the question of whether the government should have blanket access to the movements and affairs of people through their personal devices. Protecting liberty today requires establishing clear limits on the ability of the government to monitor, record, and access the digital footprint of its citizens without a clear and justifiable cause.

Defending liberty today also necessitates protecting the right to personal freedom and autonomy in decisions about one’s identity and body without government interference. Within the 2026 legislative session, the ACLU is tracking 500 anti-LGBTQ bills across the United States, ranging from curriculum censorship to creating healthcare barriers to restricting drag performances.¹⁷ Reproductive healthcare, gender-affirming care, means of personal expression, and privacy protections are all under attack, revealing the failure of the government to recognize personal freedom as a protected interest. The Declaration’s promise of liberty is inherently

undermined when the government steps in to regulate the most vulnerable and private aspects of an individual's everyday life. True liberty requires a government that refrains from imposing social and legal restraints on the choices people make regarding their expression and personal healthcare decisions. Ensuring the future of a democratic society requires the ability to choose who you want to be and how you want to lead your life, free of a government that has the ultimate say in its citizens' personal affairs.

The third and final principle outlined in the Declaration is the pursuit of happiness. To truly understand what Jefferson meant by this phrase, we can review an essay published in 1964 by historian Arthur M. Schlesinger. Schlesinger argues that the phrase is often misunderstood, coming down to semantics. The eighteenth-century meaning of the term "pursuit" also referred to the practice or engagement in something, allowing Jefferson's use of the term to be more accurately understood as not a search for happiness, but rather engaging in a fulfilling life. The modern bill of particulars for our present day is full of systemic barriers that prevent this engagement, from the affordability crisis to a defective healthcare system. A 2025 KFF Health Tracking Poll found that just under half of adults in the U.S. say that it is very or somewhat difficult to afford healthcare costs.¹⁸ Medical expenses have also consistently ranked as a leading cause of bankruptcy in America.¹⁹ Higher education costs are continuously on the rise, with the average public university student borrowing \$31,960 to obtain a bachelor's degree, and 42.8 million people having federal student loan debt.²⁰ Additionally, in March 2026, J.P. Morgan Asset Management published the discouraging statistic that 97 percent of recent graduates with college debt have "delayed or abandoned life goals, such as buying a home or starting a family."²¹ Health and education are two pillars of the pursuit of happiness, but at what cost? This is a question that America, especially in governance, must do a better job of grappling with to create a fairer, stronger future for our country.

The Declaration of Independence has served as a tool for affecting change, present throughout revolutionary social movements in American history. Early in the fight for labor rights in 1829, George Henry Evans, a member of the Working Men's Party, wrote the Working Men's Declaration of Independence to advocate for the rights and equality of the working class.²² At the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton drafted the Declaration of Sentiments, modeled after the Declaration of Independence, as part of the fight for women's suffrage. Stanton extended the Declaration's promise of equality to "all men and women" and listed sixteen grievances, addressing issues such as property rights and exclusion from opportunities afforded to men.²³ In 1961, the American Indian Chicago Conference gathered Native Americans from 64 tribes to write the Declaration of Indian Purpose, which included the powerful line: "We believe in the future of a greater America, an America which we were the first to love, where life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness will be a reality. In such a future, with Indians and all other Americans cooperating, a cultural climate will be created in which the Indian people will grow and develop as members of a free society."²⁴ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech drew on the text and principles of the Declaration of Independence, including the line, "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."²⁵ From 1965 to 1969, activists held the Annual Reminder demonstrations at Independence Hall, where the Declaration of Independence was signed, to bring attention to rights that the gay and lesbian communities had yet to be granted.²⁶ Time and time again, the Declaration of Independence has been harnessed as a powerful vision for a better future for our country, and there is no doubt that it will continue to serve this purpose.

In 1859, Abraham Lincoln wrote a letter to Henry L. Pierce, a representative from Massachusetts, concerning his thoughts on the Declaration of Independence as tensions over slavery were rising before the onset of the Civil War. In it, he wrote, “The principles of Jefferson are the definitions and axioms of free society,” and that “it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.”²⁷ In times of crisis, and in the current state of our country, we must return to this document as a rebuke, as Lincoln describes it. Returning to Woodrow Wilson’s 1914 address, he raises the point, “It is one thing to be independent and it is another thing to know what to do with your independence. It is one thing to come to your majority and another thing to know what you are going to do with your life and your energies.”²⁸ These two parallel ideas are critical to keep in mind as we go forward, reaching the 250th anniversary of the Declaration’s signing and beyond. Gaining independence was only the first step for our country. The real challenge lies in everything that follows: in using independence with responsibility, accountability, and purpose. Similarly, as we grow, both as individuals and as a country, we must act with intention and integrity to work toward building a nation where life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are attainable for all who pursue them.

Notes

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