

Ambassador Stephens' Remarks at
"The United States at 250"
Ray Dolby Centre, Cambridge University
May 29, 2026
(as prepared for delivery)

Good afternoon.

Thank you, Vice Chancellor Prentice and Chancellor Lord Smith for the warm welcome to Cambridge today – and thank you all for being here to commemorate America's 250th anniversary.

I'd like to start by congratulating the University on 25 years of Cambridge in America this year; and also, on the launch of your new Center for the United States today.

We're honored that so many in the United Kingdom and beyond still take such an interest in studying America's past and present.

Our event today seeks to address the question of whether the Declaration of Independence is still relevant in 2026.

Spoiler: You won't be surprised by my answer. I am not making any news today.

But as we are meeting in Cambridge, a temple of enlightened thought and debate for centuries – it is not enough for me just to *tell* you the Declaration is still relevant. I intend to prove it with facts and historical references.

And I would like to begin with a brief look back in history: to before 1776 and the birth of America.

Because in the course of world history, most of the great nation states have been founded on the bonds of geography, cultural identity, or conquest.

The ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome came from the fusing of local tribes and cities over time. Sometimes through *negotiation*, sometimes through *subjugation*.

And while I won't attempt to summarize the United Kingdom's history to a room of British intellectuals... it is sufficient to say that the UK was formed over millennia from the conquest and cohabitation of groups from the Celts, to the Vikings, to the Romans, Saxons, and Normans.

What we should ascertain from that list is that, in the course of world history, America has as a unique origin story.

Because ours was a nation built not on geography, conquest, or cultural ties, but on ideas, beliefs, and – unglamorous as it may seem – documents.

Perhaps the most important of these documents is the Declaration of Independence: a letter written and signed 250 years ago to express the hopes and ideals of the newly proposed nation.

The opening paragraph of the Declaration begins with the case for separating from Great Britain... but I'll skip over that for this audience.

It continues with what decorated author Walter Isaacson has described as “*The Greatest Sentence Ever Written.*”

Namely: “*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, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*”

I am inclined to agree with Isaacson's statement. Because within that famous sentence is a revolutionary idea.

The idea that all men are created equal and deserve a chance to live in freedom.

Freedom to make our own choices... to practice our own faiths... to speak our own minds, and select our own leaders.

And as Benjamin Franklin added, after spending extensive time with his friend the Scottish philosopher David Hume, those truths are quote “self-evident.”

Thomas Jefferson’s version originally said “sacred and undeniable”... but Franklin wanted to be clear that these freedoms speak for themselves. They should be universal... evident to *all* humans... self-evident.

In the 250 years since those 56 courageous men put everything on the line to sign the declaration, America has embarked upon a bold experiment to implement those founding ideals.

This experiment continues today and is always evolving.

Of course, the United States is still relatively young compared to the UK, and we are still learning from our mistakes.

Sir Winston Churchill is rumored to have said, "You can always count on Americans to do the right thing... after they've tried everything else."

But the transatlantic connection is important: because the ideas contained in the Declaration of Independence – the liberty we have pursued in the United States since 1776 – came not from American textbooks or libraries, but from the literature housed in temples of academic thought like this one.

Not just in the foundations laid by philosophers like David Hume and John Locke, whose work is so evident in the words of the Declaration of Independence...

But also in the academic background of the signers: three of whom studied here, at Cambridge. This room will be particularly pleased to hear only *one* of the signers went to Oxford.

That heritage has given us, as President Trump described it when hosting His Majesty The King in Washington D.C.: “the richest inheritance one nation has ever given to another.”

Or as Sir Winston Churchill said to an audience of students at Westminster College, Missouri, 80 years ago – the same speech where he coined the term “special relationship”:

“The great principles of freedom... Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, Habeas Corpus [and] the English Common Law... find their most famous expression in the American Declaration of Independence.”

Quite the tribute from the man who helped save Europe from tyranny, and who many historians would say was the greatest figure of the 20th Century.

The world needs those principles, and that example of leadership, more than ever.

And our two countries – with their intellectual heritage and leading research institutions – are uniquely placed to provide it.

From the free thought that can unearth more world-changing ideas like the rights of man and the laws of space travel...

To the free markets that have enabled breakthrough innovations from artificial intelligence to cures for infectious diseases...

To the free exchange between our countries that allows tens of thousands of students, millions of workers, and over \$350 billion of trade to flow between the United States and United Kingdom every year.

Our countries really have led the world – and continue to do so.

Universities like this play a vital role in maintaining that edge. By pioneering technologies in partnership with our leading businesses... by creating spaces for free thought and enquiry... and by facilitating exchange through programs like Fulbright and the Marshall Scholarship, which have enabled our academics to learn from each other for decades.

Including this building's namesake, American innovator Ray Dolby, who was so influenced by his time at Cambridge that he made the generous donation which helped fund these outstanding facilities. And also the late Milton Friedman, whose work had such a monumental impact on economic theory, and on my own career in finance over nearly 40 years.

Those examples remind us that the Declaration of Independence was never intended to be a static document, gathering dust in a government archive.

Its words may have been fixed in ink; but the ideas behind them remain the eternal foundation of the United States.

As Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas stated: "The Declaration of Independence did not establish a form of government; that was the work of the Constitution that followed. But it stated the purpose of government. That purpose is to protect our God-given inalienable rights – rights that all individuals equally possess."

I didn't know until reading Walter Isaacson's book that the sentence originally said 'unalienable'. I guess Benjamin Franklin decided that wasn't a real word.

But the Declaration was an invaluable resource for interpreting the Constitution and remains so today.

Justice Thomas went on to say that the indispensable part of the Declaration comes at the end, when the signers “pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

It was not a hollow pledge. 17 of the 56 signers had their homes burned, ransacked, or confiscated. Benjamin Franklin lost his relationship with his son.

Their example reminds us it’s not enough just to *have* an idea; you have to *act* on it. To put it into practice. To be willing to make sacrifices for it.

Because the words of the Declaration were powerful on paper... but they came alive in the sacred bonds between the men who lived them out, applied them, and even died for them.

Those bonds continue in the American nation as we know it today; and they continue in the shared ideals that bring the United States and the United Kingdom together. Those ideals are, in my view, as relevant in Cambridge University in 2026 as they were in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1776 – the place where the words “United States of America” first appeared on paper, in letters from George Washington’s military headquarters to his officers in the field.

As I began by saying: America was unique in being a nation founded on words and ideas. But it was the actions of the Declaration’s signers – the bonds between them – that caused those ideas to change the world.

250 years later, we are proud to continue their legacy – in the United States *and* the United Kingdom – by taking up their work of interpreting, and enacting, the ideals that have underpinned our shared success for centuries.

Thank you, and congratulations again on this fantastic new center.