The calligraphy on the Declaration of Independence in the National Archives is as elegant as ever, but it's nearly impossible to see. The writing is faded, ghostly. It looks like invisible ink caught in the last moment before it vanishes completely from view.

If your mind holds the bold image of the signed Declaration reproduced in countless textbooks and gift shops, it is particularly shocking to witness how unkind time has been to the document. Tourists and schoolchildren still line up daily by the thousands to see it, but they are largely unprepared for the deterioration that has occurred.

During the past two generations, the robustness of our democracy has paled as dramatically as the document that inaugurated it.

Sixty-nine percent of voting-age Americans turned out to the polls in the 1964 presidential contest; more than half of eligible citizens under 24 voted. By 1996, turnout of voting-age Americans had declined to 54%, the lowest ever for a presidential election, and turnout among Americans 18 to 24 had fallen to 32%, the lowest of any age group.

In 2000, more Americans watched the Survivor finale than voted for George W. Bush or Al Gore.

It is not just voting that has deteriorated. Virtually every measure of apathy and cynicism about civics and government has skyrocketed.

Even the heralded rise in local voluntarism seems inversely related to political engagement.

Who can blame them?

The conduct of public life has done little to inspire and much to appall. The postmodern culture of knowingness has made sincere civic commitment utterly unhip. "Don't vote," the bumper sticker says. "It only encourages them." The triumph of entertainment over every domain of modern life has transformed news, politics and education into branches of show business. The public square has contracted to the size of the private couch. The voting booth turns out to be a far less reliable piece of technology than the remote control or the mouse. The personal has become the political, and the political has become the personal. The end of the Cold War has reduced the threat to life and liberty; the commodification of culture has morphed the pursuit of happiness into the pursuit of immediate gratification.

On the evening of the Fourth of July, the rotunda of the National Archives will close for a 2-year remodeling, and its Declaration of Independence will be lovingly re-encased. But the damage done in its early history -- particularly, and ironically, by the "wet transfer" done in 1820-1823 by William J. Stone, which gave birth to the mass-produced facsimile we know today -- cannot be reversed.
Future generations will find it no easier to read the truths we hold self-evident than do tourists today.

Though it is dated July 4, 1776, the handwritten Declaration of Independence in the National Archives was not actually created or signed on that date; it was penned weeks later and signed between Aug. 2, 1776 and Jan. 19, 1777. On the night of July 4, 1776, the draft that Thomas Jefferson had written in longhand, by then much marked-up and edited by the Continental Congress, was carried from Independence Hall to the print shop of John Dunlap. There it was set in type, and a few hundred copies were printed and dispatched throughout the colonies to be read aloud to the citizens and soldiers of the new United States, letting them know that they were at war and why.

Before the press run, Dunlap pulled a proof copy, now in the vault of the Philadelphia Historical Society. When Jefferson saw it, he realized that the printer had mistakenly included the pauses and stress marks that he had written into his own copy. The marks were removed, leaving some odd spaces between words.

An ingenious piece of scholarship by Stanford University Professor Jay Fliegelman, Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language & the Culture of Performance, makes the argument that these pauses and accents were intended to enable Jefferson to give a more powerful performance of the proclamation in front of the Continental Congress.

The Declaration, it seems, was designed to be declared: declaimed, read aloud enacted. It was living language, no less than the written words of rap lyrics are today truly alive only in actual performance.

Twenty-five copies of the Dunlap broadside are known to have survived. One of them, the most recent to have been discovered, hidden behind a frame bought at a flea market for $4 in 1989, is in especially good condition. Now owned by producer Norman Lear, it will soon travel the nation as "the people's document," accompanied by Hollywood razzle-dazzle and pop-culture showmanship.

When I saw this Dunlap broadside, I understood for the first time where the energy of the original Declaration now resides. It is not in our civic culture, but in our entertainment culture. For young people in particular, music, dance and spectacle have become the vehicles of choice for democratic passions.

It would be a sweet and fitting turnaround if this age of show business, which has seen the twilight of civic engagement, could once again put the power of performance into the service of democratic renewal.

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