



## America's grand anniversary: the rise of the Indispensable Nation

A midweek symposium

9–11 March 2026 (MM 941)

Esteemed historians and commentators mark the 250th anniversary of the signing of the American Declaration of Independence.

Ten 40-minute talks, followed by Q&As, Monday afternoon to Wednesday morning.

Based at the Macdonald Bath Spa Hotel for two nights, Monday to Wednesday, with dinner both evenings.

Includes afternoon tea with curator talk and visit to the American Museum, Bath.

A mere 250 years ago in the summer of 1776, after a series of colonial conflicts and the Revolutionary War between the American colonies and the British government, the Declaration of Independence was signed by the Thirteen Colonies. The United States of America as an entity was born.

The ideals enshrined in the Declaration: equality, rights, liberty, opportunity and democracy, became the watchwords that underpinned American governance and Western ideology – at least in theory – as the United States reached the apex of world power over the next two centuries. More recently, the economic and political tectonics have shifted. The 10 talks we present here offer history, insight and analysis, as we consider America and what it signifies for the rest of us – past, present and future.

We venture to the leafy fringes of Bath for this symposium. Our venue is the MacDonald Bath Spa, a comfortable, traditional hotel set in beautiful grounds a mile outside the town centre, with free parking, a pool and spa facilities.

Speakers include David Armitage\*, Kathleen Burk, Nigel Bowles, Mario Del Pero, David Ellwood, Susan-Mary Grant, Jacqueline Fear Segal and a curator-led talk at the American Museum in Bath. *Final programme to be confirmed.*

\*(based at Harvard, his talk will be given over Zoom)



### The Talks

**David Armitage (by Zoom)**  
*An "Impudent, False and Atrocious Proclamation"? British Responses to the Declaration of Independence in 1776.*

Americans revere their Declaration of Independence but often forget it was also of great interest in Britain in 1776. This lecture tells the little known story of how the Declaration reached Britain in the summer of 1776 and what happened when it got there. Some supporters of the American cause cheered it; many recipients reviled it; and the British ministry wanted urgently to refute it. If the British had won, would we still remember the Declaration the same way today?

**Nigel Bowles**  
*Truman and Eisenhower:  
Two Presidents who remade America*

Presidents Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower changed the American Presidency, American politics, and America's place in the world. Both contributed significantly to America's modernisation. From unprivileged mid-western backgrounds, both men developed

a clear sense of duty and public purpose. Intelligent, resilient under pressure, each acquired an acute feel for political power. Their contrasting experiences of life before the Presidency informed their different approaches to leadership of a political system that the Constitution's framers designed to make governing difficult but possible.

**Kathleen Burk**  
*1783–1945: the great shift in power between the Lion and the Eagle*

Over the period from 1783 to 1945 there was a total switch in the international positions of the US and the UK. In the 19th century the UK was economically and imperially the most powerful nation in the world. The US was dependent in many ways on the UK. It was tacitly protected by the Royal Navy; it was dependent on London for investment; and Britain constrained some of its more buoyant attempts at expansion into British territory, such as Canada. Americans looked to Great Britain for cultural links, too. But Americans resented what they saw as British contempt for their mores. The First World War was a turning point: the UK became much weaker. Indeed, Britain and the US in 1919 exchanged positions as the dominant international financial power.

Illustration: 'Parson Weems' Fable', Grant Wood 1939 © Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth.

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World War II made manifest the reality of the changed power dynamic.

**Mario Del Pero**

*The fear of (inter)dependence: The US and the world in the long aftermath of the 2008 crisis*

The United States must defend its “sovereignty without apology,” proclaimed Donald Trump’s first – and, to date, only – National Security Strategy in December 2017. The possibility of regaining this supposedly lost sovereignty has been at the heart of Trump’s rhetoric and political posture. But from nuclear deterrence to the circulation of commodities, from trade to investments, is it really possible – even for the world’s leading superpower – to escape the reality of global interdependence and the constraints it imposes on sovereignty, including that of the United States itself?

**David Ellwood**

*The American Century: hard power, soft power*

“The world of the 20th century, if it is to come to life in any nobility of health and vigor, must be to a significant degree an American Century...” famously wrote Henry Luce, founder of ‘Time’, ‘Life’ etc. in 1941, before the US had entered World War II. This talk will examine the rise and fall of this vision, exploring American designs for the postwar order: collective security, free trade, raising living standards “everywhere” and their implementation in the Marshall Plan; then the following decades of American missionary effort culminating in their high point, the 1990s era of globalisation. But it will also highlight the range of responses all this triggered, emphasising the fracture lines of sovereignty, identity and modernity that opened up in Europe – including Britain – more than any other part of the world.

**Jacqueline Fear-Segal**

*Native Americans and the USA: from “merciless Indian Savages” to American citizens and Native Nations*

The American Declaration of Independence doomed the Indigenous peoples of North America. The population of the new nation rapidly expanded westward, slowly but surely subjugating Native peoples. Designated as “merciless Indian Savages” in the Declaration, Indigenous populations constantly struggled to retain their own separate lands, cultures, and sovereignties. This talk will outline how Native peoples were progressively overwhelmed by America’s industrial power, military might, demographic growth, and confident ideology of “manifest destiny”. Yet, although



dispossessed and confined to small reservation areas, the Indigenous populations were not eliminated. Today, there are 574 sovereign Native Nations spread across the United States, each maintaining distinct governments and traditions.

**Susan-Mary Grant**

*Look Back in Anger: The Emotional Evolution of the American Republic*

Former Washington Post journalist Bob Woodward, famous for his part in uncovering the Watergate scandal, wrote three best-selling books during the first Trump administration: *Fear* (2018); *Rage* (2020); and *Peril* (2021). What can the field of emotional history tell us about America today? This talk tracks the important role that both fear and anger have played in the evolution of the Republic over the course of its 250 year history. It considers the fear that accompanied the Puritans on their ‘errand into the wilderness’ in the 17th century, through the anger of the Revolution that founded the nation, and that of the Civil War that almost tore it apart, to the fear and anger of the Red Scare and the McCarthy Years of the 1950s; echoes that resonate across America today.

Illustration: ‘American Progress’, John Gast, 1872  
©Autry Museum of the American West.

## The Speakers

**David Armitage** is the Lloyd C. Blankfein Professor of History and former Chair of the Department of History at Harvard University, where he teaches intellectual history and international history. He is also an Affiliated Professor in the Harvard Department of Government and an Affiliated Faculty Member at Harvard Law School. Before joining Harvard in 2004, he taught for eleven years at Columbia University. His books include *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (2007), which was chosen as a *Times Literary Supplement* Book of the Year. In 2015, he received Cambridge University’s highest degree, the LittD, for “distinction by some original contribution to the advancement of science or of learning”.

**Nigel Bowles** is a former Director of the Rothermere American Institute; Senior Research Fellow, Corpus Christi College, Oxford. He was Tutorial Fellow in Politics at St Anne’s College, Oxford for over 20 years. He was previously a staff member in the House of Commons before being appointed a Lecturer in Politics at the University of Edinburgh. His intellectual interests lie in American political history and, in particular, in the history of the US Presidency. Among his publications are *The White House and Capitol Hill*, an exploration of the politics of presidential lobbying; and *Nixon’s Business: Authority and Power in Presidential Politics*.



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**Kathleen Burk**

Professor Emerita of Modern and Contemporary History at UCL. Her general field is international history, concentrating especially on politics, diplomacy and finance. Kathleen specialises in the 20th century, although also publishes on earlier periods. Her primary area of research is Anglo-American relations, on which she has published three books and a number of articles. Her most recent history book is *The Lion & The Eagle: The Interaction of the British and American Empires 1783-1972*, (2018). Kathleen also writes and lectures on wine and its history.

**Jacqueline Fear-Segal** is Emeritus Professor of American and Indigenous Histories at the University of East Anglia. She specialises in the social history of the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries, and is the co-founder and co-director of the Native Studies Research Network UK. With postgraduate degrees from University College London and Harvard, she has been a visiting lecturer at the Sorbonne Nouvelle in Paris, and Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

**Susan-Mary Grant** is Professor of American History at Newcastle University. She is the author of several books, including a study of nationalism in pre-civil war America – *North over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era* – a biography of Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and the *Cambridge Concise History of the United States of America*. She is an expert on the American Civil War and the emotional and medical history of the conflict, and is a Fellow of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

**Mario Del Pero** is Professor of International History at the Center for History at Sciences Po-Paris (CHSP), where he teaches courses on global history, transatlantic relations, and the United States in the world. A historian of the Cold War and US foreign relations, he is the author of numerous articles and books. His most recent works are *Buio Americano. Gli Stati Uniti e il Mondo nell'era Trump* (Il Mulino) and *In the Shadow of the Vatican: Texan Evangelical Missionaries in Cold War Italy* (Cambridge University Press).

## Practicalities

**Included:** hotel accommodation for two nights; breakfasts; two dinners with wine; admission to the talks; a drinks reception; refreshments during breaks; visit and afternoon tea at the American Museum; gratuities for hotel staff.

## Accommodation.

The Macdonald Bath Spa Hotel, Sydney Road, Bath, BA2 6NS

A 4-star level hotel (although rated 5 star) set amid landscaped gardens, on a quiet hillside on the fringes of Bath, a short taxi ride or walk (0.7 miles) from the heart of the historic town centre. Bedrooms are comfortable and spacious, with good-sized bathrooms. The overall feel is traditional rather than contemporary; there are no telephones in the rooms, however, but a barcode via your mobile phone accesses services. Most bathrooms have a bath with shower attachment, with a few only having a shower only. There is an indoor pool and spa, as well as a bar, lounge and restaurant. Free onsite car parking is available to all guests with electric vehicle charging points. WiFi is free throughout the building; lifts grant access to all floors.

**Group size:** up to 110 resident participants.