

LIGHT REFLECTIONS

Justin Collings

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Independence

Ring the rotunda of the Jefferson memorial are twenty fiery words from the author of the Declaration of Independence: “I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.”¹

Recent America 250 celebrations have given me a few chances to reflect, in firesides and other fora, about the meaning of human agency and the nature of constitutional freedom. They have also prompted thoughts about BYU, where independence is both a precondition and an objective of our work.

No one has addressed the need for independence at BYU more incisively than President Spencer W. Kimball. Independence, it turns out, is a major theme of his second-century address.

Back in 1975, on the occasion of our institutional centennial and on the eve of our national bicentennial, President Kimball urged us to declare our independence from sin and from false ideas.² “People entangled in sin,” he warned, “are not free.”³ Rather, “it is the truth that sets men free. BYU, in its second century, must become the last remaining bastion of resistance to the invading ideologies that seek control of curriculum as well as classroom. We do not resist such ideas because we fear them but because they are false.”⁴

President Kimball further warned against surrendering institutional independence through overreliance on government funds. “Too many universities,” he lamented, “have given themselves over to such massive federal funding that they should not wonder why they have submitted to an authority they can no longer

control.”⁵ The wisdom of this counsel has been powerfully vindicated by the political volatility of recent years.

President Kimball also challenged us to stand independent within the academy. In some cases, he said, “we must be willing to break with the educational establishment (not foolishly or cavalierly, but thoughtfully and for good reason) in order to find gospel ways to help mankind.”⁶ President Kimball was not inviting eccentricity but rather imploring us to employ “gospel methodology, concepts, and insights” to “help us to do what the world cannot do in its own frame of reference.”⁷

As with the patriots of 1776, independence carries risks and requires courage. We hold fast to this promise from the Lord to His faithful saints: “that through my providence, notwithstanding the tribulation which shall descend upon you, . . . the church”—and, I believe, the Church’s flagship university—“may stand independent above all other creatures beneath the celestial world” (D&C 78:14).

Even as we strive to preserve our independence institutionally, each of us must assert our independence individually. In our day, some of the most pervasive “forms of tyranny over the mind of man” stem from technology. The astonishing innovations of our time hold both great promise and grave risks, including threats to our cognitive self-reliance and intellectual independence.

Like most of you, I have dabbled with artificial intelligence in my work. I marvel at what AI can do and how swiftly it improves. And yet I feel strongly that there are some things I should *not*

allow it to do for me—some things I must always do for myself.

One of these is writing. Although AI has proved helpful for finding facts, catching typos, and spotting bloat, I have felt unsettled when I've used AI to edit something I've written or, even worse, draft something for me—so unsettled that I have resolved to do all my own composing and all my own editing even after AI is better than I am at both.

“The problem with writing with A.I.,” notes the *New York Times* columnist Bret Stephens, “is that it’s mentally enfeebling—an escalator toward a result when you really need to make a daily habit of taking the stairs.” Ubiquitous resort to that escalator “undermines not only our individual ability to write but also a society’s collective ability to reason, a culture’s inner capacity to create and everyone’s reason to care.”⁸

Stephens further observes that concerns about “cheating [don’t] capture the real scope of the A.I. threat, which isn’t merely to academic integrity or personal betterment but also to democratic self-

governance.”⁹ A society that won’t write is a society that can’t reason. And a society that can’t reason is wholly unfit for freedom.

Which brings us back to the founding. The Massachusetts constitution of 1780, originally drafted by John Adams, observed that “wisdom[,] . . . knowledge, [and] virtue” were “necessary for the preservation of . . . rights and liberties.” Freedom thus depended “on spreading the opportunities and advantages of education.” Accordingly, “it shall be the duty of legislatures and magistrates, in all future periods . . . to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences, and all seminaries of them.”¹⁰

In my view, BYU is the greatest of “all seminaries” of learning. In the second half of BYU’s second century—and in the second quarter of America’s first millennium—may we redouble our efforts to nourish independent minds, cultivate virtuous citizens, and help educated souls take flight.

¹ Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, 23 September 1800, *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-32-02-0102>.

² The revelations identify disobedience and false tradition as the great enemies of light and truth (see D&C 93:39).

³ Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Bret Stephens, “I’m Begging You: Never Write With A.I.” *New York Times*, 4 August 2026.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *A Constitution or Frame of Government, Agreed upon by the Delegates of the People of the State of Massachusetts-Bay, in Convention, Begun and Held at Cambridge, on the First of September, 1779, and Continued by Adjournments to the Second of March, 1780.*