

# Serendipity: Sustainable U.S. Document

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*The Preamble to the Constitution still accurately reflects who we are and who we want to be as a nation.*

Perhaps because of Independence Day or the upcoming election, I found myself in the shower reciting words I memorized in sixth grade. Then I started thinking about them. I decided that the [Preamble to the Constitution of the United States](#) exemplifies a sustainable document. It is a perfect encapsulation, both necessary and sufficient, of the goals of America:



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"We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

Why did the founders, and all for whom they wrote, want to bind themselves together? The colonies had different histories and goals; they competed in commerce and disagreed on religion, slavery and other issues. Yet they wanted to unite — to stand together — for the future. The Preamble doesn't name particular issues, partly because there wasn't agreement even on ones as basic as human rights. More importantly, its generality reflected the founders' desire that the document be broad enough to be relevant to a posterity who would live with these new ideas.

When I parse the words of the Preamble, I am struck that the document defines who we are, not by contrasting ourselves to other nations or other behavior. Rather, it defines who we aspire to be as an independent people, compared to no one but ourselves.



The objectives of this new government — justice, tranquility, defense, welfare and liberty — are named singly yet can only be achieved together. They are intertwined ideals, to be strived for in community, like the states themselves.

The founders knew what justice was, both as perpetrators and victims. Though they had a different idea than we do today about whom the People were, they desired to establish justice for them. They understood that domestic tranquility was possible only when people feel they are being treated justly. In turn, domestic tranquility is the norm when the people's general welfare is promoted and they are protected from foreign invasion.

What are the blessings of liberty? Then and now, they are the freedoms to be who we are, to think what we want to think, to worship the way we want to worship and to make our way in the world the way we wish, while not impinging on the freedoms of others and others-to-come: our posterity. These blessings, when applied without prejudice, insure justice and promote welfare.

Attempts to achieve these objectives separately have failed not only in conflicts around the world but within the United States. Slavery took a civil war to abolish, but it was another century before this blessing of liberty was linked to general welfare in the form of blacks' civil rights. Similar stories hold for women's rights, gay rights and the freedom of

religion. Perhaps early efforts to restore our environment faltered because the general welfare was decoupled from the cause of justice for us and our posterity.

The Preamble is succinct and elegant; specific and yet flexible. It is cherished by Democrats, Republicans and independents; daughters of the [American Revolution](#); new citizens; and immigrants both legal and illegal. This sustainable document represents the great work-in-progress that is the United States.

Happy birthday, America!

*Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: the Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at [www.canyonvoices.com](http://www.canyonvoices.com).*



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