

<sup>1</sup> See Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*

# The Weight of a Document

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You can't imagine how disappointed I was. It was the summer of 2003, and I was on a trip to Washington DC to visit the United States National Archives. But there I arrived, and the Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom was closed for renovation. The various Charters—the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—had been removed for conservation. I had travelled seven hours down the I-95 from New Haven, having to negotiate the George Washington Bridge at rush hour... I *needed* to see the Declaration of Independence for myself—the actual artefact.

Is it presumptuous of me to imagine that at least graphic designers might understand my disappointment in not seeing the typographic *founding document* of the United States? Is this need to undertake quests to international galleries, museums, and architectural sites heightened for us, as New Zealanders, because of our geographic isolation? Are we missing anything because we only ever see famous documents and art works presented as 35 mm slide projections in art history lectures, in four colour print reproduction at 150 lpi in books, or on screen at 72 dpi from a Corbis image search? Or do I just have a museum fetish?

Walter Benjamin would have insisted that I was drawn to the 'aura' of the authentic artefact.<sup>1</sup> The artefact is the centrepiece of the 'ritual' that confers/reiterates the aura of an object. The ritual of approaching an artefact preserves the 'distance' necessary for the sense of aura: 'The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity' (220). Furthermore, 'The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced' (221). But how much does this insight from Benjamin's famous essay still *illuminate* the relationship between the artefact and its broader significance?

My obsession with the Declaration of Independence is not an isolated case. Over the past decade, I have been documenting several documents that have acquired weight beyond their material substance, either at the point of their creation, their re-presentation, or their destruction. What follows is an exploration of the processes through which these documents have achieved their status, meaning, and weight.

**Doc. 1: The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America**

So, back in Washington, I was disappointed to find that the Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom was closed for renovation that day. At the time I presumed this was a result of increased security in Washington after 9/11. Washington was still very much locked down—‘the blessings of liberty’ (from The Constitution) were, it seemed, becoming less secure. I discovered that in the Lincoln Memorial, however, I could buy a facsimile of the Charters of Freedom in the gift shop—for \$15. This mundane facsimile made the Charters look like childish treasure maps, even if printed on ‘hand finished genuine parchment’ (see fig. 1). However humble, it would have to be my substitute for the real thing.<sup>2</sup>

No doubt Benjamin would have a lot to say about this too. But I am unsure whether this cheap mechanical reproduction diminished the original document’s aura. It was at Lincoln’s feet, after all. It reminded me of what I couldn’t see. It did at least attest to the document’s formal typographic quality—the handwritten contract followed by (in The Declaration of Independence case) fifty-five signatures. Actually, I counted fifty-six. But in the recent Disney movie National Treasure,<sup>3</sup> it was because Nicolas Cage’s character, Benjamin Franklin Gates, knew that the Declaration of Independence was “the resolution that fifty-five men signed”, that he could solve the critical riddle and learn that the Declaration was the treasure map he sought. I guess Disney should know...

**Doc. 2: 100% TOTAL GUEST SATISFACTION**

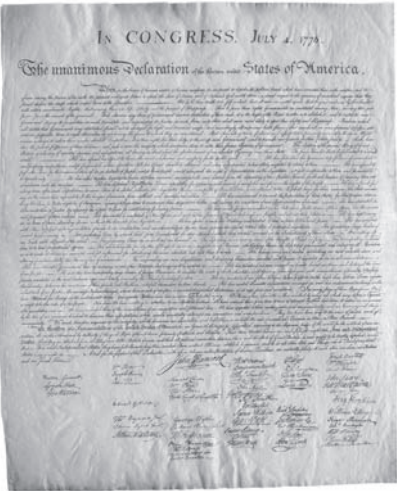
Back in our hotel, still preoccupied by my unfinished quest, I noticed a sheet of paper on the night stand that bore a striking resemblance to The Declaration of Independence (or at least the parchment facsimile of it that I was examining). But this was the declaration of ‘100% Total Guest Satisfaction’, signed by all thirteen staff of the Quality Inn. Next to my Charters of Freedom facsimiles I was tempted to see this document as a trivialisation of social contracts. It was photocopied on cheap paper, and surrounded by the furnishings of a budget hotel. Placed on my night stand next to the TV Guide, I didn’t take it seriously. It seemed insincere, flimsy and too easy to ignore.

Now, however, it seems more weighty. Any contract is a complex social phenomenon. It was a big promise—‘we strive for total guest satisfaction’. Thinking of all the contracts that exist in the Hotel to make it function (between employers and employees,

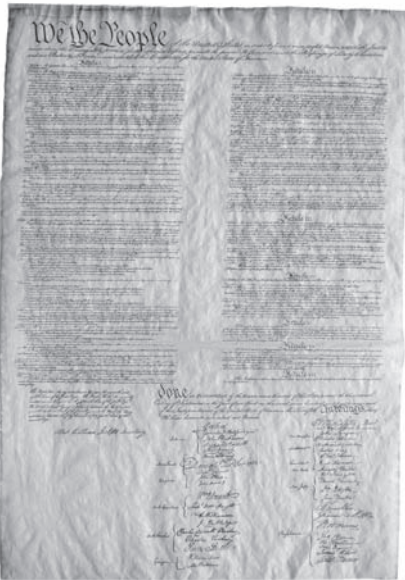
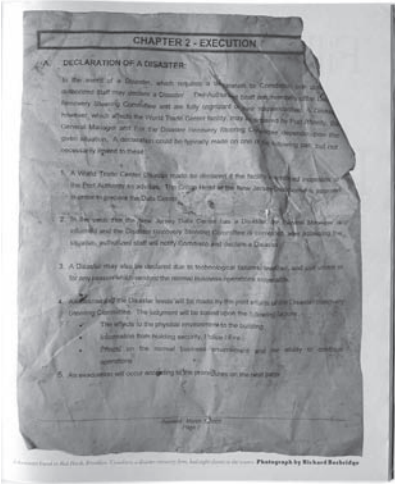
<sup>2</sup> It is actually problematic to establish what the *real* original Declaration is. The *original* Declaration was the printed John Dunlap Broadside. The handwritten one shown, with all signatures came later. The Dunlap Broadside of the Declaration of Independence was placed in the ‘Journal of the Second Continental Congress’ on July 5, 1776. The Continental Congress passed a Non-unanimous Declaration on July 4, 1776. An Engrossed (enlarged, hand written) parchment document was ordered on July 19, and was later signed by the members of Congress as the Unanimous Declaration on August 2nd 1776. See <http://www.freedomdocuments.com/>

<sup>3</sup> See the movie, *National Treasure*, Walt Disney Pictures, produced by Jerry Bruckheimer, 2004

**fig. 1:** Facsimile of The Declaration of Independence reproduction by the American Document Company  
**fig. 2:** 100% Total Guest Satisfaction from the Comfort Inn, Tysons Corner, Vienna, VA, 2003



**fig. 3:** ‘Declaration of A Disaster’, in the article ‘Fallout’ by Kurt Anderson, *New York Times Magazine*, September 23, 2001, (78) photograph by Richard Burbridge  
**fig. 4:** Facsimile of The Constitution of the United States of America, from the American Document Company



hotel and city, employers and federal government etc...), what was intriguing about the document in our room was that the staff shared it with us. I’m not sure if it was a uniquely Washington impulse for them to want to formalise and make visible/material this normally unspoken social contract, but the result was that they invited us to witness it.

**Doc. 3: Declaration of a Disaster**

Two years earlier, on the day of the World Trade Centre attack, thousands of sheets of paper escaped the chaos of collapsing concrete and steel. Glued to the television like everyone else that Tuesday morning, I remember seeing the papers floating across the East River, defying the gravity of the day.

In an article in the Sept 23 *New York Times Magazine* entitled ‘Fallout’, Kurt Anderson described what he saw after retrieving a pile of these papers found near his apartment in Brooklyn: ‘Strewn here on the floor now, stinking of smoke, this pile of banal file-drawer detritus seems transmuted, instant archaeological objects retroactively charged with meaning, too sad and strange to keep, too sad and strange to throw away’ (78). By locating the profound in a previously mundane object, Anderson described the way these documents acquired or were ‘retroactively charged’ with aura. The document reproduced in the article was not an important historical document. It was probably hidden for years in a filing cabinet. The actual terms of the contract are not as important as the poetic coincidence of its wording in hindsight. Insufficient as a protocol for the chaos of the day, the document exists now as an index to the people, the day-to-day workings and the formalisation of social relationships in those buildings. It read, ‘only authorized staff may declare a disaster’.

**Doc. 4: The Constitution of the United States of America**

In 2004, I made a second attempt to see one of the American Charters of Freedom and paid a visit to Philadelphia’s new National Constitution Centre. I had been told a copy of the US Constitution was there on display. Upon entering, a man in uniform asked if we wanted to buy a ticket. I was confused, and replied—“we just want to see the Constitution”. He became equally confused—“you have to buy a ticket”. I looked around to see if we had come to the wrong part of the building because the place looked more like a movie theatre than a museum. An LED sign flashed ‘next show in 15 mins’. We obviously had to see the show. This turned out to be a strange/

fantastic visual extravaganza that narrated the history and meaning of The Constitution. We were ushered into what was a modern digital cyclorama (that or a livestock auction-yard). A very serious actor guided us on our journey using a Britney-Spears-headset microphone. He kept repeating the phrase “We The People” throughout his dramatic presentation pointing his finger at members of the audience. This was reminiscent of my student art history experience of sitting in darkened lecture theatres. Charismatic lecturers tried to enliven the flat slides of art works, but we never saw the real thing.

When we were released into the exhibition hall, I sheepishly asked a security guard where I could find The Constitution. I was not sure if I should have known—that it is not actually there. At the gift shop however, I could again buy the Charters of Freedom for \$15 on genuine parchment as well as on mouse pads, t-shirts, and mugs. This Disnification of the Declaration of Independence was a confusing mix of simultaneously asserting the aura of The Constitution for mass appeal while cheapening it. What was interesting was how the document no longer needed to speak for itself, and yet it also needed to be dramatically re-enacted. In the end, the National Constitution Center promised that I would enter the aura’s field, but neither the architecture nor the performances of actors and digital displays could adequately deliver it for me. The artefact, once again, was absent.

#### ***Doc. 5: Te Tiriti o Waitangi: The Treaty of Waitangi***

In New Zealand, we too have our Declaration of Independence. In 1835, James Busby, a representative of the British Crown, persuaded a number of Maori chiefs to sign the Declaration of Independence. This document is almost forgotten in the dominant Pakeha account of history. Our founding document is more commonly regarded to be the Treaty of Waitangi, signed five years after the Declaration of Independence in 1840.

The nine Treaty sheets and the Declaration of Independence are stored in the New Zealand National Archives in Wellington. There are nine sheets because the representative of the Crown, Governor William Hobson travelled around the country gathering signatures from more than five hundred chiefs over a seven-month period. The Treaty sheets are now kept in a small room—a safe, really—that is in the middle of the 1970s style government library building. The room is open to the public, but without fuss or pageantry; the treaty sheets are just lying there—almost hidden—in a

darkened room down the end of the hall. These are our Charters of Freedom. The Treaty is surrounded by other significant documents that index the history of our country, like the Declaration of Independence, and the Suffragettes petition presented to the government in 1893.

#### ***Doc. 6: Hailstone Treaty Project***

In 1990, New Zealand celebrated the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty. My then tutor, Max Hailstone, the head of the graphic design department at Canterbury University, undertook a project to commemorate the sesquicentenary. Hailstone’s tribute was to re-present the nine sheets of the treaty, silk-screen printed in a limited run on 100% cotton, white A0 paper. In a perhaps untimely (in 1990) late-modernist gesture, these posters abstracted the signatures from The Treaty text (the contract) and historical context. The context/s in which his project was subsequently interpreted resulted in various readings of the project’s meaning. Hailstone’s project inadvertently revealed that the abstraction of the signatures/marks into the purely visual could be very problematic.

From an art perspective, Hailstone was criticised because he seemed content to treat the signatures of the ostensibly illiterate Maori chiefs as exotic marks. This was seen as an empty extension of the western primitivist art tradition.<sup>4</sup> Painters have (and still do) get away with such abstraction, and there is a long history of New Zealand artist’s abstracting Maori motifs. But in contrast to Hailstone’s case, the history and meaning of the formalist project in painting are ultimately about abstracting from the art world itself. The modernist project of differentiation<sup>5</sup>—epitomised as ‘art for art’s sake’ in the art world—comes from art’s desire to assert its autonomy and retreat from the political and social/cultural spheres.

From a Maori perspective, Hailstone’s project was seen as an unsanctioned appropriation of their Taonga. The project quickly developed into another case of what looked like an unfortunate and insensitive cultural exchange between the English and the Maori. The result was a solemn tapu-raising ceremony at dawn before the project could be released to the public. The tapu-raising was necessary to resolve the stand-off between Hailstone and the Maori community. It was a public demonstration against Max’s breach and was an attempt to repair or purify that which had been violated. This was a necessary ritual of *giving back*. It returned the aura to the document and re-asserted the sacredness of the treaty document. Today Hailstone’s

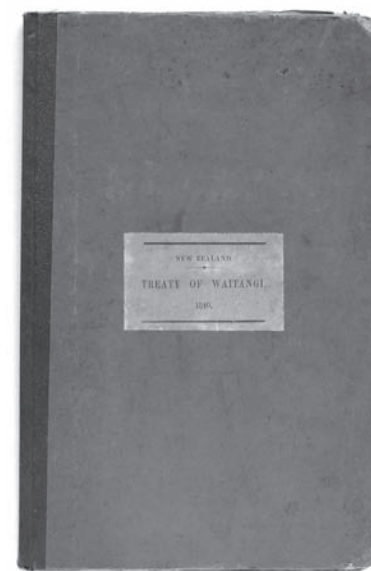
<sup>4</sup> See Jonathan Mané-Wheoki’s article ‘Treaty Issues: Max Hailstone’s 1990 Project’, in *Art New Zealand*, 1991

<sup>5</sup> See Scott Lash, *Sociology of Postmodernism*

**fig. 5:** This is actually an early test proof Max Hailstone’s Treaty of Waitangi project, 1990

image courtesy of Antoinette le Vaillant

**fig. 6:** The cover of *Facsimiles of the Declaration of Independence and the Treaty of Waitangi*, New Zealand Government Printer, 1877



Treaty sheets are hidden in a small number of collections. Because they were deemed untouchable, they were not purchased or exhibited by many public institutions in New Zealand as Max had hoped they would be.

#### ***Doc. 7: Nga Wharangi o te Tiriti: a Facsimile of the Treaty of Waitangi***

The third way that Hailstone’s project could have been interpreted (but never really was) is from a graphic design or printing perspective. Max was, after all, a graphic designer. From this perspective, the project could have been seen as a continuation of the series of Treaty Facsimile reproductions first printed in 1877. If this had been the case, his abstraction of the treaty signatures might have been more positively received.

The first set of very early photolithographs, made by the New Zealand Government Printing Office, still exist. There have been two subsequent re-prints of these facsimiles—in 1976 and in 1990. The interesting thing about these facsimiles is that they are now the documents that attest most faithfully to the visual content of the original documents. The real artefacts have deteriorated and faded so much that many signatures are now lost. It was in fact from the facsimiles, not the original artefacts, that Max was able to extract the signatures for his project. This is significant because in 1868 it was remarkable that the Treaty sheets could technically be reproduced in New Zealand at all. This *mechanical reproduction* was possible by the photolithographic process that had only recently been invented. The question of whether the Treaty should be reproduced was presumably not entertained.

#### ***Wrap Up***

In describing my encounters with a number of dubiously related typographic documents, it occurs to me that it might very well be the case that I’m not interested in the actual artefact after all. In fact, I still haven’t seen the real Charters of Freedom. But I have started a collection of facsimiles, not only of all of the Freedom Documents, but also all three of the publications of the facsimiles of the Treaty of Waitangi. I began by raising the question of how and why each document acquired weight beyond their mere material substance, which deserves a more direct answer.

For the Declaration of Independence and The Constitution, there is certainly a sense of aura in the original documents. They are protected in a museum in a glass case. The cheap facsimiles and dramatic re-enactments of them could be seen as mundane re-



<sup>6</sup> Whereas Benjamin identified the object as usually the centre of a ritual. See Benjamin, (223)

<sup>7</sup> I remember someone remarking during the tapu raising ceremony provoked by Max’s project that looking at the posters of enlarged signatures was like seeing the bones of ancestors displayed on the wall

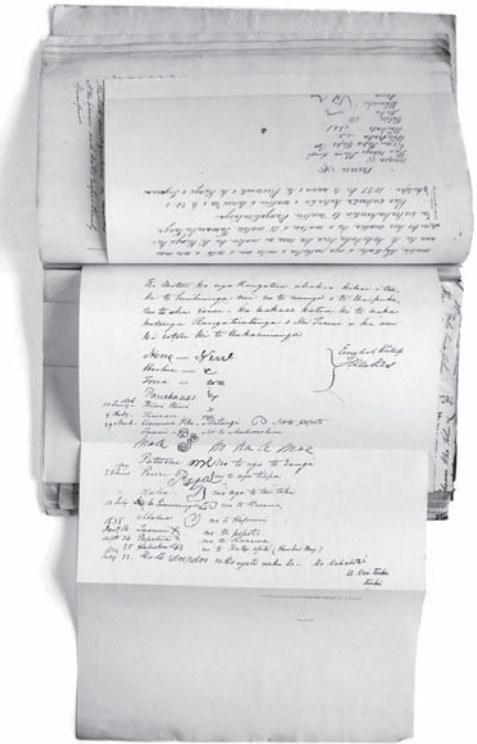
<sup>8</sup> However the project was published in the Swiss graphic design journal; *Typographische Monatsblätter*, 1993, and the US journal *Visible Language*, 27:3 , 1993

<sup>9</sup> See Walter Benjamin, (223)

<sup>10</sup> See Walter Benjamin, (224)

<sup>11</sup> See Andrew Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin and Art*, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005, (81)

**fig. 7:** From the Facsimiles of the Declaration of Independence and the Treaty of Waitangi, New Zealand Government Printer, 1877



presentations at best and comic travesties at worst. The ritual performance celebrated or replaced the unseen object in this case.<sup>6</sup> However, this could also be seen as a shift in the aura of the documents—from being anchored in the artefacts themselves to being anchored in the ideals prescribed within them. The declaration of 100% Total Guest Satisfaction was a cheaply photocopied loose sheet. There probably is no original any more. It was given more weight as a parody of the Declaration of Independence because of its formal composition and its location in a hotel near the US capital. The Declaration of a Disaster was originally a hidden, ignored document. Then it was activated or ‘charged’ with aura because of *that day* that it was found, and because it was re-presented in the New York Times Magazine in its eulogy issue the weekend after 9/11. The Treaty of Waitangi is tapu to Maori because of the significance of the promises of the treaty contract and because of the physical/material link through the signatures to the ancestors who signed them.<sup>7</sup> Since then, Max’s posters have disappeared into obscurity, having never been celebrated or critiqued by the New Zealand graphic design community.<sup>8</sup> The Facsimiles of the Treaty of Waitangi, unlike the mundane tourist re-prints of their US equivalents, were produced with great care and expense. The quality and limited number of these reproductions has meant that over time they have become very valuable themselves (especially the 1877 re-production). This is an interesting example in which the mechanical reproduction has now acquired an aura of its own over time, problematising the relationship between the ‘uniqueness and permanence’ of the artefact versus the ‘transitoriness and reproducibility’ of the copy.<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, my search for authentic objects is motivated by an assumption that by seeing them, I will have a richer, more tangible sense of their significance. I want to attain objective knowledge of them and by *returning to the source* I can begin (or end?) my quest. It may be romantic to be concerned with the aura in design (and in any art for that matter) in a post-modern 21st century. But if the value in a work has shifted away from something as mystical/spooky as aura and ritual use—where does that value now lie? Benjamin wrote three quarters of a century ago that; ‘[T]he instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics’.<sup>10</sup> When he was writing this, Benjamin was concerned with the appropriation and empty aestheticism of art for political means by Fascist governments. He also saw (more positively)

that with the technologies of reproduction, the cult value of the bourgeois art world could be replaced with the exposition or ‘exchange value’ (from Marxism) of art for the masses.<sup>11</sup> Benjamin may or may not have foreseen Bill Gate’s acquisition of the Corbis Image Collection—only an early player amongst now hundreds of companies in the image reproduction database business. The assumption behind this industry is that the value of electronic reproduction is the only kind that is going to matter in the future and that reproduction is the only aspect of an image worth owning. Corbis erases the aura of authenticity replacing it with a pecuniary glitter of reproducibility.

What am I really looking for? I don’t think it has anything to do with the uniqueness of the object, but it has everything to do with the role of Graphic Design. I am searching for proof that Graphic Design can play a vital role in something other than consumption or persuasion, something that will substantiate Graphic Design as a contributor to a contemporary pluralistic society. Although I am still ambivalent about whether I am really interested in the design of these documents, they remain significant artefacts that I consider exemplary typographic design. They are exemplary not because of a unique use of type, image, or composition—there was a fundamental utilitarian quality to the design of all of these documents—but because they attained the aura of significance that most Graphic Design cannot attain. The seductive quality of Max’s Treaty Project was its formal elements. But the fate of his project proved that when graphic design has pretensions to be about more, formal elegance isn’t really enough.

I am not that different from other people who buy these facsimiles. It’s just that for me, as a graphic designer, there is even more at stake. Maybe graphic design never had a legitimate claim to aura like its fine art and architectural relatives have/had. But I like to think that the auratic should be considered equal to the instrumental value of design, whether it is used for political or commercial ends. This is especially important at a time in New Zealand when *technology* is being celebrated once more as the key to our salvation with as much fundamentalist zeal as when Benjamin wrote ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’.

**Doc. 1: The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, 1776**

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.— That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security—Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

**Doc. 2: Declaration of a Disaster, NY, Sept 11 2001**

In the event of a disaster, which requires a declaration to Comdisco, only des... authorized staff may declare a Disaster. The Authorized staff are members of the Disaster Recovery Steering Committee and are fully cognizant of their responsibilities. A Disaster however, which effects the World Trade Centre facility, may be declared by Port Authority, the General Manager and / or the Disaster Recovery Steering Committee dependent upon the given situation...

**Doc. 3: 100% TOTAL GUEST SATISFACTION, 2003**

... At SUNBURST HOSPITALITY, we strive for TOTAL GUEST SATISFACTION. If you are not pleased with your room or our services, please inform the front desk. If we cannot correct the situation to your satisfaction, you will not be charged for the room. All Sunburst hotels have a “Manager on Duty” program. This means that there is always a Manager on Duty seven days a week who is empowered to assist you. Call on us!!!

**Doc. 4: The Constitution of the United States of America. 1787 (Preamble)**

WE THE PEOPLE of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquillity, 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.

**Doc. 5: The Treaty of Waitangi, 1840 (Preamble)**

HER MAJESTY VICTORIA Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland regarding with Her Royal Favour the Native Chiefs and Tribes of New Zealand and anxious to protect their just Rights and Property and to secure to them the enjoyment of Peace and Good Order has deemed it necessary in consequence of the great number of Her Majesty’s Subjects who have already settled in New Zealand and the rapid extension of Emigration both from Europe and Australia which is still in progress to constitute and appoint a functionary properly authorised to treat with the Aborigines of New Zealand for the recognition of Her Majesty’s Sovereign authority over the whole or any part of those islands—Her Majesty therefore being desirous to establish a settled form of Civil Government with a view to avert the evil consequences which must result from the absence of the necessary Laws and Institutions alike to the native population and to Her subjects has been graciously pleased to empower and to authorise me William Hobson a Captain in Her Majesty’s Royal Navy Consul and Lieutenant-Governor of such parts of New Zealand as may be or hereafter shall be ceded to her Majesty to invite the confederated and independent Chiefs of New Zealand to concur in the following Articles and Conditions.

KO WIKITORIA te Kuini o Ingarani i tana mahara atawai ki nga Rangatira me nga Hapu o Nu Tirani i tana hiahia hoki kia tohungia ki a ratou o ratou rangatiratanga me to ratou wenua, a kia mau tonu hoki te Rongo ki a ratou me te Atanoho hoki kua wakaaro ia he mea tika kia tukua mai tetahi Rangatira—hei kai wakarite ki nga Tangata maori o Nu Tirani—kia wakaaetia e nga Rangatira Maori te Kawanatanga o te Kuini ki nga wahikatoa o te wenua nei me nga motu—na te mea hoki he tokomaha ke nga tangata o tona Iwi Kua noho ki tenei wenua, a e haere mai nei.

Na ko te Kuini e hiahia ana kia wakaritea te Kawanatanga kia kaua ai nga kino e puta mai ki te tangata Maori ki te Pakeha e noho ture kore ana.

Na kua pai te Kuini kia tukua a hau a Wiremu Hopihona he Kapitana i te Roiaara Nawi hei Kawana mo nga wahi katoa o Nu Tirani e tukua aianei amua atu ki te Kuini, e mea atu ana ia ki nga Rangatira o te wakaminenga o nga hapu o Nu Tirani me era Rangatira atu enei ture ka kororotia nei.