

Author didn't err in Declaration of Independence

By Theodore M. Bernstein

No Jeffersonian slip. In a recent column we mentioned that the Declaration of Independence speaks of the *unalienable* rights with which all men are endowed by their Creator. Since the word these days is *inalienable*, we asked, "Did Jefferson make a mistake?" then went on to suggest that Jefferson might have written the *in-* form but

and chiefly Samuel Adams, successfully argued for changing the word to *unalienable*.

Judge Ditter quotes Donald W. Whitehead as having said in a speech that the distinction between the two words is significant: *inalienable* means that which cannot be taken away without the consent of the possessor but which may be surrendered by him, whereas *unalienable*, now archaic, meant that which could neither be taken nor given away. "Thus," writes the judge, "the Founding Fathers took pains to note that the rights of citizenship cannot be denied to any person nor can the burden of their responsible exercise be evaded."

Since that earlier column of ours appeared we have seen a facsimile of one of the earliest drafts of the Declaration and it is quite clear that Jefferson wrote in his own hand the word *inalienable*.

word has achieved recognition. The answer is that *plus* used in that way is considered colloquial—that is, permissible in conversational or informal language but not in careful writing or speech. The adverb *moreover* and the phrase *in addition* are available substitutes.

Pfew: Considering that *quite* conveys the meanings of completely or very or to a considerable extent, the phrase *quite a few* is faintly puzzling—sufficiently puzzling so that Mary Wiermanski of Mt. Clemens, Mich., asks how we feel about it. We feel content about it. The phrase is a colloquialism of American origin, but it is widely used and widely accepted. The puzzling part of it is that the phrase includes two words of almost opposite meanings. *Quite* suggests very or considerably, while *few* means not many or a small number. You would expect, therefore, that *quite a few* would mean a very small number, but actually it means a good many. It is thus a form of litotes, or understatement.

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Special Features

bernstein on words

a scribe slipped up. Now Stuart Ostrow, producer of the show "1776"; Marie R. McGuire of Philadelphia, and Judge J. William Ditter Jr. of the U.S. District Court, Philadelphia, have written us to say that Jefferson did indeed write *inalienable* but that the drafting committee,

Nonplus word. Increasingly we hear the word *plus* used as a pseudo-conjunction in instances such as this: "It costs you less; *plus* you get longer wear." James G. Van Oot of Wilmington, Del., wants to know whether that use of the

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