

# A DAY TO REMEMBER

by Charles Phillips

## July 4, 1776

On Independence Day every year, millions of Americans turn out for myriad parades, public and backyard barbecues, concerts of patriotically stirring music and spectacular pyrotechnic displays, and they do so to celebrate the day on which we declared our independence from Great Britain.

But America did not declare its independence on July 4, 1776. That happened two days earlier, when the Second Continental Congress approved a resolution stating that “these United Colonies are, and of a right ought to be, free and independent States.” The resolution itself had first been introduced back on June 7, when Virginia’s Richard Henry Lee rose in the sweltering heat of the Congress’ Philadelphia meeting house to propose an action many delegates had been anticipating—and not a few dreading—since the opening shots of the American Revolution at Lexington and Concord.

Lee asked for a newly declared independent government, one

that could form alliances and draw up a plan for confederation of the separate Colonies. The need for some such move had become increasingly clear during the last year, especially to George Washington, if for no other reason than as a rallying cry for his troops. The Virginia soldier chosen by Congress to general its Continental Army languished in New York, short of supplies, short of men and short of morale while facing the threat of a massive British offensive.

But many in Congress, some sent with express instructions against independence, were leery of Lee’s proposal despite the growing sentiment for independence stirred up by such rebel rousers as Boston’s Samuel Adams and the recent émigré Thomas Paine. Paine’s political pamphlet, *Common Sense*, openly attacked King George III and quickly became a bestseller in the Colonies; Paine donated the proceeds to the Continental Congress. Lee was so closely associated with Adams that critics



Viewers of John Trumbull’s iconic painting often assume that it re-creates the events of July 4, 1776. But the artist never intended it to portray a specific moment in American history.

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charged Lee with representing Massachusetts better than he did Virginia. On the night before Lee offered up his resolution, Adams boasted to friends that Lee's resolution would decide the most important issue Americans ever had faced.

Little wonder that the more conservative delegates, men such as Pennsylvania's John Dickinson and South Carolina's Edward Rutledge, balked. Treat with France? Surely. Draw up articles of confederation? Fine. But why declare independence? The Colonies, they argued, were not even sure they could achieve it. To declare their intent now would serve merely to warn the British, and hence forearm them. Dickinson wanted to postpone the discussion—forever if he could—and he managed to muster support for three weeks of delay. At the same time, Lee's faction won approval to appoint committees to spend the three weeks preparing drafts on each point of the resolution.

Sam Adams was named to the committee writing articles of confederation. His cousin, John Adams, a great talker, headed the committee drawing up a treaty with France. John Adams also was appointed to help draft a declaration of independence along with the inevitable choice, the celebrated author and internationally renowned philosopher Benjamin Franklin. Congress also assigned New York conservative Robert Livingston and Connecticut Yankee Roger Sherman to the committee but fell to arguing over a fifth member.

Southern delegates wanted one of their own to achieve balance. But many in Congress disfavored the two obvious candidates, considering Lee too radical and his fellow Virginian Benjamin Harrison too conservative. There was another Virginian, however, a 32-year-old lanky, red-haired newcomer named Thomas Jefferson, who had a reputation for learning in both literature and science. Though he seemed to shrink from public speaking, the Adamases liked him, and John pushed so effectively for Jefferson to join the committee that, when the votes were counted, he tallied more than anyone else.

Franklin's health was clearly failing, and he wouldn't be able to draft the declaration. Adams was busy with what he probably considered at the time the more important work of crafting an alliance with France (though he would live to regret such an opinion). Neither Livingston nor Sherman evidently had the desire nor, most probably, the talent to pen the kind of document needed. To Jefferson, then, with his reputation as a fine writer, fell the task of drafting a resolution whose language, edited and approved by the committee, would be acceptable to all the delegates.

Jefferson worried about his sick wife, Martha, back home and longed to be in Virginia working on the colony's new constitution, then under debate in Williamsburg. Nevertheless, he set to work and quickly produced what, given the time constraints, was a remarkable document. A justification to the world of the action being taken by Britain's American Colonies assembled in Congress, the declaration was part bill of indictment and part philosophical assertion, the latter an incisive summary of Whig political thought.

With the document's key sentiments much inspired, say some, by such Scottish Enlightenment figures as Francis Hutcheson, and its thinking much influenced, say many, by John Locke's

*Two Treatises of Government*, the declaration summarized common notions expressed everywhere in the Colonies in those days. Many such notions could be found in numerous local proclamations. Especially relevant, because it was on Jefferson's mind, was the language of the new Virginia constitution with its elaborate Bill of Rights penned by his cohort, George Mason. Indeed, Jefferson's assignment was to capture the sense of the current rebellion in the 13 Colonies and distill its essence into a single document.

In this, as everyone recognized, he greatly succeeded, though he did not do it alone. Despite what Jefferson himself later wrote, and John Adams, too, when age and the glory of the Revolution led

them both to embroider their accounts, the committee reviewed Jefferson's work, and then he ran it past both senior members, Adams and Franklin. He incorporated suggested changes before writing a clean copy. Still, Jefferson personally was quite proud of the draft he laid before Congress on June 28, 1776.

On the first day of July, with Jefferson's manuscript at the ready, the delegates once more took up Richard Henry Lee's resolution to openly declare independence. Lee was off in Virginia, where Jefferson wished to be, so

he was not there to see John Dickinson's last protest seemingly cow the Congress, before an eloquent rebuttal by a determined John Adams carried the motion. Congress on July 2 without dissent voted that the American Colonies were from that day forward free and independent states.

That evening an exultant John Adams wrote home to his wife that July 2, 1776, would "be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival." It was his day of triumph, as well he knew, and he imagined it "commemorated as the day of deliverance by acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations from one end of the continent to the other, from this time forward forever more."

Congress immediately turned to consider Jefferson's document. It would have to serve as a sort of early version of a press release—an explanation that could be disseminated at home and around the globe by broadside and to be read aloud at gatherings. Its statements had to inspire the troops and garner public support for the action Congress had just taken. Not surprisingly, Congress paid close attention to the document's language.

The delegates took the time to spruce it up a little and edit out what they found objectionable. In general the Congress was fine with the vague sentiments of the early paragraphs that have since become the cornerstone of American democracy: "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" and so on.

What the delegates were more interested in, however, and what they saw as the meat of the document, were the more concrete declarations. For years, they had based their resistance to England on the belief they were not fighting a divinely chosen

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king, but his ministers and parliament. But during the previous 14 months the Crown had waged war on them, and King George had declared the Colonials in rebellion, that is, outside his protection. *Common Sense* had gotten them used to thinking of the king as that "royal brute" and this document was supposed to explain why he should be so considered. Thus Jefferson had produced a catalog of George III's tyrannies as its heart and soul.

Congress at length struck out some sentimental language in which Jefferson tried to paint the British people as brothers indifferent to American suffering and a paragraph where he ran on about the glories the two people might otherwise have realized together. But more substantive changes were especially telling. Among George's crimes, Jefferson had listed the slave trade, contending that the king had "waged a cruel war against human nature" by assaulting a "distant people" and carrying them into slavery in "another hemisphere." This was too much for Jefferson's fellow slaveholders in the South, especially South Carolina, and certain Yankee traders who had made fortunes from what Jefferson called the "execrable commerce." Together, representatives of these Southern and Yankee interests deleted the section.

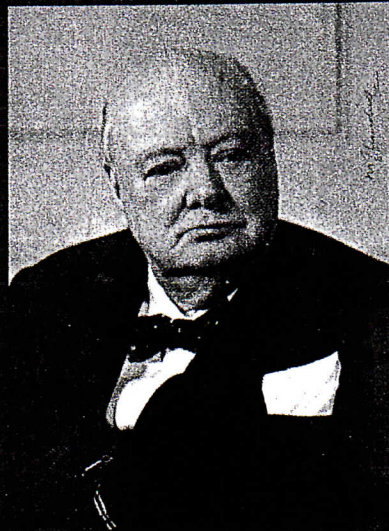
For the rest, the delegates also changed a word here and there, usually improving some of the hasty writing. They worked the language of Lee's resolution into the conclusion and added a reference to the Almighty, which Jefferson would have been happier without. "And," the document now concluded, "for support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

None of this sat well with the young author. He made a copy of the declaration as he submitted it and the "mutilated" version Congress approved, and sent both to his friends and colleagues, including Richard Henry Lee, who agreed the original was superior, though most historians since have concluded otherwise.

In any case, after more than two days of sometimes-heated debate, on July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress approved the revised document that explained its declaration of independence of July 2. The approval was not immediately unanimous, since the New York delegates had to await instructions from home and did not assent until July 9. At the time of approval, Congress ordered the document "authenticated and printed," and that copies "be sent to several assemblies, conventions and committees, or councils of safety, and to the several commanding officers of the continental troops; that it be proclaimed in each of the United States, and at the head of the army." If any delegates officially signed the approved document on the glorious Fourth, they were President John Hancock and Secretary Charles Thomson.

Within days the printed document was circulated across the land. The declaration was read aloud in the yard of the Philadelphia State House to much loud cheering. When New York formally accepted the declaration, the state celebrated by releasing its debtors from prison; Baltimoreans burned George III in effigy; the citizens of Savannah, Ga., gave him an official funeral.

The carefully engrossed copy we see reproduced everywhere today, with its large handwritten calligraphy, was not ordered prepared until July 19, and it was not ready for signing until August 2. Delegates probably dropped in throughout the sum-



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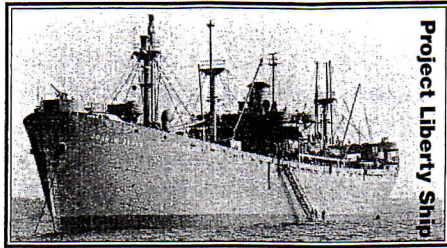
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mer to add their names to the bottom of the document. In any event, since the proceedings were secret and the signers all in danger of their lives, the names were not broadcast.

Even before the engrossed copy was ready, and long before it was signed by all, the legends were growing—how Hancock signed the parchment so boldly that John Bull could read his name without spectacles. How Hancock remarked to Benjamin Franklin: "We must be unanimous. There must be no pulling in different ways. We must all hang together." And how Franklin replied, "Yes, we must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly we shall hang separately."

Almost from the start, confusion blurred the distinctions between the July 2 act of declaring independence, the July 4 approval of the document explaining that declaration, and the actual signing of the Declaration. That confusion might best be represented by John Trumbull's famous 1819 painting, which now hangs in the Capitol Rotunda and appears on the back of the \$2 bill. Thought by most Americans to represent the signing of the Declaration of Independence, it was intended by Trumbull "to preserve the resemblance of the men who were the authors of this memorable act," not to portray a specific day or moment in our history.

The Fourth of July was not as widely celebrated during the heat of the Revolutionary War or during the period of confederation as it was afterward. It became much more popular as a national holiday in the wake of the War of 1812 and with the passing of the Revolutionary generation.

And then four score and seven years after that July 4, 1776, President Abraham Lincoln used the lofty ideas and flowing words of the Declaration as the basis for his famous Gettysburg Address to sanctify the country's sacrifices in the Civil War and, in so doing, he redefined the nation as a land of equality for all. Ever since, those early paragraphs of the Declaration, with their beautifully phrased abstractions and sentiments, have served virtually to define the American faith in secular democracy. His well-chosen remarks and our July 4 Independence Day celebrations, like Trumbull's painting, honor not a single event but, rather, the democratic process, the ideas proposed back then and the men who directly made them possible. □