

Providential Perspective

Vol. 27, No. 2 June 2013

The Teaching Journal of *The Providence Foundation*

What Really Happened on July 4th

by Stephen McDowell

During the first days of July in 1776 the Continental Congress was considering one of the most significant events of all time—the declaration by thirteen colonies to become the new nation of the United States of America.

On the issue of independence all the colonies were agreed, but a few of the most cautious delegates still were not sure about the timing. Rev. John Witherspoon, a delegate from New Jersey, answered their concerns as he said:

There is a tide in the affairs of men. We perceive it now before us. To hesitate is to consent to our own slavery. That noble instrument should be subscribed to this very morning by every pen in this house. Though these gray hairs must soon descend to the sepulchre, I would infinitely rather that they descend thither by the hand of the executioner than desert at the crisis the sacred cause of my country!¹

The delegates went on to approve the Declaration of Independence. After the announcement of the vote, silence moved over the Congress as the men contemplated the magnitude of what they had just done. Some wept openly, while others bowed in prayer. After signing the Declaration with unusually large writing, the President of the Continental Congress, John Hancock, broke the silence as he declared, “His majesty can now read my name without glasses. And he can also double the price on my head.”²

Adding to the solemnity of the tense moment, Hancock said, “We must be unanimous; there must be no pulling different ways; we must all hang together.” Benjamin Franklin responded in his characteristic wit, “Yes, we must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately!”³

On August 1, the day before an engrossed copy of the Declaration was signed (the copy now displayed in the National Archives in Washington, D.C.), Samuel Adams, the

of these signers as well as tens of thousands of colonists lost their lives, families, reputations, and property in order to purchase liberty for themselves and their posterity.⁵

What was it that motivated these people to risk everything in order that they might have freedom? What was it that brought about the events leading to the colonists declaring their independence? John Adams, our second President and a leader in the cause of independence, revealed what he and many others thought as

he wrote at the time that the colonies declared their independence:

It is the Will of Heaven, that the two Countries should be sundered forever. It may be the Will of Heaven that America shall suffer Calamities still more wasting and Distresses yet more dreadful. If this is to be the Case, it will have this good Effect, at least: it will inspire Us with many Virtues, which We have not, and correct many Errors, and Vices, which threaten to disturb, dis-honor, and destroy Us. — The Furnace of Affliction produces Refinement, in States as

well as Individuals.... But I must submit all my Hopes and Fears to an overruling Providence, in which, un-fashionable as the Faith may be, I firmly believe.⁶

John Hancock echoed the reliance upon God and the belief that the destiny of nations is in the hand of God as he said:

Let us humbly commit our righteous cause to the great Lord of the Uni-verse.... Let us joyfully leave our concerns in the hands of Him who raises up and puts down the empires



Father of the American Revolution, delivered an address in which he proclaimed regarding the day of Independence: “We have this day re-stored the Sovereign to Whom alone men ought to be obedient. He reigns in heaven and ... from the rising to the setting sun, may His kingdom come.”⁴ The men who helped give birth to America understood what was taking place. They saw in the es-tablishment of America the first truly Christian nation in history.

As Franklin suggested, they did “hang together,” but even so, many

and kingdoms of the earth as He pleases.⁷

Thomas Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration of Independence contained a recognition of God, in particular: the laws of nature's God, the existence of a Creator, the equality of all men before God, Creator-endowed rights,⁸ and the purpose of government to protect the God-given rights of God-made man. However, the reliance upon God was so universally adhered to among those in America that the Continental Congress insisted it be made clear in this seminal document. When the draft of the Declaration was debated before Congress, they added the phrase, "appealing to the Supreme Judge of the World, for the rectitude of our intentions," as well as the words "with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence."⁹ Thus, we see the Continental Congress declaring to the entire world their Christian convictions.

Not only does the Declaration of Independence reflect our Founders' faith in God, but this document only came into being as a result of Biblical ideas that had been sown in the hearts of the colonists for over one hundred and fifty years. The American Revolution was a revolution of ideas long before it was a revolution of war. As the clergy and other leaders taught the colonists their God-given rights as men, Christians, and subjects, the inevitable result was a nation birthed in liberty.

Samuel Adams recognized the importance of educating everyone throughout the colonies so that they could reason out their rights and political convictions based upon Biblical principles. For this reason he began establishing "Committees of Correspondence" in 1772.¹⁰ His desire was for the colonists to be united "not by external bonds, but by the vital force of distinctive ideas and principles."

This unity of ideas and principles helped to promote union among the colonists. The common ideas sown within the colonists' hearts by Samuel Adams and many other Christian thinking men of that and earlier generations, resulted in the Declaration of Independence and the external un-

ion of the colonies into the United States of America.

Our celebration of the birth of the nation on July 4th must surely place God at the center, for without His guiding hand our nation would have never come into being. John Adams wrote that the day of independence "will be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America.—I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty...from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more."¹¹ PP

End Notes

1. Samuel Davies Alexander, *Princeton College During the Eighteenth Century*, New York: Anson D.F. Randolph & Co., p. ix.

2. This is an anecdotal story reported by many sources using varying terminology. This quote is in Robert Flood, *Men Who Shaped America*, Chicago, 1968, p. 276. Another records Hancock said: "There, I guess King George will be able to read that" (*The Annals of America*, Vol. 2, Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1968, p. 449). This and the other comments could have been made on July 4 or perhaps on August 2 when the engrossed copy was signed by most of the delegates.

Jefferson records that on July 4 the Declaration was "signed by every member present, except Mr. Dickinson" (*The Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson in The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden, New York: The Modern Library, 1944, p. 21). Historian Benson Lossing concurs, writing that after approving the Declaration all the delegates signed their names on a paper that was attached to a copy of the Declaration (Benson J. Lossing, *Our Country, A Household History of the United States*, New York: James A. Bailey, 1895, Vol. 3, p. 871). However, some people do not think that the delegates signed on this day (citing various indirect remarks from delegates, in addition to the fact that such an original copy of the signees is not known to exist), but rather that all would not sign until an engrossed copy was made. Soon after approval of the Declaration on July 4, with the oversight of the committee, printer John Dunlap prepared and printed copies, perhaps during the night of July 4, which were sent to the governors of several states and to the commanding officers. These broadsides were authenticated by the signatures of John Hancock, the President, and Charles Thomson, the Secretary. On July 19 the Congress ordered the Declaration engrossed on parchment (Julian P. Boyd, *The Declaration of Independence*, Washington: The Library of Congress, 1999, p. 36). This engrossed copy was signed by 54 delegates on August 2 and two others afterward, one in September and the other later in the autumn (Lossing, *Our Country, A Household History of the United States*, Vol. 3, p. 871).

3. *The Annals of America*, Vol. 2, Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1968, p. 276.

4. Samuel Adams, *An Oration Delivered at the State-House, in Philadelphia, to a Very Numerous Audience; on Thursday the 1st of August, 1776;*

London, reprinted for E. Johnson, No. 4, Ludgate-Hill, 1776. See also Frank Moore, *American Eloquence: A Collection of Speeches and Addresses*, New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1858, Vol. 1, p. 324. Some historians do not think Adams made these remarks, but even if this is so, the content is consistent with his beliefs and writings.

5. These men were prepared to give their lives for the cause of liberty, and thought this was a very real possibility. Signer Benjamin Rush would later write to signer John Adams: "Do you recollect your memorable speech upon the day on which the vote was taken? Do you recollect the pensive and awful silence which pervaded the house when we were called up, one after another, to the table of the President of Congress to subscribe what was believed by many at that time to be our own death warrants?" (Letter of Benjamin Rush to John Adams, July 20, 1811, *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, edited by L.H. Butterfield, Vol. 2: 1793-1813, Princeton University Press, 1951, pp. 1089-1090.)

6. *The Book of Abigail and John, Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-1784*, ed. L.H. Butterfield, March Friedlaender and Mary-Jo Kline, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975, p. 140. Letter from John to Abigail Adams, July 3, 1776.

7. John Hancock, "Oration, Delivered at Boston, March 5, 1774," in Hezekiah Niles, *Principles and Acts of the Revolution in America*, New York: A.S. Barnes & Co., 1876, p. 42.

8. Jefferson's original wording for this point was, "that all men are created equal and independent; that from that equal Creation they derive Rights inherent and unalienable." The committee assigned to oversee the drafting of the Declaration changed it to, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." See Julian P. Boyd, *The Declaration of Independence*, pp. 31, 60.

9. See Boyd, p. 35.

10. See William V. Wells, *The Life and Public Service of Samuel Adams*, Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1865, Vol. 1.

11. Letter from John to Abigail, July 3d, 1776, in *The Book of Abigail and John, Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-1784*, p. 142. The Congress voted on July 2 for independence, while they approved the Declaration of Independence (which states the reasons for their action) on July 4. Adams was referring to the July 2 vote in this letter to Abigail.

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Providence Foundation
P.O. Box 6759
Charlottesville, VA 22906
Phone: 434-978-4535
Email: info@providencefoundation.com
Website: www.providencefoundation.com
Facebook: Providence Foundation