

Independence Day celebrations



Making sense of the Fourth of July

PAULINE MAIER

JOHN Adams thought Americans would commemorate their Independence Day on the second of July. Future generations, he confidently predicted, would remember July 2, 1776, as "the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America" and celebrate it as their "Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more."

His proposal, however odd it seems today, was perfectly reasonable when he made it in a letter to his wife, Abigail. On the previous day, July 2, 1776, the Second Continental Congress had finally resolved "That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved." The thought that Americans might instead commemorate July 4, the day Congress adopted a "declaration on Independence" that he had

colonies ever again to be united with Britain. The issue was one of timing.

John and Samuel Adams, along with others such as Virginia's George Wythe, wanted Congress to declare independence right away and start negotiating foreign alliances and forming a more lasting confederation (which Lee also proposed). Others, including Pennsylvania's James Wilson, Edward Rutledge of South Carolina, and Robert R. Livingston of New York, argued for delay. They noted that the delegates of several colonies, including Maryland, Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, and New York, had not been "empowered" by their home governments to vote for independence. If a vote was taken immediately, those delegates would have to "retire" from Congress, and their states might secede from the union, which would seriously weaken the Americans' chance of realizing their independence. In the past, they said, members of Congress had followed the "wise and proper" policy of putting off major decisions "till the voice of the people drove us into it," since "they were our power, and without them our declarations could not be carried into effect." Moreover, opinion on independence in the critical middle colonies was

asked that Congress put off its decision until the next day, since he thought that the South Carolina delegation would then vote in favor "for the sake of unanimity." When Congress took its final tally on July 2, the nine affirmative votes of the day before had grown to twelve: Not only South Carolina voted in favor, but so did Delaware, the arrival of Caesar Rodney broke the tie in that delegation's vote, and Pennsylvania. Only New York held out. Then on July 9 it, too, allowed its delegates to add their approval to that of delegates from the other twelve colonies, lamenting still the "cruel necessity" that made independence "unavoidable."

Once independence had been adopted, Congress again formed itself into a Committee of the Whole. It then spent the better part of two days editing the draft declaration submitted by its Committee of Five, rewriting or chopping off large sections of text. Finally, on July 4, Congress approved the revised Declaration and ordered it to be printed and sent to the several states and to the commanding officers of the Continental Army. By formally announcing and justifying the end of British rule, that document, as letters from Congress's president, John Hancock, explained, laid "the Ground and Foundation" of

American self-government. As a result, it had to be proclaimed not only before American troops in the hope that it would inspire them to fight more ardently for what was now the cause of both liberty and national independence but throughout the country, and "in such a Manner, that the People may be universally informed of it."

Not until four days later did a committee of Congress ?? not Congress itself ?? get around to sending a copy of the Declaration to its emissary in Paris, Silas Deane, with orders to present it to the court of France and send copies to "the other Courts of Europe." Unfortunately the original letter was lost, and the next failed to reach Deane until November, when news of American independence had circulated for months. To make matters worse, it arrived with only a brief note from the committee and in an envelope that lacked a seal, an unfortunately slipshod way, complained Deane, to announce the arrival of the United States among the powers of the earth to "old and powerful states." Despite the Declaration's reference to the "opinions of mankind," it was obviously meant first and foremost for a home audience.

As copies of the Declaration spread through the states and

were publicly read at town meetings, religious services, court days, or wherever else people assembled, Americans marked the occasion with appropriate rituals. They lit great bonfires, "illuminated" their windows with candles, fired guns, rang bells, tore down and destroyed the symbols of monarchy on public buildings, churches, or tavern signs, and "fixed up" on the walls of their homes broadside or newspaper copies of the Declaration of Independence.

The adoption of independence was, however, from the beginning confused with its declaration. Differences in the meaning of the word declare contributed to the confusion. Before the Declaration of Independence was issued ?? while, in fact, Congress was still editing Jefferson's draft ?? Pennsylvania newspapers announced that on July 2 the Continental Congress had "declared the United Colonies Free and Independent States," by which it meant simply that it had officially accepted that status. Newspapers in other colonies repeated the story. In later years the "Anniversary of the United States of America" came to be celebrated on the date Congress had approved the Declaration of Independence. That began, it seems, by accident. In 1777 no member of Congress thought of marking the anniversary of Independence at all until July 3, when it was too late to honor July 2. As a result, the celebration took place on the Fourth, and that became the tradition. At least one delegate spoke of "celebrating the Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence," but over the next few years references to the anniversary of independence and of the Declaration seem to have been virtually interchangeable.

On Independence Day, then, Americans celebrate not simply the birth of their nation or the legacy of a few great men. They also commemorate a Declaration of Independence that is their own collective work now and through time. And that, finally, makes sense of the Fourth of July.

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Revolution

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Tyrannical king and outworn system of government, or liberty and happiness as a self-sufficient, independent republic.

The Second Continental Congress appointed a committee, headed by Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, to prepare a document outlining the colonies' grievances against the king and explaining their decision to break away. This Declaration of Independence was adopted on July 4, 1776. The 4th of July has since been celebrated as America's Independence Day.

The Declaration of Independence not only announced the birth of a new nation. It also set forth a philosophy of human freedom that would become a dynamic force throughout the world. It drew upon French and British political ideas, especially those of John Locke in his *Second Treatise on Government*, reaffirming the belief that political

rights are basic human rights and are thus universal.

Declaring independence did not make Americans free. British forces routed continental troops in New York, from Long Island to New York City. They defeated the Americans at Brandywine, Pennsylvania, and occupied Philadelphia, forcing the Continental Congress to flee. American forces were victorious at Saratoga, New York, and at Trenton and Princeton in New Jersey. Yet George Washington continually struggled to get the men and materials he desperately needed.

Decisive help came in 1778 when France recognized the United States and signed a bilateral defense treaty. Support from the French government, however, was based on geopolitical, not ideological, reasons. France wanted to weaken the power of Britain, its long-time adversary.

The fighting that began at Lexington, Massachusetts, continued for eight years

across a large portion of the continent. Battles were fought from Montreal, Canada, in the north to Savannah, Georgia, in the south. A huge British army surrendered at Yorktown, Virginia, in 1781, yet the war dragged on with inconclusive results for another two years. A peace treaty was finally signed in Paris on April 15, 1783.

The Revolution had a significance far beyond North America. It attracted the attention of Europe's political theorists and strengthened the concept of natural rights throughout the Western world. It attracted notables such as Thaddeus Kosciuszko, Friedrich von Steuben, and the Marquis de Lafayette, who joined the revolution and hoped to transfer its liberal ideas to their own countries.

The Treaty of Paris acknowledged the independence, freedom, and sovereignty of the 13 former American colonies, now states.



Washington DC

helped prepare, did not apparently occur to Adams in 1776. The Declaration of Independence was one of those congressional statements that he later described as "dress and ornament rather than Body, Soul, or Substance," a way of announcing to the world the fact of American independence, which was for Adams the thing worth celebrating.

In fact, holding our great national festival on the Fourth makes no sense at all unless we are actually celebrating not just independence but the Declaration of Independence. And the declaration we celebrate, what Abraham Lincoln called "the charter of our liberties," is a document whose meaning and function today are different from what they were in 1776. In short, during the nineteenth century the Declaration of Independence became not just a way of announcing and justifying the end of Britain's power over the Thirteen Colonies and the emergence of the United States as an independent nation but a statement of principles to guide stable, established governments. Indeed, it came to usurp in fact if not in law a role that Americans normally delegated to bills of rights. How did that happen? And why?

According to notes kept by Thomas Jefferson, the Second Continental Congress did not discuss the resolution on independence when it was first proposed by Virginia's Richard Henry Lee, on Friday, June 7, 1776, because it was "obliged to attend at that time to some other business." However, on the eighth, Congress resolved itself into a Committee of the Whole and "passed that day and Monday the 10th in debating on the subject." By then all Contenders admitted that it had become impossible for the

"fast ripening and in a short time," they predicted, the people there would "join in the general voice of America."

Congress decided to give the laggard colonies time and so delayed its decision for three weeks. But it also appointed a Committee of Five to draft a declaration of independence so that such a document could be issued quickly once Lee's motion passed. The committee's members included Jefferson, Livingston, John Adams, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, and Pennsylvania's Benjamin Franklin. The drafting committee met, decided what the declaration should say and how it would be organized, then asked Jefferson to prepare a draft.

Meanwhile, Adams ?? who did more to win Congress's consent to independence than any other delegate ?? worked feverishly to bring popular pressure on the governments of recalcitrant colonies so they would change the instructions issued to their congressional delegates. By June 28, when the Committee of Five submitted to Congress a draft declaration, only Maryland and New York had failed to allow their delegates to vote for independence. That night Maryland fell into line.

Even so, when the Committee of the Whole again took up Lee's resolution, on July 1, only nine colonies voted in favor (the four New England states, New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia). South Carolina and Pennsylvania opposed the proposition, Delaware's two delegates split, and New York's abstained because their twelvemonth-old instructions precluded them from approving anything that impeded reconciliation with the mother country. Edward Rutledge now

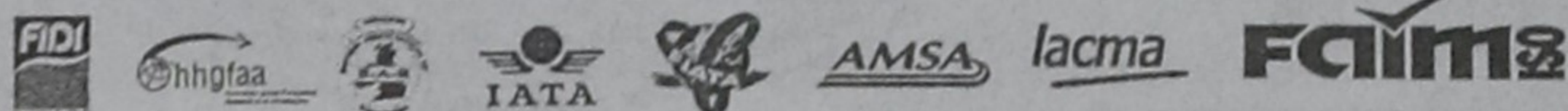
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