

**GOD OF OUR FATHERS
AND THE CALLING OF OUR TIME**

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INTRODUCTION

On September 11, 2001, tragedy struck in America in the form of an evil and carefully planned terrorist attack that took the lives of thousands of innocent American citizens. Afterwards, President George Bush led the Nation in mourning at a National Prayer and Memorial Service. During his remarks, he urged the Nation to rise up and exhibit once again the same degree of strength in defense of liberty that our Nation has always shown since it was first established in 1787. "The commitment of our fathers is the calling of our time" said President Bush. Just what is the "commitment of our fathers"? I believe it includes a renewed appreciation for how deeply the founders of this great Nation believed in God and how much they trusted in Him and looked to Him for inspiration in their fight for independence. Thomas Jefferson's writing of the Declaration of Independence calls these basic and important truths "self evident". Despite a flood of liberal philosophies and ideas, which challenge that fundamental reality, I believe those same truths are "self evident" still.

THE EVENTS LEADING UP TO THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

On May 14, 1776, thirty-three year old Thomas Jefferson returned to Philadelphia to resume his duties as a Virginia delegate to the Second Continental Congress. He did so reluctantly and with a heavy heart. As was the case with virtually all of those selfless patriots, the personal sacrifice for Jefferson was poignant indeed. Congress first convened in June of 1775. They recessed for a month in August but Jefferson's one and a half year old daughter, Jane Randolph, died before he could return home to Monticello. He was forced to leave his grieving wife who was also in failing health. From September to December, he again labored over the tedious affairs of the Congress as the delegates from the colonies continued to debate the fundamental question of whether any further petitions to England could mend the widening breach between the mother country and her distant offspring. During this time, He became extremely worried over the lack of news from home. His beloved wife, Martha (or "Patty") did not answer his letters, nor did anyone else. To his brother in law, he wrote, "The suspense under which I am is too terrible to be endured. If anything has happened, for God's sake, let me know it."

Despite the critical importance of the business of the Congress and the Revolution that was underway, Jefferson concluded that he must return home. A few days before the commencement of the fateful year, 1776, he obtained permission to leave his post and travel back to Virginia to be with his family. He was relieved to find that all was well with Martha and the children. They enjoyed the rest of winter together but just as he was about to return to Philadelphia, another personal tragedy intervened. On March 31, Jefferson's 57 year old mother died unexpectedly. She suffered a stroke that morning and was gone. It was not until May that he felt up to resuming his duties in Philadelphia. Finally, on May 4, 1776, he left and again made the ten-day journey from his beloved hilltop estate in Charlottesville, Virginia. If he had waited much longer, he would have missed the call to fashion the immortal document, which gave birth to the United States of America.

One of the first acts of the Second Continental Congress was to raise and furnish an army. On June 14, 1775, John Adams rose to praise

and propose as Commander-in Chief, "a gentleman from Virginia who..." With that introduction, Washington humbly and quietly excused himself by exiting into the nearby Library Room so he would not be present when his name was considered. Sam Adams seconded the motion and the election was unanimous. When he learned of his appointment, Washington said to Patrick Henry, "This day will be the commencement of the decline of my reputation." (Campbell, p.155). In his acceptance speech before Congress, he stated that he had accepted the "momentous duty" because Congress desired it, but "lest some unlucky event should happen.... I beg it may be remembered by every gentleman in this room, that, I this day, declare with the utmost sincerity, I do not think myself equal to the command I am honored with." He expressed a desire to receive no salary and asked only to be paid for his expenses of which he would keep an "exact account." With that simple expression, Washington sat down. At that moment, he was the first and only member of the newly adopted Colonial Army. The delegates, thus, unanimously resolved to "maintain and assist and adhere to him, the said George Washington, with their lives and fortunes." (id.)

On that historic Sunday, George Washington wrote home to his wife "Patsy" (as he called Martha Washington) to break the news of his appointment:

Dear Patsy:

It has been determined in Congress, that the whole army raised for the defense of the *American* cause shall be put under my care....So far from seeking this appointment; I have used every endeavor in my power to avoid it... A trust too great for my capacity...But as it has been a kind of destiny that has thrown upon me this service, I shall hope that my undertaking of it is designed to answer some good purpose... As life is always uncertain...I got Colonel Pendleton to draft a Will for me..." He signed the letter himself as "your affectionate George Washington."

Washington traveled to Philadelphia with fellow Virginia delegates Patrick Henry and Richard Henry Lee. When they were

leaving Washington's Mount Vernon home, Martha Washington said to the other delegates, "I hope you will all stand firm; I know George will." She knew her husband well.

The Second Continental Congress and the resolve to raise a Colonial army to be headed by Washington were preceded by Paul Revere's midnight ride and the conflict at Lexington that released the "shot heard round the world." There, 130 militiamen were mustered to combat the advancing British redcoats. It was there that Captain John Parker issued his famous command, "Stand your ground; don't fire unless you are fired upon; but if they mean to have a war, let it begin here!" That was followed by the battle at nearby Concord. Afterwards, Ethan Allen led a bold surprise attack that resulted in the capture of Fort Ticonderoga in upstate New York. He demanded the British surrender of the Fort and all its supplies and ammunition "in the name of the great Jehovah and the Continental Congress."

By early 1775, when the Second Continental Congress met, tensions were rapidly building and the flickering hope of a peaceful and lasting reconciliation with England was fading. Independence, a word few dared whisper, was nearly ripe for consideration. The two Continental Congresses resulted from the King's decision to dissolve the elected House of Burgesses in Virginia. Rather than scatter and submit, an inspired group of men that included George Washington, Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, George Mason, and Richard Henry Lee gathered at the Raleigh Tavern where they agreed to correspond with their counterparts in the other colonies. Together, they would unite in opposition to the Crown's unfounded decrees.

Back in England, the voice of reason was raised by Edmund Burke. He urged the King and Parliament to realize that their American cousins were merely holding out for the same freedoms shared by all English citizens. Burke's plea to repeal the offensive Acts imposed on the colonies was rejected. A few days later in America, Virginia delegates met at St. John's church in Richmond in preparation for the Second Continental Congress that would soon meet in Philadelphia. Just as Thomas Jefferson was burdened with personal heartache in the midst of these world shaping events, Patrick Henry was also not immune to domestic sorrow. Sarah Shelton was the wife of his youth and the mother of his six children. They were all under the age of twenty-one that spring when their mother would pass away within just a few months of their father's stirring call to arms in the defense of the heaven blessed cause of liberty.

On the evening of March 19, 1775, Patrick Henry sat by the living room fire of his "Scotchtown" estate. On the morrow, he would go down to Richmond as the representative from Hanover County. His position was known by all, dating back to his early advocacy of the bold Stamp Act Resolves and his rousing declaration at Carpenter's Hall before the First Continental Congress. There he declared, "I am no longer a Virginian. I am an American." Henry knew he would be opposed by the most loyal, wealthy and powerful Tory elements of the 61 county delegates to the convention. They gathered at Richmond to escape the watchful eye of the Royal Governor at Williamsburg. The outcome was tense and uncertain.

The risk for Patrick Henry was tremendous but he was still undaunted. His intended speech could easily bring him to the block. And yet, when Tories earlier yelled "Treason" as he proposed his Stamp Act Resolves, he calmly replied, "If this be treason, make the most of it." He was on a collision course with everyone and everything that stood for continued subjection to English rule and he knew it.

The next morning, a light March snow was falling as he left the stone steps of Scotchtown. Drawing his cloak about him and leaving his ailing wife in the care of their oldest daughter, he rode off to Richmond. The snowfall had lifted by the time Henry arrived. Horses were hitched everywhere and many carriages could be seen outside the church. A howling March wind added to the somber tone of the Assembly. The representatives all scurried to their seats. Patrick Henry sat in the third

pew.

The Second Virginia Convention opened with Peyton Randolph, the Speaker of the House, elected President as usual. With Randolph in the chair now, as in Congress, it must have seemed a hopeless situation from the beginning to Patrick Henry. The former King's attorney, now the Speaker, was always in the chair to checkmate him. On Thursday, the third day of the State Convention, the important matter of arming the colony was taken up. Randolph swiftly pushed forward yet another petition to the King. This time it contained numerous disarming recitals of abuses by the King that were designed to appease those like Henry who were ready to make the break. However, Randolph also included language that specifically conceded the divine right of kings. He asserted that the King's power and authority were supreme and independent of the people who only had the limited rights conferred upon them by the Crown. While others missed or were timidly willing to overlook this all important point, Patrick Henry was not.

The tone of Randolph's petition and its false premise and principle concerning the source of individual liberty aroused Henry's most patriotic indignation. He rose to his feet and proposed instead a resolution to immediately form a militia for the defense of their colony. He urged that preparations be made for a state of war. This set off a lively debate. The consensus at first seemed to be that talk of war was still perhaps premature until Patrick Henry rose to state his case for independence. What followed was truly one of the proudest moments in our American Heritage.

“NO MAN thinks more highly than I do of the patriotism, as well as abilities, of the very worthy gentlemen who have just addressed the House. But different men often see the same subject in different lights; and, therefore, I hope it will not be thought disrespectful to those gentlemen if, entertaining as I do opinions of a character very opposite to theirs, I shall speak forth my sentiments freely without reserve. This is no time for ceremony. The question before the house is one of awful moment to this country. For my own part, I consider it as nothing less than a question of freedom or slavery; and in proportion to the magnitude

of the subject ought to be the freedom of debate. It is only in this way that we can hope to arrive at the truth, and fulfill *the great responsibility which we hold to God* and our country. Should I keep back my opinions at such a time, through fear of giving offense, I should consider myself as guilty of treason towards my country, and of an act of disloyalty toward *the Majesty of Heaven, which I revere above all earthly kings*.

Mr. President, it is natural to man to indulge in the illusions of hope. We are apt to shut our eyes against a painful truth, and listen to the song of that siren till she transforms us into beasts. Is this the part of wise men, engaged in a great and arduous struggle for liberty? Are we disposed to be of the numbers of those who, having eyes, see not, and having ears, hear not, the things which so nearly concern their temporal salvation? For my part, whatever anguish of spirit it might cost, I am willing to know the whole truth, to know the worst, and to provide for it.

I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of my experience. I know of no way of judging of the future but by the past. And judging by the past, I wish to know what there has been in the conduct of the British ministry for the last ten years to justify those hopes with which gentlemen have been pleased to solace themselves and the House? Is it that insidious smile with which our petition has been lately received?

Trust it not, sir; it will prove a snare to your feet. Suffer not yourselves to be betrayed with a kiss. Ask yourselves how this gracious reception of our petition comports with those warlike preparations which cover our waters and darken our land. Are fleets and armies necessary to a work of love and reconciliation? Have we shown ourselves so unwilling to be reconciled that force must be called in to win back our love?

Let us not deceive ourselves, sir. These are the

implements of war and subjugation; the last arguments to which kings resort. I ask gentlemen, sir, what means this martial array, if its purpose be not to force us to submission? Can gentlemen assign any other possible motive for it? Has Great Britain any enemy in this quarter of the world, to call for all this accumulation of navies and armies? No sir, she has none. They are meant for us; they can be meant for no other. They are sent over to bind and rivet upon us those chains which the British ministry have been so long forging. And what have we to oppose them? Shall we try argument? Sir, we have been trying that for the last ten years.

Have we anything new to offer upon the subject? Nothing. We have held the subject up in every light of which it is capable; but it has been all in vain. Shall we resort to entreaty and humble supplication? What terms shall we find which have not been already exhausted? Let us not, I beseech you, sir, deceive ourselves longer. Sir, we have done everything that could be done to avert the storm which is now coming on. We have petitioned; we have remonstrated; we have supplicated; we have prostrated ourselves before the throne, and have implored its interposition to arrest the tyrannical hands of the ministry and Parliament. Our petitions have been slighted; our remonstrances have produced additional violence and insult; our supplications have been disregarded; and we have been spurned, with contempt, from the foot of the throne!

In vain, after these things, may we indulge the fond hope of peace and reconciliation.

There is no longer any room for hope. If we wish to be free — if we mean to preserve inviolate those inestimable privileges for which we have been so long contending — if we mean not basely to abandon the noble struggle in which we have been so long engaged, and which we have pledged ourselves never to abandon until the glorious object of our contest shall be obtained — we must fight! I repeat it, sir, we must

fight! *An appeal to arms and to the God of Hosts is all that is left us!*

They tell us, sir, that we are weak; unable to cope with so formidable an adversary. But when shall we be stronger? Will it be the next week, or the next year? Will it be when we are totally disarmed, and when a British guard shall be stationed in every house? Shall we gather strength by irresolution and inaction? Shall we acquire the means of effectual resistance by lying supinely on our backs, and hugging the delusive phantom of hope, until all our enemies shall have bound us hand and foot? *Sir, we are not weak, if we make a proper use of those means which the God of nature hath placed in our power.* The millions of people, armed in the holy cause of liberty, and in such a country as that which we possess, are invincible by any force which our enemy can send against us. *Besides, sir, we shall not fight our battles alone. There is a just God who presides over the destinies of nations, and who will raise up friends to fight our battles for us.* The battle, Sir, is not to the strong alone; it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave. Besides, sir, we have no election. If we were base enough to desire it, it is now too late to retire from the contest. There is no retreat, but in submission and slavery! Our chains are forged! Their clanking may be heard on the plains of Boston! The war is inevitable — and let it come! I repeat it, sir, let it come!

It is vain, sir, to extenuate the matter. Gentlemen may cry, peace, peace - but there is no peace. The war is actually begun! The next gale that sweeps to the North will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! **Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!”**

A soldier, Colonel Edward Carrington, listened from a window in the east end of the church. He was so moved by Henry's eloquence that

he exclaimed, "Let me be buried on this spot." His request was honored thirty- five years later.

Henry correctly noted that war with England was already underway. Their navy was positioned in the Chesapeake Bay and posed to attack. The King had "rented" thirty thousand Hessian mercenaries from Germany to fight in America. The succeeding months confirmed Patrick Henry's predictions. By early 1776, events were moving at a furious pace. Thomas Paine's compelling pamphlet, *Common Sense*, was eagerly read and discussed in every village. Washington had recently reported in person to the Continental Congress on the state of the military. As John Adams declared in a letter home to his wife Abigail in Massachusetts, "Every Post and every day, independence rolls in on us like a torrent."

AMERICA DECLARES ITS INDEPENDENCE

It was under these conditions that Thomas Jefferson reluctantly left Monticello to rejoin that fellow company *of* wise and courageous men who we revere today as the "Founding Fathers" *of* our great nation. Upon his return to Philadelphia, he sought peaceful seclusion away from the hectic activities *of* the Congress. Thus, he chose to rent a two room upstairs suite with parlor and bedroom at Seventh and Market Street from a young bricklayer named Joseph Graff. There, through the night, he labored to capture on paper what he would later refer to as an "expression *of* the American mind." He did not refer to any books or notes of any kind. Rather, as a gifted penman and a brilliant young philosopher and patriot who had already studied and internalized the philosophies and writings of countless respected thinkers throughout the world, he wrote his own version of a proposed "Declaration of the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress Assembled". Jefferson's original draft was debated and modified somewhat by the delegates of the Second Continental Congress. A controversial clause on slavery was deleted to satisfy the Southern States. (The issue of slavery would linger in America and become the cause of Civil War almost 100 years later). The final agreed upon "Declaration of Independence" was unanimously adopted by the Thirteen United States of America on July 4, 1776.

There are two main parts to the Declaration. First, there is the central truth that Americans have certain fundamental rights, which the King had violated. The second part contains the evidence that supports this argument. These are what Jefferson called "facts submitted to a candid world." There, he lists a long list of examples of tyranny by King George III. The opening paragraphs of the Declaration acknowledge the Americans' deep reverence for the God of nature and the laws of nature and the Creator of mankind. The colonists considered such be supreme authority, which excused them from any duty of loyalty to the King of England because his ways and his laws conflicted with that faith:

"WHEN in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the Powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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. . . . "

After explaining why independence was justified as a God given right of self government and due to the train Of abuses by the English King, the Declaration concludes with the solemn resolve that:

"These United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; . . . And for the 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."

John Adams wrote to his wife and with great joy and enthusiasm informed her that, "Yesterday, the greatest question was decided which ever was debated in America, and a greater, perhaps, never was or will be decided among men You will see in a few days a Declaration setting forth causes which have impelled us to this mighty revolution, and the reasons which will justify it in the sight of God and man It is the will of Heaven that the two countries should be sundered forever ..."

Adams worried that once the people were completely free and independent and thereby able to govern themselves, they might not be virtuous enough to be trusted with so much power. Even so, he said, "I must submit all my hopes and fears to an overruling Providence, in which, unfashionable as the faith may be, I firmly believe."

If public expressions of faith in God were "unfashionable" in 1776, it has sadly become even more so in today's world. However, times of crisis like the 9/11 tragedy and the continuing war against terrorism often humble a nation and cause them to again look to and rely upon that same God and "divine providence" that the founders so confidently and unapologetically praised when our Nation was established. The Declaration of Independence clearly documents that truth, which is "self evident" still. That has been the commitment of our fathers and I believe it is indeed, "the calling of our time."

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