

June 2011

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A Memorable Epoch

“One generation shall praise Your works to another, And shall declare Your mighty acts.” Ps 145:4

A few years ago,¹ we brought to your attention something quite shocking. A poll² of seniors in America’s top 55 colleges revealed that most could not identify what historic period either George Washington or Abraham Lincoln served in office. Equally disturbing and hard to believe, was a man-on-the-street interview aired June 30, 1999 on *The Michael Medved Show*.

Stationed in front of Seattle’s Tower Building at lunch time, Medved’s producer Jeremy asked shoppers, workers, students and tourists to explain the essential nature of the *Fourth of July Holiday*. Ready for this? Fewer than two-in-five “persons on the street” knew what the annual parades, picnics and fireworks commemorate. What a ~~shame~~ disgrace!

The story of the official “birth” of the United States of America is a mosaic of providential events that should be faithfully and enthusiastically shared with every generation. Here is one of them.

American colonists (the Patriots) had been skirmishing with British forces for more than two years before popular local support for “independence” forced congressional delegates to consider bringing the matter to a vote in early July, 1776. Parliament had given King George III the go-ahead to declare war against their American cousins some seven months earlier. So, while General Washington and his forces were otherwise occupied in and around New York City, the colonies were in desperate need of decisive leadership at the State House in Philadelphia, home to the Continental Congress. It seemed a mantle of leadership came to rest on a certain farmer and Boston lawyer from Braintree, Massachusetts, John Adams.

Rising early on Monday morning July 1, John Adams penned a long letter to a former delegate stating, “This morning is assigned the greatest debate of all. A declaration, that these colonies are free and independent states, has been reported by a committee some weeks ago for that purpose, and this day or tomorrow is to determine its fate. May heaven prosper the newborn republic.”³

Adams also informed his friend that “The object is great which we have in view, and we must expect a great expense of blood to obtain it. But we should always remember that a free constitution of civil government cannot be purchased at too dear a rate, as there is nothing on this side of Jerusalem of equal importance to mankind.”^{Ibid}

Following breakfast, Adams walked to the State House. At ten o’clock, with crowds of the curious surrounding the building, the doors were closed and the windows shuttered. Shortly after John Hancock sounded the gavel, a motion calling for independence was read aloud and John Dickenson rose to be recognized. After an awkward acknowledgment that his opposition to the motion would only hasten his diminishing popularity, Dickenson summarized previous arguments for sticking with Britain for yet a while longer. Adams later wrote that he conducted the debate “not only with great ingenuity and eloquence, but with equal politeness and candor.”^{Ibid}

After a period of silence and reflection, John Adams rose to present the final argument in favor of the motion to declare independence from Great Britain.

Thomas Jefferson later wrote that Adams was “not graceful nor elegant, nor remarkably fluent,” but spoke “with a power of thought and expression that moved us from our seats.” New Jersey delegate Richard Stockton said Adams was “the man to whom the country is most indebted for the great measure of independency... He it was who sustained the debate, and by the force of his reasoning demonstrated not only justice, but the expediency of the measure.”

After more than nine hours of debate the vote was taken. Nine-of-the-thirteen colonies—a clear majority—sided with Mr. Adams. However, it was the sense of Congress assembled that the weighty decision to declare independence from Great Britain should be unanimous since they (the delegates) were only acting as a committee on behalf of the whole country. Inasmuch as one of the Delaware delegates was absent and the other two split their votes, and South Carolina seemed as yet a soft nay, it was decided to resume the debate the following morning, followed by another vote. To resolve the Delaware deadlock, a rider was dispatched to Dover to fetch the third delegate, Caesar Rodney. Author Peter Marshall, Jr. adds his scholarship here: ⁴

“A Patriot of deep conviction, Rodney had been summoned home on urgent business. But now the express rider arrived at his farm at two-in-the-morning, bearing word that debate would resume in less than seven hours, after which the final vote would be taken. Taking his best horse, Rodney galloped off into a pitch-black, stormy night. It was eighty-nine miles to Philadelphia, over stretches of road which were difficult under the best of conditions, and this night the conditions could not have been worse. Streams which were normally fordable with ease had become a swollen torrent, and the rain had turned one portion of the road into a quagmire so deep that Rodney had to dismount and lead his horse through it to avoid its being crippled.

Unable to obtain a fresh change of horses until dawn, Rodney nevertheless arrived at the State House by 1:00 PM just as the final vote was being taken. Half-carried into the assembly room, he was barely able to speak: ‘As I believe the voice of my constituents and of all sensible and honest men is in favor of independence, my own judgment concurs with them. I vote for independence.’

The Delaware deadlock was broken, and the other delegations voted the same way, save New York, which abstained. The decision was twelve to none. The Colonies had just become the United States of America.”

News of the Declaration spread quickly resulting in cheering, ringing church bells, bonfires and much expending of gunpowder. “The people, I am told,” wrote Samuel Adams, John’s cousin, “recognize the resolution as though it were a decree promulgated from heaven.”

In a letter to his wife Abigail, John Adams wrote that *Independence Day* “...will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America.” He believed it should be commemorated “as the Day of Deliverance” and “solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward... forevermore.”

But in the Philadelphia State House, silence followed the announcement. Marshall writes, “... the magnitude of what they had done began to weigh upon them, and they realized that they and their countrymen were no longer Englishmen, but citizens of a fledgling nation barely a few minutes old. Many stared out the window. Some wept openly. Some, like Witherspoon, bowed their heads and closed their eyes in prayer.

At an appropriate moment, Samuel Adams rose to his feet and declared, “We have this day restored 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.” ⁵

Rick Forcier

¹ “Something to Ponder On Presidents’ Day,” 02/2005, Christian Coalition of Washington, www.christiancoalition.us

² “Where did social studies go wrong?” Leming, Ellington & Porter-McGee, 8/2003, Thomas B Fordham Institute, www.edexcellence.net

³ *John Adams*, David McCullough, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, 2001, pgs. 125-127

⁴ *The Light and the Glory*, Peter Marshall & David Manuel, Fleming H. Revell Company, Old Tappan, NJ, 1977, pg 308-309

⁵ *America’s God and Country Encyclopedia of Quotations*, William J. Federer, Fame Publishing, Coppell, TX, 1994, pg. 23