

The Indelible Mark of the Declaration of Independence

on its Signers, the Colonists and a Nation

The decision to declare independence and fight for freedom was not made haphazardly. As our founding fathers recognized, the oath they affirmed by signing the Declaration of Independence was signed not only with ink, but also with their own blood. While the words themselves and the principles that they illustrated were penned by the ink of Thomas Jefferson, they were backed up by the blood of the signers and, by extension, all of the patriots. Affixed to the bottom of the Declaration of Independence, these fifty-six signers swore that they would “mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”¹ And, soon enough, their pledge would be tested, but it never broke.

In risking their lives, fortune, and sacred honor, the signers emphatically affirmed that the justification of the American Revolution, spelled out in the Declaration of Independence, was moral, justified, and necessary to ensure their freedom in this New World. Each voluntarily affirmed this Declaration, fully cognizant of the consequences of his signature. At the time, John Adams summarized the sentiment of his fellow signers, “I am well aware of the toil and blood and treasure it will cost us to maintain this declaration and support and defend these states.”² And, Benjamin Franklin wisely observed, “We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.”³ Those fifty-six men signed the Declaration of Independence, knowing that they were committing treason to the Crown, and, in the case of John Hancock, signed so boldly that King George III could read his signature without the benefit of his reading glasses.

In the end, like the patriots who fought on the battle field, the signers paid a tremendous price for their conviction. Of the fifty six signers, five were “captured by the British Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned. Two lost their sons in the Revolutionary Army, nine of the fifty-six fought and died during the revolutionary war.”⁴ Their individual willingness to sign the Declaration of Independence and stand up for principles of the young republic, regardless of the consequences, illustrated the intense zeal and conviction by these signers that their cause was just.

Similarly, the cause became justified for each individual when he stopped referring to himself as a British colonist, and instead declared his allegiance to the new republic. Patrick Henry, after the Boston Tea Party, exclaimed, “The distinctions between Virginians, Pennsylvanians, New Yorkers, and New Englanders are no more. I Am Not A Virginian, But An American!”⁵

¹ Thomas Jefferson, *Declaration of Independence*, (Philadelphia: July 4, 1776).

² Elizabeth Olson, “Fourth of July Quotes,” <<http://www.factmonster.com/spot/july4quotes.html>>.

³ Elizabeth Olson, “Fourth of July Quotes,” <<http://www.factmonster.com/spot/july4quotes.html>>.

⁴ Barbara and David Mikkelsen, “The Price they Paid,” <<http://www.snopes.com/history/american/pricepaid.asp>>.

⁵ “Patrick Henry Biography,” <<http://www.notablebiographies.com/He-Ho/Henry-Patrick.html>>.

This radical transformation of personal conviction was necessary to initiate any robust allegiance. The colonists consciously rebelled in their mind before they fought on the battlefield. In order to fight as Americans, they, like the Signers to the Declaration, had to declare themselves American. The American Revolution, therefore, began long before the famous “shot heard round the world.” Instead, the American Revolution started whenever a colonist of the British Empire embraced the guiding principles expounded in the Declaration of Independence. As Thomas Jefferson noted, “the cement of this union is in the heart blood of every American.”⁶

Without the resolve and the belief of each individual, the patriots could not succeed. The American Revolution was won, one patriot at a time, and endures in the “hearts and minds” of the people, American or not, who embrace the ideals espoused in the Declaration of Independence.

Thomas Jefferson meticulously spelled out the justification for the American Revolution in the Declaration of Independence. In this founding document, he highlighted the core guiding principles of the new nation.⁷ Though the Declaration of Independence is well-written, one would be remiss to attribute these ideas solely to Thomas Jefferson. While Jefferson was the primary author, the others on the Committee of Five, especially John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, assisted in the editing process. Enlightenment thinkers, such as John Locke in his *Second Treatise of Civil Government*,⁸ heavily influenced Thomas Jefferson as did the English revolutionaries with their Bill of Rights of 1669.⁹ Nevertheless, the resulting document and principles were uniquely American. Thomas Jefferson wrote that the objective of the Declaration was “neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion.”¹⁰ This expression of the rights of man, the blanket that swaddled the nascent republic, has remained indelibly etched into the fabric of our nation ever since.

But while many Americans today only remember the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence, much of the document concerns itself with the specific reasons and justification for the Revolutionary War. The Declaration of Independence combines philosophical reasoning with concrete justifications. As Jefferson wrote in the Declaration, “a decent respect to the

⁶ “Thomas Jefferson and Politics & Government,”

<<http://www.famguardian.org/Subjects/Politics/ThomasJefferson/jeff0350.htm>>.

⁷ Thomas Jefferson, *Declaration of Independence*, (Philadelphia: July 4, 1776).

⁸ Rick Grush, University of California: San Diego.

<http://mind.ucsd.edu/syllabi/99_00/Empiricism/Readings/Encyc_Phil/Locke.html>

⁹ Bill of Rights. 1669.

¹⁰ R. B. Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, (New York: Oxford University Press. 2003.), 33.

opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.”¹¹

¹¹ Jefferson, Thomas, *Declaration of Independence*, (Philadelphia: July 4, 1776).