

The Rocky Road to Revolution

While most members of Congress sought a negotiated settlement with England, independence advocates bided their time

BY JOHN FERLING

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 . . .

LABORING AT HIS DESK in the midst of a Philadelphia heat wave in June 1776, Thomas Jefferson hastened to complete a pressing assignment. A Congressional committee, recognizing his “happy talent for composition,” had given the 33-year-old Jefferson responsibility for drafting a declaration of independence, a document that Congress needed almost immediately. Jefferson, one of Virginia’s seven delegates to the Second Continental Congress, worked in his two-room apartment on the second floor of a tradesman’s house at Market and Seventh streets, a heavily trafficked corner. He rose before sunrise to write and, after the day’s long Congressional session, he returned to his lodging to take up his pen again at night. Toward the end of his life, Jefferson would say that his purpose had been to “place before mankind the common sense of the subject.” Congress, he recalled, required an “expression of the American mind.”

Jefferson well knew that America was at a defining moment in its history. Independence would sever ties with a long colonial past and propel the 13 states—and the new American nation to which they would belong—into an

extremely uncertain future. Jefferson also knew that Congress wanted the declaration completed by July 1, less than three weeks after he was given the assignment.

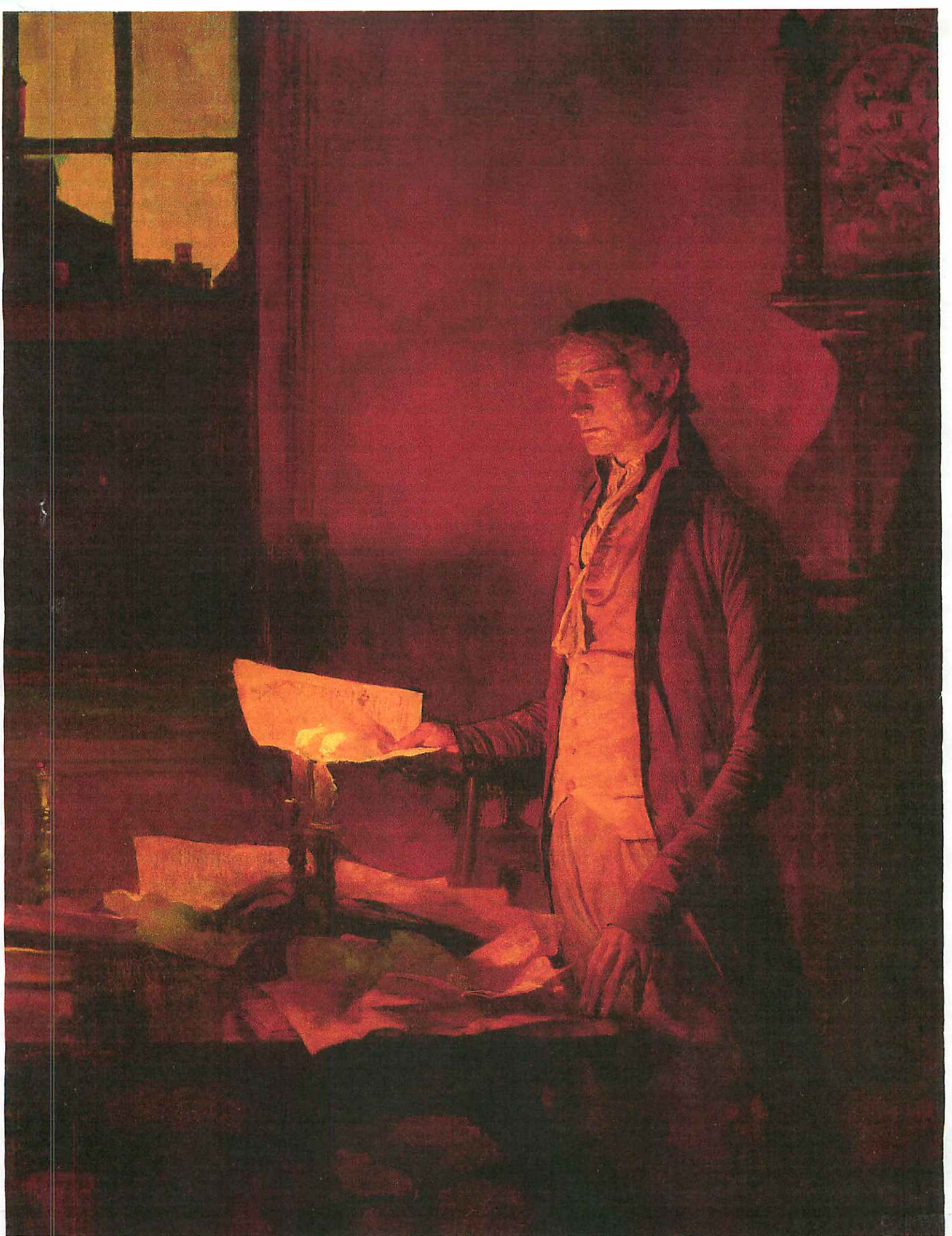
No one appreciated better than he the irony in the sudden desire for haste. Jefferson had been prepared to declare independence perhaps as much as a year earlier, from the moment that war against the mother country erupted on April 19, 1775. Yet Congress had refused. In the 14 months since American blood had been shed at Lexington and Concord, American soldiers had also died at Bunker Hill, in the siege of Boston, and during an ill-fated invasion of Canada. In addition, the Royal Navy had bombarded and burned American towns, and the colonists’ commerce had been nearly shut down by a British blockade. Still, Congress had not declared independence.

But not even Jefferson, passionate advocate of independence that he was, fully grasped the importance of the document he was preparing. Nor did his colleague, John Adams of Massachusetts, who had masterminded the arduous struggle

within Congress to declare independence. Focused single-mindedly on that contentious undertaking, Adams regarded the actual statement itself as a mere formality—he would call it “a theatrical show”—a necessary instrument of propaganda. Jefferson, for his part, said little about his accomplishment. Not long after his work was completed, he would depart Philadelphia to return to his responsibilities in the Virginia legislature. Still, he was more than mildly vexed that Congress had made revisions—or “mutilations,” as he put it—to



Thomas Jefferson (opposite, in an 1898 painting by Howard Pyle) drafted the Declaration at his Philadelphia lodging (above, as it appeared in 1885). Jefferson professed himself fully prepared to “lend my hand to sink the whole Island [of Britain] in the ocean.”





the language of his original draft. Historians now agree that Congress' alterations and excisions enhanced the Declaration's power. Jefferson's magisterial opening passage, and indeed, much of his original language, actually survived intact.

Today, the passage of time has dulled our memory of the extent to which many Americans, including a majority in the Continental Congress, were, for a very long period, reluctant to break ties completely and irrevocably with Britain. The creation of the document we have come to regard as the seminal expression of revolutionary ardor was by no means inevitable. More than two-and-a-quarter centuries after the Declaration was signed, this eloquent assertion of individual rights, reinstated last September in a state-of-the-art glass encasement at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., can be assessed in all of its complexity—as the product of the protracted political debate that preceded its formulation.

BY THE SUMMER of 1776, the patience of many congressmen had been sorely tried by bitter wrangling over the question of whether or not to declare independence. Many of the legislators thought it nonsensical to fight a war for any purpose other than independence, yet others disagreed. For month after bloody month Congress had sat on its hands, prompting John Adams to exclaim early in 1776 that America was caught “between Hawk and Buzzard,” fighting a war it could not win unless it declared independence from Britain, thereby prompting England's enemies, most prominently France, to aid in the struggle.

America's war with the mother country had commenced when a British army of nearly 900 men, acting on orders from London, had marched from Boston to Concord, intending to destroy a colonial arsenal and, if possible, capture ringleaders John Hancock and Samuel Adams. The Second Continental Congress, which assembled in Philadelphia just three weeks later, had barely been gavelled to order when John Rutledge of

South Carolina, a 35-year-old lawyer from Charleston, raised the critical question: “Do We aim at independancy? or do We only ask for a Restoration of Rights & putting of Us on Our old footing [as subjects of the crown]?” It would take Congress 14 months to answer that question.

Congress quickly divided into two factions. One felt that the British actions at Lexington and Concord in April required nothing less than a clean break from the motherland; they believed colonists would always be second-class citizens in the British Empire. This faction would have declared independence in May or June 1775. But a second faction, which comprised a substantial majority in Congress, yearned to be reconciled with Britain. These delegates believed in waging war only to compel London to accept America's terms—Rutledge's “old footing”—to return to the way things were before Parliament tried to tax Americans and claim unlimited jurisdiction over them.

Opposition to Parliament had been growing since it enacted the first American tax, the Stamp Act of 1765. At the First Continental Congress, which met in Philadelphia in September 1774, some delegates wanted to force repeal of it and other repressive measures through a trade embargo. A more conservative faction had pushed for a compromise to provide American representation in Parliament. In the end, Congress adopted the trade boycott, and war had come. “Nothing,” wrote John Adams, “but Fortitude, Vigour, and Perseverance can save Us.”

Most who had attended the First Continental Congress now sat in the Second, where they were joined by several fresh faces. For instance, Hancock, who had escaped capture at Lexington thanks to Paul Revere's timely warning, was now a member of the Massachusetts delegation. Sixty-nine-year-old Benjamin Franklin, who had just returned to Philadelphia after a decade in London, had been named a delegate from Pennsylvania. Gone were those from the First Continental Congress who refused to countenance a war against Britain, prompting Richard Henry Lee of Virginia to observe that a “perfect unanimity” existed in the Second Continental Congress, at least on the war issue.

Historian JOHN FERLING is the author of *A Leap in the Dark: The Struggle to Create the American Republic*.



Reconciliationists such as John Rutledge (far left) opposed secessionists (including, from left, John Hancock, Richard Henry Lee, John Adams). Said Adams: “There are 600,000 men in [the colonies] . . . it will be very difficult to chichane them out of their liberties.”

John Adams concurred that a “military Spirit” that was “truly amazing” had seized the land. Militiamen were “as thick as Bees,” he said, marching and drilling everywhere, including in the steamy streets outside the Pennsylvania State House where Congress met. His cousin, Samuel Adams, believed an equally militant spirit gripped Congress and that every member was committed to “the Defence and Support of American Liberty.” The Adams cousins soon discovered, however, that while all in Congress supported the war, sentiment for severing ties with Britain was strong only in New England and Virginia. Reconciliationists prevailed everywhere else.

John Adams counseled patience. “We must Suffer People to take their own Way,” he asserted in June 1775, even though that path might not be the “Speedyest and Surest.” He understood that to push too hard for independence was to risk driving conservative Americans back into Britain’s arms. Thus, for most of 1775, the pro-independence faction never spoke openly of a break with Britain. Adams likened America to that of “a large Fleet sailing under Convoy. The fleetest Sailors must wait for the dullest and slowest.” For the foreseeable future, he lamented, “Progress must be slow.”

But Adams was confident that those who favored reconciliation would be driven inexorably toward independence. In time, he believed, they would discover that London would never give in to America’s demands. Furthermore, he expected that war would transform the colonists’ deep-seated love for Britain into enmity, necessitating a final break.

Reconciliationists were strongest in the Middle Atlantic colonies (New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Delaware) and in South Carolina, all of which had long since been drawn into the economic web of the Atlantic world. Before the war, the products of the backcountry—furs, hides and lumber—as well as grain, had moved through New York and Philadelphia to markets in the Caribbean and England. Charleston exported indigo and rice. In return, English-manufactured goods entered the colonies through these ports. Business had flourished during most of the 18th century; in

recent years Philadelphia’s merchants had routinely enjoyed annual profits of more than 10 percent.

The great merchants in Philadelphia and New York, who constituted a powerful political force, had other compelling reasons for remaining within the empire. Many relied upon credit supplied by English bankers. The protection afforded to transatlantic trade by the Royal Navy minimized insurance and other overhead costs. Independence, Philadelphia merchant Thomas Clifford asserted in 1775, would “assuredly prove unprofitable.” The “advantages of security and stability,” said another, “lie with . . . remaining in the empire.”

And there was fear of the unknown. Some in Congress spoke of a break with Britain as a “leap in the dark,” while others likened it to being cast adrift on “an Unknown Ocean.” To be sure, many things *could* miscarry should America try to go it alone. After all, its army was composed of untried soldiers led, for the most part, by inexperienced officers. It possessed neither a navy nor allies and lacked the funds to wage a lengthy conflict. The most immediate danger was that the fledgling nation might lose a war for independence. Such a defeat could unleash a series of dire consequences that, the reconciliationists believed, might be avoided only if the colonies, even in the midst of war, were to negotiate a settlement *before* breaking absolutely with Britain. The reconciliationists held that it was still possible to reach a middle ground; this view seemed, to men such as John Adams, a naive delusion. Finally, the anti-independence faction argued, losing the war might well result in retaliation, including the loss of liberties the colonists had long enjoyed.

Even victory could have drawbacks. Many felt independence could be won only with foreign assistance, which raised the specter of American dependence on a European superpower, most likely autocratic and Roman Catholic France. But Adams believed that fear of anarchy accounted for most conservative opposition to independence. More than anything, said Adams, it rendered “Independency . . . an Hobgoblin, of so frightfull Mein” to the reconciliationists.

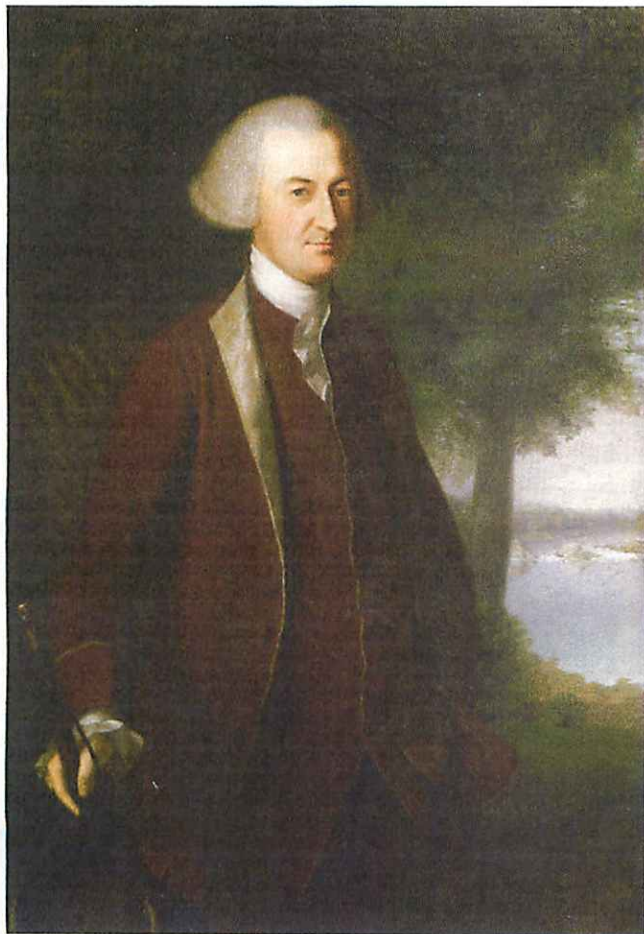


Some advocates of independence (including, from left, George Washington; Thomas Paine; Roger Sherman) were deeply committed to separation. Robert Livingston (far right), a pragmatist, believed in “swimming with a Stream which it is impossible to stem.”

PENNSYLVANIA'S JOHN DICKINSON soon emerged as the leader of those who sought rapprochement with Britain. Dickinson, who was 43 in 1775, had been raised on plantations in Maryland and Delaware. One of the few supporters of the war to have actually lived in England, where he had gone to study law, in London, he had not been impressed by what he found there. The English, he concluded, were intemperate and immoral; their political system was hopelessly corrupt and run by diabolical mediocrities. Returning to Philadelphia to practice law in 1757, he was soon drawn to politics.

Tall and thin, Dickinson was urbane, articulate and somewhat prickly. A patrician accustomed to having his way, he could be quick-tempered with those who opposed him. He had once brawled with a political adversary and challenged him to a duel. Early in the Second Continental Congress, following an incendiary speech by Adams, Dickinson pursued him into the State House yard and, in a venomous outburst, as recounted by Adams, demanded: "What is the reason, Mr. Adams, that you New Englandmen oppose our Measures of Reconciliation. . . . Look Ye," he threatened, "If you dont concur with Us, in our pacific System, I, and a Number of Us, will break off from you . . . and We will carry on the Op-

Patrician and combative, John Dickinson (in a 1770 portrait) fiercely opposed a total break with Britain, predicting that if it came, Americans would "wade thro Seas of Blood."



position by ourselves in our own Way." Adams was infuriated by Dickinson's invective: the two never spoke again.

Dickinson had a distinguished record. In 1765 he had served in the Stamp Act Congress convened to protest that measure. Two years later, he published his cogent and illuminating *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*, America's most popular political tract before 1776, which assumed that Parliament, though possessed of the right to regulate trade, lacked authority to tax the colonists. That was the very stand taken by 1774's First Continental Congress, and a constitutional settlement along those lines—not independence—was what the reconciliationists hoped to achieve through war. Dickinson charged that London had launched an "inexpressibly cruel War." Its "Sword is opening our Veins," he said, compelling Americans to fight for their freedom.

But he also warned that a war for independence would be interminable. British prime minister Lord Frederick North had pledged an implacable fight to maintain "every Advantage" that Britain derived from its control of the colonies. Before any war for independence ended, Dickinson prophesied, Americans would have "tasted deeply of that bitter Cup called the Fortunes of War." Not only would they have to "wade thro Seas of Blood," but in due course, hostilities would bring on massive unemployment within the maritime trades, heinous cruelties along the frontier, slave insurrections in the South and the relentless spread of disease from armies to civilians. And even in the unlikely event independence was achieved, Dickinson argued, yet another catastrophe might well lie in store: France and Spain would destroy the infant United States. In contrast, a war for reconciliation would be short-lived. Confronted with "a bloody & tedious Contest attended with Injury to their Trade," Lord North's government would collapse. Its successor would be compelled to accept Congress' terms: American "Dependence & Subordination" on the Crown, but with it a recognition from London that Parliament's only power over the colonies was the regulation of American trade.

Given Dickinson's position as a longtime foe of Parliamentary taxation, it was only to be expected that he would emerge as a leader in Congress. Adams' rise, however, was a different story. When he became leader of the independence forces—what one contemporary observer, Dr. Benjamin Rush, described as the "first man in the House"—many were caught by surprise. Before his election to Congress in 1774, Adams was largely inexperienced in public life. He had served only one term in the Massachusetts assembly and had not even headed the Massachusetts delegation at the First Congress—cousin Sam had assumed that responsibility.

Forty years old in 1775, John Adams had grown up on a small farm just south of Boston, where his father moonlighted as a shoemaker to earn the money to send his oldest son to Harvard. Like Dickinson, Adams had practiced law, and also like him, had advanced rapidly. Within a dozen years of opening his law office, Adams maintained the heaviest caseload of any attorney in Boston. Unlike Dickinson, Adams was

necticut, to Versailles to pursue talks with the French government. In fact, if not in name, the Second Continental Congress had become the government of an autonomous union of American provinces.

Back in November 1775, word had arrived that George III had branded the colonists rebels and traitors and had contemptuously refused to accept the Olive Branch Petition. Two months later, the full text of the king's speech to Parliament reached Philadelphia. In it the monarch unsparingly assailed those colonists who supported hostilities, charging that they were part of a "wicked" and "desperate conspiracy." In addition, he revealed his intention to obtain foreign mercenaries to help suppress the rebellion. Hancock, by now president of Congress, wryly remarked that the Crown's actions "don't look like a Reconciliation." John Adams gleefully noted that Dickinson "sinks . . . in the public opinion."

Indeed, evidence was mounting that the mood of the country was changing. Already, by the summer of 1775, when Congress began authorizing the colonies to create their own governments, supplanting those chartered by the Crown, it had taken its most radical step since the creation of the army. Dickinson and his principal ally, James Wilson of Pennsylva-

Ben Franklin (left, with John Adams, center, and Jefferson) helped polish Jefferson's draft, written in perhaps two days. "We were all in haste," Adams recalled. "Congress was impatient."



nia, fought back. In January 1776 they proposed that Congress adopt yet another "humble & dutiful Petition" disclaiming independence to the king. This time Congress refused. Some members, such as Samuel Adams, had begun to see the reconciliationists as "Tools of a Tyrant."

Yet Congress still remained unwilling to declare independence. Had a vote been taken in early January 1776, the measure would likely have failed. On the 17th of that month, however, word reached Philadelphia of a devastating military setback, the young army's first. The news was instrumental in propelling Congress on its final journey toward independence.

AS WASHINGTON'S ARMY besieged British regulars in Boston during the summer of 1775, Congress had authorized an invasion of lightly defended Canada in order to defeat British forces there. It was a troubled campaign from the start, and on December 31 disaster struck. An attack on Quebec was repulsed; 500 men, half of America's invading army, were lost: 100 were killed or wounded and another 400 taken prisoner. So much for any expectation of a short-lived war. Overnight, many in Congress came to believe that no victory would ever be possible without foreign assistance; all understood that no aid from any outside power would be forthcoming so long as America fought for the "purpose of repairing the breach [with Britain]," as Thomas Paine had observed in his incendiary pamphlet *Common Sense*, published in January 1776.

Soon after the debacle at Quebec, John Adams observed that there now existed "no Prospect, no Probability, no Possibility" of reconciliation. Late in February came still more stunning news. Congress learned that Parliament had enacted the American Prohibitory Act, shutting down all trade with the colonies and permitting seizure of colonial vessels. John Adams called the law "a Gift" to the pro-independence party. Virginia's Richard Henry Lee concurred, saying that it severed the last ties with the mother country. It was "curious," he stated, that Congress yet hesitated to declare independence when London had already "put the two Countries asunder."

As spring foliage burst forth in Philadelphia in 1776, ever larger numbers of Americans were coming round to independence. The "Sighing after Independence" in Massachusetts, said James Warren, speaker of the colony's House of Representatives, had become nearly "Universal." By mid-May every Southern colony had authorized its delegates to vote for breaking off ties with Britain.

Within Congress, emotions ran high. "I cannot conceive what good Reason can be assign'd against [independence]," Samuel Adams railed in mid-April. He exclaimed that the "Salvation of the Country depends on its being done speedily. I am anxious to have it done." John Adams maintained that had independence been declared months earlier, America's armies would already possess French arms. Elbridge Gerry, a Massachusetts delegate, complained that "timid Minds are terrified at the Word Independency," while Franklin deplored those who clutched at the "vain Hope of

Reconciliation." As for General Washington, he said he believed that Congress had "long, & ardently sought for reconciliation upon honourable terms," only to be rebuffed at every turn. He had long been of the opinion that "all Connexions with a State So unjust" should be broken.

Still, the reconciliationists held out, encouraged by a passage in the Prohibitory Act that authorized the monarch to appoint commissioners to grant pardons and to receive the grievances of colonists. Dickinson and his followers viewed the appointees as peace commissioners and held out hope that they were being sent to resolve differences. Many in Congress refused to budge until they learned just what the envoys had to offer. John Adams disdainfully predicted that this was "a Bubble" and a misbegotten "Messiah that will never come." Samuel Adams said that he was "disgusted" both with the "King & his Junto," who spoke of peace while making "the most destructive Plans," and with the reconciliationists who were willing to be "Slaves" to "a Nation so lost to all Sense of Liberty and Virtue."

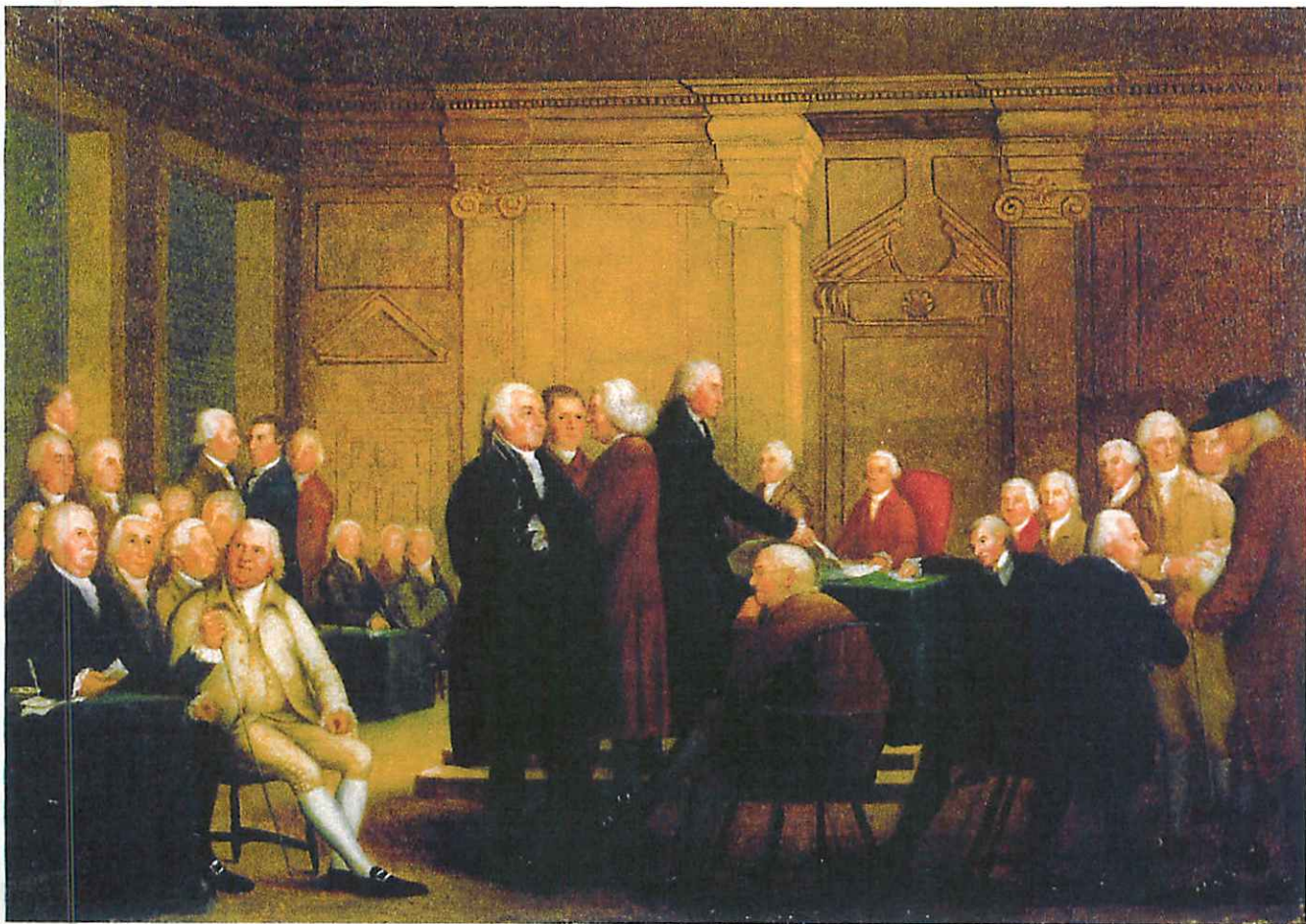
In May, as American newspapers published the text of Britain's treaties with several German principalities, authorizing the hiring of mercenaries, outrage toward the Crown skyrocketed. Many were now convinced, as Richard Henry Lee said, that the action proved Britain was bent "upon the absolute conquest and subduction of N. America." Nearly simultaneously, word arrived of yet more calamities in Cana-

da. Congress had dispatched reinforcements following the failed attack in December, but smallpox and desertions soon thinned their ranks. With the arrival of British reinforcements in May, the American army commenced a long, slow retreat that lasted until mid-June. Now, said Lee, it "is not choice then but necessity that calls for Independence, as the only means by which a foreign Alliance can be obtained."

One final matter helped the slowest sailors in Congress catch up with the swiftest. Month after month had passed with no sign of the so-called peace commissioners. Then, in the spring, it was learned that, although some commissioners had been named, they had been ordered not to treat with Congress. That proved a final blow; all but the most ardent reconciliationists were persuaded that the king's envoys were coming for the sole purpose of dividing American opinion and derailing the war effort.

With the tide so turned, in mid-May, Congress declared that "every kind of authority under the . . . Crown should be totally suppressed" and instructed each colony to adopt a new government suitable for providing for the "happiness and safety of their constituents and . . . America in general." John Adams, who called this the "last Step," believed this was tan-

Ultimately, the delegates (in a c. 1800 painting) voted unanimously for independence. Wrote John Adams: "The Second Day of July 1776 will be the most memorable . . . in the History of America."



amount to a declaration of independence. Even Maryland's Thomas Stone, a foe of separation, disconsolately allowed that the "Dye is cast. The fatal Stab is given to any future Connection between this Country & Britain." Only a formal declaration of independence remained, and that could not now be long in coming.

On June 7, three weeks after Congress urged changes in the provincial governments, Lee introduced a motion for independence: "*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."

Congress rancorously debated Lee's motion for two days. Several reconciliationists from the Middle-Atlantic colonies made their final stand, even threatening to "secede from the Union" if Congress declared independence. But their threats and recriminations no longer frightened the majority, including Oliver Wolcott of Connecticut, who recognized that America was in the "Midst of a great Revolution . . . leading to the lasting Independancy of these Colonies." On June 11, Congress created a five-member committee to prepare a statement on

independence. Adams, Franklin, Jefferson, Roger Sherman of Connecticut and Robert Livingston of New York were given until July 1 to complete their work. Once again it was to Jefferson that a panel turned, this time for the fateful task of drafting the declaration.

Jefferson and his colleagues beat the deadline by two days, submitting on June 28 a document that explained and defended independence. By July 1, the final consideration of Lee's motion to declare independence was taken up. That day's session, John Adams told a friend in a letter written early that morning, would see "the greatest Debate of all." With the outcome no longer in doubt, he said that he prayed for "the new born Republic" about to be created.

When debate began midmorning on that hot, steamy Monday, Dickinson was first on his feet to make one last speech against independence. Speaking emotionally for perhaps as much as two hours in the stifling heat of the closed room (windows were kept shut to keep spies from listening in), Dickinson reviewed the familiar arguments: America could not win the war; at best, it could fight Britain to a stalemate, and deadlocked wars often ended in partition treaties in which territory is divided among the belligerents; therefore, after all the killing, some colonies would remain part of the British Empire, while others would pass under the control of France or Spain.

It was John Adams—soon to be christened "the Atlas of Independence" by New Jersey's Richard Stockton—who rose to

At the National Archives in Washington, D.C., one million visitors annually view the Declaration of Independence (now in a state-of-the-art, climate-controlled encasement installed last year).



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answer Dickinson. Striving to conceal his contempt for his adversary, Adams spoke extemporaneously in subdued tones. Once again, he reviewed the benefits of independence. Although his speech was not transcribed, he surely invoked the ideas he had expressed and the phrases he had used on many another occasion. Breaking ties with Britain, he argued, would ensure freedom from England's imperial domination; escape from the menace of British corruption; and the opportunity to create a republic based on equality of representation.

Others then took the floor. The speeches stretched past the customary 4 o'clock adjournment and into the evening. The business was "an idle Mispence of Time," Adams remarked sourly, as "nothing was Said, but what had been repeated and hackneyed in that Room an hundred Times for Six Months past." After the Congress reconvened the next morning, July 2, the delegates cast their momentous votes. Twelve states—the colonies would become states with the vote—voted for independence. Not one voted against the break with Britain. New York's delegation, which had not yet been authorized by the New York legislature to separate from the mother country, did not vote. (Dickinson and Robert Morris did not attend, and Pennsylvania cast its vote for independence by a three-to-two margin.)

Adams predicted that July 2 would ever after "be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other." He was wrong, of course, for July 4, the date that Congress approved the formal Declaration of Independence, would become the commemorative day. But Adams had made one prediction that would prove tellingly correct. With the Union intact after a 15-month battle for independence, and with the step finally taken that could secure foreign assistance in America's desperate war, Adams declared he could "see the Rays of ravishing Light and Glory" that would accompany military victory. ○

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