John Adams and the Question of Independence

by James Parton

It was an act of something more than courage to vote for Independence in 1776. It was an act of far-sighted wisdom as well, and it was done with the utmost possible deliberation.

The last great debate upon the subject took place on Monday, the first of July, 1776. Fifty-one members were present that morning, a number that must have pretty well filled the square, not very large, room in Independence Hall, which many of our readers visited during the Centennial year.

No spectators were present beyond the officers of the House. John Hancock was in the chairman's seat. In the room overhead the legislature of Pennsylvania was in session. Out of doors, in the public squares and grounds adjacent, troops were drilling, as they had been every day for months past, and a great force of men was at work fortifying the Delaware below the city.

This day had been set apart for the final and decisive consideration of Independence. The draft of the Declaration, as written by Mr. Jefferson, had been handed in three days before, and lay upon the table—perhaps visibly so, as well as in a parliamentary sense.

The question had been discussed, and discussed again, and again discussed, until it seemed to the more ardent minds a waste of breath to argue it further; but it requires time, much time, as well as great patience, to bring a representative body to the point of deciding irrevocably a matter so momentous, involving their own and their country's destiny.

Ought we to sever the tie which binds us to the mother country? That was not so very difficult to answer; but there was another question: *Can* we? Britain is mighty, and what are we? Thirteen colonies of farmers, with little money, no allies, no saltpetre even, and all the Indians open to British gold and British rum. Then there was another question: Will the people at home sustain us?

At nine o'clock President Hancock rapped to order. The first business was the reading of letters addressed to the Congress, which had arrived since the adjournment on Saturday. One of these, from General Washington in New York, contained news calculated to alarm all but the most stalwart spirits: Canada quite lost to the cause; Arnold's army in full, though orderly, retreat from that province; a powerful British fleet just arriving in New York harbor, three or four ships drifting in daily, and now forty-five sail all at once signalled from Sandy Hook.

"Some say more," added General Washington, "and I suppose the whole fleet will be in within a day or two."

The whole fleet! As if these were not enough; and, in truth, the number soon reached a hundred and twenty, with thousands of red-coats in them abundantly supplied with every requisite. Washington's own army numbered on that day seven thousand seven hundred and fifty-four men, of whom, as he reported, eight hundred had no guns at all, fourteen hundred had bad guns, and half the infantry no bayonets. Add to this fifty-three British ships just arrived at Charleston, with General Clinton's expedition on board.

We must bear this news in mind in order to appreciate what followed in Congress that day.

When General Washington's letter had been read, the House went into committee of the whole, "to take into consideration the question of Independence."

The boldest man upon that floor could not avoid feeling that the crisis was serious and the issue doubtful. As if to deepen this impression, there soon rose to address the House John Dickinson, of Pennsylvania, a good man and a patriot, an able speaker and better writer, but rich, not of robust health, and conservative almost to timidity.

From the first, while opposing the arbitrary measures of the King, he had been equally opposed to a Declaration of Independence; and to-day, refreshed by the rest of Sunday, and feeling that it was now or never with his party, he spoke with all the force and solemnity of which he was capable.

"I value," said he, "the love of my country as I ought, but I value my country more, and I desire this illustrious assembly to witness the integrity, if not the policy, of my conduct. The first campaign will be decisive of the controversy.

"The declaration will not strengthen us by one man, or by the least supply, while it may expose our soldiers to additional cruelties and outrages. Without some preliminary trials of our strength we ought not to commit our country upon an alternative where to recede would be infamy, and to persist might be destruction."

In this strain he spoke long, urging all the reasons for delay which an ingenious mind could devise, and clothing his argument with the charm of a fine literary style.

He ceased. There was a pause. No one seemed willing to break the silence, until it began to be embarrassing, and then painful.

Many eyes were turned toward John Adams, who for eighteen months had been the chief spokesman of the party for independence. He had advocated the measure before Thomas Paine had written "Common Sense," and when it had not one influential friend in Philadelphia. Early in the previous year, when it first became known by the accidental publicity of a letter that he favored the Declaration of Independence, the solid men of Philadelphia shunned him as if he had had the leprosy.

"I walked the streets of Philadelphia," he once wrote, "in solitude, borne down by the weight of care and unpopularity," and Dr. Rush mentions that he saw him thus walking the streets alone, "an object of nearly universal scorn and detestation."

But he was on the gaining side. The cruel burning of Falmouth on the coast of Maine weaned New England from the mother country, and the burning of Norfolk completed the same office for Virginia.

To-day he stood with a majority of the people behind him. To-day he spoke the sentiments of his country. To-day he uttered the words which every man on the floor but John Dickinson wished to hear uttered.

Yet he did not immediately rise; for he wished some one else, some one less committed to Independence than he was, to take the lead in that day's debate. At length, however, since every one else hung back, he got upon his feet to answer Mr. Dickinson.

The speech which he delivered on this occasion was deemed by those who heard it the most powerful effort of his life, though he had made no special preparation for it beforehand. He had thought of the subject from his college days, and had never ceased to regard the Independence of his country as only a question of time. During his professional life, it had been the frequent theme of his reflections, and he was perfectly familiar with every phase of it.

"This is the first time in my life," said he, "that I have ever wished for the talents and eloquence of the ancient orators of Greece and Rome, for I am very sure that none of them ever had before him a question of more importance to his country and to the world. They would, probably, upon less occasions than this, have begun by solemn invocations to their divinities for assistance.

"But the question before me appears so simple that I have confidence enough in the plain understanding and common-sense that have been given me to believe that I can answer, to the satisfaction of the House, all the arguments which have been produced, notwithstanding the abilities which have been displayed and the eloquence with which they have been enforced."

Proceeding then to the discussion of the question, he dwelt strongly upon the point that, as the colonies had gone too far to recede, as they had already been put outside of British law, the Declaration of Independence could not possibly make their condition worse, but would give them some obvious and solid advantages.

Now, they were rebels against their king, and could not negotiate on equal terms with a sovereign power. The moment they declared Independence, they would be themselves a sovereignty. The measure, he contended, would be as prudent as it was just. It would help them in many ways and hinder them in no way.

We have no report of this celebrated oration, and can only gather its purport from allusions scattered here and there in the letters of those who heard it. We know, however, that Mr. Adams dwelt forcibly upon this one position, that the king himself having absolved them from their allegiance, and having made unprovoked war upon them, the proposed Declaration would be simply a proclamation to the world of a state of things already existing.

Many members followed. When the debate had proceeded for a long time, three new members from New Jersey came in: Richard Stockton, Dr. Witherspoon and Francis Hopkinson. These gentlemen, on learning the business before the House, expressed a strong desire to hear a recapitulation of the arguments which had been brought forward.

Again there was an awkward silence. Again all eyes were turned upon John Adams. Again he shrank from taking the floor. Mr. Edward Rutledge of South Carolina came to him and said:

"Nobody will speak but you upon this subject. You have all the topics so ready that you must satisfy the gentlemen from New Jersey."

Mr. Adams replied that he was ashamed to repeat what he had said twenty times before. As the new members still insisted on hearing a recapitulation, he at length rose once more, and gave a concise summary of the whole debate. The New Jersey gentlemen said they were fully satisfied and were ready for the question. It was now six o'clock in the evening. The debate had continued all day, nine hours, without the least interval for rest or refreshment, and during that long period, as Mr. Jefferson wrote at a later day, "all the powers of the soul had been distended with the magnitude of the object."

Mr. Edward Rutledge, of South Carolina, then rose, and asked as a favor that the voting be deferred until the next morning, as he and his fellow-members wished still further to deliberate.

The request was granted; the House adjourned; the hungry and exhausted members went to their homes.

The next morning members met in a cheerful mood, for it was well ascertained that every colony was prepared to vote for Independence. When Mr. Adams reached the State House door, he had the pleasure of meeting Caesar Rodney, still in his riding-boots, for he had ridden all night from Delaware to vote on the momentous question. Mr. Adams, it is said, had sent an express at his own expense eighty miles to summon him, and there he was to greet him at the State House door.

The great question was speedily put, when every State but New York voted for declaring independence, and that State's adherence was delayed a few days only by a series of accidents.

What a happy man was John Adams, and what a triumphant letter was that which he wrote to his noble wife on the 3d of July, telling her the great news that Congress had passed a resolution, without one dissenting colony, "that these united colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States." Then he continued in the passage so often quoted:

"The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be 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, no; not on July second. The transaction was not yet complete. As soon as the vote was recorded, Mr. Jefferson's draft of the Declaration was taken from the table, and discussed paragraph by paragraph. Many alterations were made, thirty-four in all, most of them for the better. This discussion lasted the rest of that day, all the next, and most of the next, which was the fourth. Late in that afternoon the members present signed the document, and so the day we celebrate is the FOURTH OF JULY.

Source:

Parton, James. “John Adams and the Question of Independence.” *Revolutionary Heroes, and Other Historical Papers*. Electronic.