THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE:

"Let Facts [and propaganda] be submitted to a candid World."

If King George III had ever had had the opportunity to engage in a leisurely non-political conversation with Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, or George Washington, he probably would have enjoyed himself very much. He might have lacked the imagination of any of those men, but on agricultural, mechanical, or scientific subjects the king was an interested and engaged pupil. Like Washington and Jefferson, he was an admirer of progressive farming practices, and put them into operation on 'model farms' on his estates at Windsor. (They continue to this day.) And he was a diligent and unselfish ruler, a moral and pious man, who truly loved and was beloved by ordinary people, though he was also both timid and stubborn, and limited in his experience of the world in ways that set him apart, not only from his American adversaries, but also from his predecessors and successors.

By all accounts, when the Declaration of Independence of his erstwhile American subjects came to his attention, this amiable monarch was surprised at its animosity towards him personally. More than two centuries later, we may be moved to sympathy. We all think we know it, this foundational document of our nation. It is only when deliberately hearing or reading it in its entirety that we realize that the familiar parts comprise only about a sixth of its contents: the introduction and the conclusion. The bill of particulars in the middle, the catalogue of enormities allegedly visited upon the colonies by George III, is less familiar, and may surprise us anew every year. (It would surprise us even more if, for example, Jefferson's blaming the king for the slave trade had been left in, but this was too much even for the Continental Congress to stomach.)

If what we remember of the Declaration is mostly the stately preamble and the ringing conclusion, that is precisely what Jefferson and his colleagues on the drafting committee, Franklin and John Adams, intended. We may see the Declaration as a timeless document; the Continental Congress was hoping that it would keep the struggle alive for the next weeks and months. It was intended to rally support for the war effort and discourage all attempts at reconciliation with the British government. It is also aimed at shaping the "Opinions of Mankind", in particular the opinion of the French court, and encouraging those who could gain from British weakness to become allies. And if it helped those British public figures openly sympathetic to the cause, so much the better.

In short, this document is a superb piece of propaganda, edited as the British fleet entered New York's harbor, causing the New York Provincial Congress to evacuate. The Declaration was carefully crafted to support and justify the Continental Congress' adoption on July 2 of the June 7 resolution, by Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, declaring independence from British rule:

> "***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 connexion between them, and the state of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved."***

The immediate success of the July 4 Declaration of Independence can be judged by the facts that, first, after five more years of armed struggle, the French fleet made Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown inevitable; and second, that to this day almost all Americans see the Revolutionary War as a fight between Britain and America—precisely as the Declaration wished us to think.

It is worth remembering that, at the time, things did not seem so simple. The fighting initiated at Lexington and Concord had been going on for more than a year. Despite Washington's efforts as commander, troop morale was shaky and victories scarce. Both volunteers and money were a constant problem.

And Americans were by no means all on the same side in this struggle. In July of 1776, there were substantial numbers of Loyalists in every colony, in all walks of life, many of them rooted in American soil for generations. Some doubtless felt an emotional attachment to monarchy, but some were pragmatists who believed that the grievances of the colonies, though real, could be better addressed through legal and political channels than through armed uprising. And some were appalled at the mob violence and intimidation on the local level: the Rev. Mather Byles, then a Congregational minister in Boston, demanded, "Tell me, which is better: to be ruled by one tyrant three thousand miles away, or by three thousand tyrants less than a mile away?" Many of these colonials took up arms as well, so that what ended as a world war was also, throughout the fighting, a civil war.

Until July of 1776, some of the concerns of conservative Americans had been met by asserting that the struggle was not a rebellion against the King, but an assertion of British rights against the King's misguided advisors, the "Ministry" of Lord North. Washington's officer's mess continued to toast the King every evening at dinner. But it was becoming clear that this would be at best a protracted fight. A dramatic gesture was needed. That was the resolution of July 2. And then, a forceful, clear, but reasonable-sounding explanation: that was the Declaration drafted by the committee and passed on July 4. Henceforth, this was to be considered a war among sovereign nations. Foreign powers would have to decide whether to recognize the new states or not. Residents would have to decide whether to stay, as citizens of a new political entity, or to depart. And the members of the Congress eventually known to us as the "Signers" (though their signatures were an afterthought) were committing, as they said, "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor" to the cause. Not just their words.

Much has been written about the risks they were taking and the price they would pay, some of it spurious. It does not seem, in fact, that any of them actually suffered later for the act of signing the Declaration (with the exception of Richard Stockton of New Jersey, who was captured by Loyalists, turned over to the British army, and agreed to renounce the Declaration and sign an oath of allegiance to the Crown). Many of them did endure the depredations of war, like their neighbors. On the other hand, if they had fallen into the hands of their enemy, they could have been regarded as traitors and rebels simply for being members of the Continental Congress. But their signatures upon the Declaration of Independence would certainly have been prime evidence against them.

Desperate times, they thought, called for desperate measures. It certainly seemed to them at the time that their enterprise could fail; they had defied the greatest armed power of their day. And yet, they were creatures both of their times, the "Age of Reason", and of their political culture,

British constitutionalism, solidified by the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688. If they took the King personally to task for their grievances, it was as constitutionalists who had been brought up to believe that lawless oppression was illegitimate even when engaged in by a legitimate ruler. And if they were to decide that they could no longer be both constitutionalists and British, then that had to be explained by letting "facts be submitted to a candid world". We may smile at the formality, the leisurely indignation, the carefully balanced sentences; but those lawyers, farmers, merchants, though all white, all male, and none poor, began a journey that July which no one yet has been able to stop. Not here, not really anywhere.

Richard Cassius Lee Webb, June 2009