

Lesson Fifteen

The Declaration Of Independence

LESSON IDEA

To show that the Declaration of Independence is based on God-given, not government-given, rights.

PREPARATION

Make copies of the words from the Declaration of Independence that appear on the last page of tonight's lesson, so that each family member can follow along as the excerpts are read during the discussion.

LET'S REVISIT where we left off last week, and learn what happened after England declared war on its American colonies. In 1775 and early 1776, it still amounted to a family fight, with the British soldiers and ships anchored near Boston, and George Washington's volunteer army skirting the west edge of the city. Each waited for the other to back down, but neither did.

As the Second Continental Congress (which was still in session) struggled to find and finance food, uniforms, and ammunition for Washington's troops, talk of cutting all ties with Britain escalated. In January, Massachusetts passed a resolution calling for independence. In April, North Carolina took the bold step, followed by Rhode Island. Virginia declared its own independence from

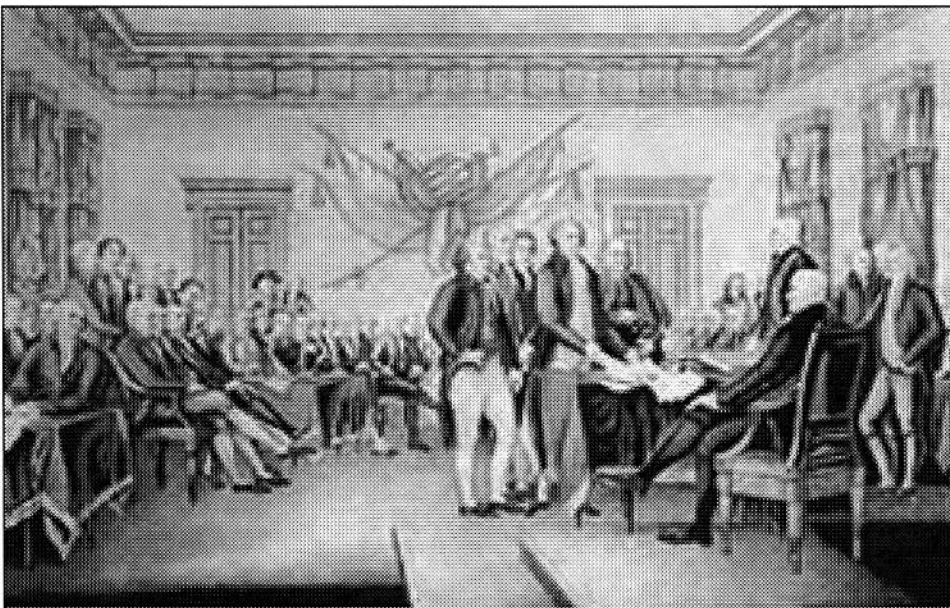
England. New York and Pennsylvania opposed the break, but in other colonies the idea gained steady momentum.

Finally, on June 7th, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia asked the Continental Congress to vote on a resolution stating: "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 connections between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved."

THE LONG-ANTICIPATED moment of decision had arrived. The vote, however, had to be unanimous. If some colonies voted "Yea," while others voted "Nay," England could take advantage of the division and the drive for independence would likely fail. Rather than press for an immediate decision, the vote was postponed until July 2nd.

To save time in the event the resolution passed, the Congress appointed a committee of five (John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston) to draft a declaration detailing reasons for the break with

England. Even unanimous support of Lee's resolution would not be quite sufficient. The delegates desired a formal statement that all men and governments could read, making clear that their quarrel with England was more than a tax dispute or a fight over who had what rights. They intended to challenge the very "right" of a king to be a king; the idea that a man could be a government "god" who could give and take liberties at whim. For many thousands of years kings, pharaohs, and emperors had been venerated, even worshiped, as the source of rights. Few of their subjects had dared look such deified beings in the eye and



The signing of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

say: "Behind your ermine robes, and under your diamond crowns, you are men, no more or less kingly than the rest of us. Any rights you have come from the same source as ours: the Supreme Being who created us all. And because of this, we have rights by birth, not by your decrees."

The idea of God-given, rather than king-given or government-granted, liberties had sparked the American colonists' drive for independence and nationhood. It was the only reason sufficiently important to justify pulling away from the protection of the English empire, and risking defeat and death by challenging British military power.

THE FIVE-MAN COMMITTEE appointed to prepare the Declaration of Independence asked Thomas Jefferson of Virginia to draft it. Tall, freckled, and sandy-haired, Jefferson was known for his mastery of the English language. He was a mediocre speaker, and had not delivered even a single speech during his months in Congress, but with pen and paper he had few equals.

For three weeks Jefferson worked on the Declaration at a portable writing desk he had invented. His lodgings were simple: a second-floor parlor and bedroom in the home of a Philadelphia bricklayer.

While Jefferson searched for precise words that would explain the concept of God-given rights to the world, the speech-makers and debaters (persuasive men such as John Adams and cousin Samuel) hammered home the logic of independence to undecided and reticent delegates, particularly those from Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and New York.

Since each colony had a single vote that was determined by a majority of its delegates, it was not necessary to convince every delegate to support independence. A simple majority of each colonial delegation would be sufficient. By July 1st, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and even New York (where British sentiment was most in evidence) appeared to be moving toward independence. The delegation most in doubt was Delaware, whose three representatives were divided two-to-one: Thomas McKean and Caesar Rodney favored independence, while George Reed believed that such a move was premature. Rodney, however, was not in Philadelphia. He had been called home to squelch a pro-British uprising. Making the 80 mile ride to Pennsylvania in time for the July 2nd vote would have been a great deal to ask of anyone, but espe-

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

What were the specific charges levelled by the colonists against the King? How do they compare to abuses by the executive branch of our own central government today? Make a list of the latter, and compare them with the charges specified in the Declaration of Independence. (Check a history or other reference book.) What action did the colonial leaders take to remedy the injustices? What can Americans do to remedy such injustices today?

cially Rodney. The 48-year-old bachelor suffered nearly constant pain from a cancer that had spread over much of his face. Physicians had advised him to seek treatment in Europe, but he had refused to leave the colonies during the crisis with Britain.

On the evening of July 1st, Rodney was riding toward Philadelphia through a blinding thunderstorm, stopping only long enough to change horses at the homes of friends. He arrived on the morning of July 2nd, weary, mud-splattered, and still shod in boots and spurs, only moments before John Hancock (president of the Congress) called the session to order.

THE ROLL CALL began. Two Pennsylvanians who could not bring themselves to vote "Yea" had stayed away, thereby enabling the remaining delegates to vote for independence. New York declined to vote either way. South Carolina backed independence for the sake of unanimity. When the roll call reached Delaware, Caesar Rodney rose to his feet and declared: "As I believe the voice of my constituents and of all sensible and honest men is in favor of Independence, and my judgment concurs, I vote for Independence!"

The issue was decided. Twelve colonies had voted unanimously for nationhood and separation from England. New York, the one colony the British had counted on to vote against independence, had abstained.

Once Lee's resolution was adopted, Congress turned its attention to the Declaration of Independence, which Jefferson had drafted and Adams, Franklin, Sherman, and Livingston had approved. The debate focused on the specific words and phrases that Jefferson had penned. The debate continued from July 2nd until the evening of July 4th, when the document was finally approved. Let's take a brief look at the final product, a freedom declaration that generated shouts of

