How to Think About the American Revolution

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How should we think about the American Revolution on the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence? The American revolutionaries can help us answer this question.

John Adams, one of the chief revolutionaries, looking back more than four decades after the Declaration of Independence, recorded a memorable judgment on the Revolution in which he played such a central part. Adams lived through all the great events of the Revolution beginning well before and continuing long after July 4, 1776: the Boston Tea Party, the convening of the First Continental Congress, Paul Revere's Ride, the Battles of Lexington and Concord, Washington's crossing of the Delaware, the winter at Valley Forge, and the Battle of Yorktown. He understood that all the colorful circumstances, the risky and fateful choices, the acts of daring and heroism would be long remembered and would deserve and need serious study.

But Adams also thought that we couldn't understand the heroic deeds of the American Revolution—we couldn't recognize their most essential lesson for us—without understanding the reason they were undertaken. As he wrote to Hezekiah Niles on February 13, 1818, the American Revolution took place "in the Minds and Hearts of the People"—a "radical Change in the Principles, Opinions Sentiments and Affection of the People," he wrote, "was the real American Revolution."

The record of this revolution in Americans' hearts and minds is one of our great national treasures. It provides precious knowledge of the American Revolution to all future times and all peoples everywhere, but especially to what America's Founders called "ourselves and our Posterity." It is the eloquent record of the conception and articulation of the American idea of political freedom in

pamphlets, petitions, state papers, letters, sermons, constitutions, resolves, bills and declarations of rights, memoirs, diaries, journals, treaties, and speeches—mostly in a compressed period in the 1760s and 1770s—in which a revolutionary generation learned to think and act like the Americans they were becoming.

This "real American Revolution," as Adams called it, culminated in the Declaration of Independence—an expression of what Thomas Jefferson called "the American Mind." All of the revolutionary actions and documents leading to the Declaration express one dimension or another of the American idea of political freedom. Returning to them again and again is a way by which succeeding generations of Americans can continue to experience the American Revolution for themselves.

This experience should not be seen as merely historical. To experience the real American Revolution, and not just the record of it, is to experience the idea of political freedom becoming active in our hearts, minds, and lives. It is to experience being free—not as an unhinged Supreme Court Justice explained freedom in 1992, writing that freedom means being able to "define [our] own concept of existence," but in the active exercise of the capacities required for self-government. It is an experience that requires, as the Virginia Declaration of Rights proclaimed in 1776, "a firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance, frugality, and virtue, and [a] frequent recurrence to fundamental principles."

The revolutionary and founding generations did their heroic part in bequeathing to us this legacy of freedom. So abundant is this gift that to live up to it is the most fulfilling thing we can do. It is to confirm with our lives what George Washington declared in his First Inaugural Address, "that there exists in the economy and course of nature, an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness." The daily activity of a free people is the "pursuit of Happiness," the activity of being good sons and daughters, good parents, neighbors, secretaries, teachers, artists, farmers, plumbers, mechanics, business owners, and citizens. As Benjamin Franklin's homely Poor Richard put it: "Pitch upon that course of life which is most excellent, and Custom will make it the most delightful."

In this daily American "rising to equality," as Abraham Lincoln described it, the idea of political freedom so richly articulated by the American revolutionaries informs and elevates our lives, our communities, our institutions, and all we do and aspire to do. Those who undertook the American Revolution intended for it

to honor human nature. Nothing can do more honor to human nature or greater good to ourselves, our country, and our world than living up to that Revolution.

Ark of Our Covenant

John Adams left a legacy of freedom not only with his life but in his death. In 1826, at the age of 90, as one of the surviving signers of the Declaration of Independence and a former president, he received an invitation from the mayor of Washington, D.C., to attend a celebration of the 50th anniversary of American independence. He declined the invitation for reasons of ill health. But on June 30, 1826—four days before that anniversary—he received in his home in Quincy, Massachusetts, the Reverend George Whitney and representatives of Quincy's July 4th celebration committee. They asked the great statesman for a toast to be presented in his name on the Fourth of July. Adams proposed, "I will give you, 'Independence Forever!'" They asked if he would like to add anything, and he replied, "Not a word."

It was Adams' last public act. He died on July 4, 1826, fifty years to the day after the adoption of the Declaration of Independence by the Continental Congress. Thomas Jefferson received the same invitation Adams received to celebrate the 50th anniversary of American independence. The last letter in Jefferson's handwriting of which we have any record is his response to that invitation, dated June 24, 1826. Like Adams, Jefferson was too ill to attend. And like Adams, he would die—as if American destiny had decreed it—on the day for which the celebration was scheduled.

In his response, sent from Monticello, Jefferson reflected on the meaning of the Declaration, of which he was the famous author, and he showed that his revolutionary spirit had not dimmed. "May it be to the world," he wrote,

> what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all), the Signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self government. . . . All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God. These are grounds of hope for others. For ourselves, let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollections of these rights and an undiminished devotion to them.

Jefferson had intended to write a memorable letter, and he succeeded. It was widely reprinted just days after he sent it and continues to convey the spirit and meaning of the Revolution 200 years later.

John Quincy Adams was President of the United States when he learned that his father and Jefferson had both died on that Fourth of July. He wrote in his diary what many others were thinking and saying, that this was a manifestation of "Divine favor." Daniel Webster, who was invited to deliver a eulogy in Faneuil Hall in Boston the following month, called the passing of Jefferson and Adams on that day a "dispensation of the Divine Providence." "Adams and Jefferson are no more," he intoned, but "their work doth not perish with them." "No age will come," said Webster, "in which the American Revolution will appear less than it is, one of the greatest events in human history."

In John Quincy Adams' and Daniel Webster's eyes, the highest attainment of all future generations of Americans would be to understand and live up to the greatness of the American Revolution. The essence of that greatness was not the heroic deeds, of which there were many, in the War for Independence. It was the *idea* of independence itself—the idea of political freedom expressed most memorably in the document whose 250th anniversary we are celebrating.
Fifty years ago, when Americans were celebrating the 200th anniversary of the Declaration, Harry V. Jaffa wrote in his book, *How to Think About the American Revolution*, "Nothing threatens the future of human freedom more than the failure to keep alive the understanding of, and attachment to, its principles."
John Quincy Adams made the same point beautifully in one of his many great speeches. "Fellow citizens," he said, after telling the biblical story of the children of Israel's entry into the promised land, "the ark of *your* covenant is the Declaration of Independence." All of their blessings, he went on to say, would come from adherence to the Declaration's principles, and all of their curses would come from departure from those principles. He concluded:
Lay up these principles, then, in your hearts, and in your souls—bind them for signs upon your hands, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes—teach them to your children, speaking of them when sitting in your houses, when walking by the way, when lying down and when rising up—write them upon the doorplates of your houses, and upon your gates—cling to them as to the issues of life—adhere to them as to the cords of your eternal salvation. So may your children's children at the next return of this day of jubilee, after a full century of experience under your national Constitution, celebrate it again in the full

enjoyment of all the blessings recognised by you in the commemoration of this day, and of all the blessings promised to the children of Israel upon Mount Gerizim, as the reward of obedience to the law of God.

The Great Seal

On July 4, 1776, the very day the Continental Congress declared that the American people were going "to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them," it appointed a committee to design and propose a "seal for the United States of America." This seal was to be the official expression of the sovereign authority Americans were fighting for in the War for Independence. To show how serious Congress was about the matter, it put Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams on the committee, which submitted recommendations a month later.

The long, hard war delayed action on this matter. Four years went by before a second committee was formed, which made its own recommendations. Two years after that, while peace talks were underway in Paris, a third committee was formed. At that point the need for a seal was more pressing, because an independent United States would want an official symbol of its newly won sovereignty and an official seal for any peace treaty to be signed.
Charles Thomson, Secretary of the United States Congress and a founding father of whom most of us haven't heard, was asked to take the recommendations of the three committees into account and submit a proposal for a Great Seal. To begin to understand his work, one need only look at the back of an American one dollar bill, on which the right side depicts the front and the left side depicts the back of the Great Seal of the United States.

Heraldry is the discipline of designing coats of arms, armorial bearings, and such things, and the Great Seal of the United States is a product of the art of heraldry along with the art of the statesman. In designing it, the arts of the Old World were used to create a coat of arms that would be the official expression of sovereign authority of a nation that understood itself to be inaugurating a new order of the ages.

Thomson submitted to Congress what heraldists call a "blazon" accompanied by "remarks and explanation" on June 20, 1782. It was approved that same day. A blazon is a written description in heraldic terms describing the appearance of the

proposed seal. No sketch or illustration accompanied it. Thomson's words alone, which are part of the law officially approving the Seal, are the final authority for what the Great Seal of the United States is and what it means. Reading the blazon along with Thomson's remarks and explanation, while studying the back of our dollar bill, can teach us important things about the meaning of the Revolution we have inherited and are meant to pass on to our posterity.

On the front of the Great Seal we behold an American bald eagle bearing on its breast a shield with 13 vertical stripes; clutching in its left talon 13 arrows and in its right talon an olive branch; the eagle's head is turned right toward the olive branch; a scroll held in the eagle's beak bears the familiar motto in Latin, *E Pluribus Unum*; and a "crest" above the eagle's head contains 13 stars from which a "glory" emanates, breaking through a cloud. This is our nation's official coat of arms.

All the thirteens represent, of course, the 13 original American states. The Latin motto, *E Pluribus Unum*—out of many, one—expresses the joining of those states into one nation. In his explanation, Thomson tells us that the shield is "born on the breast of an American Eagle without any other supporters to denote that the United States of America ought to rely on their own Virtue. . . . The Olive branch and arrows denote the power of peace & war which is exclusively vested in Congress." In heraldry, the right side is always superior to the left side, and the eagle's head is turned to the olive branch, the symbol of peace, rather than to the arrows, because we fight wars for the sake of peace.

On the reverse side of the Great Seal we see, in Thomson's words, "A Pyramid unfinished. In the Zenith an Eye in a triangle surrounded with a glory proper. Over the Eye these words 'Annuit Coeptis' [which means 'He approves of what has been started']. On the base of the pyramid, the numerical letters MDCCLXXVI [1776] & underneath the following motto, 'Novus Ordo Seclorum' [which means 'New Order of the Ages']."

Thomson explains: "The pyramid signifies Strength and Duration: The Eye over it & the Motto allude to the many signal interpositions of providence in favour of the American cause. The date underneath is that of the Declaration of Independence and the words under it signify the beginning of the new American Era, which commences from that date."

We still live in that new American Era. Like the unfinished pyramid under the eye of God, the earthly work of American freedom, aspiring to be worthy of divine approval, is always unfinished. We have, since 1776, experienced many more "signal interpositions of providence in favour of the American cause." So long as

we continue in good conscience to appeal, as we did in our beginning, “to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions,” we may “with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence,” like Americans of all preceding generations, with good heart “pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor” in this greatest of earthly causes.