

1776 TO TODAY

Mobilizing for Independence

by Nancy Spannaus

Put yourself, in your mind's eye, back in June of 1776, specifically, the period between June 7 and July 1. It is precisely at that time that one of the most crucial battles in the history of the American republic was fought—the battle over whether we would, as 13 united colonies, declare our independence to the world. Without that

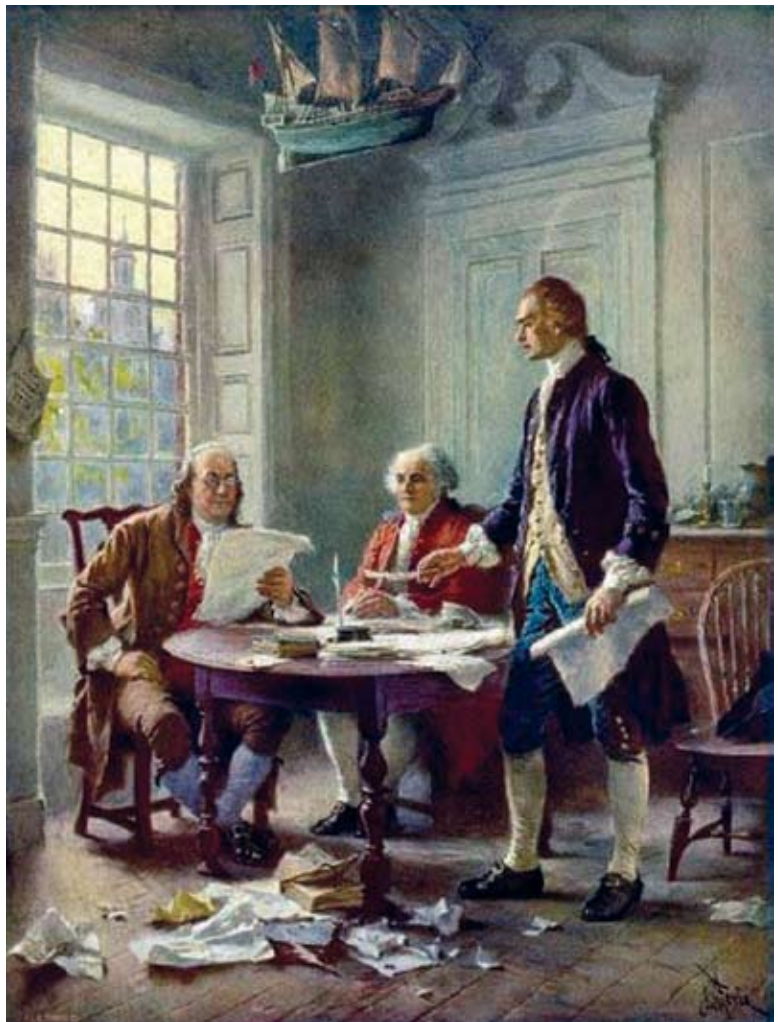
EIR June 17, 2011

bold step—which put every outspoken leader, national or local, at risk of torture or death—the United States of America would never have been born.

There are lessons to be learned from reliving that battle in our imaginations, vital lessons for the current war to free the United States from the British monetarist empire today. As we come down to the deadline, set by Lyndon LaRouche, for the restoration of the Glass-Steagall banking principle to the U.S. economy—July 4, 2011—we can truly take inspiration from the successful fight of that period, and the method by which it was fought.

To situate the political scene, start from the fact that the decision to issue a Declaration of Independence was a strategic question, not a matter of stating or mustering “public opinion.” By June of 1776, the British had been waging a shooting war against the colonies, starting with Massachusetts, for over a year. Declarations from King George himself had made it clear that the Crown was determined to impose total rule over its American subjects—a threat the patriots appropriately called slavery. The military force assembled by the Americans, under the leadership of George Washington, had brilliantly outwitted the British Army in Boston, driving it from the town, but tens of thousands of well-trained British regulars, and their Hessian mercenary cohorts, were headed for New York City, with the clear intent of splitting the continent in two.

The core of the leadership of the Colonies, most of which was sitting in the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia, faced a *punctum saliens*. These leaders, including Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, had been briefed by General Washington in late May on the situation in New York City, where the prospects of an American victory looked poor. It was their firm conviction that durable military success would require the active support of Britain’s historic enemies, the French and the Spanish. But there was no chance of winning such support without a Declaration of Independence of the unified states—and even then, the necessary international aid was not guaranteed.



Library of Congress

As Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin worked on the composition of the Declaration of Independence, in Philadelphia (shown here, in a painting by J.L.G. Ferris), patriot leaders of the nation-to-be were rallying the population of the colonies to support their efforts.

On the other side, however, the Revolutionary leadership, especially Franklin, Washington, and Adams, knew that a declaration, which would escalate the war, had to be backed by a large portion of the population. It would take a mobilization in-depth of committed patriots, to prevent a British Empire intent on condemning us to extinction, to provide the support for the leadership that could win the war.

Resolution on the Table

It was Friday, June 7, when Richard Henry Lee, a delegate to the Second Continental Congress from Virginia, presented his resolution calling for a declaration of independence. He took this action with the mandate

of a Virginia Convention that had taken place on May 15. The resolution was terse.

“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.

“That it is expedient forthwith to take the most effectual measures for forming foreign Alliances.

“That a plan of confederation be prepared and transmitted to the respective Colonies for their consideration and approbation.

“Resolved, That the consideration of them be referred till tomorrow morning; and, that the members be enjoined to attend punctually at 10 o’clock. . . .”

On the next day, Lee’s resolution met a divided response. In open support were six additional states: North Carolina, Rhode Island, Massachusetts (whose delegate John Adams had seconded the resolution), New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Georgia. The rest were uncommitted or opposed, believing such action “premature.” But the leadership of the Convention knew it would never do to pass the resolution with a mere 7-6 majority. The states of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and South Carolina—some of the largest in the nation-to-be—had to be brought along.

The solution chosen was uniquely American—and precisely in line with the republican principles we must apply today. A decision was made to delay the vote for three weeks, while the pro-independence leadership mobilized popular support to ensure that unanimity for independence was achieved. The “voice of the people” must be heard, was the sentiment even of opponents, such as Edward Rutledge of South Carolina. At the same time, anticipating success, the Congress appointed a committee of five to prepare a draft Declaration of Independence, which committee included Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin, John Adams, Robert R. Livingston, and Roger Sherman.

The Mobilization

There was no question but that support for independence was uneven throughout the Colonies. Strongest in favor were the New England states, with their strong republican tradition, and experience of British military oppression; and some of the Southern states, led by Virginia, which had also been victims of armed assault.

The fact that America’s foremost military figure, George Washington, strongly supported independence also played a crucial role in Virginia’s stance.

The mid-Atlantic states were more divided, especially the crucially important Pennsylvania and New York.

There had been a national mobilization for independence underway, explicitly, since early 1776. One of Franklin’s many imported revolutionaries, Thomas Paine, had electrified the nation with his *Common Sense* pamphlet, which was published in January, and which set forth unequivocal arguments for separation from Great Britain. Estimates of the 90-page pamphlet’s circulation range from 120,000 to 500,000, within a population estimated to have been 2.5 million (including slaves).

Over the course of that six month period, and even before, all of the colonies had undergone some sort of popular upheaval in their governments, with Crown governors ousted or ignored, and legislative bodies replaced or nullified. Local political associations, such as Committees of Safety, sprang up around local leaders, in a continuation of the process of the Committees of Correspondence which had formed in the early 1770s. Thousands of patriots participated, discussing political ideas as well as mobilizing support against political, and physical, atrocities.

It was this political infrastructure that the Revolutionary leaders set out to mobilize when the Congress set the deadline of July 1 for reconsidering Richard Henry Lee’s resolution of independence. In some of the originally resisting states the conversion to support was easy; in others it was not.

For example, in New Jersey, the legislature decided on June 15 to arrest Royal Governor William Franklin, and to order their delegates to the Congress to vote for independence. In Maryland, pro-independence leaders, led by Samuel Chase, expelled their proprietary governor, and called on the counties to hold emergency conventions on the question—with the result that they voted for independence, and overrode the Provincial Convention in an emergency session June 28.

In the cases of Pennsylvania and New York, however, the fight was more difficult. In divided Pennsylvania, conventions in every county elected a new statewide body which declared for independence. Militia battalions (Pennsylvania had already raised eight rifle companies for the Continental Army) raised the cry for independence, calling on the formal legislature to be overridden. While Continental Congress delegates Ben Franklin, James

Wilson, and John Morton were in favor of independence, the other four delegates were not. Yet, delegates Robert Morris and John Dickinson decided to respect the popular will insofar as they would not vote against it; their abstention permitted Pennsylvania to vote in favor.

In New York, the “General Committee of Mechanicks, in union,” among others, urged the state’s delegates to the Continental Congress to vote for independence.

Consent of the Governed

When the Congress once again took up the issue on July 2, the leadership engaged in a full nine hours of debate. Leading the forces for independence was John Adams, who had long advocated separation, and was intimately involved in the organization of the colonies for war. Leading the other side was Pennsylvania’s John Dickinson, who argued at length that a Declaration of Independence would be “to brave the storm in a skiff made of paper.” Even at the end of the discussion, four states were still not on board—New York, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Delaware.

But, when matters came to a vote again on July 2, every state but Pennsylvania had gotten the message from the people, to support the national call for independence. A decision by two Pennsylvania delegates to abstain led to the vote going through, 12 for, 1 abstention (New York), none opposed. John Adams accurately described the process in a letter to his wife:

“Time has been given for the whole people maturely to consider the great question of independence, and to ripen their judgment, dissipate their fears, and allure their hopes, by discussing it in newspapers and pamphlets, by debating it in assemblies, conventions, committee of safety and inspection, in town and county meetings, as well as in private conversation, so that the whole people, in every colony of the thirteen, have now adopted it as their own act.”

Or, to put it the way Lyndon LaRouche has done recently, the Revolutionary leadership of the nation had mobilized the people to give their consent to the action that *had* to be taken, for the nation to survive. The principles outlined in the formal Declaration of Independence, which followed and was voted up July 4, had already been put into effect. To secure their God-given rights to “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,” a government had been instituted “deriving [its] just Powers from the Consent of the Governed.”

To re-instill this character in our government today,

requires an equally urgent mobilization to that which those patriots of 1776 carried out, starting with the restoration of Glass-Steagall. Rest assured, the consequences for our survival, and that of the world as a whole, are just as great.