

# A Hanging Affair

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America's Declaration of Independence was not signed on July 4, 1776, nor was independence voted on July 4. Rather, on July 4, the Continental Congress finished editing Thomas Jefferson's draft of the Declaration. The Congress had approved independence in principle two days earlier.

The delegates to the Second Continental Congress had gathered at Pennsylvania State House in Philadelphia. They well understood the personal danger in which they had placed themselves. As New Jersey's Abraham Clark wrote on July 2: "Let us prepare for the worst, we can Die but once."

Massachusetts' John Adams was always a realist about the difficult struggles ahead of America – with or without a Declaration of Independence. As Congress debated independence, its foremost advocate wrote on July 1 that he did not expect "this declaration will ward off calamities from this country."

Adams prophesied: "A bloody conflict we are destined to endure. This has been my opinion from the beginning. You will certainly remember my declared opinion was, at the first Congress, when we found that we could not agree upon an immediate non-exportation, that the contest would not be settled without bloodshed; and that if hostilities should once commence, they would terminate in an incurable animosity between the two countries."

"Every political event since the nineteenth of April, 1775, has confirmed me in this opinion," wrote Adams to a Maryland colleague. "If you imagine that I flatter myself with happiness and halcyon days after a separation from Great Britain, you are mistaken again. I do not expect that our new government will be so quiet as I could wish, nor that happy harmony, confidence and affection between the colonies, that every good American ought to study, labor, and pray for, for a long time. But freedom is a counterbalance for poverty, discord and war and more."

Reality was also setting in on the new country. Historian John C. Miller wrote: "With the Declaration of Independence, Americans put an end to the anomaly of waging war against a sovereign to whom they professed allegiance and against a country they called 'mother.'"

It would be another month until the engrossed copy of the Declaration would be ready for signing. Benjamin Franklin as usual had a saying to accompany the occasion: "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately."

Franklin told Elbridge Gerry, a delegate from Massachusetts: “I shall have a great advantage over you, Mr. Gerry, when we are all hung for what we are now doing. From the size and weight of body I shall die in a few minutes, but from the lightness of your body, you will dance in the air an hour or two before you are dead.”

The implications of the Declaration of Independence were not lost on General George Washington. Toward the end of August, Washington wrote to the Continental Army: “The hour is fast approaching, on which the Honor and Success of this army, and the safety of our bleeding Country depend. Remember officers and Soldiers, that you are Freeman, fight for the blessings of Liberty – that slavery will be your portion, and that of your posterity, if you do not acquit yourselves like men.”

Indeed, the last half of 1776 would involve a series of bloody disasters for the American revolutionaries – reversed only by the brilliant victories at Trenton and Princeton. Independence was costly. Victory and peace would not come until 1783. The cost of lives and treasure had been high. Freedom has its price.