

Edited by committee: The Declaration of Independence

By Lewis E. Lehrman

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Thomas Jefferson was a writer, not a speechmaker. Even his most memorable public address -- his first presidential inaugural in 1801 -- was delivered in barely audible tones. In June 1776, the [Second Continental Congress](#) assigned a five-member committee to prepare the Declaration of Independence. [John Adams](#) of Massachusetts decided that Jefferson of Virginia should compose the draft document.

Jefferson's heart was elsewhere. He yearned to be in Richmond working on a new constitution for Virginia. Still, he secluded himself in his two-room apartment in Philadelphia to write the first draft of the Declaration. His committee colleagues -- particularly Adams and [Benjamin Franklin](#) -- made some changes before they presented the document to the full Congress.

On July 1, debate on independence began under the leadership of the indomitable Adams, who had been the restless engine of independence, relentlessly driving the debate forward in the spring and early summer of 1776. Five decades later, Jefferson would give Adams credit for his leadership: "This, however, I will say for Mr. Adams, that he supported the Declaration with zeal and ability, fighting fearlessly for every word of it."

The vote on independence was delayed by opposition or neutrality from three states -- Delaware, Pennsylvania and South Carolina. After the arrival from Delaware of the sick and rain-drenched [Caesar Rodney](#), a favorable vote was taken on July 2. Only New York did not support the resolution because of a delay in its instructions.

In a letter to his wife on July 3, Adams recorded the historic act: "Yesterday, the greatest Question was decided, which ever was debated in America, and a greater perhaps, never was or will be decided among Men. A Resolution was passed without one dissenting Colony `that these united Colonies, are, and of right ought to be free and independent States."

Debate shifted to the precise wording of the Declaration. Jefferson himself stayed quiet during the discussions. "As to myself, I thought it a duty to be, on that occasion, a passive auditor of the opinions of others, more impartial judges than I could be, of its merits or

demerits." Seated next to Franklin, Jefferson writhed silently as Congress debated his words and changed his phrasing. From previous experience, the older and wiser Franklin tried to comfort Jefferson: "I have made it a rule whenever in my power, to avoid becoming the draftsman of papers to be reviewed by a public body."

Jefferson was comforted by Franklin but not by Congress' actions. Nevertheless, the finished document was that rare event when a group actually improved on a draft document written by an individual. Congress generally tightened and strengthened Jefferson's language. His Virginia colleague, [Richard Henry Lee](#), was also chagrined by the alterations made by Congress, but noted "the Thing is in its nature so good, that no Cookery can spoil the Dish for the Palates of Freemen." Nevertheless, according to historian [Walter A. McDougall](#), "Jefferson maintained his text was `mangled' and went into a funk that lasted all summer."

The debate, which Adams derided as an "an idle Mispence of Time," came to an end on a hot, humid July 4. To alleviate the oppressive heat that day, windows of the [State House](#) were opened. The final vote was hastened by an invasion of horseflies from a nearby stable. Their aggressive behavior caused the delegates to vote, adjourn, and quickly retreat from Independence Hall.

As [Abraham Lincoln](#) would later say of this event: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." That is, the United States of America was inaugurated by the Declaration of Independence in 1776 not by the new Constitution in 1789.

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