

THE GREATEST REVOLUTION (1765–1783)

Excerpt from Chapter 3 of *America: The Last Best Hope, Volume I*

THE SHOT HEARD “ROUND THE WORLD”

In Boston, the British general Thomas Gage had been named royal governor. He was determined not to let colonists arm. On the night of 18 April 1775, he ordered his troops to seize the militia’s military stores at Concord and to arrest Patriot leaders Samuel Adams and John Hancock.

Hoping to catch the colonists unaware, Gage’s troops moved out of their barracks by night, by boat. But there was a spy under Gage’s roof. The general’s American wife, Margaret, got word to Dr. Warren who passed it on to Paul Revere.⁶⁶

Revere had arranged a signal—two lanterns—to be placed in the tower of Old North Church to let the Patriots know the regulars were moving out. Revere himself was rowed past HMS *Somerset*, a British warship. The low hanging moon behind Boston’s buildings cast a shadow that concealed Revere’s movements.⁶⁷ Once mounted on horseback, Revere and William Dawes managed to evade British patrols and brought the warning to Lexington. There at the home of Reverend Jonas Clarke, where the Patriot leaders were sleeping, Revere was challenged by Sergeant William Munroe. Munroe shushed him for making too much noise. “Noise!” Revere shouted, “You’ll have noise enough before long. The regulars are coming out!” (Revere would only have confused colonists if he had yelled: “The British are coming,” since Massachusetts people still thought of themselves as British.)⁶⁸

At five o’clock the next morning, the Minutemen (so called because they could be ready for military duty in a minute) were drawn up on the village green in Lexington as the British regulars came marching up. Captain Jonas Parker

ordered the Minutemen to stand their ground. “Don’t fire unless fired upon,” he said, “but if they mean to have a war, let it begin here!”⁶⁹ British Major of Marines John Pitcairn ordered the Americans to lay down their arms. “You damned rebels, disperse!” he cried.⁷⁰ The Americans were beginning to disperse when a shot rang out. In a flash, there were competing volleys that left eight Americans dead in the spring sunlight. Three British soldiers were wounded.⁷¹ In vain, Major Pitcairn had tried to stop his men from shooting.

The British column marched on to Concord, where another force of colonials met them. There the British destroyed militia stores and turned back toward Boston, mission accomplished. The road back became a highway of death, with Minutemen firing from behind walls and trees. Many of the regulars, who had been marching for more than twenty-four hours carrying heavy packs on their backs, fell out, exhausted. By the time they got back to Boston, they had lost 73 dead, 174 wounded, and 26 missing. The Americans suffered 49 dead, 39 wounded, and 5 taken prisoner.⁷² These were little more than skirmishes as the world measures warfare, but the American farmers had indeed “fired the shot heard ’round the world.”

Less than a month later, the second Continental Congress assembled in Philadelphia. One of its first acts was to authorize a Continental Army. This army pledged its loyalty to Congress, and not to the individual colonies, as was the practice in the militia.⁷³ John Adams and other Massachusetts men worried that Boston might be abandoned by other colonies. To prevent this from ever happening, Adams nominated Colonel George Washington of Virginia to command all American forces, with the rank of general. Congress knew it needed a leader it could trust. The delegates recalled Oliver Cromwell, who had fought King Charles I in the name of Parliament only to wind up using the force he had been given to purge Parliament itself.⁷⁴ George Washington not only had more military experience than any other colonist, he had been a reliable member of the House of Burgesses since 1759. Washington, resplendent in his full dress military uniform, humbly accepted Congress’s call and left immediately for embattled Boston. Congress also named as postmaster general Benjamin Franklin, recently returned from London.⁷⁵

En route to Boston, Washington received word of a battle that was no skirmish. Stung by his earlier losses to ragtag colonials, General Gage was determined

to overawe the rebels by a show of military force in clear view of all of Boston. He ordered General William Howe to take Bunker Hill.* On 17 June 1775, Howe led his disciplined regulars up the slope, vowing never to order them to go where he was unwilling to lead. When they neared the American lines, they were cut down by a fierce musket volley. “Don’t fire until you see the whites of their eyes,” was the order given all along the line of determined American defenders.

In his blood-spattered white silk breeches, General Howe rallied his men and finally drove the Americans off the hill. British losses—including Major Pitcairn—were tremendous—nearly 1,000 out of 2,000 in action.⁷⁶ American losses were far fewer—about 440 out of 3,200 defenders. Among the Patriot dead, though, was the revered Dr. Joseph Warren. Although the Americans were driven back, they had inflicted major casualties on the most professional and well-trained army in the world, an impossible accomplishment that imbued them with a swelling sense of confidence and pride.

When Washington arrived a week later to take command of American forces surrounding Boston, he had another advantage. He had amassed considerable artillery. These cannon had been captured from the British at Fort Ticonderoga in upper New York. Colonel Ethan Allen, supported by his Vermont “Green Mountain Boys” and ably aided by the courageous Benedict Arnold, had taken the defenders by surprise. Allen demanded surrender from the startled British commander “in the name of the great Jehovah and the Continental Congress.” A young Boston bookseller, the energetic, three hundred-pound Henry Knox, was put in charge of the cannon, dragging them across mountains and valleys to the aid of Boston Patriots. His patriotism and zeal impressed General Washington.⁷⁷ With the addition of the captured artillery, Washington was able to force the evacuation of the British from Boston. This was another great boost to American morale.** And it helped establish the Continental Army as an effective force.

Congress sent General Richard Montgomery and Benedict Arnold to take on the British in Canada in the summer of 1775. Montgomery succeeded in taking Montreal, but was stopped in Quebec City at year’s end, where he lost his life. The

*A historical misnomer, the battle was actually fought on nearby Breed’s Hill.

**Evacuation Day, 17 March 1776, is commemorated in Boston to this day. And it does not hurt that Beantown revelers can mix their celebrations with St. Patrick’s Day festivities!

ragged American force soon bogged down and was driven out. Arnold was wounded, but won praise for bringing order to the retreat.

Against this background, Washington's actions in camp have special significance. In November 1775, he learned that New England soldiers were preparing their annual celebration of Pope's Day, during which effigies of the pope were burned to the amusement of their Protestant neighbors. New England had been celebrating this holiday for more than a century. Washington issued an order sternly forbidding this "ridiculous and childish" display. He explained that the aid of French Catholics in Canada and across the sea was important to the American cause. He also wanted help from Catholics throughout the colonies. Washington's firmness ended a New England tradition and marked a major step forward in religious tolerance and national unity.

Congress needed help. Without Canada's support, Congress felt that the British would always threaten invasion from the north. So in March 1776 they named a diplomatic delegation including Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Chase of Maryland, and Charles and John Carroll, two prominent Catholic Patriots from Maryland (the Carrolls were cousins; John was a priest).

Franklin, who had just turned seventy, thought the northern trip might kill him, but he actually weathered the strain better than some of the younger men.⁷⁸ The delegation's reception in Canada was not favorable, however. French Canadians appreciated the tolerance of their language and religion shown by King George's Parliament—and they resented the anti-Catholicism that they sensed was a part of some of the colonial petitions and pamphlets.

While Franklin and his compatriots were in Canada, events were moving quickly in America. Thomas Paine, whom Franklin had met in London and given letters of recommendation just two years previously, came out with the most influential pamphlet of all: *Common Sense*. Published in January 1776, and selling for a mere eighteen pence, *Common Sense* sold more than 150,000 copies. Americans had heard the case for their rights put with great legal expertise and scholarship from men such as John Adams and John Dickinson, but Paine had a flair for colorful writing and he surely had the common touch. As a recent immigrant from England, his fierce writing against this king—and *against all kings*—struck a responsive chord. As soon as it came off the presses, New Hampshire delegate Josiah

Bartlett noted, *Common Sense* was “greedily bought up and read by all ranks of people.”⁷⁹ John Adams was probably more influential than any other American in moving Congress, but it was Paine who moved the people.⁸⁰ Of all the arguments Paine made, his charges against the king were most devastating. He attacked the pretended “FATHER OF HIS PEOPLE [who] can unfeelingly hear of their slaughter, and composedly sleep with their blood upon his soul.”⁸¹

Paine knew the religious beliefs of his readers. He used the Bible to hammer home his points: “[T]he children of Israel in their request for a king urged this plea, ‘that he may judge us, and go out before us and fight our battles.’ But in countries where he is neither a judge nor a general, as in England, a man would be puzzled to know what is his business.”⁸² This was amazingly bold. Paine might have been making a personal appeal with this powerful and emotional plea: “O! ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose not only the tyranny, but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been haunted round the globe. Asia, and Africa, have long expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. [America] receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.”⁸³*

The Americans, recalling how grasping Parliament had been for their taxes, were shocked to see Lord North’s ministry hiring German and Scottish mercenaries to make war on them (although the *need* to do so betrayed the war’s deep unpopularity in Britain). News that the king would send to America twelve thousand *Hessian* troops (hired from the German state of Hesse) reached America in May.⁸⁴ Every American coffin seemed to bring death, as well, to the idea of reconciliation with England.

In addition to their increasing bitterness caused by British warfare against their colonies, Americans were facing the practical problem that no European state would support them while they were still formally members of the British Empire. They were still rebels. And there was a danger to the French, the Dutch, and the Spanish that the Americans might make peace with the mother country and leave them to fight a vengeful England by themselves. Independence would help Americans gain European recognition and practical help.

*What better example of “American exceptionalism” can we find?

Finally, on 7 June 1776, Virginia's Richard Henry Lee introduced before Congress his motion "that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, Free and Independent States."⁸⁵ Congress then named a committee to draft a declaration of causes for independence: John Adams (Massachusetts), Benjamin Franklin (Pennsylvania), Thomas Jefferson (Virginia), Robert Livingston (New York), and Roger Sherman (Connecticut). Adams was keenly aware that there were four Northerners and only one Southerner on the drafting committee.

Once again, Adams made a fateful decision. He was desperate to have Virginia's support. He knew that Virginia led the South. And with Virginia's help, Massachusetts would never have to stand alone. Again, he opted for a Virginian to take the lead for the sake of national unity. He nominated Jefferson to draft the Declaration of Independence. Later, Adams would recall the reasons why he did so:

1. That [Jefferson] was a Virginian and I a Massachusettensian. 2. That he was a southern Man and I a northern one. 3. That I had become so obnoxious for my early and constant Zeal in promoting [Independence] that any [draft] of mine would undergo more severe Scrutiny and Criticism in Congress than one of his composition. 4thly and lastly that would be reason enough if there were no other, I had a great Opinion of the Elegance of his pen and none at all of my own. . . . He accordingly took the Minutes and in a day or two produced to me his [draft].⁸⁶

In this passage—wordy, stuffy, but brutally honest—we see the best of John Adams. He was acutely conscious of his own role, undeniably ambitious to make his mark, but he constantly put his country first. Seldom could such a world-changing event be described in such spare terms—"in a day or two produced to me his draft."

And what a draft! Jefferson's "peculiar felicity of expression" (another Adams phrase) gave America a founding document that surpasses any other in the world for beauty, logic, and inspirational power. About the *philosophy* of the Declaration of Independence, there was no debate in Congress. It was what the Founders believed. Jefferson's immortal words were conventional wisdom of the time.⁸⁷ And the words of the Declaration became the greatest, most consequential statement of political philosophy of all time:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness—That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. . . .⁸⁸

This is America's political creed in a nutshell. Yes, they meant *all* men, regardless of race, religion, sex, or riches. They imposed no religious test for adherence to these ideals except belief in a creator God who *endows* us with our inalienable rights. They defined the purpose of all government. And they laid down the requirement that governments must rule by consent if they were to rule with justice at all. We will return to the philosophy of this Declaration in future chapters. Suffice for now, the Founders did not immediately free the slaves, give votes to their wives, or invite the Indian tribes to sign the Declaration with them. But we must realize that all the greatest advocates for human equality in America—Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Suffragettes, Martin Luther King Jr.—pointed to this passage in the Declaration to give force to their demands for justice.

The philosophical sentiment was near universal, but the practical matter of voting for independence was less so. The final tally was close. Congress had to wait for uninstructed delegates to return to Philadelphia. Caesar Rodney, suffering from asthma and cancer, rode eighty miles from his Delaware home to the sweltering capital on the night of 1 July 1776 in order to break a tie in his state's delegation and carry the motion for independence.

The men who signed the Declaration knew this was no casual debating society resolution. They acknowledged this as they pledged “our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor” to support independence. When John Hancock summoned the delegates to sign the parchment “fair” copy of the Declaration, he wrote his own signature in large, bold strokes so that King George (legend has it) could read his name without his glasses.

He urged them to make it unanimous. “There must be no pulling different ways,” he said. “We must all hang together.” To that, Franklin, ever the wit, reportedly responded: “Yes, we must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly, we shall all hang separately.”⁸⁹ Though none of the signers was hanged, seventeen served in

the military, and five were captured by the British during the war. Richard Stockton, a New Jersey signer, never recovered from slow torture during captivity and died in 1781.⁹⁰

A CONTINENTAL WAR

While Congress made its fateful move, General Washington was facing the danger of entrapment by the British army in New York. It was there that he had the Declaration of Independence read to his troops. There, the famous statue of George III was pulled down and its lead melted into bullets. Washington had been widely acclaimed when the British withdrew from Boston in March, but a string of defeats followed. Boston was to be his last victory for almost a year. Washington knew that no one who did not control the sea could hold waterborne Manhattan Island. Congress did not want to abandon the new nation's second largest city to the enemy.

Colonel John Glover's Marblehead men from Massachusetts were sailors and fishermen, more at home on the water than on dry land.⁹¹ The night of 29 August 1776, their seagoing ways would prove vital to the Patriot cause.

The Continental Army had initially held firm under murderous British fire on Long Island, but the redcoats marched through the night, in perfect military order, to take the Americans by surprise.⁹² Hessian soldiers took no prisoners. They stabbed the surrendering Americans with their bayonets, the blades of which were seventeen inches long.

Washington knew he had to withdraw from Brooklyn on Long Island and escape with his army to Manhattan. Five British warships were prepared to sail up the East River to block Washington's retreat, but the wind "miraculously" shifted and the British squadron was unable to come upriver.⁹³ Then, when Washington ordered Glover's Marblehead men to man the boats, he evacuated the bulk of the army from Brooklyn. Only a portion of the army was able to escape under the cover of darkness the night of August 29, but then a thick fog rolled in to hide the action as the remainder of the army entered the boats. One Connecticut officer claimed he made eleven crossings of the East River that night.⁹⁴ Author David McCullough called that covering fog incredible—an unlikely turn of fate. Believers in Providence called it the Hand of God.*⁹⁵

Washington felt the disappointment personally when his men ran before the advancing Hessians and Scots Highlanders. In anguish, he threw his hat to the ground and cried out: “Are these the men with whom I am to defend America?”⁹⁶ But he could also point with pride at troops who stood their ground and did their duty, as when 250 Marylanders attacked General Cornwallis’s forces to cover the army’s retreat, risking death or capture. “Good God, what brave fellows I must lose this day,” Washington said. He then gave Maryland troops the name by which the state is known to this day—The Old Line.

The city could not be held. In September, as Washington withdrew to Harlem Heights, the city of New York caught fire. No one knows how it started. Loyalists—called Tories—who supported the Crown naturally blamed the rebels. Angered, British General William Howe seized a young American officer whom he accused of spying for Washington. Nathan Hale, of Connecticut, was about twenty-four. Howe gave him no trial. Hale was in civilian clothes, so he was treated as a spy. Shocking Americans, Howe denied the young man’s last request for a pastor, or even a Bible. As Howe prepared to hang him, the fearless Patriot recited words from the popular play *Cato*:

**How beautiful is death, when earned by virtue!
Who would not be that youth? What pity is it
That we can die but once to serve our country.**⁹⁷

The quote has come down to us, in paraphrase, as “I regret I have but one life to give for my country.” The Revolution had its first martyr.

Despite failure of his diplomatic mission to Canada, Benjamin Franklin agreed to go to France in the fall of 1776 to plead the American cause. Franklin embarked on a ship named *Reprisal*. It was a very rough crossing, with many seasick. It was also dangerous, too, as Franklin was the most recognizable of all the rebels and the British still held mastery of the seas. Even when he disembarked in France, he found himself on a country road where a gang of thieves had only recently mur-

*When the British Expeditionary Force was similarly evacuated from Dunkirk in 1940, thus saving England and the cause of freedom from the Nazi menace, Winston Churchill called it “a miracle of deliverance.”

dered a party of twelve travelers. Happily, Franklin entered Paris safely in December 1776.⁹⁸

Throughout that fall, General Howe and his lieutenant, Lord Cornwallis, pushed Washington south through New Jersey. The military position was helped when Benedict Arnold delayed a British thrust down from Canada and Patriots defending Charleston, South Carolina, repelled a British assault. Although Washington had kept his army together and with it the Revolution, retreat was still dispiriting. Throughout New Jersey, farmers were tacking red ribbons to their doors to show sympathy with the king. By December 1776, with enlistments running out for many militia forces, Washington's Continental Army was dwindling.

At Christmastime, most armies went into winter quarters. Washington had retreated across the Delaware River into Pennsylvania, chopping down bridges and taking boats with him. Washington knew that as soon as the river froze solid, Lord Cornwallis's superior numbers could cross over on the ice. Washington was running out of money and supplies. He appealed to Pennsylvania's master of finance, Robert Morris, to raise hard cash to pay bonuses to his soldiers. Only when they had been paid did some of his ragged, starving soldiers agree to extend their enlistments into the new year.

So, on Christmas night, in foul weather, General Washington prepared a sudden assault on Trenton, New Jersey. Once again, Washington relied on Colonel John Glover's seasoned Marblehead, Massachusetts, troops. They were all excellent sailors and boat handlers. They had already saved the Continental Army by ferrying it from Brooklyn to Manhattan. Now, Glover's men carried the entire army—with horses and cannon—across the ice-choked Delaware. The little band of ragged men took the Hessian defenders by surprise. In a short, sharp action, Washington's men killed the Hessian commander, Colonel Johann Rall, and took nearly a thousand prisoners. Only two Americans were wounded, one of them Lieutenant James Monroe, the future president. Captain Alexander Hamilton's cannon, whose touch holes had been kept dry on the boat trip over, were used to devastating effect. Another in the boats that night was young John Marshall, the future chief justice of the United States. America in 1776 could have fielded an army of 280,000 men,⁹⁹ but that Christmas night, just 2,400 held the fate of a continent in their hands.

Washington's attack had been a great success. He quickly put into practice the "policy of humanity" that John Adams and others in Congress had urged upon him. Instead of bayoneting the surrendering Hessians—as the Hessians had done to Americans who gave up on Long Island—Washington treated them with compassion. As a result of this enlightened policy, thousands of Hessian Germans would later settle in the backcountry of Pennsylvania and Virginia.

American Patriots rejoiced with the retaking of Trenton and were overjoyed when, just two weeks later, Washington followed up his victory with another successful attack on Princeton. In this battle, Washington galloped directly into the smoke of British cannon fire. One of his young aides, Colonel John Fitzgerald, covered his eyes with his hat, certain the commander in chief would be killed. Washington came riding out of the smoke, eyes ablaze with victory. "Thank God your Excellency is safe," Fitzgerald cried out, offering his hand. Washington grasped it with enthusiasm, perhaps realizing how close to death he had come. "It's a fine fox chase, my boys," Washington cried, as his men sent the British defenders of Princeton into headlong retreat.¹⁰⁰

Independence did not bring French help immediately, at least not openly. But one man was to be a harbinger of things to come. In July 1777, a tall, nineteen-year-old French aristocrat named Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, better known to history as the Marquis de Lafayette, arrived in Philadelphia. Congress was embarrassed when the eager young nobleman—who had already seen plenty of military action—showed up to present his credentials from the American minister in Paris, Silas Deane. They had no money to pay him, members explained, and Deane had exceeded his authority in promising commissions. Lafayette could not return home. He had defied King Louis XVI in sailing to America. Instead, he offered to serve *without pay* as a volunteer in the ranks.¹⁰¹ By August, he was riding by Washington's side as a major general—at age twenty! Lafayette would soon see action in September 1777, at the Battle of Brandywine in Pennsylvania. There, he was wounded as he gallantly led American troops. Although Washington's forces fought bravely, they lost and the road to Philadelphia lay open to the British.

Washington was hundreds of miles away when America's greatest military victory was achieved. Americans waited expectantly as Patriot forces faced British General John Burgoyne at Saratoga, New York, in October 1777. Burgoyne,

“Gentleman Johnny” to London society, was a member of Parliament, a playwright, and flamboyant figure. He had bet parliamentary leader Charles James Fox a substantial wager that he would come home from America victorious by Christmas Day 1777. His task was to come down from Canada and link up with General Howe, leading a British force north from New York. But Howe was headed for Philadelphia—trying to catch Washington. Burgoyne let it be known his Indian soldiers had permission to scalp any British deserters. Initially crowned with success, Burgoyne had retaken Fort Ticonderoga and had burned the fine Albany home of American General Philip Schuyler.¹⁰²

But Burgoyne’s army moved too slowly—burdened by a huge baggage train—and he was trapped by the Americans. The sound of turkey gobble calls—Americans signaling each other before the attack—spooked the British troops. Gunfire erupted, and Dan Morgan’s riflemen, who could drop a redcoat a mile away, quickly cut down Burgoyne’s men.¹⁰³

Surrendering his entire force of more than six thousand at Saratoga on 17 October 1777, Burgoyne was amazed by the merciful response he received from General Schuyler. “Is it to *me*, who have done you so much injury, that you show so much kindness?”¹⁰⁴

Gentleman Johnny had lost his big wager. Fox, who predicted his friend would return a prisoner on parole, had won.¹⁰⁵ Saratoga was America’s greatest victory to this point. American General Horatio Gates was quick to claim the victor’s laurels, but as before, much of the credit for victory goes to General Benedict Arnold. Although seriously wounded, Arnold had nonetheless rallied American soldiers for action. The French foreign minister, Charles Gravier, the Comte de Vergennes, would see in Saratoga evidence of the Americans’ ability to outlast the English.

General Washington’s position was not improved as he moved into winter quarters at Valley Forge. With General Howe’s British forces firmly in control of Philadelphia, Washington could only watch and wait. This was the worst winter of the war. Once again, he desperately appealed to Congress for aid. He wrote that you could trace his men’s tracks by the bloody footprints in the snow. When he said his men were naked and starving, that was not an exaggeration. Some Continental soldiers had to borrow pants just to go out to stand watch.

Fortunately, another foreign addition to America’s army arrived on the scene

at this moment. A Prussian officer, Baron von Steuben, had met Benjamin Franklin in Paris and was recommended to Congress. Von Steuben, who spoke no English, was a colorful figure who had inflated his credentials—an eighteenth-century résumé padder. Still, he knew the art of drill, and he knew the importance of discipline and training to turn a rabble into a fighting force. Von Steuben began whipping the ragged, dispirited men of Valley Forge into shape. He comically employed an interpreter to translate his French and German curses into English the men could understand. (Every drill instructor in the American military since is a spiritual descendant of the outlandish Prussian.)

General Anthony Wayne, a thirty-two-year-old Pennsylvania surveyor and legislator, needed no translator. He was known for his violent oaths. One lieutenant complained that Wayne had “damned all our souls to hell” when he found no sentry posted outside an American camp.¹⁰⁶ Washington was known to hate profanity,¹⁰⁷ still Washington wisely chose Anthony Wayne to help straighten out the problems of supply. Without “Mad Anthony” Wayne’s raids on Tory farms, the army might have starved.