

JEFFERSON'S PROSE POEM: THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

By S. K. PADOVER

"Jefferson's Declaration of Independence . . . is not a thesis for philosophers, but a whip for tyrants."—WOODROW WILSON, April 13, 1911.

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, probably the most inspiring public statement ever penned on American soil, did not leap into being suddenly, as some imagine, nor did it meet with instant approval. On the contrary, its writing and final acceptance represented enormous labors of composition and persuasion. It was the brain child of one of America's great writers, who chose and chiseled his words with the conscious deliberateness of a Shakespeare. Into it the thirty-three-year-old Thomas Jefferson poured all the fire that was in him, his passionate faith in the goodness of man, his enthusiasm for science and progress, his indestructible love of justice and tolerance, his relentless hatred of cruelty and injustice.

For seventeen days the tall, lean, red-headed Virginian struggled over the Declaration, and when he got through he had a document of

such beauty that it has haunted mankind ever since. Although a state paper, it should really be read *as poetry*. When it is broken into free verse, the result is eloquent.

The background of the Declaration is known to every schoolboy. On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee, Jefferson's fellow deputy from Virginia, rose in Congress and made the startling proposal that "these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, Free and Independent States." This meant that the Colonies were ready to take the revolutionary step of separating from England. Congress appointed a committee of five, to draw up a declaration explaining the "causes which impelled us to this mighty resolution." The committee (John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston and Thomas Jefferson) met and agreed that Jefferson, the youngest among them and reputed to wield a facile

pen, should do the actual writing.

When he went to his parlor on the second floor of the bricklayer's house on Market Street in Philadelphia to write a draft, he did not feel that he was doing anything extraordinary nor did he suspect that he was toying with immortality. In his Autobiography he says laconically: "The committee for drawing the Declaration of Independence, desired me to do it. It was accordingly done." The inspiration behind his quill was not personal. He felt himself writing words that were, or should have been, common property. Only the composition was his; the sentiments belonged to mankind. He always insisted that the Declaration of Independence merely gave voice to what his compatriots felt. He was merely the instrument, not the creator. Half a century after writing the Declaration he said: "Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind."

But the words had wings and the phrases a haunting beauty.

When in the Course of human events
it becomes necessary for one people
to dissolve the political bonds
which have connected them with
another,
and 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,
a decent respect to the opinions of
mankind requires
that they should declare the causes
which impel them to the Separation.

Thus far Jefferson was on familiar ground. Those who knew their Locke and their Milton — and what gentleman did not? — would not quarrel with the principle of voluntary dissolution of political bonds. Few lawyers in America at this time disbelieved in the theory of the social compact. It was the dominant doctrine of the middle class. Moreover, it was the experience of Americans on this new continent.

Jefferson's second sentence was dynamite.

We hold these truths
to be self-evident,
that all men are created equal,
that they are endowed by their Creator
with inherent and inalienable Rights,
that among these
are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of
Happiness.

Congress later struck out "inherent and," substituting "certain." The last three words are a declaration of faith, Jefferson's undying contribution to American life. The assertion that the "pursuit of happiness" was one of the objects for which governments ex-

It, was something entirely new in the history of political doctrine. Ordinarily the trinity of political values included life, liberty and property. By substituting the "pursuit of happiness" for "property," Jefferson broke with the traditional concept and laid the foundation for a unique commonwealth of justice and freedom and security which make for happiness).

II

Having affirmed a man's right to happiness, Jefferson then asserted the hardly less revolutionary doctrine of the right to self-government and to revolution.

That to secure these rights,
Governments are instituted among
Men,
deriving their just powers
from the consent of the governed;
that whenever any Form of Govern-
ment
becomes destructive of these ends,
it is the right of the People
to alter or to abolish it,
and to institute
new Government,
laying its foundation on such principles,
and organizing its powers in such form,
as to them shall seem most likely to
effect
their Safety and Happiness.

From these general principles Jefferson leaped to specific charges. With the cleverness of a subtle manipulator of public opinion, he

personalized the enemy and exposed him to devastating attack. Instead of accusing the British nation, Jefferson singled out George III as the *diabolus ex machina* and delivered him short, relentless jabs:

He has refused —
He has forbidden —
He has called together —
He has dissolved —
He has endeavored —
He has made —
He has erected —
He has kept —
He has affected —
He has combined —
He has plundered —
He has constrained —
He has incited —.

Then, without transition, Jefferson aimed a blow at the hapless George III that came close to being below the belt. The owner of more than two hundred slaves suddenly put the onus of slavery and the responsibility for its horrors upon the shoulders of the King of England.

He has waged cruel war
against human nature itself,
violating its most sacred rights
of life and liberty
in the persons of a distant people who
never offended him,
captivating and carrying them into
slavery in another hemisphere,
or to incur miserable death in their
transportation thither.
This piratical warfare,
the opprobrium of INFIDEL powers,
is the warfare
of the CHRISTIAN king of Great
Britain.
Determined to keep open a market

where MEN should be bought
and sold,
he has prostituted his negative
for suppressing every legislative attempt
to prohibit or to restrain
this execrable commerce.
And that this assemblage of horrors
might want no fact of distinguished
die,
he is now exciting those very people
to rise in arms among us,
and to purchase
that liberty of which he has deprived
them,
by murdering the people
on whom he also obtruded them:
thus paying off former crimes
committed against the LIBERTIES
of one people,
with crimes
which he urges them to commit
against the LIVES of another.

Congress, however, struck out
the whole passage, probably wisely,
for it was not altogether fair to put
the blame of slavery upon one man,
be he king or planter. In any case,
the Congress did not wish to alien-
ate South Carolina and Georgia,
which were in favor of continuing
the importation of slaves. After
heaping hot coals upon the head of
George III, Jefferson wrote elo-
quent words about the English
people, words that did not taste
sweet.

They too have been deaf
to the voice of justice,
and consanguinity,
and when occasions have been given
them,
by the regular course of their laws,
of removing from their councils

the disturbers of our harmony,
they have,
by their free election,
re-established them in power.
At this very time too,
they are permitting their chief ma-
istrate
to send over
not only soldiers of our common blood
but Scotch and foreign mercenaries
to invade and destroy us.
These facts
have given the last stab
to agonizing affection,
and manly spirits bid us
to renounce forever
these unfeeling brethren.
We must endeavor
to forget our former love for them,
and hold them
as we hold the rest of mankind,
enemies in war,
in peace friends.
We might have been a free and a great
people together;
but a communication of grandeur and
of freedom,
it seems,
is below their dignity.
Be it so,
since they will have it.
The road to happiness and to glory
is open to us too.
We will tread it
apart from them,
and acquiesce in the necessity
which denounces our eternal separation.

Most of this passage was like-
struck out by Congress. The word
sounded too bitter to people who
up till yesterday still considered
themselves Englishmen and had
"lingering affection" for the mother
country. Moreover, the reference
to "Scotch and foreign mercen-
aries" was too invidious in a court

ry where almost 90 per cent of the population was Anglo-Scotch. And he concluded:

We therefore,
the representatives of the United States
of America
in General Congress assembled,
do in the name, and by the authority
of

the good people of these [States
reject and renounce
all allegiance and subjection
to the kings of Great Britain
and all others
who may hereafter claim by, through,
or under them;
we utterly dissolve
all political connection
which may heretofore have subsisted
between us
and the people or parliament
of Great Britain:
and finally we do assert and declare
these Colonies to be free
and independent States,]
and that

as free and independent States,
they have full power
to levy war,
conclude peace,
contract alliances,
establish commerce,
and do all other acts
and things
which independent States may of
right do,
And for the support
of this declaration,
we mutually pledge to each other
our lives,
our fortunes,
and our sacred honor.

The words enclosed in brackets were cut out by Congress and others substituted. The reader should compare this section with any offi-

cially recognized copy of the Declaration.

An interesting sidelight on Jefferson may be gained from the following entries in his notebook during the time he was sculpturing the words of the Declaration of Independence:

June 11	Paid £1.18.2	for window shutter rings
June 18	Paid 7/6	for a nest of trunks
June 19	Paid 6/	for wine
June 20	Paid 5/	for lining a map
June 22	Paid 22/	for pair spiers
June 23	Paid £3.10	Paid Graaf 2 weeks lodging
June 25	Paid 15/	for 2 pair of stockings for Bob
		1/ for a straw hat
June 28	Paid 39/9	for washing in full.

III

When Jefferson finished the draft he presented it separately to Franklin and Adams, the two men whose judgment he most respected. They made a few slight corrections. "Their alterations," Jefferson says, "were two or three only, and merely verbal." Then Jefferson meticulously rewrote the whole draft, including the Franklin-Adams insertions, and presented it to the whole committee. The latter unanimously approved, and on June 29 "A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress As-

sembled" was thrown into the lap of the Congress. This was Jefferson's original title. On July 19 an act of Congress changed it to "The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America."

The sharp-witted lawyers of the Congress fell upon Jefferson's creation with a zest that cut the sensitive author to the quick. For three days they flayed the paper with hatchet and cutlass, hacking away words and phrases as if they were offensive tissue. Jefferson writhed. Out of more than 1800 words, the members of the Congress expunged 460, or about one-fourth of the whole. They altered about two dozen words and made two insertions in the peroration — references to a "supreme judge" and a "divine providence." Jefferson had neglected the deity.

The debate was an agonizing ordeal for Jefferson. He sat still and silent, "a passive auditor," he said, suffering more than his dignity permitted him to show. Burden of the defense lay with the chunky, hard-hitting John Adams, who, in the words of the grateful Jefferson, was "fighting fearlessly for every word." Every word under attack was a ruthless depredation upon the author's creation. Despite his pride, he could not altogether control his emotions. Finally

the seventy-four-year-old Franklin took pity on the sensitive author. The great Doctor leaned over in his genial bulk, and with the humorous wisdom and serene compassion for which he was famous he spoke words of comfort to the unhappy Virginian.

Jefferson tells the delightful story

I was sitting by Dr. Franklin, who perceived that I was not insensible to these mutilations.

"I have made it a rule," said he "whenever in my power, to avoid becoming the draftsman of papers to be reviewed by a public body. I took my lesson from an incident which I will relate to you.

"When I was a journeyman printer, one of my companions, an apprentice hatter, having served out his time, was about to open shop for himself. His first concern was to have a handsome signboard, with a proper inscription. He composed it in these words, *Joseph Thompson, Hatter, makes and sells hats for ready money*, with a figure of a hatter subjoined: but he thought he would submit it to his friends for their amendments.

"The first he showed it to thought the word *Hatter* tautologous, because followed by the words *makes hats*, which show he was a hatter. It was struck out.

"The next observed that the word *makes* might as well be omitted, because his customers would not care who made the hats. If good and to their mind, they would buy, by whomsoever made. He struck it out.

"A third said he thought the words *for ready money* were useless, as it was not the custom of the place to sell on credit. Every one who purchased expected to pay. They were parted with

and the inscription now stood, *John Thompson sells hats.*

"Sells hats!" says his next friend: "Why, nobody will expect you to give them away; what then is the use of that word?" It was stricken out, and *hats* followed it, the rather as there was one painted on the board.

"So the inscription was reduced ultimately to *John Thompson*, with the figure of a hat subjoined."

The hacking which the Declaration underwent did not, miraculously enough, spoil the force of its arguments or the cadence of its phrases. Many felt as did Richard Henry Lee, who told the pleased Jefferson: "The thing is in its nature so good, that no cookery can spoil the Dish for the potatoes of Freemen."

On Monday, July 1, "the thing" was put to a vote. After nine hours of acrimonious debate all the colonies, except Pennsylvania and South Carolina (and partly Delaware), voted in its favor. On the following day the recalcitrant colonies changed their vote, and "there was not a dissenting voice." The Declaration of Independence was approved on July 2. On July 3 the Congress took up Richard Henry Lee's original resolution of June 7 and debated the crucial point that "these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, Free and Independent States."

On that day Jefferson noted that

the temperature was 76° Fahrenheit — not a hot afternoon for Philadelphia in July. On that same day Jefferson spent 103 shillings. He bought a thermometer for £3.15 and "7 pr. women's gloves" for 27 shillings; 1/6 he gave "in charity."

On July 4 the Congress debated all day. It was a comparatively cool day. Jefferson said nothing; he quietly took notes. He was not so absorbed, however, as to neglect to record the temperature in his notebook. He took at least four readings on his new nineteen-dollar thermometer. While the statesmen of the newly-born Nation were arguing heatedly, Jefferson recorded: "July 4th, 6 A.M., 68°; 9 A.M., 72¼°; 1 P.M., 76°; 9 P.M., 73½°."

In the evening the debate was closed and all the members present, except John Dickinson, signed the Declaration of Independence. Many were not present and signed several days later.

To inform the citizens that the Nation was born, the Declaration of Independence was read in the public square (Independence Square) in Philadelphia. Copies were made and published in all the hamlets and settlements throughout the thirteen colonies that had suddenly been declared States.

And so a new Nation was born.

► *A composite picture of what the RAF is doing to Hitler's Reich.*

BOMBS FALL ON GERMANY

By WILLIAM BAYLES

THE damage visited on England from the skies has been extensively reported by foreign correspondents, described by literary men, photographed and filmed for the whole world. But the Nazis have made a deep secret of the devastation wrought on Germany by the Royal Air Force. The impression has thus been created, as Hitler intended, that the aerial duel has been more or less one-sided. In actuality both sides have played the game and the Britons, too, have scored heavily.

The writer has been given access to certain official data and has supplemented it with investigation in other quarters, in an effort to assemble a reasonably full picture of Germany under fire. The results of the inquiry, while admittedly incomplete, leave no doubt that Germany has suffered vast damage. The composite picture is less spectacular than that provided by the bombings of England; but this is chiefly because the British have used their restricted forces — operating at longer and hence less favor-

able ranges — primarily against industrial, communications and other strategic war targets rather than population centers.

As the winter started, the British Prime Minister was able to announce that with the approach of the long nights, ideal for bombing, the Royal Air Force "is at least equal in size and numbers to the Germans." In actual bombing power it now exceeds the *Luftwaffe*, if the heavy raids on England the preceding winter and spring are used as a basis of comparison. The Nazi planes that bombed Coventry and London carried between one and one and a half tons of explosive. In the heaviest of all German raids, on last May 10, an estimated 500 planes participated. But in two successive nights at the beginning of November, over 1000 British aircraft went to Germany. They were not the small machines of last year, carrying a ton of bombs; a larger percentage were huge four-engined Stirlings and Halifaxes with five, six and even seven tons of bombs in their racks. And the bombs have