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Founding Facts vs. Fiction (Part 2)

In Part 1, I showed how July 4th's *Declaration of Independence* (DoI) was not the essential, operative, unique *sine qua non* most believe it to be. Congress already *voted for independence* on July 2, 1776; that we now celebrate "Independence Day" on July 4th rather than July 2nd was simply due to a 1777 oversight.

– *The final DoI was not what Jefferson wrote!*

Adams and Franklin submitted Jefferson's original draft to the Committee of Five with various changes; 47 alterations (including insertion of three paragraphs) were made before presenting it to Congress on June 28th. After voting for independence on July 2nd (New York's assembly didn't give approval to its delegation until the 9th), Congress "refined" the *declaration* (which was merely to be like a judicial *opinion* delivered several days after the actual *judgment* rendered by a court), making 39 more revisions before adopting it July 4th. The "original Rough draught" includes the many corrections, additions, and deletions, mostly done in Jefferson's hand; he later indicated the edits he believed made by Adams and Franklin. But he opposed many of the changes, particularly removal of his criticisms against slavery (mention of that "peculiar institution" threatened to sink southern support, so had to be dropped). Bitterly resenting it the rest of his life, he often quoted from *his* version of the DoI, rather than the "mangled" text! (Various versions and transcripts are at the Library of Congress and LoC website.)

– *The DoI was not signed en masse on July 4th!*

Even many official sites still refer to "the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4th," and incorrectly label the 12' x 18' Trumbull mural, commissioned in 1817 and placed in the Capitol in 1826, as such. John Trumbull – Harvard grad, colonel, aide to General Washington, Ambassador to London (where he studied art under Benjamin West) – did most of the painting's 47 portraits from life over several years in the 1780s; some, having died, he just made up, or went by family descriptions. He even included five who didn't sign (like the Committee's Livingston), and left out 14 who had. He never saw the room as it was in 1776, so his painting shows only how it looked many years later.

Only *one* person signed a handwritten draft (since lost) of the DoI on July 4th: "Signed by Order and in Behalf of the Congress, John Hancock, President." Only his name (and that of Secretary Charles Thomson, who just attested to it) appear on John Dunlap's broadsides, which Congress ordered printed that evening, to be distributed to the states, army, and overseas. Of those first 150-200 printed texts of the DoI, only 25 originals are now known to exist, including part of Washington's. (Copies listing subsequent signers weren't ordered until Jan. 18th, 1777, for fear of reprisals to those "traitors.")

On July 19th, Congress ordered one engrossed (officially inscribed) parchment copy of the DoI, most likely inked by Timothy Matlack, Thomson's assistant. Delegates, including some not voting for its adoption, *began to sign on August 2nd, 1776*; it's likely 50 did that day. Others signed as they could; the 56th didn't until 1781! (Three recanted their signatures under British pressure; I won't honor them by naming here.) *This is the DoI* now encased in the National Archives rotunda.

– *The DoI was mainly a PR piece!* It was a bit of florid polemic to keep or win supporters to the cause of

independence, aimed at swaying domestic and foreign leaders and the general populace – "a candid world." It wasn't addressed to King George, or written to promote religious or political philosophy; any such references were simply part of the common tools of rhetoric of the era (even many of the charges against the King were a bit overblown, melodramatic... and flimsy).

Jefferson originally said "all men are created equal & independant, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent & inalienable"; just as in Mason's earlier, similar phrasing, there's *no* mention of a "Creator"! *His* only reference to *any* deity is to "laws of nature & of nature's god"! To fundamentalists who hold up the DoI as proof that America was founded on Christianity, this is rather thin gruel; indeed, a lower-case "nature's god" can only refer to an impersonal Providence or a Deistic entity who set the wheels in motion and walked away, rather than the biblical Jehovah God. That many of the Founders, including the first six US presidents, were essentially Deists, Masons, or Unitarians, and were not orthodox "Christians" in any but a nominal sense, is often forgotten or covered up. Indeed, only 5% or so of the population were participating members of churches in 1776. (Similarly, some Masons have claimed as many as 53 of the 56 signers as Brothers; but more scrupulous Masonic leaders will only cop to nine, which, though a significant ratio, is hardly even a majority.)

– *The DoI founded no nation or government!* The DoI itself confirms *thirteen already-independent* nation-states in alliance (note the phrase "*united* States"), like the members of NATO. Treaties made with France listed *each* state, not *one* single nation! They only planned for a *confederation* of sovereign states, like today's UN or EU. Even the 1783 peace treaty with Britain was with *each* of the 13 states! No, in 1776 *they did not want one nation*; not until the Constitution, over a decade later, was there a *true* birth of the US as a *nation* (the DoI was, at most, the "conception")! As for government, Congress was *already* in place, though with very limited powers; the DoI changed none of that, having *no* legal status (laws aren't ruled "un-declarationofindependencial"!), then or now. Even the Articles of Confederation – which formalized the limited, "less perfect" union of strong states – didn't go into effect until ratified in 1781.

– *There's no evidence* Benjamin Franklin ever said "We must all hang together, or most assuredly we shall hang separately." Or that John Hancock said he signed his name large "so King George could read it without his spectacles." Or that the Liberty Bell (not so-named until the 1830's, when used as an anti-slavery rallying symbol due to the biblical inscription on it: "Proclaim Liberty throughout all the Land...") was rung July 4th *or* at the DoI's public reading on the 8th, as the steeple was too deteriorated then to allow for it. (What *appears* to be the bell's wide crack is actually an 1846 man-made fix to prevent the *real* cracks from getting worse, to allow it to be rung on Washington's birthday that year; but a final unfixable crack from *that* event is why it's not been rung since.) But, both Jefferson and Adams *did* die on July 4th, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the DoI's adoption, in one of history's great and poignant ironic coincidences.

The *actual* truth of America's being "conceived in liberty" is so profound, yet so human, we should have no need to mythologize it into white marble friezes of unreachable demigods (as depicted in Brumidi's Capitol fresco, above). The Founders had doubts, struggled against great odds, made unhappy compromises... yet courageously pledged "lives, fortunes, & sacred honor" to a noble experiment. Should *we* do any less against *today's* "long train of abuses and usurpations" than take up *their* torch? Wouldn't that better honor their vision than mere safe, blind worship of them and their work?