



Independence and the Foundation of the Republic

The development of politics was one of the most important effects which the Enlightenment had upon the New World. America was geographically divided into three regions: New England, the mid-Atlantic, and the South, and these comprised thirteen colonies within the British Empire. During the 17th century relationship between the American colonies and England was generally peaceful. But in the 18th century great tension developed and a group of revolutionaries started to consider that it would be better to be independent of England.

The strain between England and America happened mainly because, originally, the colonies had obtained a great number of advantages from being part of the British Empire. England bought all the produce grown by the Americans; the colonists benefited from English investment, financing and manufactures; and the army and navy of England protected the colonies.

But during the 18th century these advantages slowly became disadvantages. The English prohibited the American colonialists to sell their products to other countries; they were also forbidden to manufacture their own goods. Furthermore, England increased American taxes to meet ever growing expenses for the army and navy in an expanding empire. Just when the British Empire had become less profitable for Americans, their participation to maintain it increased.

This situation quickly became a rebellion that escalated to a revolutionary attitude. In 1775 the thir-

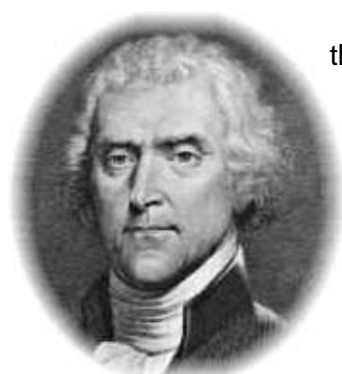
teen colonies came together in a national congress. Battles between English soldiers and American colonists were constant. The Congress appointed George Washington, one of its most admired and distinguished members, to manage and guide an American army since he had previously been an officer in the militia of Virginia, his native colony, in the South. Washington accepted the invitation and refused to accept any pay for such military service.

In 1776, the Congress declared the American colonies independent states, a group of "united states" struggling for their independence. The letter declaring independence was shown on July 4th, 1776, marking the birth of the United States of America. The declaration was mostly edited by Thomas Jefferson, also a prominent member of the congress.

To merely declare independence was not, a guarantee of obtaining it. The war for independence lasted for many years; but the Americans, with the help of the French, won the war. Independence then called for the establishment of a government -- so they needed to create a constitution, which would help them to organize and define a new government.

An elementary and functional document was therefore written. It established a republic governed by a congress and by a president. (The fact that it still serves -- two hundred years later -- to govern the United States is proof enough of the Constitution's success) George Washington, the victorious general of the revolution, was elected the first president of the new republic.

Thomas Jefferson



Jefferson was elected the third President of the United States (1801-1809) he was the founder and leader of the Democratic-Republican Party which dominated American politics for over a quarter-century and he was the precursor to today's Democratic Party.

In addition to his political career, Jefferson was also an agriculturalist, horticulturist, architect, etymologist, archaeologist, mathematician, cryptographer, surveyor, paleontologist, author, lawyer, inventor, violinist, and the founder of the University of Virginia. Many people consider Jefferson to be among the most brilliant men ever to occupy the Presidency.

The two following selections are: The opening of "The Declaration of Independence" and a letter written by Jefferson to a friend, analyzing the character of George Washington. Ironically both men, as southerners, were slave owners. Despite careers successfully and brilliantly dedicated to the freedom of America. However, later in their lives, they did set their own slaves free.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.

"When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands 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. 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 rescue these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, that whenever any Form of Government 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 power in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States."

Letter (Concerning George Washington)

"His mind was great and powerful, without being of the very first order; his penetration strong, though not so acute as that of a Newton, Bacon, or Locke; and as far as he saw, no judgement was ever sounder. It was slow in operation, being little aided by invention or imagination, but sure in conclusion. Hence the common remark of his officers, of the advantage he derived from councils of war, where hearing all suggestions, he selected whatever was best; and certainly no general ever planned his battles more judiciously. But if deranged during the course of the action, if any member of his plan was dislocated by sudden circumstances, he was slow in readjustment. The consequence was, that he often failed in the field, and rarely against an enemy in station, as at Boston and York. He was incapable of fear, meeting personal dangers with the calmest unconcern. Perhaps the strongest feature in his character was prudence, never acting until every circumstance, every consideration, was maturely weighed; refraining if he saw a doubt, but, when once decided, going through with his purpose, whatever obstacles opposed. His integrity was most pure, his justice the most inflexible I have ever known, no motives of interest or consanguinity, of friendship or hatred, being able to bias his decision. He was, indeed, in every sense of the words, a wise, a good, and a great man. His temper was naturally irritable and high toned; but reflection and resolution had obtained a firm and habitual ascendancy over it. If ever, however, it broke its bonds, he was most tremendous in his wrath. In his expenses he was honorable, but exact; liberal in contributions to whatever promised utility; but frowning and unyielding on all visionary projects, and all unworthy calls on his charity. His heart was not warm in its affections; but he exactly calculated every man's value, and gave him solid esteem proportioned to it. His person, you know, was fine, his stature exactly what one would wish, his deportment easy, erect, and noble; the best horseman of his age, and the most graceful figure that could be seen on horseback. Although in the circle of his friends, where he might be unreserved with safety, he took a free share in conversation, his colloquial talents were not above mediocrity, possessing neither copiousness of ideas, nor fluency of words. In public, when called on for a sudden opinion, he was unready, short, and embarrassed. Yet he wrote readily, rather diffusely, in an easy and correct style. This he had acquired by conversation with the world, for his education was merely reading, writing, and common arithmetic, to which he added surveying at a later day. His time was employed in action chiefly, reading little, and that only in agriculture and English history. On the whole, his character was, in its mass, perfect, in nothing bad, in few points indifferent; and it may be truly said, that never did nature and fortune combine more perfectly to make a man great, and to place him in the same constellation with whatever worthies have merited from man an everlasting remembrance."

The flag known as the "Betsy Ross" flag was reputedly first sewn by Betsy Ross. It was used as the official flag of the United States from June 14, 1777 to May 1, 1795.

According to legend, in June, 1776 Betsy Ross received a visit from George Washington, George Ross and Robert Morris of the Continental Congress. She had met George Washington through their mutual worship at Christ Church (and she had sewed buttons for him previously) and George Ross was John's uncle. They announced that they were a "Committee of three" (perhaps self-appointed, under the circumstances) and showed her a suggested design, which was drawn up by Washington in pencil. The design had 6-pointed stars and Betsy suggested 5-pointed stars instead because she could make a five pointed star in one snip. The flag was sewn by Ross in her parlor. It was this flag that

flew when the Declaration of Independence was read aloud at Independence Hall on July 8, 1776.

No contemporary record of this meeting was made; the information is based solely on oral affidavits from her daughter and other relatives, and made public in 1870 by her grandson William J. Canby in a paper read before the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. There is no further supporting documentation that Betsy Ross was otherwise involved in federal flag design although the Pennsylvania State Navy Board did commission her for work in making "ships colors & c."

Some historians believe that it was Francis Hopkinson and not Betsy Ross who designed the official "first flag" of the United States (13 red and white stripes with 13 stars in a circle on a field of blue). Hopkinson was a member of the Continental Congress and a signer of the Declaration.



DISCUSSION

1. State the influences of Enlightenment thought that can be noticed in both the characters of Franklin and of Jefferson.
2. How is the right of the American colonies to rebel justified in "The Declaration of Independence"?
3. What does Jefferson mean in "Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes"?
4. What does Jefferson think of Washington's character?
5. What are the similarities and differences between Jefferson's analysis of human virtue in this letter and Franklin's analysis in his Autobiography?