

**Answer the following questions.**

**Why were these men so bold?**

**Clearly consider the boldness in theories regarding government.**

**Clearly consider the boldness in Action.**

**What does this say about our democratic society?**

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## **Bold Men in Ruffled Shirts**

By **DAVID McCULLOUGH**

WEST TISBURY, Mass. "You will see in a few days a Declaration setting forth the causes which have impelled us to this mighty revolution ..."

From his boardinghouse in Philadelphia, John Adams was reporting to his wife, Abigail, in a letter dated July 3, 1776. Filled with emotion over events of the preceding day, Adams prophesied that July 2 would be celebrated for generations as a national festival. "It ought to be commemorated as the Day of Deliverance by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty," he wrote. "It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations from one end of this continent to the other from this time forward ever more."

For on July 2, after weeks of intense debate behind closed doors, the Continental Congress had voted to proceed with a declaration of independence for the "United States of America," and this to Adams and others was the crucial decision. The die was cast.

July 4, the day Congress adopted the final edited version of Thomas Jefferson's draft of the Declaration, seemed at the time to carry less historic importance. Nor was July 4 the day the document was signed. That took place a month later, on Aug. 2, and even then not all members were present. Those who were absent would sign later still. Only the president and the secretary of Congress, John Hancock and Charles Thomas, affixed their signatures on July 4, and Congress ordered the document printed and distributed to the press and the public at large.

It was the year after, 1777, when July 4 became the national day of festival. And so we will celebrate it today, "from one end of this continent to the other," just as Adams foresaw, except that in the present national mood, in the aftermath of last Sept. 11, there will be differences. We are at war again, and with patriotism running as strong as at almost any time in memory, our feelings will be abundantly on display, and from the heart, as perhaps never before.

But if Adams, or others of the 56 patriots who put their names on the Declaration of Independence, could imagine us celebrating what they did, how should we imagine them?

To begin with, they were not gods. Indeed, had they been they would deserve less honor and respect. Gods, after all, can do largely as they please. They were human and imperfect; each had his flaws and failings. Jefferson made the point in the very first line of the Declaration of Independence: "When in the course of human events . . ." The key word is human.

The miracle was that imperfect mortals could so rise to the occasion, that such noble ideals and brilliant political leadership came to the fore as they did, that so few could, in the end, accomplish so much for all humankind.

With the exception of Benjamin Franklin, who was 70, and a few others, they were also younger than we usually think of them. Hancock was 39; Adams, 40; Jefferson, all of 33. The remarkable Benjamin Rush was younger still, 30. Further, the man in whom Congress had entrusted command of the fledgling American army bore little resemblance to the white-haired president with awkward teeth who looks out from the dollar bill. George Washington was 44 in 1776.

The odds against them in challenging the might of the British empire were overwhelming. None had had any experience in revolution-making. Or nation-making. And let us never forget they were setting out not only to triumph over the British Army and Navy, but to establish an entirely new nation. There was little at hand with which to fight a war? almost no gunpowder, no navy and no money to speak of. There were few trained officers. Washington himself had never commanded an army in battle.

As daunting as almost anything was the lack of popular support for independence. Though war had broken out near Boston the year before, in the spring of 1775, the Americans who fought at Lexington, Concord and Bunker Hill had been defending their rights as Englishmen, not fighting for independence. When, in late summer of 1775, Jefferson confided to a kinsman that he hoped still for a reconciliation with Great Britain, he was only expressing what was widely felt. By early 1776 about a third of the people were for independence, while another third remained adamantly opposed. The rest, in the old human way, were waiting to see who came out on top.

Had they been poll-driven, "risk-averse" politicians gathered in Philadelphia that fateful summer of 1776, they would have scrapped the whole idea of a "mighty revolution."

Those for independence argued passionately that there could be no real freedom without independence, no chance to "begin the world over again," as said in Thomas Paine's little pamphlet, "Common Sense."

We think we live in a dangerous, uncertain time, and we do. But theirs was worse, and they had no sure way of knowing how things would turn out, any more than we do. Their courage and determination, their commitment to what they called the Cause of America, were almost beyond our imagining. To sign your name to the Declaration of Independence was to declare yourself a traitor to the British Crown. If caught by enemy forces, you would almost certainly be hanged.

And consider that in that same first week of July 1776, the British fleet appeared in New York Harbor and began landing on Staten Island the largest force ever sent to crush a rebellion, fully 32,000 troops by the time they were all ashore. This was more than the entire population of Philadelphia, the largest city in America. When the signers of the Declaration pledged "our lives, our fortunes, our sacred honor," that was no mere rhetorical flourish.

The delegate Stephen Hopkins of Rhode Island, who was nearly as old as Franklin and suffered from palsy, is said to have remarked when his turn came to sign his name, "My hand trembles, but my heart does not."

When we see them in paintings, with their ruffled shirts and powdered hair, they look a little like fops, softies. But life then, at best, was tougher than we know, and they were, too, and the women no less than the men. John Adams predicted a long, costly struggle. "I am well aware of the toil and blood and treasure it will cost us to maintain their Declaration," he told Abigail. "Yet through the gloom I can see the rays of ravishing light and glory. I can see the end is more than worth all the means."

For her part, at home in Massachusetts, raising their children, running the family farm, she had to cope with rampant inflation, shortages of all kinds, epidemic smallpox and her husband's endless absences in the service of the country. "Posterity who are to reap the blessings," she would write, "will scarcely be able to conceive the hardships and sufferings of their ancestors."

The Revolutionary War lasted eight years. Except for Vietnam it was the longest war in our history, and it was the most important. It was the birth of the nation. It made possible everything that followed. It gave us those "self-evident" truths at the heart of our whole way of life.

No one in Congress spoke for the need for a Declaration of Independence with greater force than John Adams. As is often said, Jefferson was the pen of independence; Adams, the voice.

Half a century later ? amazingly, unbelievably ? Jefferson and Adams died on that same day, July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. That spring,

in a letter that touched Adams deeply, Jefferson had recalled how once in younger days, as "Argonauts," they had faced the perilous storms of a "heroic age." If ever there was a time to draw strength from their example, and renew our commitment to their Cause, it is now. Today's the day, their day of days. And we might well begin, as John Adams suggested, with expressions of gratitude to God Almighty.

David McCullough is the author of "John Adams," which won this year's Pulitzer Prize for biography