

Roots in Ripon

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An Act of Political Courage

As an amateur student of history, and in particular American History, I have always been amazed at the manner in which the United States of America came into existence. How were these colonialists of the seventeen hundred's in what was known then simply as America, able to come together from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, and form a more "perfect union"?

In the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States, we read these enduring words: *We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence (British spelling of defense), promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.*

What I should like to point out in this Preamble is the focus on the wording. The Founding Fathers purposefully wrote a Constitution that was for all Americans and was intended to last into perpetuity. That means it's as relevant today in providing America with a basis for rights and liberties as it was the day it was drafted in 1787.

Enjoying the comforts of a prosperous nation such as we have become, fogs the image of embattled patriots encamped against the most powerful monarch in the world at that time (King George III), and the most powerful army, the British Redcoats. Yet fully two-thirds of the colonists were preparing themselves to resist Britain, even if it meant war.

The Constitution was written for the American colonists, but it was also written to King George as a challenge that these colonists who had been mistreated and denigrated as second class British subjects, had had enough. That is not to say that all Americans were wanting to push back against the oppression of the British crown. Some were willing to grovel and fawn before the power of the rule of Britain.

Thomas Jefferson wrote in his "Summary View of the Rights of British America" in 1774, these words of challenge that he knew full-well would be read by the king. *"Let those flatter, who fear. It is not an American art form."* Americans do not, and will not, ever bow to a head of state, including our own. In fact, George Washington would not hear of being made King of America, as some petitioned.

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And he had the foresight to recommend for the presidency no more than two four-year terms.

"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." The delegates from the original thirteen states set in motion the eventual undoing of slavery with these words, "All men are created equal." To them, the truths that were self-evident, were truths ordained by God so that the entirety of the human race would recognize that all humans are of one family. To oppose such an understanding, or to treat others as lesser beings, is in direct contradiction to what God had declared in Holy Scripture.

"And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor." It's at this point, these final words of the Declaration of Independence, that the signers on this hallowed document laid everything on the line. The year was 1776, and the Revolutionary War was already underway. In fact, the outcome was in serious doubt.

Of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence, all knew what they were getting into. If the colonists should lose the war, then they would be hung, shot, or otherwise dispatched from this earth. The best they could hope for was to be captured, returned to England for a trial and then executed in some hideous manner. The members of the 2nd Continental Congress had been arguing over many issues. Once the Declaration was finished and all agreed to sign it, a comment was made to Benjamin Franklin that they must all hang together in a show of unity. Is said that Franklin responded with this quip: *"We must all hang together, or most assuredly, we will all hang separately."*

Though these men were of varying backgrounds, educational levels, even places of birth (some born in Britain, while most were born in America), and though they did not agree on all issues (slavery, for instance), they also realized if they had any chance to be free from the oppressive rule of Britain they must, at all cost, come together in unity. And they did!

The signers of the Declaration were not revealed until January of 1777, following General George Washington's Christmas victory in the Battle of Trenton (NJ), and in early January, the Battle of Princeton (also NJ).

The Revolutionary War would last until 1783, but the die was cast. The army Washington commanded would indeed defeat the vaunted British crack troops, and America would be reborn as the United States of America, all because a few dozen patriots were willing to give up everything they had in life, including their own lives, to establish for the world the "land of the free, and the home of the brave!"