

A HUNDRED YEARS OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE

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You have all read the Declaration of Independence. A hundred years ago it was a new revelation, startling, with new terror, kings on their thrones, and bidding serfs, in their poor huts, arise and take heart, and look up with new hope of deliverance. It asserted that all men, kings and peasants, master and servant, rich and poor, were born equal, with equal rights, inheritors of equal claim to the protection from the law; that governments derived their just powers, not from conquest or force, but from the consent of the governed, and existed only for their protection and to make them happy. These were the truths eternal, but long unspoken – truths that few dared to utter, which Providence ordained should be revealed here in America, to be the political creed of the peoples all over the earth. Like a trumpet blast blown in the night, it pealed through the dark abodes of misery, and aroused men to thought and hope and action.

And that trumpet blast still is pealing and will peal, still summons whatever of manhood remains in mankind to assert itself. Still, at that sound, the knees of tyrants will be loosened with fear, and the hopes of freemen will rise, and their hearts beat faster and higher as long as this earth hangs poised in air, and men live upon it whose souls are alive with memories of the past.

The Declaration of American Independence was a declaration of war with Great Britain, war to the knife, and the knife to the hilt. There were fearful odds against the Colonies when they threw down the gage of battle¹. On one side was was England – strong in the consciousness of wealth and power, strong in the prestige of sovereignty, fully armed and equipped for war, insolent, haughty, scorning even to entertain the idea of possible check or defeat. On the other side, the Thirteen Colonies, stretching, for the most part, along the seaboard, vulnerable at a hundred points, and open to attack by sea and land, without army, without navy, without money or ammunition or material of war, having for troops only crowds of undisciplined citizens, who had left for a while plough and anvil and hurried to the front with what arms they could lay hands on to fight the veterans of King George, skilled in their terrible trade by long service in European wars.

On the second of July, 1776, the Continental Congress was in session in Philadelphia. There were about forty-nine delegates present. That day was a day of gloom. The air was dark and heavy with ill news: Ill news from the North – Montgomery had fallen at Quebec, and the expedition against Canada had miserably failed²; ill news from the South – a fleet of British men-of-war had crossed the bar of Charleston, South Carolina; ill news from New York – Lord Howe's ships were riding in the Lower Bay, and a British army of thirty thousand men menaced the city with attack. From all sides came ill tidings. Everywhere doubt and suspicion and despondency. It was a dark and gloomy time, when even the boldest might be well forgiven for losing heart.

Such was the hour when Congress entered upon the consideration of the great question on which hung the fate of a continent. There were some who clung still to British connection. The King might relent – conciliation was not impossible – a monarchical form of government was dear to them. The past of England was their past, and they were loath to lose it. Then, war was a terrible alternative. They saw the precipice, and they shuddered and started back appalled.

But on the other side were the men of the hour – the men of the people, who listened to the voice of the people, and felt the throbbing of the people’s great heart. They too, saw the great precipice. Their eyes fathomed all the depth of the black abyss, but they saw, beyond, the glorious vision of the coming years. They saw countless happy homes stretching far and wide across a continent, wherein should dwell for ages generation after generation of men nurtured in strength and virtue and prosperity by the light and warmth of freedom.

Remember that between the Thirteen Colonies there were but few ties. They differed in many things; in race, religion, climate, productions, and habits of thought, as much then as they do now. One grand purpose alone knit their souls together, north to South, Adams of Massachusetts to Jefferson of Virginia – the holy purpose of building up here, for them and their children, a free nation, to be the example, the model, the citadel of freedom; or, failing in that, to die and be forgotten, or remembered only with the stain of rebellion on their names.

The counsel of these brave and generous men prevailed. Some light from the better world illumined their souls and strengthened their hearts. Behind them surged and beat the great tide of popular enthusiasm. The people, ever alive to heroic purpose; the people whose honest instincts are often the wisest statesmanship; the people waited for the word; ready to fight, ready to die, if need be, for independence. And so God’s will was done upon the earth.

The word was spoken, the “Declaration” was made that gave life and name to the “United States of America,” and a new nation breathed and looked into the future, daring all the best or the worst that future might bring. If that declaration became a signal of rescue and relief to countries far away, what word can describe the miracles it has wrought for this people here at home? It was a spell, a talisman, an armor of proof, and a sword of victory. The undisciplined throng of citizen-soldiers, taught in the stern school of hardship and reverse, soon grew to be a great army, before which the veterans of Britain recoiled.

Europe, surprised into sympathy with rebellion, sent her best and bravest here to fight the battle of freedom, and LaFayette of France, De Kalb of Germany, Kosciusko of Poland, and their compeers, drew their bright swords in the ranks of the young republic. Best support of all was that calm, fearless, steadfast soul, which, undismayed in the midst of peril and disaster, undaunted amid wreck and ruin, stood like a tower,

reflecting all that was best and noblest in the character of the American people, and personifying its resolute will. Happy is that nation to whom, in its hour of need, bountiful Heaven provides a leader so brave and wise, so fitted to guide and rule, as was, in that early crisis of the American republic, its foremost man – George Washington.

Thus, from the baptism of blood, the young nation came forth purified, triumphant, free. Then the mystic influence, the magic of her accomplished freedom, began to work, and the thoughts of men, and the powers of earth and air and sea, began to do her bidding and cast their reassures at her feet.

From the thirteen parent colonies thirty-eight great States and Territories have been born. At first a broad land of forest and prairie stretched far and wide, needing only the labor of man to render it fruitful. Men came; across the Atlantic, breasting its storms, sped mighty fleets, carrying hither brigades and divisions of the grand army of labor. On they came, in columns mightier than ever king led to battle – in columns millions strong – to conquer a continent, not to havoc and desolation, but to fertility and wealth, and order, and happiness.

They came from field and forest in the noble German land – from where, amid corn-field and vineyard and flowers, the lordly Rhine flows proudly towards the sea. From Ireland – from heath covered hill and grassy valley – from where the giant cliffs standing as sentinels for Europe meet the first shock of the Atlantic and hurl back its surges, broken and shattered in foam. From France and Switzerland, from Italy and Sweden, from all the winds of heaven, they came; and as their battle line advanced, the desert fell back subdued, and in its stead sprang up corn and fruit, the olive and the vine, and gardens that blossomed like the rose.

Of triumphs like these, who can estimate the value? The population of three millions a hundred years ago has risen to forty-three millions today. We have great cities, great manufacturers, great commerce, great wealth, great luxury and splendor. Seventy-four thousand miles of railway conquer distance, and make all our citizens neighbors to one another. All these things are great and good, and can be turned to good. But they are not all. Whatever fate may befall this republic, whatever vicissitudes or disasters may be before her, this praise, at least, can never be denied to her, this glory she has won forever: that for one hundred years she has been hospitable and generous; that she gave to the stranger a welcome – opened to him all the treasures of her liberty, gave him free scope for all his ability, a free career, and fair play.

And this it is that most endears this republic to other nations, and has made fast friends for her in the homes of the peoples all over the earth; not her riches, not her nuggets of gold, not her mountains of silver, not her prodigies of mechanical skill, great and valuable though these things may be. It is this that most makes her name beloved and honored: that she has been always broad and liberal in her sympathies; that she has

given homes to the homeless, land to the landless; that she has secured for the greatest number of those who have dwelt on her wide domain a larger measure of liberty and peace and happiness, and for a greater length of time, than has ever been enjoyed by any other people on this earth. For this reason, the peoples all all over the earth, and through all time, will call this republic blessed.

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1. Gage: an armored glove, symbolic of a challenge to battle.
2. War against the rebellious colonies had already commenced before the Declaration of Independence, attacks were being launched from Canada and an expeditionary force was sent to Canada to stop the attacks, and, if possible, rally the Canadians to the American cause.