

2022

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Citation of this paper:

Simner, Marvin L., "Use of the Declaration of Independence as a Military Recruitment Tool During the American Revolution" (2022). *History Publications*. 407.
<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/historypub/407>

Use of the Declaration of Independence as a Military Recruitment Tool During the American Revolution

Marvin L. Simner

The Declaration of Independence, viewed by thousands each year, is one of the most revered documents in American history. Housed in a hermetically sealed glass enclosed frame located in the National Archives, it contains principles “both universal and eternal,” that are said to form the bedrock for American democracy.¹ The first celebration of its importance took place in Philadelphia on July 8, 1776, while the final celebration that year occurred in Georgia during the month of August. Between these two periods massive celebrations, as recorded in 1906 by John H. Hazelton,² were held in communities across the country when the Declaration was read to the assembled crowds.

Because the goal of the Declaration, as expressed in its title, was largely aspirational and not realized until end of the war, it was reasonable for Maier³ to ask “what exactly were they celebrating”? In answer, she wrote “The news, not the vehicle that brought it; independence and the assumption of self-government, not the document that announced Congress’s decision to break with Britain.” Similarly, Travers⁴ claimed that during the war years

It gave Revolutionary Americans an opportunity to identify themselves as a group publicly, to “educate” the uncommitted, and isolate enemies. For the faithful it fueled enthusiasm for a “new system” and rededicated them to a cause not yet won.

Although it is quite possible that both of these political accounts are correct, it is equally possible that the Declaration could have had a more pedestrian purpose. According to Maier⁵ “By raising the spirit of the people, the Declaration might also encourage men to join the army and so help American affairs ‘take a more favorable turn’, as John Hancock and the Congress hoped.”

In keeping with Maier’s suggestion, it is important to note that most of the grievances in the Declaration began with the words “He has refused” or “He has forbidden.” Thus, it could be, as others⁶ have written, that by personalizing the enemy in this fashion, the colonists’ longstanding anger with respect to taxation, the housing of British troops in private homes, etc. would now focus solely on the King as the ultimate doer of harm. Indeed, as soon as the news arrived and the Declaration was read to the assembled crowds the celebrations that took place throughout the colonies, as documented by Hazelton, clearly testified to the hatred along with the patriotic fervour that these grievances evoked.

A slightly modified version of this material will appear in the *Journal of the American Revolution*.

On July 9 in New York City

The troops under Washington's command were told that "The General hopes this important Event will serve as a free incentive to every officer, and soldier, to act with Fidelity and Courage, as knowing that now the peace and safety of his Country depends (under God) solely on the success of our arms." That same evening "an equestrian statue of George III ...was, by the sons of freedom, laid prostrate in the dirt (and)...the lead within...was made into bullets, to assimilate with the brains of our infatuated adversaries..."

On July 16 in Watertown, Massachusetts

The old Gentlemen, Grandfathers to the age of seventy years old, and upwards had met...and formed themselves into an independent company...and unanimously made choice of Elias Pelletreau Esq for their leader who made a very animating speech to them on the necessity of holding themselves in readiness to go into the field in time of invasion; they cheerfully agreed to it, and determined, at the risk of their lives to defend the Free and Independent States of America.

On July 22 in Huntington, Long Island

A flag "having Liberty on one side, and George III on the other, underwent a reform, i.e., the Union was cut off and the letters GEORGE III were discarded, being publicly ripped off; and then the effigy of the Personage, represented by those letters, being lately fabricated out of base materials, its head adorned with a wooden crown stuck full of feathers...was hung on a gallows, exploded and burnt to ashes."

On August 7 in Bridgetown, New Jersey

The Chairman of Inspection for the County of Cumberland made a speech that contained the following fiery message. "In our present situation, engaged in a bloody and dangerous war with the power of Great Britain for the defence of our lives, our liberties, our property and everything that is dear and valuable, every member of this State who enjoys the benefits of its civil government is absolutely bound by the immutable law of self-preservation, the laws of God and society to assist in protecting and defending it...As it is impossible for any one possessed of the spirit of a man, who is a friend to the United States, and whose conscience does not furnish him with an excuse to stand by, an idle spectator, while his country is struggling and bleeding in her own necessary defence, all such inactive persons ought therefore to be shunned as enemies or despised as cowards...and while we rejoice in being formally emancipated from our haughty and imperious task-masters, let us remember that the final termination of this grand event is not likely to be brought about without shedding the blood of many of our dear friends and countrymen."

On August 10 in Savannah, Georgia

During the evening the town staged a solemn funeral procession attended by light infantry companies and the militia. "With drums muffled and a greater number of people than had appeared on any occasion before in this province, George the Third was interred before the court-house... Forasmuch as George the Third, of Great Britain, hath most flagrantly violated his coronation oath and trampled upon the constitution of our country, and the sacred rights of mankind, we therefore commit his political existence to the ground, corruption to corruption, tyranny to the grave, and oppression to eternal infamy; in sure and certain hope that he will never obtain a resurrection to rule again over these United States of America..."

These examples, along with many others reported by Hazelton, serve to illustrate that the material in the Declaration clearly generated thoughts of hatred toward the Crown along with the need for patriotic fidelity. At issue though is whether such thoughts were sufficiently robust to cause voluntary enlistments in the Continental Army. To address this issue first we reviewed the forces that led to the emergence of the Continental Army. Next we asked if the Declaration helped in the army recruiting process.

The rise of the Continental Army

As the Massachusetts colonial militia pursued the retreating British following the battle of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, riders were dispatched throughout the colonies to enlist the aid of additional men to assist in what has become known as the siege of Boston. Paul Revere, who was one of the riders, traveled widely throughout New England between April 21 and May 7 while others reached such destinations as Philadelphia on April 24, Baltimore on April 26, and as far south as Charleston on May 9.⁷

On May 3 the president of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, Joseph Warren, sent an urgent appeal to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia for military assistance. One month later Congress received a further request from Warren in which he asked Congress to take full responsibility for the execution and overall operation of a proposed army.

As the Army now collecting from different colonies is for the general defence of the right of America, we would beg leave to suggest to your consideration the propriety of your taking the regulation and general direction of it, that the operations may more effectually answer the purposes designed.⁸

On June 3, and in keeping with Warren's request, Congress' first action was to take charge of the Massachusetts militia units as the basis for a Continental Army and to appoint a committee for the "purpose of borrowing the sum of six thousand pounds for...the purchase of gunpower for the use of the Continental Army."⁹ Next, Congress began the process of laying the groundwork for such an army by approving its size along with a monthly pay scale.

...six companies of expert riflemen, immediately raised in Pennsylvania, two in Maryland, and two in Virginia; that each company consist of a captain, three lieutenants, four serjeants, four corporals, a drummer or trumpeter, and sixty-eight privates....\$20 for each captain, \$13 1/3 dollars for each lieutenant, \$8 for each serjeant, \$7 1/3 for each corporal, drummer or trumpeter, and \$6 2/3 for each private who were to find their own arms and cloaths.¹⁰

Owing to a widespread fear among the colonists against the existence of a standing army, enlistments in this newly constituted Continental Army were for one year only, “unless sooner discharged...” Then on June 15 Congress unanimously elected George Washington to serve as General in command of the Army and two days later it further resolved to appoint the remaining officers in the chain of command.¹¹ Finally, on June 20 Washington was told to “repair with all expedition to the colony of Massachusetts bay to take charge of the army of the united colonies...” and received a set of instructions on how to proceed with the task of actually raising the required army.¹² In essence, Washington’s main purpose in being sent to Boston was to take command of what was said to have been a series of well armed, well trained militia units from which a robust Continental Army could be formed. He was also told that the final force he needed to assemble should not exceed 22,000 men¹³ and that its overall cost, if possible, should not exceed \$500,000.¹⁴

On July 3, however, he described the army of which he was now in charge as consisting of little more than “a mixed multitude of people...under very little discipline, order or government.”¹⁵ To rectify this situation he subsequently held “conferences with a Congressional committee” that visited the camp in September 1775. The plan for a proper army that emerged from these conferences was to consist of

26 regiments of infantry of 728 men each, plus one regiment of riflemen and one of artillery, 20,372 men in all, to be uniformly paid, supplied, and administered by the Continental Congress and enlisted to the end of the 1776...¹⁶

Although Washington had requested a force of over 20,000 men, the majority already in the army resigned as soon as their one-year terms of enlistment were over.¹⁷ In fact, by December 1775, fewer than 4,000 of those who had initially volunteered for service remained,¹⁸ and when taken together with those in service on January 1, 1776, Washington “had exactly 5,582 men to man a ring of forts and batteries in the sprawling semicircle that ran from Prospect Hill through the town of Cambridge to Roxbury – some eight miles.”¹⁹ By early March 1776 “only a thousand or so more” had voluntarily agreed to serve the needs of the country and joined the Continental Army.²⁰

Did the Declaration help in recruiting?

Although there are no data that bear directly on this question, a tentative answer can be found in recommendations from the Board of War. In view of the extremely troubling circumstances that Washington had encountered, coupled with a still worsening military situation, on

September 16, 1776, which was only one month after the final celebrations of the Declaration were held, Congress received for its consideration several recommendations from the Board both of which stemmed from Washington's long held beliefs.²¹ First, an effective army will result only if its members are recruited for periods that extend well beyond the current one year term of enlistment and, second, enlistment bonuses are essential to achieve the desired numbers of recruits. With these recommendations in mind Congress approved the following:

That eighty eight battalions be enlisted as soon as possible, to serve during the present war, and that each state furnish their respective quotas in the following proportions: Delaware 1 battalion, Rhode Island 2 battalions....Virginia and Massachusetts bay 15 battalions each (and) that twenty dollars be given as bounty to each non-commissioned officer and private soldier, who shall enlist to serve during the present war, unless sooner discharged by Congress.²²

To further encourage enlistments, Congress also approved an additional bonus that consisted of the granting of land "to the officers and soldiers who shall so engage in the service, and continue therein to the close of the war, or until discharged by Congress and to the representatives of such officers and soldiers as shall be slain by the enemy." The grants ranged in size from 100 acres for non-commissioned officers and soldiers to 500 acres for a Colonel.²³

Clearly, if hatred of the crown and patriotic fervour engendered by the Declaration were sufficient justifications to induce enlistments there should have been no need for the Board to request, and for Congress to approve, both land grants and \$20 bonuses as added enlistment incentives. As a result of his own experiences in the French and Indian War, Washington was well aware that this would be the case since he had concluded that "the average man thought in terms of his own self-interest as long as total disaster did not seem imminent." In line with this point, and more recently, Washington reported that a number of his officers had defected to the British in order to obtain the pardons that had been offered by General Howe on November 30, 1776, and few of the troops under Generals Sullivan and Gates "showed any willingness to reenlist for service after the expiration of their terms..."²⁴ Possibly in anticipation of such defections on October 21, 1776, Congress had approved the following oath that "every officer who holds or shall hereafter hold, a commission or office from Congress, shall subscribe (to)..."

I do acknowledge the Thirteen United States of America, namely, New Hampshire, Massachusetts Bay, etc. to be free, independent, and sovereign states, and declare, that the people thereof owe no allegiance or obedience to George the third, king of Great Britain; and (that) I renounce, refuse and abjure any allegiance or obedience to him...So help me God. ²⁵

Also worth mentioning are Washington's further experiences in mid-August, 1776. Two British ships, the *Phoenix* and *Rose*, were sighted sailing up the Hudson and were suspected of attempting to establish contact between Howe and Burgoyne. Although Washington had hoped that the words in the Declaration would serve as an "incentive to every officer and soldier to act with Fidelity and Courage," apparently this did not happen. When the troops

under his command were ordered to halt the passage of both ships, they had failed to obey his order. As revealed in the following summary of this episode, the patriotic zeal displayed so eagerly only one month earlier was now totally absent.

One serious aspect of this affair was the misbehavior of many of the American soldiers, who, at the sounding of the alarm, should have hurried to their posts. They did almost everything except that. Not more than half the artillerists even went to the guns. Hundreds of the troops appeared to forget their duty in watching the race of the ships up the stream. Several men were killed and two or three were wounded because they carelessly failed to sponge their guns. Some of their comrades attributed this to drunkenness; the absence of still others was due, in the language of one disgusted diarist, to the fact that they “were at this cups or whoring.” That, surely, was not the disciplinary standard necessary in service of the sort that manifestly lay ahead. “Such unsoldierly conduct,” Washington said the next day in General Orders, “must grieve every good officer, and give the enemy a mean opinion of the Army...”²⁶

Conclusion

While there was tremendous excitement and enthusiasm for the impending revolution when the words in the Declaration were initially read to the assembled crowds in July/August 1776, the most that can be said about their subsequent impact is that they had either a negligible, or at best, only a limited effect on encouraging military enlistments and on maintaining military fidelity. Martin and Lender²⁷ were equally explicit in their evaluation of this matter when they stated that “the inclusion of bounty provisions in the recruiting laws was an admission that appeals to virtue had not spurred enough enlistments,” and so too was Royster based on his review of the October 16, 1775, correspondence between Nathanael Green and Samuel Ward. He concluded that “Men were not obliged to resort to the Army for employment and were not inclined to enlist altruistically.”²⁸ Finally, and in the words of Freeman, it is worth noting that not only did

the American Army continued to dwindle in a manner to make a stout heart stop beating,...at the end of November (1776), exhortation, oratory and the tender of the bounty had weighted not at all against fear and cold, homesickness and the professed belief that the other man ought to now do his part...²⁹

End Notes

[1] President’s Advisory 1776 Committee, *The 1776 Report*, 2021, p.1.
(<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov.2021/01>)

[2] John H. Hazelton, *The Declaration of Independence- Its History* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1906)

[3] Pauline Maier, “Making Sense of the Fourth of July,” *American Heritage*, July/August 1997, vol. 48, Issue 4, p. 54-64.

[4] Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth* (Amherst MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997) 28.

- [5] Pauline Maier, *American Scripture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 156.
- [6] Black, Jeremy (2008). *Crisis of Empire: Britain and America in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Continuum), 131.
- [7] David H. Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 267-271.
- [8] *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1775, 6: 78.*
- [9] *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1775, 6: 79.*
- [10] *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1775, 6: 89-90*
- [11] *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1775, 6: 93-94.*
- [12] *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1775, 6: 100-101.*
- [13] *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1775, 7: 202.*
- [14] *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1775, 8: 235.*
- [15] Robert W. Coakley and Stetson Conn, *The War of the American Revolution*, (Washington, DC: Center of Military History United States Army, 2010) 30; see also Henry Belcher, *The First American Civil War* (London, England: MacMillan and Co, 1911, vol. 2), 22-27.
- [16] Coakley and Conn, 2010, 32.
- [17] Thomas Fleming, *1776 Year of Illusions* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1975), 36.
- [18] James K. Martin and Mark E. Lender, *A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789*, (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2006), 69
- [19] Fleming, 1975, 36.
- [20] Coakley and Conn, 2010, 32.
- [21] Martin and Lender, 2006, p. 75-76.
- [22] *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1776, 9: 762.*
- [23] *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1776, 9: 763.*
- [24] Douglas S. Freeman, *George Washington: A Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951, vol. 4, p. 297.
- [25] *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1776, 10: 894.* The members of Congress were alerted to the need for this legislation as the result of a very similar offer that had been made by General Howe's brother, Vice-Admiral Richard Howe, on June 20, 1776.
- [26] Freeman, 1951, vol. 4, p. 272-273.
- [27] Martin and Lender, 2006, p. 76.

[28] Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 64.

[29] Freeman, 1951, vol. 4, p. 136.