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JULY 4

July 4 is America's most important non-religious holiday. It commemorates the brave people who, had things gone badly, would all have been executed by the British for treason. All who were involved with the Declaration of Independence knew that they had signed their own death warrant. Instead, the American revolutionaries were successful in their rebellion and the document is now one of the most famous documents of all time.

The Declaration of Independence, which was finalised on July 4 1776, was the statement of explanation as to why the 13 American colonies had rebelled. The rebellion had been underway for over a year but there was no one single explanation as to why the war had begun.

The Declaration was not merely a complaint against British rule but a statement in favour of ordinary humans running their own affairs (and so being so subservient to a king or queen).

It was one of the foundation documents of the "modern" era and a beginning to the modern human rights regime.

The document took on a life of its own. Some of its phrases have entered the political language of other countries, such as that "all men are created equal" and that people have certain rights (such as "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness").

Never before in modern times had a group of private individuals decided that they could run their own affairs without kings or queens or other inherited rulers. An ordinary person had as much wisdom as a traditional ruler in deciding how a country should operate and so should have the opportunity of running the country. This was a new way of governing.

The copy in Washington DC is viewed with reverential awe by American visitors. It goes underground at night into a bombproof cellar. Washington DC could be destroyed in a sudden war but the blueprint for the next civilization will survive.

From the 16th century onwards, North America was gradually over overrun by foreigners. The Spanish were in the south (Florida and Mexico) and the west (California), while the French were mainly in the north (present day Canada). The indigenous peoples were being beaten off their land.

But North America's destiny was mainly determined by the three million American settlers in the north-east United States, who slid into a war against Britain. They controlled the smallest amount of territory and they were apparently loyal to Britain.

But King George III foolishly took their loyalty for granted. Britain protected the 13 colonies from the French and Indians and it expected the colonies to pay some of the resulting war debt.

The colonists disagreed. They thought they were better at protecting themselves without British help. Besides, they had no say in how the wars had been fought. They did not have any representatives in the Parliament in London. "No taxation without representation" was their slogan.

George III had no patience with these upstarts. He increased the tax and sent more British troops to the 13 colonies to ensure that the colonists behaved themselves.

In 1773 a group of colonists, disguised as Indians, climbed on a ship in Boston harbour and threw a load of British tea into the sea. The Boston Tea Party outraged the king. He shut the port of Boston and made half of the city's subjects unemployed.

Some people in the other colonies were angry at the British heavy-handedness. They began to see the dispute as something between the 13 colonies and Britain, and not just between Boston and Britain.

They did not want to fight. Britain was on the path to becoming a great power, while the colonists were small in number and lacked the military expertise of the British.

But they decided to take precautions because the erratic British king could not be trusted. No one could be sure what he would do next. They decided to stockpile weapons and ammunition at Concord, near Boston.

Meanwhile, the British assumed that the colonists were getting ready to rebel and so they decided to act against them. On the night of April 18 1775, silversmith Paul Revere rode to warn his fellow colonists that "The British are coming".

At Concord and nearby Lexington, American farmers were ready. They were called "minutemen" because they could be mobilized within a minute.

The following day "the shot that was heard around the world" was fired at Lexington. The War of Independence was underway.

On August 23 1775, the king proclaimed that a “general rebellion existed in the American colonies” and that the “utmost endeavours” should be made to “suppress it and bring the traitors to justice”.

Before that day, the 13 colonies had seen themselves as separate entities, each owning its loyalty directly back to London. There was little sense of national unity. Now there was a common threat of execution hanging over all their heads. The king had united the feuding colonies – against him.

The war was to drag on until 1783. Some of the colonists disapproved. The Loyalists eventually fled north to British-controlled Canada.

George Washington was unanimously elected commander in chief of the new Continental Army. He knew the immense task ahead of him. But (like present day guerrilla leaders) he knew he could win, despite if necessary losing every battle. He could simply tire out the British. That is what he eventually did – and he became one of the world’s most famous military leaders.

On June 7 1776, the Continental Congress in Philadelphia formally voted to declare the colonies free from British rule. They then had to formulate what the war was all about. On June 10, the politicians gave the job of writing their statement to a committee of five, headed by the young Virginian lawyer and landowner Thomas Jefferson. He was not a good speaker - he was called the “silent member”.

But he was good with the pen. The draft was completed on July 2. It was voted for on July 4.

The names of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were withheld from the public until 1777 because it was an act of treason. If the Revolution failed, they could all have been executed. In fact, some of them were killed in the war or lost relatives or lost their property. The first public reading of the document was made on July 8 to a crowd in Philadelphia. The following day it was read to George Washington and his troops in New York City. The crowd were so inspired that they pulled a statue of King George from its pedestal and melted it into 42,000 bullets.

After the war Thomas Jefferson went on to even greater service to his new nation. In 1785, he went to France as the US minister (where he supported the French Revolution, which had been partly inspired by the American one).

He became US president in 1800 and served two terms. He took on the Barbary pirates (Muslims in North Africa) who were attacking American shipping. In 1803 he bought the Louisiana Territory off the French and so greatly expanded the size of the US. He then sent out the explorer



team Lewis and Clark to map the extent of the new country and to find a river route to the west coast.

He remained active to the end. He was one of his country's most distinguished citizens. He maintained his love of learning and he helped create the University of Virginia.

He died on exactly the 50th anniversary of his famous Declaration – July 4 1826.

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