

# ONE NATION UNDER GOD

## Jamie Buckingham

The date was June 7, 1776. The summer heat was already stifling as the Continental Congress convened to consider a motion by Richard Henry Lee, the delegate from Virginia. Lee's resolution was "that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states." John Adams of Massachusetts seconded the motion and in the quiet that followed the small group of men who represented only a minority of the colonists realized the time for action was at hand.

A committee was appointed to work on a Declaration of Independence, but to Thomas Jefferson was entrusted the actual preparation of the paper which was brought back and approved on July 2. Only twelve of the thirteen colonies approved, however—New York not voting. Two days later the thirteen colonies voted officially, but refused to sign the document until the voting was unanimous. Such a gigantic task as declaring independence from George III,

who said his crown was divinely bestowed, could only be undertaken if all the men were of one accord.

The delegates from New York finally approved the document on July 9, and ten days later fifty-six men gathered in a small room in Philadelphia and boldly signed their names to the parchment. It was both the birth certificate of the nation—and the death warrant for all who signed. It was called the Declaration of Independence.

The fundamental principle of this hallowed document is that people have the right to abolish any government which destroys their God-given rights of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. It further declares that all government derives its powers from the divine right of kings—a position which the Church of England declared heresy and the Crown called treason.

This strong desire to be free under God went all the way back to the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock in 1620—156 years before the Declara-

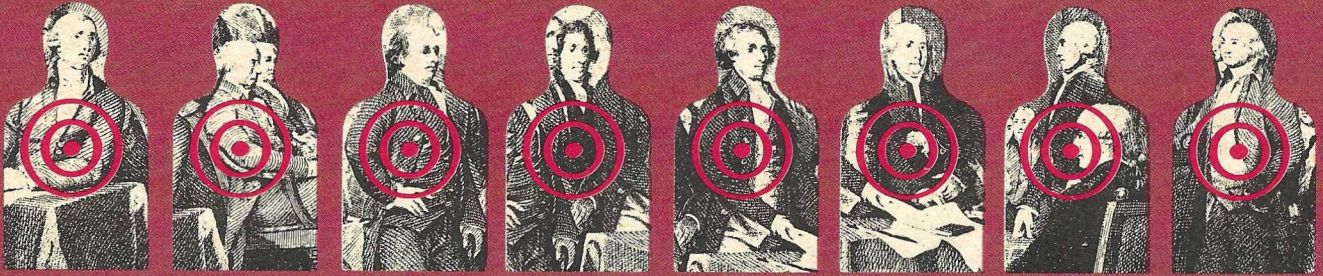
tion of Independence was signed. The Pilgrims came seeking religious freedom and the opportunity to practice their Bible-based, God-fearing faith in freedom. They believed in separation of church and state with pastors elected by congregations, not appointed by the monarchy.

### Blessing in Disguise

Forced to flee England, they went to Holland and eventually braved the rough Atlantic on the tiny Mayflower. Intending to land in Virginia, they were blown off course and came ashore at what is now Provincetown, Massachusetts. It turned out to be a great blessing. Free from the laws of the English settlement in Virginia, they drew up their own "covenant" or compact for self-government: The Mayflower Compact. It became the foundation stone for the settling of a nation.

"We are knit together in a body in a most strict and sacred bond and covenant of the Lord, of the violation whereof we make great conscience,





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and by virtue whereof we do hold ourselves strictly tied to all care of each other's good, and of the whole by everyone, and so mutually."

Although the covenant was legalistic, it was scripturally sound. It required everyone to keep the Sabbath, respect the sanctity of the marriage relationship, and obey other laws of the community. It was the mustard seed which grew into a great tree of American democracy and religious freedom.

As Governor William Bradford wrote:

"... as one small candle may light a thousand, so the light here kindled hath shone unto many, yea in some sort to our whole nation; let the glorious name of Jehovah have all the praise."

The Mayflower Compact sounded, in many respects, like the type of living required by the early Apostles as recorded in the Book of Acts. Although private ownership was hal- lowed, sharing with a neighbor in need was even more sacred. Even more

awesome was the fact the Pilgrim leaders entered into a solemn covenant with God—a covenant they intended to keep, even if it had to be legislated.

This brought excesses notably under the Puritans who soon followed the Pilgrims to New England. They saw themselves as the New Israel, and Cotton Mather, one of the leading clergymen, even proposed the colonists adopt Hebrew as their state language. People who fell into immorality were often executed, and in less than sixteen years from the time the Puritans fled persecution, they were themselves driving religious dissenters into the wilderness.

Two of these dissenters were Roger Williams and Thomas Hooker. Williams believed the final authority rested in the people—not king, magistrate, or even the clergy who claimed apostolic authority. He left Massachusetts and established Rhode Island—guaranteeing "soul liberty" to all.

Hooker went south to Connecticut

and established his state as an "orderly and decent government under God."

Thus it was out of this rich Christian heritage that the signers of the Declaration entered into a new covenant with one another and with God.

#### **The Cost is Great**

The signers, all fifty-six of them, were immediately declared traitors by the British Crown, and bounties were offered for their capture or death. They knew their signatures meant they would lose everything—but what was everything without freedom? At the last moment Jefferson, recalling the deep statement of covenant in the Mayflower Compact, inserted that awesome closing sentence in the Declaration of Independence—a sentence which carries with it the great principles of Kingdom living: "... with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

The sentence was no empty pledge,

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for in the years that followed what they pledged was required of nearly every man who signed.

Twenty-one of the signers were under forty years of age, and three were in their twenties. All but two had wives and children, and all but one were wealthy men with much property to lose. They were men without power. They had no authority to levy taxes, form an army, or even make a flag. All they had was the will to be free, a precept garnered from their study of the Word of God. By signing their names they automatically forfeited all their earthly belongings to the Crown. They literally laid down their lives for what they believed.

JOHN HANCOCK, heir to Boston's largest shipping firm, wrote his name with a large flourish and quipped: "I want John Bull to be able to read my signature without spectacles." He immediately contributed one hundred thousand pounds to the emerging nation and lost it all.

Five of the men were from New Jersey. RICHARD STOCKTON had donated the land for Princeton University. He was imprisoned and put on a felon's diet, a pound of bread each day. He died soon after his release.

THE REVEREND JOHN WITHERSPOON was Princeton's first president. He was captured, and his son was killed in action against the British.

JOHN HART's wife died during his absence when he was forced to flee from home. Several of his thirteen children were never found following his wife's tragic death.

ABRAHAM CLARK managed to elude the British but his two young sons were captured and held on a prison hellship. The British offered to release them if Clark would renounce the American cause. He refused and his sons died under horrible circumstances.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, at the age of seventy, was the oldest and most distinguished of all the signers. He lost his entire fortune, but the thing that grieved him most was the knowledge his only son refused to go along with him. His son adhered to the Crown and died in England without ever seeing his father again.

GEORGE CLYMER put all his wealth into the new government—

continental bills of credit—and lost everything.

ROBERT MORRIS, the great financier, owned 200 ships in addition to mercantile and bank interest. He was sent to a debtors' prison where President Washington visited him after the war. Even though Washington helped pass a new law which permitted his release, Morris died a poor man.

GEORGE ROSS, whose niece Betsy designed the new flag which was adopted on June 14, 1777, fought beside General Washington but died in obscurity. His name cannot be found in most of the modern-day history books except in connection with his niece.

GEORGE TAYLOR had come to Pennsylvania from Ireland as a bond servant and rose to great wealth. The war consumed all his belongings, however, and he died in obscurity.

The southern campaign of the British was the most vicious of all. The signers from South Carolina and Georgia suffered the most.

LYMAN HALL's large coastal rice plantations in Georgia were destroyed, and his family left destitute.

BUTTON GWINNETT was the wealthy owner of the beautiful thirty-six-square-mile Saint Catherine Island. The British attacked it with fury, leveling Gwinnett's mansion with fire and cannon. Neither Gwinnett nor his wife and daughter survived the war.

GEORGE WALTON, an orphan, had come up the hard way as a carpenter's apprentice. He educated himself to the law and enlisted in the militia as a captain. Later he was captured during heavy fighting and spent many months in a disease-wracked prison. After Yorktown he was released and he returned to the practice of law, devoting most of his remaining life to public service.

All four signers from South Carolina were born into families of great wealth. Like many children of rich landowners, they had been educated in England.

Trying to protect his beloved Palmetto State, THOMAS LYNCH contracted the dreaded "swamp fever." On his doctor's orders he set sail with his young wife for the Dutch West Indies. The ship was lost at sea.

The other three South Carolina sig-

ners were captured during the fierce battle of the siege of Charleston. ARTHUR MIDDLETON, EDWARD RUTLEDGE, and THOMAS HEYWARD were sent to a military prison at Saint Augustine. Their paintings were slashed with sabers, their silver and furnishings confiscated, and their farms set to the torch. Rutledge, who was the youngest signer, discovered while he was in prison that his mother had also been jailed as an enemy spy.

JOSEPH HEWES, a North Carolina Quaker, played a key role in persuading delegates to sign the Declaration and support the cause—even though he was pledged to nonviolence as a matter of spiritual principle. Later he helped John Paul Jones fit out the *Bon Homme Richard* in which Jones earned his fame. When the Quakers, meeting in Philadelphia, refused to support the Continental Congress, Hewes broke with the church and never returned. He died from overwork.

WILLIAM HOOPER from Wilmington, North Carolina, was best known as an eloquent orator who stumped the new nation in support of the "cause." After the war he returned to his native city only to find himself both penniless and homeless.

JOHN PENN who had only two years of schooling at the age of eighteen, nevertheless became a distinguished lawyer and served in Congress. After serving several years for no pay, he made the decision to return to his law practice to try to pick up loose ends. He died, however, before his term in Congress was over.

Another famous name was BENJAMIN HARRISON. He lost heavily in the war. His shipyards on the James River in Virginia were burned and many of his cargoes lost. As with Abraham of old, the seed of this godly man continued to bless the nation for years to come. His son, William Henry Harrison, became our ninth president and his great-grandson, Benjamin Harrison, our twenty-third president.

RICHARD HENRY LEE's great-grandfather had, through Oliver Cromwell, arranged dominion status for the colony of Virginia. Lee, however, who strongly favored independence, was marked for special reprisal by the British who demanded that Lee



and George Washington be surrendered to the British as a prelude to any negotiations in case the colonies wanted to talk surrender. Of course this never came to pass, but Lee remained a prime target for the British, and the bounty on his head was never removed.

Lee's brother, FRANCIS LIGHT-FOOT LEE, helped make up the only two-brother team to sign the declaration. He was also a marked man, hated not only by the British but by many of the colonists because he opposed slavery and favored extending the colonies' west boundary to the Mississippi River. He was instrumental in including the Bill of Rights in the Constitution.

GEORGE WYTHE was another wealthy plantation owner. After he signed the Declaration, however, his plantation manager defected and turned over all slaves and other assets to the British. Impoverished at the war's end, he accepted a humble teaching position at a new college, William and Mary. Ironically, he is credited with charting a course of jurisprudence which prevailed for more than 100 years in the new nation's system of law.

CARTER BRAXTON was another signer from Virginia. Owner of a large fortune which included ships, cargo, and estates, he had nothing left after the British departed. His two sons-in-law followed him into poverty, and when he died his widow had to depend on charity from relatives for final support.

THOMAS JEFFERSON, who actually wrote the draft for the Declaration, became our third president. Like Francis Lightfoot Lee, he strongly favored the abolishment of slavery from the colonies and had even written this into the Declaration of Independence. One of his greatest disappointments was seeing this edited out at the last minute. Jefferson so sadly neglected his personal affairs that he died on the verge of bankruptcy.

Another Virginian, THOMAS NELSON, mortgaged his vast land holdings to support the French fleet in American waters. When he discovered the British were using his stately brick mansion at Yorktown for their headquarters he bravely gave the order to

fire on his home until it was demolished. He died in a small house in a coastal village—a pauper.

Of all the signers of the Declaration, however, perhaps none sensed the cost as much as CAESAR RODNEY from Delaware, the first of the newborn states. Rodney was suffering from a face malignancy which his doctors advised could be corrected by surgeons in England alone. Rodney weighed the cost before he dipped his quill in the ink to sign the parchment. He knew that by signing he was literally signing his own death warrant, for no signer would ever be permitted to return to England. Knowing all this, Rodney bravely scratched his name on the parchment and in due course of time, died from the malignancy.

These were men who knew that the glorious achievement of freedom could only be purchased in the price of blood. Nine of them died of wounds or wartime hardships. Five were captured and subjected to brutal and cruel treatment. One had to flee from his wife's deathbed and lost his children. The homes of twelve were burned, and seventeen lost everything they had. The wives, sons, daughters—even the fathers and mothers of many—were killed, jailed, or tortured. All but two were offered immunity, freedom, restoration of their property and the lives of their loved ones if they would break their pledge. Let it forever be remembered that not a single signer defected or changed his mind throughout these darkest hours of their lives. "Give me liberty or give me death" were not just the words of Patrick Henry—they were the will of all.

#### **A Unique Nation**

Two-hundred years have now passed. Yet even with all the loud voices in our nation, screaming against a freedom based on "In God we trust," voices demanding a perversion of freedom which leads to license, voices crying for us to capitulate to the anti-God forces outside the nation, the United States remains a free and blessed nation—unique in the history of mankind.

Just as God honored the covenant made between him and his servant Abraham, blessing and preserving the Jewish nation, so his blessing, too, is still upon America. Not because of who

we are—but because of who they were: the pilgrims and the signers of our Declaration who entered into a sacred covenant with God and with one another.

Today, as then, there are unbelievable forces at work, both within and without the nation, trying to extinguish the torch of liberty, justice, and freedom for all. A Danish doctor, who had to leave his practice because he refused to perform legal abortions, says it clearly. "Democracy can only exist in a Christian framework. When a land ceases to be Christian then democracy will destroy what Christianity stands for—and do it in the name of democracy."

Democracy without God is chaos.

Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ says the Christians of America have less than a year to turn this nation back to God. He believes it can only be done by fasting, prayer, repentance, and voting godly men into places of leadership in the November elections. If the American people do not re-state the original proposition that we are protected not by might nor by power but by His Spirit, then the present judgment of God shall change to God's condemnation—and he will destroy us as certainly as he destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.

Yet the torch of freedom can be kept burning beside the golden door. The secret: "If my people . . . (not the leaders, nor the military), but if the people of God will humble themselves, pray, seek God's face through fasting, and repent—then God shall heal our land and restore the years the locusts have eaten (2 Chron. 7:14).

When someone said that there was nobody on the colonists' side but God, Dr. John J. Zubly, the Swiss clergyman who represented Georgia, replied in his heavily-accented English, "Dat is enough." ✕

*"Protect us by thy might  
Great God, our King."*



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