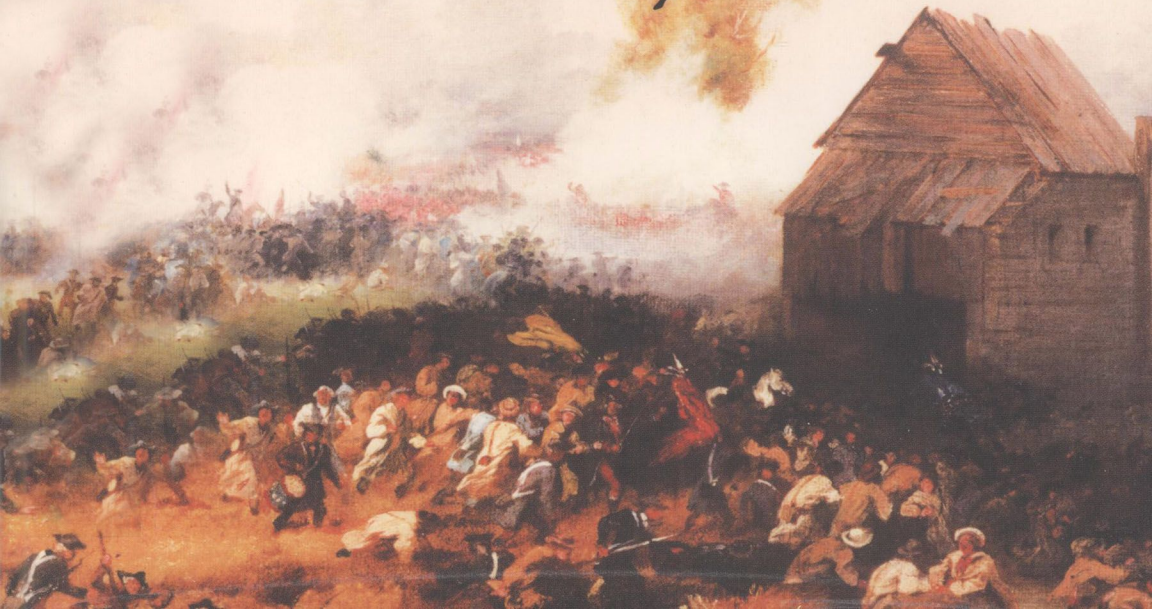
JOSEPH J. ELLIS

Pulitzer Prize–winning author of

FOUNDING BROTHERS

Revolutionary SUMMER

The Birth of American Independence



REVOLUTIONARY SUMMER

The Birth of American Independence

JOSEPH J. ELLIS

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REVOLUTIONARY SUMMER

In memory of

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PREFACE

If you will grant a somewhat expansive definition of summer, then the summer of 1776 was the crescendo moment in American history. During the five months between May and October, a consensus for American independence emerged and was officially declared, the outlines for an American republic were first proposed, the problems that would shape its future were faced and finessed, and the largest armada ever to cross the Atlantic arrived to kill the American rebellion in the cradle, which it then very nearly did.

There are two intertwined strands to this story that are customarily told as stand-alone accounts in their own right. The first is the political tale of how thirteen colonies came together and agreed on the decision to secede from the British Empire. Here the center point is the Continental Congress, and the leading players, at least in my version, are John Adams, John Dickinson, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin.

The second is the military narrative of the battles on Long Island and Manhattan, where the British army and navy delivered a series of devastating defeats to an American army of amateurs, but missed whatever chance existed to end it all. The focal point of this story is the Continental Army, and the major actors are George Washington, Nathanael Greene, and the British brothers Richard and William Howe.

My contention in the pages that follow is that the political and mili-

tary experiences were two sides of a single story, which are incomprehensible unless told together. They were both happening at the same time, events on one front influenced outcomes on the other, and what most modern scholarship treats separately was experienced by the participants as one.

More specifically, the political consensus that formed around American independence in June and July was driven by a widespread loathing of the looming British invasion at New York. And the commanders of both the British and the American armies made battlefield decisions on multiple occasions based on their perceived political impact on public opinion. The battles on Long Island and Manhattan were political contests for hearts and minds more than military maneuvers for territory.

Knowing the outcome of the American Revolution has also blinded us to the problematic character of this intense moment, when everything was in the balance, history was happening at an accelerating pace, and both sides—especially the Americans—were improvising on the edge of catastrophe. The delegates in the Continental Congress and the officers in the Continental Army were forced to make highly consequential decisions without knowing what the consequences would be. In this compressed moment, they were living, as Adams put it, "in the midst of a Revolution," which almost by definition meant that they were making it up as they went along.

Two articles of faith were also colliding. The first was that the British army and navy were invincible, which turned out to be true. The second was that the cause of American independence, often referred to in semi-sacred incantations as "The Cause," was inevitable, which turned out to be truer. Recovering this supercharged moment as a historian necessarily entails seeing the choices as they were perceived by the participants at the time, on both the American and the British sides. But how we assess those choices is inescapably a function of our privileged perch in the twenty-first century.

For example, the Continental Congress made a deliberate decision to avoid any consideration of the slavery question, even though most delegates were fully aware that it violated the principles they claimed to be fighting for. Adams is most revealing on this score because, more

than anyone else, he articulated the need to defer the full promise of the American Revolution in order to assure a robust consensus on the independence question. Whether this was an admirably realistic decision in the Burkean tradition or a moral failure in the "justice delayed is justice denied" mode is a question we cannot avoid asking, knowing as we do how the next century of American history would play out.[1]

To take another example, our recent experiences in Southeast Asia and the Middle East have prepared us to understand the dilemmas confronting armies of occupation in a distant land, facing an indigenous enemy with a revolutionary agenda. The Howe brothers had the misfortune to encounter those conditions for the first time in modern history, so they confidently assumed that their military superiority would prove decisive because they had no reason to believe otherwise. And from a conventional military point of view, at least tactically, their conduct of the New York campaign was a textbook example of a coordinated naval and ground operation. But our perspective as a somewhat chastened imperialistic power changes the core question. It was not "How could the British possibly lose?" but rather "Was there any realistic chance for them to win?"[2]

If such a chance ever did exist, it occurred in the summer of 1776, when the Howe brothers missed several opportunities to destroy the Continental Army on Long Island and Manhattan. Chance, luck, and even the vagaries of the weather played crucial roles, as did the strategic and tactical decisions of the Howes, which came under considerable criticism after the war, when hindsight revealed that their more measured and limited goals were rooted in a fundamental misreading of the challenges they were facing. There was disagreement within the American camp at the time about the fate of the rebellion if the Continental Army ceased to exist. We can never know, because it did not happen, though it was a very close call. Hindsight does allow us to know that once the Howes missed the opportunity to destroy the Continental Army early in the war, it would never come again.

So this is the story of the birth of the American Revolution, the pains and tribulations that accompanied that process, and the large and small decisions in both the political and the military arenas that

shaped the outcome. It is told as a story, which means that narrative is presumed to be the highest form of analysis, and recovering the way it looked to the participants must precede any imposition of our superior wisdom in the present.

Before we begin our trek back to the past, two oddly shaped features of the terrain merit mention, chiefly because they do not align themselves with the expectations we carry in our heads and therefore need to be marked on the map beforehand.

The first is a distinctive sense of honor, a lingering vestige of the medieval world that was still alive and pervasive, especially within the military culture of the eighteenth century. The core concept in this quasi-chivalric code was character, the notion that a clearly defined set of principles governed a gentleman's behavior at all times, most especially in highly stressful or life-threatening situations. Men driven by this aristocratic sense of honor would tend to behave in ways we consider strange, like standing at attention in the face of a salvo of gunfire rather than lying down or seeking cover. Generals would discuss strategic and tactical options on the battlefield in similarly peculiar ways, because they regarded retreat as dishonorable and harmful to their reputations. Washington is the most conspicuously honor-driven character in our story, and his conduct throughout the Battle of New York is inexplicable unless viewed from this eighteenth-century perspective.

The second place we need to mark on the map is actually an empty space. Because we know that the American Revolution eventually led to the creation of a consolidated nation-state and subsequent world power, it is nearly irresistible to read these future developments back into the story. But in truth, no shared sense of American nationhood existed in 1776, even though the Continental Congress and the Continental Army can be regarded as embryonic versions of such. All alliances among the colonies, and then the states, were presumed to be provisional and temporary arrangements. Allegiances within the far-flung American population remained local, or at most regional, in scope. To presume otherwise is to impose a level of political coherence on a much messier reality and to underestimate the dilemma that American leaders in the congress and the army were truly facing. They were attempt-

ing to orchestrate a collective response to multiple political and military challenges on behalf of an American population that had yet to become the American people. In that sense, the very term *American* Revolution is misleading.

With these cautionary signs in place, let us return to the late spring of 1776. An undeclared war has been raging for over a year, and a huge British fleet is preparing to sail across the Atlantic to deliver a decisive blow that will crush the American rebellion at its moment of birth. Meanwhile, the Continental Congress has not declared American independence because moderate delegates regard war with Great Britain as suicidal, and it is not clear where the loyalties of most American colonists lie. The proverbial arrow is in the air, and it is clearly going to land at New York, the obvious target for the British invasion. Whether there is a consensus on American independence is much less clear, though John Adams claims to know where history is headed.

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REVOLUTIONARY SUMMER

☆ I ☆

Prudence Dictates

Is it not a saying of Moses, "Who am I, that I should go in and out before this great People?" When I consider the great events which are passed, and those greater which are rapidly advancing, and that I may have been instrumental in touching some Springs, and turning some small Wheels, which have had and will have such Effects, I feel an Awe upon my Mind, which is not easily described.

—JOHN ADAMS TO ABIGAIL ADAMS, May 17, 1776

By the spring of 1776, British and American troops had been killing each other at a robust rate for a full year. While the engagements at Lexington and Concord had been mere skirmishes, the battle at Bunker Hill had been a bloodbath, especially for the British, who lost more than 1,000 men, nearly half their attack force. The American dead numbered in the hundreds, a figure inflated by the fact that all the wounded left on the field were dispatched with bayonets by British execution squads enraged at the loss of so many of their comrades. Back in London, one retired officer was heard to say that with a few more victories like this, the British Army would be annihilated.

Then, for the next nine months, a congregation of militia units totaling 20,000 troops under the command of General George Washington bottled up a British garrison of 7,000 troops under General

William Howe in a marathon staring match called the Boston Siege. The standoff ended in March 1776, when Washington achieved tactical supremacy by placing artillery on Dorchester Heights, forcing Howe to evacuate the city. Abigail Adams watched the British sail away from nearby Penn's Hill. "You may count upwards of 100 & 70 sail," she reported. "They look like a forrest." By then the motley crew of militia was being referred to as the Continental Army, and Washington had become a bona fide war hero.[1]

In addition to these major engagements, the British navy had made several raids on the coastal towns of New England, and an ill-fated expedition of 1,000 American troops led by Benedict Arnold, after hacking its way through the Maine wilderness in the dead of winter, suffered a crushing defeat in the attempt to capture the British stronghold at Quebec. Though most of the military action was restricted to New England and Canada, no reasonable witness could possibly deny that the war for American independence, not yet called the American Revolution, had begun.

But if you widen the lens to include the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, the picture becomes quite blurry and downright strange. For despite the mounting carnage, the official position of the congress remained abiding loyalty to the British Crown. The delegates did not go so far as to deny that the war was happening, but they did embrace the curious claim that George III did not know about it. Those British soldiers sailing away from Boston were not His Majesty's troops but "ministerial troops," meaning agents of the British ministry acting without the knowledge of the king.[2]

While everyone in the Continental Congress knew this was a fanciful fabrication, it was an utterly essential fiction that preserved the link between the colonies and the crown and thereby held open the possibility of reconciliation. Thomas Jefferson undoubtedly had these motives in mind when he crafted the following words a few months later: "Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient reasons; and accordingly all experience hath shown, that mankind are more disposed to suffer,

while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed."[3]

One might argue that those wounded American boys who were bayoneted to death on Bunker Hill amounted to something more than light and transient reasons. Washington himself, once he learned of those atrocities, let it be known that he had lost all patience with the moderates in the congress who were—it became one of his favorite phrases—"still feeding themselves on the dainty food of reconciliation." Though he made a point of reminding all his subordinates that the army took its orders from the Continental Congress—civilian control was one of those articles of faith that required no discussion—Washington did not believe he could send brave young men to their deaths for any cause less than American independence. That was what "The Cause" had come to mean for him and for the army. His civilian superiors down in Philadelphia were straggling behind him on the patriotic path, but Washington simply presumed that, sooner or later, they would catch up.[4]

In the meantime, however, during the final months of 1775, the military and political sides of the American Revolution were not aligned. There were, in effect, two embodiments of American resistance to British imperialism, two epicenters representing the American response to Parliament's presumption of sovereignty. The Continental Army, under Washington's command, regarded American independence as a foregone conclusion, indeed the only justification for its existence. The Continental Congress regarded American independence as a last resort, and moderate members under the leadership of John Dickinson from Pennsylvania continued to describe it as a suicidal act to be avoided at almost any cost.

It was clear at the time, and became only clearer in retrospect, that the obvious strategy of the British government should have been to exploit the gap between these two positions by proposing some reconfiguration of the British Empire that gave the American colonists a measure of control over their domestic affairs in return for a renewed expression of American loyalty to the king. Two years later, the British ministry actually proposed just such an arrangement, but by then it was