

Unfortunate Initial Conditions

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A couple weeks ago my wife and I were spending the weekend on Steamboat Slough in the Delta at a quiet spot under the trees where water flowed coolly just a few steps away, where the sun, breeze, temperature and humidity combined to create a place as close to heaven as one can possibly find on earth -- if one isn't living in Hawaii, that is -- so the day should have been perfect.

But it wasn't.

Staying next to us were several families who were certain that we would love country music as much as they did. As Hank Williams' cheatin' heart became so lonely that he could cry and Patsy Cline got crazy before she fell to pieces, I stood staring at the water with my arm around my wife, my bones resonating to the earth-pounding beat that only the highest quality stereo with bass boosters can produce, and I wondered how different life would have been right here in these great United States of America if only Thomas Jefferson and John Adams had taken a little more time crafting the Declaration of Independence.



The summer of 1776 is as hot as hot can get and so muggy that John Adams dries his forehead with a handkerchief after climbing the stairs to the second floor of the inn where Thomas Jefferson is staying. Adams knocks on the door twice, rapping hard, the sound like two shots from a gun. There's nothing to fear. The British aren't in Philadelphia where the Continental Congress is meeting.

Jefferson is frowning when he opens the door in a loosely fitting nightshirt even though it's no more than two in the afternoon.

“Come in, come in,” Jefferson says, offering Adams his hand. “I expected you earlier, but then thought myself mistaken.” It’s Jefferson’s habit to claim error when he knows he’s right. It saves time and puts his detractors on the defensive. But Jefferson has always liked Adams and now likes him even more since the two of them have been assigned by the Committee of Five, which includes Ben Franklin, Bob Livingston and Roger Sherman, the task of drafting the Declaration of Independence.

Jefferson points to hooks on the wall. “My God, John, you’re dressed for winter. Hang your coat there.” Jefferson flourishes his hand about his head. “Pour yourself some wine. I tell you, ideas are buzzing about in my brain like hornets trapped in a sack. Have you done that, John?”

Adams smiles. “I can’t say that I have.”

“Late at night I catch them,” Jefferson says, crouched down, skulking forward now as though he’s in pursuit. “They hang from a tree limb in their round gray hive sound asleep when I snatch them into my sack. In the morning sun they buzz for their lives.”

“Rather gruesome,” Adams says, leaning back in his chair, sipping the weak, warm wine. “The hornets are trapped like slaves on a plantation.”

Jefferson gives Adams a severe sidelong glance as he picks up pages from the table. “I started to take down some ideas. What do you think of this?”

Jefferson places the glasses that Franklin made for him on his nose and reads. “King George has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain who is determined to keep open a market where men should be bought and sold.”

Jefferson looks up. "That's as far as I've got on the slavery issue."

"Don't you have slaves yourself?" Adams says.

"I do," Jefferson says, nodding once as though passing sentence on himself. "But I can change. The country can change."

"Not that much," Adams says. "Not the Southern States. Certainly not your beloved Virginia."

"But we should try," Jefferson says.

"Have you made any progress on the opening?" Adams asks. "If we captivate them with our boldness, they might yet be convinced that slavery is a stain we cannot clean except through abolition."

Jefferson stands with his pages and presses his fingers against his brow. "On this I have good news, an opening, if you'll pardon my hubris, that will change the world."

Adams laughs. "Of course this is no time for modesty, but the world is a big, an unknown place."

Jefferson stares down at his pages and reads. "We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with inherent and inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to –"

An awful, loud sound interrupts Jefferson. A band of drummers and fiddlers is playing directly beneath their window. "A dance at Liberty Hall this evening!" a crier screams at the top of his horse lungs as the fiddlers screech like cats in heat and the drummers pound an incoherent beat.

"Damn your music!" Jefferson shouts down on their heads. "Take your raucous noise away from this place. We're about important business here."

A fiddler looks up. "Are we not a new and free country?" he shouts back. "Is your business more important than ours? Is it

not our right as we fight the British to do as we please?”

“He has a point,” Adams says to Jefferson’s back. “You’ve just concluded as much in your opening. All men are created equal and endowed with rights to do as they please. Perhaps you weren’t thinking of the common man when you wrote those words.”

Jefferson walks away from the window and slumps in his chair for a moment, but only for a moment before he moves to the table. “I need to add just a bit more, something about liberty tempered by the needs of others.”

Jefferson dips his quill into the inkpot and writes furiously, saying the words aloud as the nib scratches the parchment: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inherent and inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness and that these individual rights can only be fully realized when the rights of others are held in equal esteem.”

Adams laughs. “If you include that, Tom, we’ll stop fighting the British. If we think of others, of the British, you’ll kill our zeal for war. We’ll start negotiating again, and that could go on long after we’re dead.”

Jefferson’s lips tighten. With the sound of the miserable band scratching at his ears, he draws a line through his concern for others. “The individual over everything, then,” Jefferson says. “Long live the Republic.”

When the Declaration of Independence is adopted by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776, it’s a bright, sunny, but cool day in Philadelphia. Some are heard to say that the weather is almost Hawaiian, which is odd since Captain Cook won’t visit and die on the islands for another two years.

While my account is fictitious, and I have no evidence that Jefferson and Adams were ever worried about the potential self-

centeredness of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson's anti-slavery passage quoted above was in his fair copy, but removed by the Continental Congress.

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