Remember November: The Month Americans Learned of George III's "Abdication"

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At George III's coronation in 1761, the 23-year-old monarch stood near the height of his popularity in America. Great Britain seemed poised for victory in war against France, where Louis XV ruled by divine right and exercised what seemed like absolute power. Meanwhile, the British monarch's reputation as a champion of liberty, together with his duty to share governance with Parliament, led Boston minister Andrew Eliot in 1765 to describe Britain's balanced constitution as "the glory of Britons, and the envy of foreigners." George III retained Americans' esteem even after they began to oppose the actions of Parliament. In 1766, the New York General Assembly commissioned an equestrian statue of the king to recognize "the innumerable and singular Benefits received from our most gracious sovereign"—including his assent to the repeal of the Stamp Act, which threatened to violate their property rights through taxation without representation. Erected in lower Manhattan in 1770, its sculptor, Joseph Wilton, aimed to echo the famous depiction of Marcus Aurelius on Rome's Capitoline Hill. John Adams gazed upon the "Statue of his Majesty on Horse back" when, in 1774, he stopped in New York on his way to the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia. Distraught by Parliament's recent actions, including the Coercive Acts, Adams nonetheless had not given up on the king, whose larger-than-life likeness he admired in Roman garb and "gilded with Gold, standing on a Pedestal of Marble very high."[1]

[1] Andrew Eliot, *A Sermon Preached before His Excellency, Francis Bernard… May 29th, 1765* (Boston, 1765), p. 14; *The New-York Gazette; or, the Weekly Post-Boy*, June 30, 1766; John Adams, August 20, 1774, in L. H. Butterfield, ed., *The Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 4 vols. (Harvard University Press, 1961), 2:110; Bob Ruppert, "The Statue of George III," *Journal of the American Revolution* (September 8, 2014).

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In the two years that followed, everything seemed to change. In Massachusetts, at Lexington and Concord, Britain launched a war in April 1775. The Continental Congress responded by creating the Continental Army and appointing George Washington as its commander-in-chief. But Congress' resolve to meet force with force did not yet amount to a war for independence. In July, it sent to George III the Olive Branch petition, which detailed American grievances while assuring the king that colonists remained "your Majesty's faithful subjects" and begging "that your royal authority and influence may be graciously interposed to procure us relief … and to settle peace through every part of your dominion." In September Benjamin Franklin noted that "whether America is ever again to have any Connection with Britain either Commercial or Political is at present uncertain. All depends upon that Nation's coming to its Senses. Here we are preparing and determined to run all Risques rather than comply with her mad Demands." Meanwhile, Connecticut delegate Eliphalet Dyer observed that the "K—g is Obstinately bent to prosecute the Warr against the Americans as appears by the K—s answer to the London Petition," in which the lord mayor, aldermen, and Commons of the city of London urged him—unsuccessfully—to cease military action in America.[2]

Prospects failed to brighten. In fact, during November 1775 it became clear to many Americans that the king had sided not with them but instead with the hardline government of Lord Frederick North. This transformed the contest between Britain and America. What had been a constitutional crisis hinging on whether, as Parliament asserted in its 1766 Declaratory Act, it possessed the authority to legislate for the colonies "in all cases whatsoever," became something even more profound. The betrayal of the king prompted an increasing number of Americans to consider whether the British government could be considered a government at all. As early as September 1774, Patrick

[2] "Second Petition from Congress to the King, [July 8, 1775]," in Julian P. Boyd, et al., eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 47 vols. to date (Princeton University Press, 1950–), 1:219–21; Benjamin Franklin to Jonathan Williams Jr., September 12, 1775, in Paul H. Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 26 vols. (Library of Congress, 1976–2000), 2:5; Eliphalet Dyer to Joseph Trumbull, September 15, 1775, in Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 2:14–15.

Henry thundered on the floor of Congress that "we are in a State of Nature." As in philosopher John Locke's imagined land without government, Americans possessed natural rights but no effective means to secure them. Bad enough that, for more than a decade, Britain had failed to protect their rights—which Locke had written was government's purpose, justifying the replacement of King James II with William and Mary during England's Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689. Worse still, Britain had acted to seize their property, trample on their liberty, and threaten their lives. If George III had abandoned his American subjects, wasn't he abdicating his claim to serve as their king?[3]

The *Pennsylvania Journal* reported on November 1, 1775 that "no answer has been yet given, nor will any be given, to the petition of the Continental Congress, as it is thought beneath the dignity of Government to treat with or acknowledge an assembly which has no constitutional or legal existence." The king's intransigence—as well as his August 1775 "Proclamation for suppressing Rebellion & Sedition," word of which arrived in early November—cheered Samuel Ward, a Rhode Island delegate to Congress who itched for independence. The king's hard-line stance provided "immense Service" since "Our Councils have been hitherto too fluctuating" between "measures for carrying on the War" and inaction provoked by the belief that "nothing must be done to widen the unhappy Breech between G.B. & the Colonies." Indeed, not a single member of the Rhode Island delegation expected "a Redress of Grievances from Petition." As Joseph Hewes of New Jersey observed, "We have been told" that the Olive Branch Petition "will be disregarded; that we shall be declared rebels, and our

[3] "The Declaratory Act, March 18, 1766," in Danby Pickering, ed., *The Statutes at Large*, 46 vols. (Cambridge, 1762–1807), 27:20; Patrick Henry's remarks as recorded by John Adams, "Notes of Debates in the Continental Congress, September 6, 1774," in L. H. Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 4 vols. (Harvard University Press, 1961), 2:124; John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government: A Critical Edition with an Introduction and Apparatus Criticus*, ed. Peter Laslett, rev. ed. (New American Library, 1963), pp. 309–23, 327–44, 361–99, 446–77.

estates confiscated; we are threatened with ships of war, troops, Russians, Hanoverians, and Hessians. God knows how it will end."[4]

John Hancock soon received confirmation that Congress would receive "No Answer" to its olive branch, with news arriving of "the King Refusing to Receive it on the Throne" and consigning the colonists to "work out our own Salvation." Samuel Adams fumed that George III treated the petition "with insolent Contempt." The British people, who seemed "to be generally fitted for the Yoke of arbitrary Power," were little better. America's few allies in England offered "feeble and languid" support, while "the Tyrant" on the throne "is flushed with Expectations from his Fleets and Armies, and has, I am told, explicitly declared … his *unalterable* Determination, to *compel* the Colonists to *absolute* Obedience." Some regretted even attempting to appeal to the monarch. "I objected when our last petition was before Congress," South Carolina delegate Thomas Lynch insisted, because a direct message required deferential language that amounted to "lowly, and humiliating expressions" that produced "in narrow minds, an opinion of our weakness." Samuel Ward agreed. As he wrote on November 21, the "Timidity and Fluctuation … which a Hope of Reconciliation induced have done Us infinite Mischief," he believed, because British leaders "concluded from our Petition that the Congress found themselves too weak to carry on Opposition & took a Resolution to exert their whole Force to crush us at once."[5]

While some blamed themselves, in part, for the failure of the Olive Branch petition, they could not help but to acknowledge the king's

[4] *Pennsylvania Journal, or, Weekly Advertiser* (Philadelphia), November 1, 1775; Samuel Ward to Henry Ward, November 2, 1775, in Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 2:291; Rhode Island Delegates to Nicholas Cooke, November 4, 1775, in Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 2:301; Joseph Hewes to James Iredell, November 9, 1775, in Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 2:322.

[5] John Hancock to James Bowdoin Sr., November 9, 1775, in Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 2:321; Samuel Adams to James Bowdoin Sr., November 16, 1775, in Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 2:352; Thomas Lynch to Ralph Izard, November 19, 1775, in Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 2:363; Samuel Ward to Henry Ward, November 21, 1775, in Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 2:370.

intransigence as the reason for its futility. "It is an immense misfortune to the whole empire to have a king of such a disposition at such a time," Thomas Jefferson observed at the end of the month. "We are told and every thing proves it true that he is the bitterest enemy we have." Americans, Jefferson believed, lacked "neither inducement nor power to declare and assert a separation. It is will alone which is wanting and that is growing apace under the fostering hand of our king."[6]

After November 1775, when the king's betrayal became undeniable, events accelerated. "Is not America already independent?" Samuel Adams wrote on April 3. "Why then not declare it?" After all, "Nations at War" cannot "be said to be dependent either upon the other." In addition, "the King[']s last Proclamation" made it clear that Britain would only "be reconciled upon our abjectly submitting to Tyranny." Twenty days later, South Carolina chief justice William Henry Drayton proclaimed "that George the Third, King of Great-Britain, has abdicated the Government, and that the Throne is thereby vacant; that is, HE HAS NO AUTHORITY OVER US, and WE OWE NO OBEDIENCE TO HIM." Meanwhile, the Virginia Convention on May 15, 1776 passed resolutions clearing the way for a republican constitution, a declaration of rights, and confederation with the other colonies. That night, with great fanfare, patriots lowered the Union Jack and raised in its place the Continental Union flag at the capitol in Williamsburg.[7]

By June 7, on the floor of the Continental Congress, not only John Adams but also delegates such as Virginians George Wythe and Richard Henry Lee argued, as Jefferson paraphrased their remarks, that "the question was not whether, by a declaration of independence, we should make ourselves what we are not; but whether we should declare a fact which already exists." The same day, Lee advanced the resolution that "these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and

[6] Thomas Jefferson to John Randolph, November 29, 1775, in Boyd, et al., eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 1:269.

[7] Samuel Adams to Samuel Cooper, April 3, 1776, in Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 3:481, 483; Keith Krawczynski, *William Henry Drayton: South Carolina's Revolutionary Patriot* (Louisiana State University Press, 2001), pp. 109, 198; David Ramsay, *The History of the Revolution of South-Carolina, from a British Province to an Independent State*, 2 vols. (1785), 1:111, 120; Kevin R. C. Gutzman, *James Madison and the Making of America* (St. Martin's Press, 2012), pp. 9–10.

independent States, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved." Jefferson reiterated this description of independence as the current state of affairs in the Declaration of Independence, which not only incorporated Lee's resolution but also the charge that George III "has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us."[8]

On July 9, after the text of the Declaration reached George Washington and his troops encamped in New York City, the commander-in-chief ordered that it be read in front of an assembly of soldiers and citizens, who subsequently marched down Broadway to lower Manhattan. There, they toppled the two-ton statue of George III and smashed it into pieces shipped to Connecticut, where in a Litchfield foundry the lead was melted into more than 42,000 musket balls for the use of the Continental Army. Three months later, John Adams—who once revered George III and had stood in awe of his larger-than-life likeness—described him as "an Abdicated King" and "a Pretender to the Crown."[9]

[8] Thomas Jefferson, "Notes of Proceedings in the Continental Congress, [June 7 to August 1, 1776]," in Boyd, et al., eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 1:311; "Resolution of Independence Moved by R. H. Lee for the Virginia Delegation, [June 7, 1776]," in Boyd, et al., eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 1:298; "The Declaration of Independence as Adopted by Congress, July 4, 1776," in Boyd, et al., eds., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 1:431.

[9] Ruppert, "The Statue of George III"; John Adams to Abigail Adams, October 8, 1776, in Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 5:319, 2:141.