

1776

CAST

John Adams (William Daniels)
John Hancock (David Ford)
Benjamin Franklin (Howard Da Silva)
John Dickinson (Donald Madden)
Thomas Jefferson (Ken Howard)

The Second Continental Congress

The Second Continental Congress assembled in Philadelphia on May 10, 1775, in the aftermath of the bloodshed at Lexington and Concord. Radicals in favor of independence had a far stronger voice than they had manifested in the Continental Congress of 1774. But they were opposed by conservatives and moderates led by John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, who argued that a solution to the quarrel short of war could still be found. The shattering failure of the American attempt to annex Canada made others wary of radical predictions of



an easy victory. The Declaration of Independence by no means healed these political divisions. After the virtual collapse of the American army in 1776, the radicals' vision of a short violent war was replaced by George Washington's doctrine of a protracted conflict. By 1779 the radicals were in disarray. Samuel Adams was contemptuously called "Judas Iscariot" by conservative congressmen. Men such as financier Robert Morris, who believed in order and system and took a dim view of radical enthusiasm, displaced Adams and his circle and brought the war to a successful conclusion.

A MUSICAL ABOUT THE DECLARATION of Independence? The first time composer Sherman Edwards and librettist Peter Stone proposed this improbable notion, their friends must have recommended intensive psychotherapy. Still, they amazed everyone, creating a Tony Award-winning show. The inevitable film version of *1776* closely follows the stage production. The camera never leaves Philadelphia and seldom departs from Independence Hall and its gardens.

Thomas Fleming

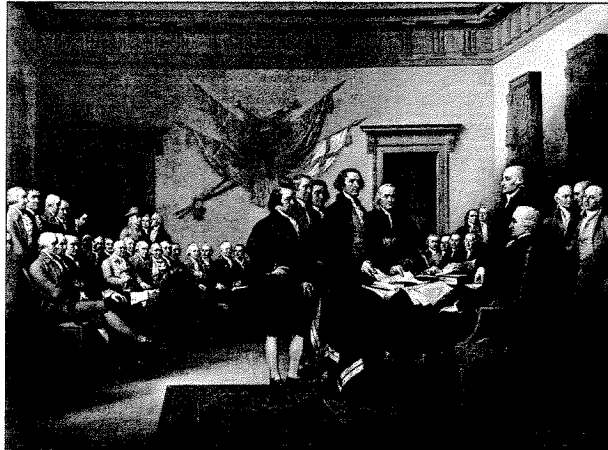
From a historical point of view, Stone, who adapted his Broadway success for the screen, gets a number of things right. He conveys not a little of the confusion, hesi-

tation, and conflict that raged among the Founding Fathers in the spring of 1776 as they wrestled with the question of whether to declare the independence of thirteen barely united American colonies or try one more time to achieve a reconciliation with Great Britain. Two of the leading protagonists for independence—the hotheaded, loquacious John Adams and the diffident, reticent Thomas Jefferson—as well as their chief opponent, starchy, pompous John Dickinson of Pennsylvania—are deftly and, on the whole, accurately depicted. The quarrel between northerners and southerners over slavery, one of the major differences that almost wrecked the enterprise, is starkly dramatized. The swarming flies and beastly temperatures of Old Philadelphia in July are also vividly rendered.

There is little doubt that the creators of *1776* hoped to give their audience a history lesson as well as a good time. This makes all the more regrettable the historical lapses that mar the story. The most egregious error is the utter hash the film makes of the Continental Army's role during these tense weeks. By the spring of 1776, the Americans, having imbibed the heady antimonarchical vitriol of Tom Paine's *Common Sense*, were already fighting a full-scale war. Their invasion of Canada was faltering, but they had driven the British army out of Boston and were busily fortifying New York City against an almost certain British attack. Gen. George Washington was more than a little hopeful that his twenty-three-thousand-man army could make a good showing against the oncoming enemy army and fleet. Despondence did not set in until the Americans were routed in the Battle at Long Island, seven weeks after July 4.

None of this military optimism, however, penetrates *1776*. Instead, Washington sends a series of lugubrious letters detailing the parlous state of his troops. The communiqués are read aloud by Charles Thomson, the secretary of the Continental Congress, to a chorus of hoots and groans from the sweaty solons. Someone grouches that Washington

HISTORY



Backed by ex-presidents Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, John Trumbull was commissioned by Congress to create this painting for the Capitol Rotunda. In it the members of the drafting committee—John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston—present the Declaration of Independence to John Hancock, president of the Congress. Along with the work, Trumbull provided a key that identified all the delegates but one—the man wearing a hat in the rear. He remains a mystery.

HOLLYWOOD



1776 on Broadway

Aging Hollywood lion Jack L. Warner, never bothered by such trifling matters as historical accuracy, spent well over one million dollars on the screen rights to Peter Stone and Sherman Edwards's play, hoping to duplicate its considerable success on Broadway, where it ran for some twelve hundred performances following its opening on March 16, 1969. (Warner's previous musical triumphs had included *Yankee Doodle Dandy* [1942], *My Fair Lady* [1964], and *Camelot* [1967].) Despite its cast of distinguished stage performers, the resulting five-million-dollar film version, released through Columbia Pictures (Warner had already retired from the famous company that bore his name), was a resounding critical and commercial failure, a most unworthy swan song for Warner, who died in 1978.



John Dickinson

John Dickinson was born in Maryland and raised in Delaware but moved to

Philadelphia to practice law after studying for three years in London. Conservative by nature, he opposed Benjamin Franklin's attempts during the 1760s to oust the proprietary government of the descendants of William Penn. Despite his unpopularity among local democrats, Dickinson remained an influential force in Pennsylvania's politics, which inevitably made him a power in the Continental Congress. He was a gifted writer, and Congress turned to him repeatedly to draft public documents. Defeated in the independence struggle, he volunteered for military duty to prove his patriotism. After the war he was elected president of Pennsylvania and was a delegate from Delaware to the 1787 Constitutional Convention.

Lewis Morris

Lewis Morris was the third lord of the manor of Morrisania, which composed a good chunk of the present-day Bronx and Westchester County. Strongly anti-British in his sentiments, he overcame considerable local resistance among his tenants and neighbors to get himself elected to the New York Provincial Congress, which sent him to the Continental Congress. There he served competently on several committees though was absent when the vote on independence was taken, having been appointed a brigadier general of the militia. Later in the summer he returned to Congress and signed the Declaration, one of many who did not get around to contributing their signatures until months after July 4.

Richard Henry Lee

Richard Henry Lee was the eldest of the four political sons of Thomas Lee. A tall, austere man, sometimes described as a southern Puritan, he was an early supporter of independence and subsequently played a key role in persuading Virginia to give up its grandiose claims to western lands, enabling Congress to ratify the Articles of Confederation. With his troublemaking brothers, Arthur and William, he became deeply embroiled in the controversy over funds spent in France by American representatives, a quarrel that generated much heat and little light in the Second Continental Congress. After the war he joined Patrick Henry in opposing the Constitution—but served briefly as Virginia's first U.S. senator.



needs to learn to write more upbeat letters to the delegates and stop "depressing" them.

Before independence can be voted, therefore, the filmmakers must solve the problem they've created of Washington's supposedly collapsing army. To do so, they send Samuel Chase of Maryland, a wavering moderate, along with Adams and Benjamin Franklin on a visit to a "training camp" in New Brunswick, New Jersey, which Washington has reported in one of his lamenting letters to be full of disorder and prostitutes. Chase returns to tell everyone his worries have been resolved. The camp was disorderly, but when a flock of ducks flew over, the hungry Americans shot them out of the sky. Thus does the film enshrine the myth of American marksmanship as the key not only to victory in the war but also to the vote for independence—piling myth upon myth.

On many other occasions, Sherman and Stone seem to view the Continental Congress as an early version of *Animal House*. When Thomas Jefferson says he is going home to see his wife, Stephen Hopkins of Rhode Island, who is portrayed as an unkempt drunk (the real Hopkins did like his rum), yells: "Give her a flourish for me." Even more imaginary is the depiction of Richard Henry Lee, that austere Virginia Puritan, who was heart and soul with the pro-independence New Englanders from the moment he entered Congress. Humorless, high-minded, intense, Lee was, after Adams, the most powerful orator in Congress. In the film he is portrayed as a giggling buffoon who makes endless puns on the name Lee. When Franklin and Adams suggest he procure a resolution for independence from Virginia, he acts as though the idea would never have occurred to him in a million years and rides wildly off to do their bidding.

Perhaps aiming at a warts-and-all realism, the authors similarly downgrade other characters. The brilliant Lewis Morris is depicted as an idiot who repeatedly says: "New York abstains—courteously." James Wilson, the shrewd and contentious lawyer from Pennsylvania, perhaps the greatest intellect in America after James Madison, is portrayed as a timid fool. The magisterial Robert Livingston of New York, the man who would negotiate the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, comes across as an utter twit. Benjamin Franklin, portrayed by the veteran actor Howard Da Silva, is full of sly winks and leers about assignations with women—which is not a complete caricature; Ben did have his racy side—but the authors miss the bitter seriousness with which Franklin backed independence. He was an angry man, out to even the score with a British government that had hauled him before the Privy Council in 1774 and called him a liar and a thief.

The worst departure from reality, however, is the film's handling of Jefferson's relationship with his wife, Martha. Jefferson was deeply worried about her health during the weeks he struggled with the Declaration of Independence. She was at Monticello, too ill and depressed even to write him a letter. In the film we see him discarding draft after draft of the manifesto, which begins to look stillborn. Then comes a knock on the

door: There stands a radiant Blythe Danner as Martha. John Adams has "sent for her," as though she were a package of sweetmeats. The Jeffersons embrace passionately while Adams and Franklin giggle and snigger. Presto! Within a day or two, Tom's sexual frustrations have been relieved, and we have the great document, followed by an inane song from Danner, "He Plays the Violin."

1776 is at its best in the final scenes, which cover the first four days in July, when the vote on independence was debated. At the end of the first day, defeat seems inevitable. However Edward Rutledge procures an overnight delay to rally the wavering South. Meanwhile, Franklin manipulates Pennsylvania into a yea, and Caesar Rodney arrives with the vote that swings Delaware into line. The film combines the decision for independence on July 2 with the approval of Jefferson's document on July 4, which were actually two distinct procedures, but this dramatic license is hardly objectionable.

During the movie debate over Jefferson's paragraph on the evils of slavery, which was in fact excised, John Adams defends it with all-or-nothing rhetoric and Rutledge stalks around a darkened chamber declaiming with operatic intensity that northern ship owners and southern slave owners are equally responsible for the incubus. While Jefferson did praise Adams's stout defense of his original antislavery draft, these histrionics are a good deal stronger than Jefferson's own recollection that the paragraph was cut because South Carolina and Georgia objected to it and some northern states "felt a little tender" on the subject. This is a quibble, to be sure, but it concerns the origins of this nation's most divisive issue.

In spite of these departures from the historical record, 1776 manages to convey the peculiar mixture of bravado, wily politicking, and hardheaded courage that produced an epochal moment—and a historic document—that continues to reverberate around the world. It would take an enervating seven-year war to guarantee the United States of America's survival. But, as the self-same screenwriter would be quick to tell you, that's another story.

Background Reading

Thomas Fleming, *1776: Year of Illusions* (Norton, 1975)

H. James Henderson, *Party Politics in the Continental Congress* (McGraw-Hill, 1974)

1972/USA/Color

DIRECTOR: Peter H. Hunt; **PRODUCER:** Jack L. Warner; **SCREENPLAY:** Peter Stone; **STUDIO:** Columbia; **VIDEO:** Columbia Tristar; **RUNNING TIME:** 141 min.



Edward Rutledge

Edward Rutledge had a poor opinion of New England men, their "low cunning" and their "levelling principles." John Adams had an equally poor opinion of Rutledge, calling

him "jejune, inane and puerile." Educated for the law at the Temple in London, Rutledge ably represented in Congress the planter oligarchy of his native South Carolina. He was no enthusiast for independence, finally voting for it because he saw disunion as a worse evil. He continued to harbor grave doubts about what might happen to South Carolina in a government dominated by Yankees. He spent most of the war years in the army as an artillery captain. Captured when Charleston surrendered to the British in May 1780, he survived to serve as a postwar state senator and governor.

Caesar Rodney

Caesar Rodney was described by John Adams as "the oddest looking man in the world; he is tall, thin and slender as a reed, pale; his face is not bigger than a large apple, but there is sense, fire, wit and humor in his countenance." Rodney's midnight ride to cast a tie-breaking vote and bring Delaware into the independence camp made him persona non grata in his state. During the following year, he was defeated in contests for a number of political offices, and he did not return to Congress until late 1777. He died in 1784 of cancer of the face, a disease that had tormented him for a decade.



Later...

The Declaration of Independence acquired a history of its own, becoming over the course of the next two centuries one of the primary documents of Western civilization. In 1776 the signers saw it largely as an attempt to explain the decision to sever their loyalty to the king. What has made the Declaration endure are its opening paragraphs, in which Thomas Jefferson states the fundamental premises of American nationhood: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with inalienable rights; and that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. These ideas became the driving force of the American experiment—and reverberated throughout the nations of the world. They were at the heart of Lincoln's address at Gettysburg. In ten classic sentences Lincoln made it clear that the Civil War was being fought for "a new birth of freedom" in which the principles of the Declaration would be paramount.