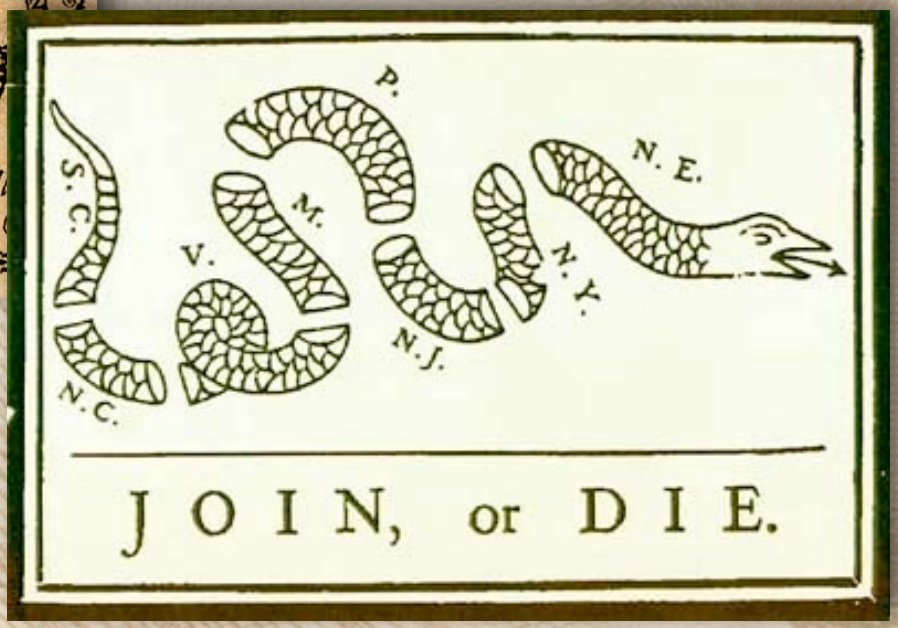
The Problem of Becoming "One"



E Pluribus Unum

Although Benjamin Franklin proposed "We are One" as one of the mottos to be printed on Continental Currency in 1776 and designed a logo of interlocking rings to reinforce his message, it was not an easy matter for the thirteen original colonies to come together in the Revolutionary Era. Before you can agree with another person or group or feel connected to them in any meaningful way, you need to be able to share information and exchange ideas. In the twenty-first century, you may have an interesting encounter with a person you meet on a trip, but unless you continue your face-to-face conversations in some other form by exchanging letters, emails, or phone calls, you are unlikely to be able to build a real friendship. The kinds of quick long-distance communication that we take for granted were not, however, available to the colonists.

In some respects, it was easier for a colonist to communicate with those in England than with people in other colonies. The workings of both government and trade relied on regular exchanges between the colonists and the "mother" country. And to a large extent colonists thought of themselves essentially as "British" and as members of a particular British colony. When people described themselves as "Americans" in the first half of the eighteenth century, they were generally talking about themselves as members of a group of people who shared certain practical, political, and economic concerns. The term "American" had not yet gained the weight of meaning it has since accumulated and was not yet connected to any deep sense of an identity based on a unified set of beliefs, practices, laws, and traditions. In fact, it was the 1770s that our present-day understanding of what it means to be an American truly began to develop. As Andrew Burstein writes in Sentimental Democracy,

> *Inventing a nation entails giving definition to the character of the people, identifying their compatible qualities and common understandings, cultivating a sense of moral community. In the United States, this process is still going on.. . . Almost every such attempt to define the nation's identity can be linked in some way to an embellishment of the language and events of the American Revolution . . . .*

A single colony would not have had the power to establish independence from England. Revolution required unity, and the only way to make "from many, one" was to establish a serious and continuing conversation among the American people that could transcend geographical boundaries and connect the people of the green mountains of Vermont to their counterparts in the back country of Virginia. The conversation also needed to transcend boundaries of class and connect mechanics, merchants, farmers, ministers, land owners, sailors, women, servants, and all other members of the society. Finding a way to connect with one another despite their differences was one of the major challenges confronting the colonists as their troubles with Britain began to deepen. In the years after the war, John Adams explained conditions in the years leading up to the Revolution in this way:

> The colonies had grown up under constitutions of government so different; there was so great a variety of religions; they were composed of so many different nations; their customs, manners, and habits had so little resemblance; and their intercourse had been so rare and their knowledge of each other so imperfect that to unite them in the same principles in theory and the same system of action was certainly a very difficult enterprise.

Loyalist Daniel Leonard, writing on January 9, 1776 as "Massachusetts" (a pseudonym) in the Boston Gazette, used precisely this sense of division as a basis for warning that a revolution would be disastrous for "Americans":

> *For if our connexion with Great-Britain by the parliament be dissolved, we shall have none among ourselves, but each colony become as distinct from the others, as England was from Scotland, before the union. . . .*

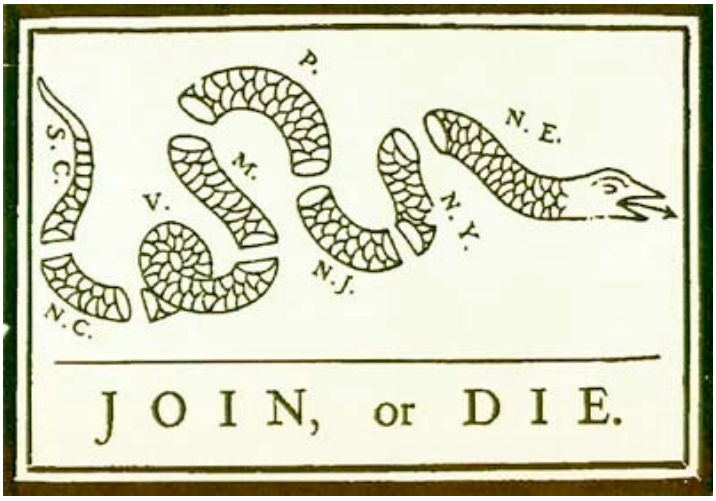
Earlier Attempts to Join (or Die!)

In the years leading up to the 1770s, there had been a few periods of intense "conversation" in the face of other crises such as the French and Indian War and the Stamp Act Crisis. For example, in 1754, representatives from seven colonies worked together at the Albany Convention to arrange a treaty with the Iroquois. Always ready to seize any opportunity to encourage the exchange of ideas and coordinated action, Benjamin Franklin put forth a Plan for Colonial Union similar in many ways to the Plan for Union proposed by William Penn in 1697 to the London Board of Trade. Both proposals called for each colony to send representatives to regular meetings for the purpose of conferring, making joint decisions, and speaking with one voice on behalf of the American people.

The crown's unwillingness to allow the colonies to coordinate their affairs suggests why a revolution was later required in order to achieve independence. But the fact that the assemblies of several colonies also voted down the proposal indicates that there were more immediate obstacles to unity. Franklin would, no doubt, have been pleased had he known that many of the recommendations both he and Penn proposed would be incorporated into the United States Constitution when it was adopted in 1787. However, it is also easy to imagine how exasperated he would have been to learn that over thirty years would lapse before the union he sought would be achieved.

Consider, then, the difficulties faced by the thirteen colonies. Separated by vast distances and in many cases quite different from one another in their beliefs, business transactions, and cultures, what hope was there that they could unite in a common cause against England? If Benjamin Franklin was right and it was important to "Join, or Die," how could the colonists find means of communicating so they could join together?

Frustrated by the unwillingness of colonial legislatures to accept his "Plan for Colonial Union"out of fear they might lose individual power by agreeing to work jointly, Franklin designed and published this simple warning: "Join, or Die." This icon would later gain popularity and importance as a revolutionary symbol.



To see the complete editorial as it originally appeared, go here.

The Communications Revolution that Made the American Revolution Possible

The fact that the colonists succeeded in "becoming one" made the revolution particularly worthy of study for John Adams. He marveled:

The complete accomplishment of it in so short a time and by such simple means was perhaps a singular example in the history of mankind. Thirteen clocks were made to strike together: a perfection of mechanism which no artist had ever before effected.

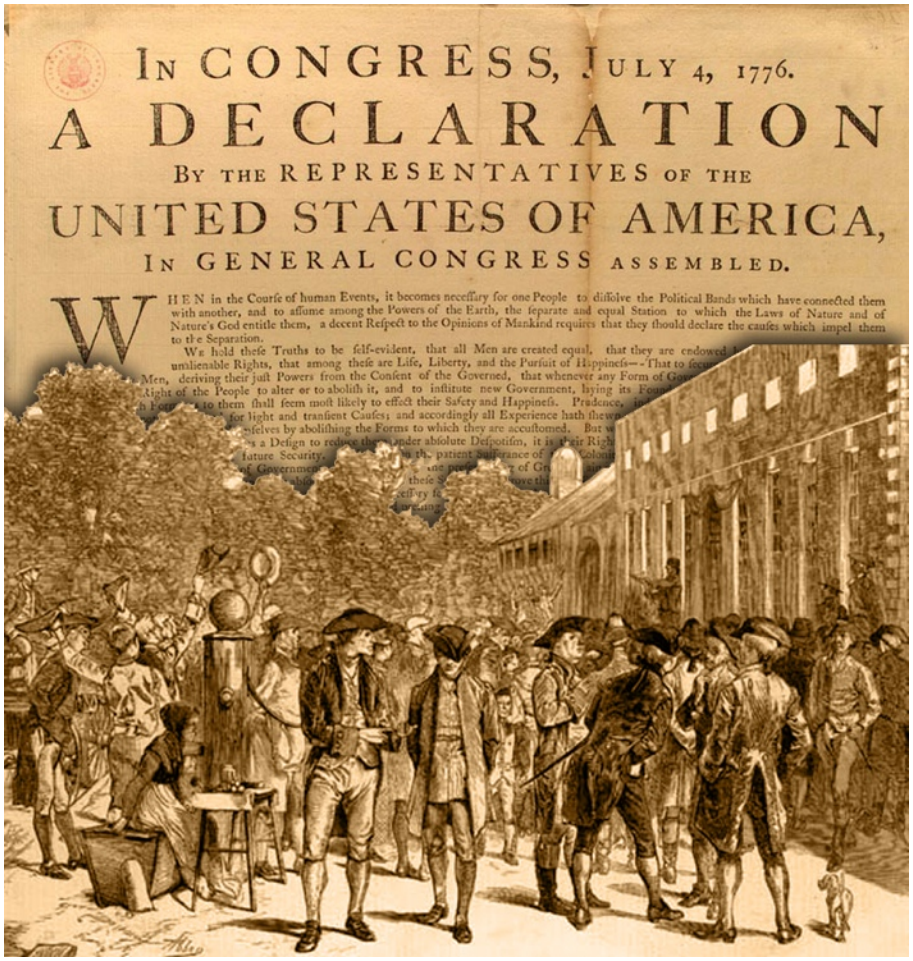
Adams hinted at the nature of the "mechanism" when he directed Americans interested in finding how the Revolution had come about to look at the "records, records, pamphlets, newspaper, and even handbills, which in any way contributed to change the temper and views of the people, and compose them into an independent nation."

So effective was the exchange of every mode of print, speech, and handwritten material as a means of uniting the colonies, that, for example,

> *revolutionary language by 1773 was sounding in virtually every adult ear in Massachusetts, and that there was a fluid continuum of discourse joining the Boston press and town meeting and the talk in meetings and taverns throughout the Province. (Bushman, "Massachusetts Farmers and the Revolution," 79-81 quoted by Ray Raphael in The First American Revolution: Before Lexington and Concord, [The New Press, New York, 2002] 35.)*

In pictures commemorating the reading of the Declaration of Independence, we see how that exchange worked. The final version of the Declaration, a piece of writing that had been drafted by a committee and revised in response to countless debates, was copied by hand and printing press so it could be sent out to the people. Riders carried copies to George Washington and a series of towns and cities, and at each location a person would read the Declaration aloud to the people. In the depiction below, we can see how the reading of the document inevitably led to countless other conversations, meetings, and pieces of writing.

In a very real sense, the American revolution could NOT have happened without the mail and the other systems by which Americans exchanged ideas. Building consensus and a communal identity required a shared understanding that could only be developed through an ongoing civic conversation that took place through the use of informal conversations, letters, speeches, meetings, newspapers, pamphlets, broadsides, and books.



Edwin Austin Abbey's "Reading the Declaration of Independence By John Nixon, From the Steps of Indepedence Hall," Philadelphia July 8 1776 - p.573 Harper's Weekly 15 July 1876.