

Q79 – When was the Declaration of Independence adopted?

DOUGLAS GINSBURG, Federal Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals, D.C. Circuit:

The Declaration of Independence was adopted on July 4th, 1776 – after more than a year of war with Britain. So how did a local rebellion become a national revolution? The start is a bit of a mystery.

Outside Boston, British troops ran into Patriot militia. No one knows which side fired “the shot heard ’round the world,” but that moment was when the war began. Two months later, the two sides again clashed outside Boston in one of the bloodiest battles of the war.

Even then, most Americans still thought of themselves as loyal subjects of the Crown. At dinner, General Washington’s officers still toasted King George. The Continental Congress sent the king a message of reconciliation known as the Olive Branch Petition – signed by most of the men who later signed the Declaration of Independence. King George refused the petition and declared the colonies in rebellion.

The war soon widened. The Congress created a navy – and the army invaded Canada. Nothing changed American minds as much as a best-selling pamphlet that appeared in January 1776, written by an English immigrant named Thomas Paine. He called it Common Sense – and it was. He wrote, “Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil. In its worst, an intolerable one.” And: “How absurd that a continent should be governed by an island.”

On June 7, Virginia delegate Richard Henry Lee rose in Congress to propose that the “united colonies” declare their independence. On July 4th, 1776, they adopted the Declaration of Independence.