Remarks of James Russell Wiggins
at the
Sedgwick Bicentennial Ceremonies
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We meet here on a date most auspicious in the history of our country. On this date, 200 years ago, June 27, 1776, Thomas Jefferson, working at his folding desk, in lodgings on the second floor of the Graaf House, at the Southwest corner of Seventh and Market streets, in Philadelphia, completed the fair copy of the committee draft of THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, which was submitted to the Continental Congress on June 28, 1776.

Richard Henry Lee of Virginia had laid before Congress on Friday, June 7, 1776, a motion that the Congress declare "these United colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent states"...

The Congress decided to postpone debate on this motion until July 1, and to appoint a committee, in the meantime, to prepare a declaration. This committee, appointed on June 11, consisted of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston. It is believed that the committee first met at the house where Ben Franklin was confined with the gout. They discussed the general form of the declaration and Jefferson was asked to draft it. Jefferson appears to have shown a first draft separately to Adams and to Franklin. In the 17 days between June 11 and June 28, Jefferson finished the draft which was reported to Congress.

Congress resumed debate on the Virginia resolution on July 2. The debate was marked by the opposition of John Dickinson and the notable recapitulation of all the arguments for independence by John Adams. Adams made the greatest speech of his career.
As he spoke a storm broke over Philadelphia, so dark and so violent that the candles were lighted. In the midst of the crashing thunder, lightning and rain, delegates arrived from Annapolis, and a note was sent to Adams that Maryland was unanimously for independence.

As the day wore on, it became clear that there would be at least four colonies against independence. The debate was deferred until the next day. There was a night of frantic argument with the dissenters. Then, on July 2, with John Hancock in the chair, Congress approved independence, with New York alone abstaining.

John Adams wrote Abigail: "The Second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable Epocha in the History of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding Generations, as the Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more".

The formal language of the Declaration of Independence, however, remained to be approved. The text was debated in the hours that remained of the session of July 2, all of July 3, and most of July 4. Some thirty nine changes were made in the committee draft. Finally, the text was approved. Congress ordered that it be authenticated and printed. John Hancock signed the authenticated copy. Charles Thomson, the secretary of Congress, attested it. The committee of five was ordered to "superintend and correct the press". Julian Boyd, the distinguished editor of The Jefferson Papers, has written: "It may be that Jefferson, as chairman of the Committee, took the authenticated copy of John Dunlap--perhaps, it is pleasant
to suppose, accompanied by the greatest of all Colonial printers—and watched over its composition and proofs during the night of July 4. But even Franklin could not have given more appropriate setting to the calm majesty of Jefferson's cadences than the chaste broadside that John Dunlap printed.

So explicit and complete as to the causes of the American Revolution is the Declaration of Independence that one might have thought the long enumeration of grievances and declaration of principles would have ended forever any debate or dispute as to why the American Revolution happened. Nevertheless, scholars, generation after generation, have continued to debate what caused the relationship between the Colonies and Great Britain to come to an end in one decade of furious controversy, discontent, and rebellion.

Historians such as George Bancroft viewed the Revolution as part of an epic struggle to gain greater freedom for all mankind—the hopeful, optimistic, expansive American mood of mid-nineteenth century—a Revolution made by a Rising People.

Charles Andrews saw the Revolution as an inevitable conflict: "On one side was the immutable, stereotyped system of the mother country, based on precedent and tradition and designed to keep things comfortably as they were; on the other, a vital, dynamic organism, containing the seed of a great nation, its forces untried, still to be proved. It is inconceivable that a connection should have continued long between two such yokefellows, one static, the other dynamic, separated by an ocean and bound only by the ties of a legal relationship".
The English historian, Eric Robson, agreed with the statement of John Adams that "The Revolution began in 1620, it was in the minds and hearts of the people from the beginning". And Robson pointed out that the American colonies were founded as a result of an escape from conditions in England. They simply postponed, and moved to another continent, the final struggle with authority inaugurated in England in the 17th Century.

Louis M. Hacker, emphasizing economic conflict between the colonies and England, has pointed out the stern measures that the British government used to obstruct development of native industries in the colonies. As early as 1699, the Woolen Act barred colonial wool, woolen yarn and woolen manufactures from intercolonial and foreign commerce. The Hat Act of 1732 forbid exportation of hats out of the separate colonies. A Pennsylvania law for fostering shoemaking was disallowed in England in 1706. Laws setting up new towns were blocked. In 1756 when the Board of Trade recommended disallowance of a Massachusetts law for aiding the production of linen, it said flatly: "the passing of laws in the plantations for encouraging manufactures, which in any ways interfere with the manufacture of this kingdom, has always been thought improper, and has ever been discouraged".

Edmund S. Morgan, distinguished Yale historian, has put the economic causes succinctly: "The American fought England because Parliament threatened the security of property. They established state constitutions with property qualifications for voting and officeholding in order to protect the security of property. And when the state governments seemed inadequate to the task, they set up the Federal government for the same purpose."
The economic motive was present in all these actions, but it was present as the friend of universal liberty).

A strong case is made by many historians, such as J. Franklin Jameson, for the argument that the Revolution was not only a revolution against England, but was, as well a social revolution. He cites persuasively the universal changes in land laws that had maintained a landed aristocracy in England; how state after state abolished entail, and primogeniture, that kept great landed inheritances in tact. On the basis of the land laws alone, he thought that "our Revolution, however much it differed from the French Revolution, in spirit, yet carried in itself the seeds of a social revolution".

Merrill Jensen is another historian who believes that the Revolution was a democratic movement. And he points out that "there is one eighteenth century American idea is worthy of a whole study by itself, and that is the concept of rotation in office. Many Americans were convinced that office-holding bred a lust for power in the holder. Therefore, there must be frequent, if not annual elections, and there must be a limitation on the time one might spend in certain offices...under the Articles of Confederation, no man could be a member of Congress more than three years out of six".

There has been, in recent years, a greater emphasis than hitherto upon the influence of "persistent localism" as a force in New England thought. It is, I think a correct emphasis. T.H. Breen, of the history department of Northwestern University, has written convincingly of this force in America. He has said:
"The towns and churches of Massachusetts were shaped by Charles I's ill-advised attempt to increase his authority by attacking local English institutions. Between 1625 and 1640 his government made what appeared to many Englishmen—not just Puritans—to be a series of arbitrary attempts to dominate county and local affairs, to assert the king's influence in matters that his predecessors had wisely left alone. The settlers departed England determined to maintain their local attachments against outside interference, and to a large extent the Congregational churches and self-contained towns of Massachusetts Bay stood as visible evidence of the founders' decision to preserve in America what had been threatened in the mother country.

Whatever the root causes of the Revolution, it was the colonial press that stirred American discontent until it boiled over into resistance and revolution. There were only 23 weekly newspapers in all the colonies when the Stamp Act and the Sugar Act were passed in 1764. There were also a handful of pamphleteers who joined in the fight on British encroachments. They kept up an unrelenting attack on Great Britain. They challenged its power to levy taxes. They reproached it for denying America representation in parliament. They said the King was deceived by his ministers. Finally they attacked King George as a tyrant. Step by step, issue by issue, thrust by thrust, and point by point, they brought a whole people to such a pitch of resentment that resistance became feasible and effective. Then they fanned that resistance into acts of open rebellion. And the rebellion finally, at long last, flowered into Independence.

Other controversial explanations of the American
Revolutionary phenomena continue to appear. Today, 200 years after the adoption of the Declaration of Independence and its eloquent and explicit enumeration of the causes of the Revolution, men may still grope for full understanding of the forces that made a handful of coastal communities rise against the armed might of the then foremost power of the world.

Perhaps the conflicting views of historians need not be regarded as mutually exclusive. There was wrapped up in the Revolution a rebellion against British imperialism, an angry revolt against excessive economic regulations, an unhappiness with economic injustice, a resistance to coercive policies, a longing for more perfect justice and freedom and liberty, an anger over excessive taxation, a passion for home rule, a hatred of entrenched political power, a distaste for state religion, a longing for democratic equality, and a hope for economic security.

A foreign imperial power no longer offers a target upon which antipathy can unite, 200 years after Independence was declared. Some of the other resentments have by no means disappeared from society.

Time may have made somewhat out-of-date the Jeffersonian indictments of George III, but time has not diminished the luminous phrases that set forth the doctrine that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain Unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness".

That is the lamp Jefferson raised to guide our path, 200 years ago, on June 27, 1776, when he put away his folding desk, and scrutinized the early draft of The Declaration of
Independence. Perhaps it still explains the American Revolution better than all the close scrutiny of scholarly historians.

Those who govern the nation now, and those who will govern it in the future, need to pause in their hot pursuit of day-to-day political ends, to examine the nature of the Revolution that the Declaration announced to the world.

They need to pay attention to the circumstances of history out of which the Revolution grew---to the passion of Americans then, and now, for local self-government, for the wide diffusion of wealth, for the just distribution of power, for the freedom from coercive taxation, for immunity from oppressive laws and for all the attributes of life associated then and now with "life and liberty and, the pursuit of happiness".
Those who made the American Revolution were, almost without exception, confident that they labored upon a universal design, that the nation they hoped to create was to be the light of the world, that freedom here was to give hope to those who sought freedom everywhere.

Even in our cynical contemporary society this faith persists. It is a faith that lifts patriotism out of its parochialism, that rescues nationalism from provincialism, that enlarges the love of country into a greater idealism that embraces all the world.

Samuel Williams, in 1775, spoke in Salem on the Love of Country, and expressed this idea of the universal importance of this country. "In our destruction", he said, "liberty itself expires, and human nature will despair of evermore regaining its first and original dignity".

It is this sense of mission that has enlarged the American outlook, expanded American horizons, stretched the American mind, warmed the American heart, and intense love of country from a narrow selfish and acquisitive impulse into a love of freedom and liberty throughout the world.

This was the new and noble idea that had an important part in making the American Revolution, and a major role in making the nation whose birth we celebrate here today.