TOWER TALK

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Opinion: Modern American Heroes

James W. Guthrie

The Fourth of July offers an opportunity to reflect upon our heroes, our heritage, our hopes, and our needs as a people.

Woodrow Wilson was once asked how long it took to prepare a speech. He is reported to have replied that a five-minute speech occupied approximately two weeks. A one-hour speech required one week. He said that if it was to be a two-hour speech, "I could begin immediately."

> In what follows, "hero" refers both to men and women. It is awkward to say "hero" and "heroine." Moreover, in Greek mythology, the god who bore the name "Hero" was a female. Thus it seems appropriate to use the word to encompass both genders.

I have not taken two weeks, two days or even two hours to prepare this essay, a fact that will soon be painfully evident. Nevertheless, I will attempt a brief discourse about the relative absence of heroes in modern America.

In the past, America has had popular heroes. Such is said to be no longer useful. Now, heroes are held by some social critics to be unhealthy and to reflect poorly upon a culture. Because heroes are almost never the larger than life persons they are depicted as being, critics assert their false images provoke false hopes and render a people dependent.

I disagree. Heroes can be important for many purposes. They embody values to which a people can aspire. They can galvanize a people to action. They can serve as models for the young, and so on for a multitude of good purposes. Under this appraisal, our contemporary absence of living heroes is a distressing condition for the body politic.

Why No Modern Heroes?

If there truly is an absence of modern American heroes, and there seems to be—Oprah Winfrey is the only media figure that holds widespread public approval—the reasons are easy to understand. When there were only oral societies, heroes could be celebrated in poems, plays, paintings, and tales. Heroes' flaws could be reduced and strengths magnified. Few individuals actually knew heroes first hand. Thus, there was little danger that heroic myths would be seriously challenged.

Contemporary America is an electronic society, not an oral one. Today there is little opportunity to sustain a mythical hero. Public relations experts may try to package a hero. However, there are stronger forces in opposition. The more likely result is anti-heroes.

Television and newspapers provide frequent exposure for would-be heroes. Seldom, however, can a potential hero withstand such intense scrutiny. Journalists enjoy debunking idols. Television interviews often have a confrontational style that seldom accepts heroism. Consequently, TV and newspaper personalities who uncover the weaknesses of prospective heroes— for example, Walter Cronkite, Barbara Walters, Mike Wallace, and Woodward and Bernstein—sometimes themselves become quasi-heroes.

Little is left of prospective heroes after gonzo tabloids, radical radio talk show hosts, and twenty-four-hour cable television pundits have punctured their images and the remaining carcass is thereafter scavenged by partisan historians and muckraking social scientists. No vulture's or maggot's prey has ever been picked cleaner. George Washington is now said not to have been completely honest, Benjamin Franklin loved his female neighbors too much, Alexander Hamilton may have been secretly

gay, Martin Luther King was a hypocritical philanderer, and Thomas Jefferson owned slaves.

Even single-handed acts of individual heroism are explained by sociobiologists as simply genetically pre-ordained endeavors. Heroic actions, no matter how selfless, courageous or threatening of life to the Good Samaritan involved, are now seen as small scale sacrifices by individuals, the evolutionary purpose of which is the larger scale preservation and procreation of the species gene pool.

Thus, if there is an insufficient supply of living heroes, we certainly know why. We destroy them faster than we construct them.

Another View

Rather than lament the limited number of acceptable current heroes, I wish to offer another view. The relative absence of living heroes may well reflect the health of the republic.

Living heroes are often founded on waves of popular feeling. They tend not to flow from undercurrents of sustained or honest thought. Nations that have had living heroes have not always prospered, and quite often neither have their neighbors. Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Idi Amin, Saddam Hussein, and Fidel Castro come to mind as examples.

Fisher Ames was a disaffected, 18th century Federalist anxious to convince colonial peers of the utility of revolution against England. He likened monarchies to large merchantmen, the great ships of his day, which could be boarded, borne by wind and the tide, and provided safety and a sense of elation. Inevitably, however, he asserted, such great ships hit a reef and sink.

Democracy, on the other hand, is like a loosely woven log raft. It seldom sinks, but you almost always have your feet wet.

Ames could have added that merchantmen, monarchies if you will, require a captain, a strong, perhaps heroic, elite figure able to give orders and impose discipline. The crew need possess only strong backs and be compliant. Rafts, democracies, need few or no permanent officers: they rely upon crewmembers that are strong willed, self-reliant, and self-disciplined.

One should not be so short sighted as to believe that heroes serve no purpose or are never needed. A people in crisis often must be able to evoke heroes from the past and give birth to new ones.

Should our nation find itself deeply imperiled, it might well need a contemporary hero, and there is little reason to believe that Americans would be unable to meet the challenge. However, in the hoped-for absence of a national crisis, the shortage of living heroes is not worrisome.

America does not now need a strong hero in whom citizens can invest emotionally so that they themselves may benefit. Rather, America needs strong citizens who will invest in themselves so that democracy can benefit.

The Inspirational, Possibly Heroic, Message in the Declaration of Independence

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which connect them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, respect for the opinions of mankind requires they declare the causes which compel them to separate.

We hold these truths to be self evident, all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with unalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

To secure these rights, governments are instituted among men deriving their just powers from consent of the governed.

Whenever government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it and to institute new government, laying its foundation on principles and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

Prudence dictates that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly experience hath shown that mankind is more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, then to right themselves by abolishing forms to which they are accustomed.

But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing one object, events designed to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government and to provide new guards for their future security.

Such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies and such is now the necessity to which the conditions that ordain them to alter their former system of government.

Who Signed the Declaration of Independence?

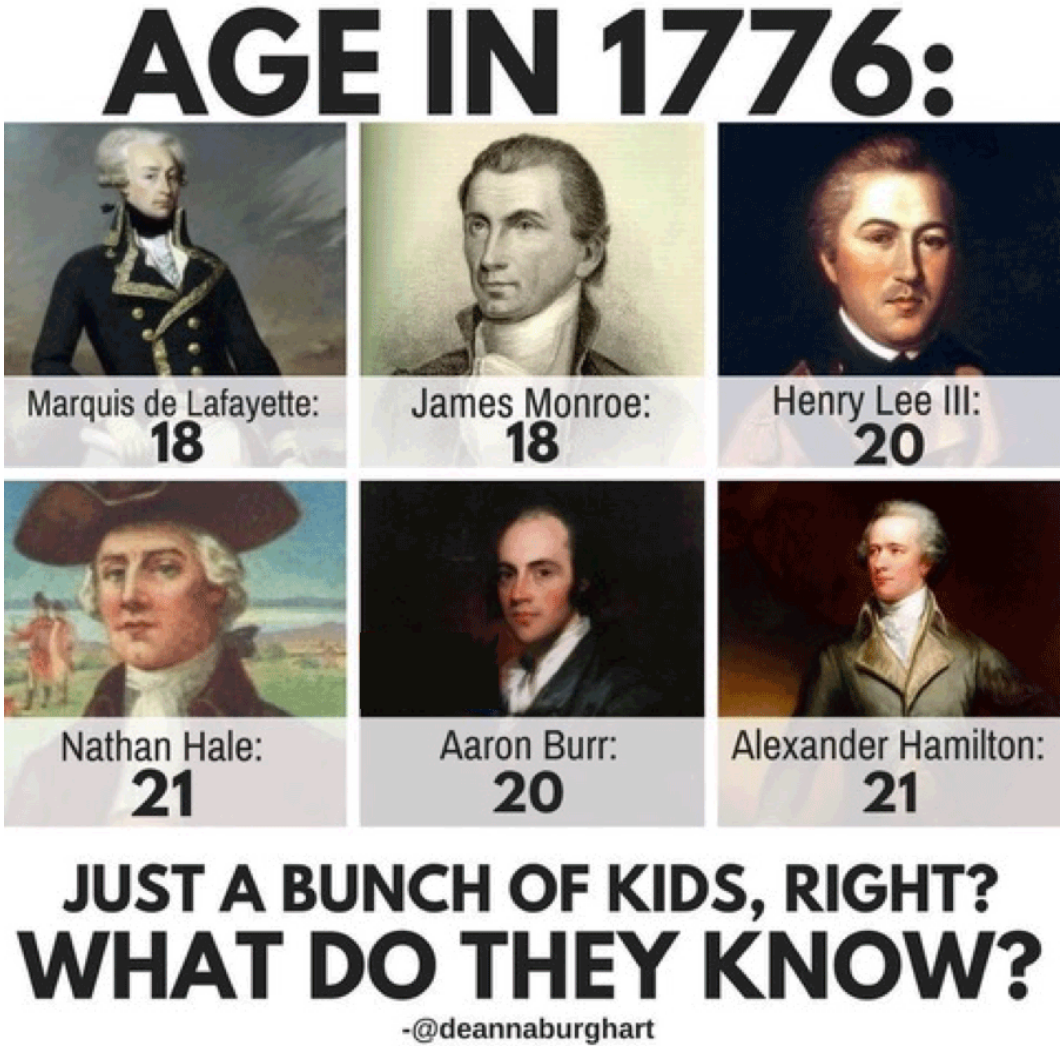
Fifty-six Continental Congress members from thirteen colonies met during the brutal summer heat. George Washington presided.

Adams and Jefferson were requested to undertake a draft paper proclaiming Colonial independence. Adams absolved himself of drafting duties claiming Jefferson to be a better writer and specifying that political reality dictated the document be written by a Virginian.

With his characteristic hubris, Jefferson insisted that he was the only convention participant possessed of abilities matching the task. Despite such immodesty, he did acknowledge relying upon the ideas of John Locke and Voltaire, Enlightenment theorists then widely popular with Colonial intellectuals.

On July 4, the collective body approved a document of far reaching consequences. It not only proclaimed independence from Britain, but also gave voice to a theory of state that forever thereafter severed what had been centuries of monarchial rule.

Monarchies previously prevailed, protected by a popularly accepted philosophy that king's and queen's powers were derived from God. To oppose monarchs was to place one at peril, both in this life and the thereafter.



The Declaration reversed history by accepting Locke's theory that the right to govern was indeed God given, not delegated to divinely designated monarchs, but, rather, to all men, who in turn could themselves determine the means of their government.

The document was finished August 2nd. Fifty-five, at great personal peril, had signed.

Which Continental Congress Attendee Did Not Sign?

Few Continental Congress members were held in greater regard than John Dickinson. In 1765 he helped lead opposition to the Stamp Act, Britain's first effort to get colonists to cover part of the mounting cost of empire through taxes on paper and printed materials.

Then, after Parliament rescinded the Stamp Act but levied a new set of taxes on paint, paper, lead and tea with the Townshend Duties of 1767, Dickinson galvanized colonial resistance by penning *Letters From a Pennsylvania Farmer,* a series of impassioned broadsides widely read on both sides of the Atlantic.

Dickinson even set his political sentiments to music, borrowing the melody from a popular Royal Navy chantey for his stirring "Liberty Song," which included the refrain: "Not as slaves, but as freemen our money we'll give."

Yet on July 1, 1776, as his colleagues in the Continental Congress prepared to declare independence from Britain, Dickinson offered a resounding dissent. He chided his fellow delegates for daring to "brave the storm in a skiff made of paper."

He argued that France and Spain might be tempted to attack rather than support an independent American nation. He also noted that many differences among the colonies had yet to be resolved and could lead to civil war. When Congress adopted a nearly unanimous resolution the next day to sever ties with Britain, Dickinson abstained from the vote.

Signing The Declaration Had Significant Consequences

Twenty-four signers were lawyers and jurists. Eleven were merchants, nine were farmers and large plantation owners; men of means, well educated. But they signed the Declaration of Independence knowing full well that the penalty would be death if they were captured.

Nine of the 56 fought and died from wounds or hardships of the Revolutionary War. They signed and they pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. What kind of men were they?

Five signers were captured by the British as traitors, and tortured before they died.

Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned. Two lost their sons serving in the Revolutionary Army; another had two sons captured.

Carter Braxton of Virginia, a wealthy planter and trader, saw his ships swept from the seas by the British Navy. He sold his home and properties to pay his debts, and died in rags.

Thomas McKeam was so hounded by the British that he was forced to move his family almost constantly. He served in the Congress without pay, and his family was kept in hiding. His possessions were taken from him, and poverty was his reward.

Vandals or soldiers looted the properties of Dillery, Hall, Clymer, Walton, Gwinnett, Heyward, Ruttledge, and Middleton.

At the battle of Yorktown, Thomas Nelson, Jr., noted that the British General Cornwallis had taken over the Nelson home for his headquarters. He quietly urged General George Washington to open fire. The home was destroyed, and Nelson died bankrupt.

Francis Lewis had his home and properties destroyed. The enemy jailed his wife, and she died within a few months.

John Hart was driven from his wife's bedside as she was dying. Their 13 children fled for their lives. His fields and his gristmill were laid to waste. For more than a year, he lived in forests and caves, returning home to find his wife dead and his children vanished. A few weeks later he died from exhaustion and a broken heart. Norris and Livingston suffered similar fates.

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