

THE SPIRIT OF AMERICA

Soon the United States of America will be 250-years-old. Compared to the great civilizations of the world, our country is still a newborn. We can't imagine America without freedom ringing from sea to shining sea, yet not too long ago, freedom was still a dream. When the founding fathers officially declared their independence from the British Empire in

1776, they were taking a drastic step away from everything they had ever known. Up until then they were only British colonists. As soon as the ink dried on the Declaration of Independence, they were something else. They were Americans.

It's easy for us to sit here at the other end of our nation's history and act like we would be brave enough to take such a bold step. But to most of the founding fathers' fellow colonists the idea of revolution was suicide. Everyone knew King George would not take the colonies' separation lightly. He would do all in his military power to stop it. Death and defeat would come quickly.

In one of the biggest surprise victories of all time, the revolutionaries *weren't* defeated by the much larger British army. King George lost his mind, and American freedom was more than a possibility; it was a reality. One of the first tasks at hand was to form a national identity. The new Americans asked, "Who are we? What do we believe?" It was obvious that the founding fathers had plenty of strong ideas on the subject, but their ideals had to be sorted out and streamlined. They took their final shape in the Constitution of the United States of America. Much blood, sweat, and tears went into that "We the people"!

History, a long record of names and deeds, is important to every nation. The founding fathers had divorced themselves from British history, and American history had to start from scratch. Along with American history a little American mythology grew up along the way as well. These stories were a necessary part of forging a new nation. After all every society needs a set of stories that tells them how to live. The Greeks had the *Iliad*, and the Romans had the *Aeneid*. The colonists had been raised on the myths and legends of the old world, but America needed a new set of heroes and stories to establish the American spirit. What appeared were American legends—tales about real people that may have happened, but maybe not.

To satisfy the nation's need for a hero, George Washington became larger-than-life. One story about the young George Washington claimed that when he was just a boy, he took his new hatchet and chopped down his father's prize cherry tree. When little George was questioned by his father, George replied, "I cannot tell a lie," and confessed. His father, overcome with emotion at George's honesty, did not have the heart to punish the boy. Later in life it was said that Washington skipped a silver dollar across the Potomac River (even though the Potomac is half a mile wide, and the silver dollar wasn't minted then). Accounts of Washington's crossing of the Delaware river and his winter at Valley Forge helped to solidify



his legendary status. He was called America's Moses who had led them through the wilderness into the promised land of liberty. Nathaniel Hawthorne sarcastically claimed that George Washington was not born naked—but fully clothed and wearing a powdered wig.

Washington was not the only revolutionary to receive the hero treatment. Another tale involved the revolutionary soldier Paul Revere risking his life by making a midnight ride to warn his fellow colonists that "The British are coming! The British are coming!" Revere had been alerted of the British troops' method approach by a lantern code: One lantern if the British come by land; two if by sea.

There are many other legends in this same vein—before an assembly of the Virginian legislature, Patrick Henry shouted, "Give me liberty or give me death!" Benjamin Franklin discovered that lightning is electricity and then suggested the national bird should be the turkey (not necessarily in that order). The Liberty Bell was rung to celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence. During a battle of the Revolutionary War, Molly Pitcher brought water to wounded soldiers, carried some out of the line of fire, and even manned a cannon when its operator went down. Benedict Arnold defected to the side of the British—earning his place as America's Judas Iscariot. George Washington visited seamstress Betsy Ross in person to give her the task of designing a new flag for the country.

Historians have begun to pick some of these stories apart—declaring some of them to be more myth than history. But does this diminish their importance? Are we so tied down to facts that we can no longer learn from a myth? These stories have been woven into the tapestry of our society. Although not completely factual, these stories are *true* to the American spirit. They're ideals—conceptualizations of the first Americans—larger-than-life characters intended to make us more patriotic, to challenge *us* to be larger-than-life ourselves. Our country's founders started out as humans just like us, but have since become icons, legends, myths.

Our American stories and the people behind them are much like our nation. We strive for an incorruptible ideal, an unattainable goal. We want the George Washington who never told a lie. But, like George, we are not as great as our ideal. Our country, though we hate to admit it, is flawed. It will never be perfect, but should we stop trying to perfect it? Without an ideal before us, we have nowhere to go. George Washington and the others were ideal Americans because they stood for something bigger than themselves. We should do the same. Figure out what it means to be an American, and be the best one you can be. *America* should mean life, liberty, and the pursuit of perfection.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why are stories important to a nation's identity?
2. Do people need larger-than-life characters to inspire them? Explain.
3. Legends are tales that have basis in fact. Is it wrong to stretch the truth about real-life people?
4. Judging by the legends of the revolutionary heroes, what does it mean to be an American?