



World Business Academy

PERSPECTIVES

Vol. 6, Issue 4

REKINDLING THE HUMAN SPIRIT IN BUSINESS

August 22, 2001

Editor's Note: Author Joseph Sohm posits that to visualize America in the twenty-first century, it is necessary to look back at America in the eighteenth century. In this insightful piece, he examines three popular pre-Revolutionary documents that transformed America and the world: Thomas Paine's Common Sense, Adam Smith's The Wealth of Nations and Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, all written within 170 days of each other. These three writers, thinkers and activists helped humanity begin to reorder its belief system. The time marked the beginning of an evolutionary shift in world consciousness.

Today, Sohm notes, Jefferson would call for a revolution of values and a further evolution of consciousness. For as Thomas Paine penned, "We have it in our power to begin the world over again...the birth of a New World is at hand." Jefferson's generation proclaimed a Declaration of Independence. "Let our generation proclaim a Declaration of Interdependence," writes Sohm.



1776: The American Evolution

Celebrating the 225th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence

Written and Photographed by Joseph Sohm

My profession is my passion. Since the early eighties, I've been photographing all things American: big cities, small towns, people of all colors and lush landscapes that comprise who we are as a nation. The tools of my trade are the prerequisite camera, film, tripod, rental car with unlimited mileage and airline ticket to Anywhere, USA. My most important tool, however, is an understanding of where we come from. As a former high-school American history teacher, I believe history is the pathway to the future. To visualize America in the twenty-first century, it is necessary to look back at America in the eighteenth century.

Mostly, I shoot America on a good day. The photographs I take require bright sunny days, deep blue skies, and ideally, white puffy clouds. If the sun comes out, I shoot all day. Summer shooting results in long sixteen-hour days. I wake up forty-five minutes before sunrise to capture the "pink moment" and quit thirty minutes after the final fading "sunset glow." In between, I drive two to three hundred miles, scout locations for future tripod holes, send film to labs and clean my lenses.

Secretly, I long for cloudy days so I can sleep late and over a lingering breakfast read the books that are my traveling companions. I had that opportunity several years ago while photographing colonial Williamsburg and the revolutionary areas of Virginia. I am fascinated by the period of 1776 - 1787, a time when western civilization transformed itself.

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"The Academy is not just another association of business people to exchange information and foster collegiality. It is about investing ourselves in a task of historic proportions." **Willis Harman**

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Over the course of that cloudy day, something magical unfolded. With my cameras stowed, I pored over three popular pre-Revolutionary documents that transformed America and the world: Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, and Thomas Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence* . . . all written within 170 days of each other.

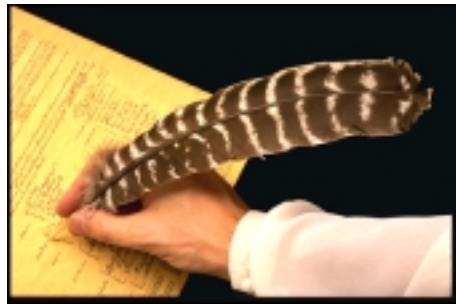
Good things often come in threes, and with the help of these three writers, thinkers and activists, humanity began to reorder its belief system. Within a brief six-month period, this visionary trio established a new paradigm for a New World. Although they were born subjects of the British Crown, ironically it wouldn't be England that embraced their ideas: It would be the American Colonies. What they did was to engineer the political and economic bridge linking the Age of Enlightenment to our New Age of the twenty-first century. As I continued reading, a new theory of the American Revolution unfolded: it was less a Revolutionary war and more an evolutionary shift in world consciousness.

What do we mean by the American Revolution? The War? That was no part of the Revolution, it was only an effect and consequence of it. The Revolution was in the minds and the hearts of the people fifteen years before a single drop of blood was shed at Lexington.

John Adams

Later that day, I photographed a Revolutionary War reenactment in the colonial village of Williamsburg. Afterwards, I visited Bruton Parish, America's oldest English Church. As I sat in the same church pews that Jefferson and friends sat in two centuries earlier, I contemplated those critical 170 days of 1776. But it wasn't the war I was thinking about; it was the power of three documents to radically realign the world as we knew it then.

On January 10, 1776, Thomas Paine presented his first copy of *Common Sense* to Benjamin Franklin. In one brilliant stroke, Paine placed the radical notion of independence at the forefront of the American debate. Prior to *Common Sense*, Americans considered themselves Englishmen living in America who were merely having a dispute with Mother England over taxation. After *Common Sense*, they considered themselves Americans living in America, politically separate and independent of England. When Thomas Paine coined the phrase, "The United States of America," he conceived a new nation on Earth. Paine is truly the father of American independence.



In the most successful political pamphlet since Martin Luther posted his doctrines on the back of a church door, Paine broadcast his ideas of independence, liberty and freedom to masses of Americans. In what traditionally would have been a debate between the intellectuals and elitists of the day, Paine "democratized" his *Common Sense* by writing to the common man in common language. *Common Sense* articulated the shifting consciousness of the Revolutionary era. In just three months, his pamphlet became America's first bestseller, with a record circulation of more than 120,000 copies! As it was passed from household to household, at least 25 percent of America's two million citizens read it, and, more importantly, embraced his argument.

The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. 'Tis not the affair of a city, a county, a province, or a kingdom; but of a continent - of at least one-eighth part of the habitable globe. 'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected even to the end of time by the proceedings now. Now is the seedtime of continental union, faith, and honor.

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*

Adam Smith was undoubtedly the remarkable product of a remarkable age. With history as our lens, Smith becomes the prophet of a new economic order. According to economics professor Andrew Skinner:

The real sophistication of “The Wealth of Nations” lies less in individual areas of economic analysis than in its overall picture of a vast analytical system—a capitalist economy—in which all the parts can be seen simultaneously interacting with each other.

Smith’s ideas liberated the common man from centuries of feudal servitude and empowered him with a new belief in “enlightened self-interest.” All at once it was acceptable for the individual to realize his dream of prosperity. In fact, it was desirable. Smith’s argument for economic freedom was the counterpart of Thomas Paine’s demand for independence. These parallel systems of thought became twin pillars of the American City on the Hill.

When Smith published *The Wealth of Nations* in March of 1776, 98 percent of America was agricultural and 2 percent urban. Two centuries later these numbers are reversed, with less than 2 percent of our population feeding more than 98 percent of our industrialized society. If Einstein provided the physics for the twentieth century and Thomas Paine supplied the political theory for the American Revolution, then Adam Smith established the economic infrastructure for the Industrial Revolution. Empowered by his ideas, we moved from a state of dependency to a United States of economic independence.

Every individual endeavors to employ his capital so that its produce may be of greatest value . . . By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of society more effectively than when he really intends to promote it.

Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*

In July of 1776, just three months after Smith published *The Wealth of Nations*, and five months after Paine published *Common Sense*, Thomas Jefferson began authoring one of the most liberating political documents of the Second Millennium. In 1783, Richard Lee described Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence as no less than “an expression of the American mind.” Ezra Stiles stated that Jefferson had poured “the soul of the continent” into his declaration.

Before Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, Colonists were largely trapped by the circumstances into which they were born—whether of wealth or poverty, family position or lack of it. One’s position in life departed only incrementally from the hand one was dealt at birth. Prior to America, the future offered little refuge for a soul who wanted to break from his/her past.

After America, individuals were freed from the random circumstances of birth. The Age of Enlightenment questioned the godly authority that monarchs held over their subjects. With the Declaration of Independence, the individual was released and the idea of a future better than today emerged. The American dream was born.

Just days before Jefferson’s death, which precisely coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, he wrote:



May the Declaration of Independence be to the world what I believe it will be: the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition have persuaded them to bind themselves and assume the blessings and security of self-government. All eyes are opened or opening to the rights of man.

The American Evolution was largely about civilization moving from a state of dependence to a nation of independence, as witnessed by the fledgling American colonies’ growth into the most influential nation on earth. But it wouldn’t happen overnight. Great ideas

take centuries to be realized. While the New World ushered in a new form of government, the Old World spent the next 225 years catching up. Paine's, Smith's and Jefferson's ideas were seeds in the wind, traveling the planet, taking root in distant places and times. People in nations not yet dreamed of would experience this American Evolution, as in the French Revolution of the 18th century, Simon Bolivar's Venezuela in the 19th Century, and in Nelson Mandela's 20th Century South Africa.

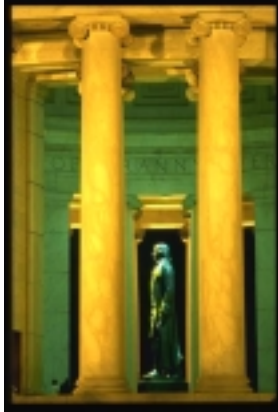
When Boris Yeltsin defiantly stood on a tank and shook his fist at the Russian White House, we were eyewitnesses to the ongoing American Evolution. When an unknown Chinese student courageously stood before a tank in Tiananmen Square, we could hear Paine's cry for independence. When the Berlin Wall came crashing down, Jefferson's voice for democracy and Smith's argument for a free-market economy would be heard.

Among Paine, Smith and Jefferson, two central ideas seized western civilization: the desire for political independence in a democratic system and the need for a free market economy. For more than two hundred years, America has found strength by drawing upon this inheritance. But what was once our strength, our economic individualism and political independence, is rapidly becoming our weakness. July 4, 2001 marks the 225th anniversary of the signing of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. This is the time to ask big questions and pose worthy goals. Will the 21st century be The American Century, as Time Magazine editor Henry Luce proclaimed the twentieth? Or will humanity's step to the next evolutionary level be passed to another nation? As the world population approaches seven billion and America's population exceeds 276 million, our excessive independence threatens our collective future. Can 4 percent of the world's population continue to consume 30 percent of the world's resources? Will we continue paying our athletic stars \$200 million while we pay our teachers \$35 thousand? Will we choose the rights of gun owners over the concerns for our children? Can there be a time when individual rights threaten collective concerns? Is that time now?

The Time Hath Found Us.

Thomas Paine

Just as Jefferson's dream of a nation of farmers was no longer appropriate for the industrial age, neither are industrial values appropriate for our digital age. Today, Jefferson would call for a revolution of values, an evolution of consciousness.



As the mind becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths disclosed and manners and opinion change with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also, and keep pace with the time.

Thomas Jefferson

Jefferson's generation proclaimed a Declaration of Independence. Let our generation proclaim a Declaration of Interdependence. We are a nation moving from "me" to "we." Let us usher in a new era in which we balance individual and collective rights, economic and environmental concerns, nationalism and internationalism. We no longer live in an "either/or" world; it is "both-and." Just as we needed the ideas of Paine, Smith and Jefferson to get from "there to here," we need a new set of road maps to get "from here to there." May our actions produce as positive an effect on future generations of Americans as did the actions of Paine, Smith and Jefferson on us.

As students of American History, we know about "the shot heard round the world," but perhaps it is more accurately, "the words heard around the world." As these eighteenth century words are the cornerstone of our twenty-first century, so will our words and actions today be the cornerstone for our children's children. For if we are, as Sir Frances Bacon says, "standing on the shoulders of giants," then let us remember that others are preparing to stand upon ours.

We have it in our power to begin the world over again . . . the birth of a New World is at hand.

Thomas Paine

As the clouds over Williamsburg cleared, the setting sun bathed the land in golden light. I put away my books and once again took out my cameras. As I recommitted to photographing the United States with fresh eyes, the image of an American Mosaic revealed itself. With renewed vigor I planted my tripod, selected the lens and framed my vision of America. As I pressed the shutter, I placed my stamp on this land, as all of us do in our own unique ways. Contributing our joys and labors, we are all eyewitnesses to this New American Renaissance, each of us with tile in hand.



Joseph Sohm: American History teacher turned Photographer-Writer-Speaker, Sohm is both student and teacher of America's past, present and future. He is published daily around the world for clients such as National Geographic, Time Magazine and Simon Shuster. On December 18, 2000, his image of the U.S. Constitution appeared on the election covers of both Newsweek and US News and World Report. His images are featured in advertisements for IBM, Ford, AOL, Microsoft, Sony, Kodak, Merrill Lynch, Apple and Chrysler. Sohm's work has been featured on CNN, PBS, NBC's Today Show and MSNBC. His photographs have been exhibited at American embassies for the U.S. Department of State, New York's Neikrug Gallery, L.A.'s Ira Robert Gallery and First Boston Corporation. He was President Clinton's campaign photographer for the Democratic National Committee and photographed, conceived and co-produced the MTV Official Presidential Inaugural Video, Portrait of Change. He also conceived President Clinton's favorite inaugural event, The Bells of Hope. Sohm has been featured by the Los Angeles Times, New York Times, San Francisco Examiner, St. Louis Post Dispatch and C-SPAN. In 1998, the Japanese edition of Esquire profiled him. He was awarded a Gold Medal in the New York International Film Festival. In 2000, Joseph published "Pan America," a photographic catalogue and book and conceived the Rodale book, "Imagine," with Marianne Williamson. Sohm resides in Ojai, California with his wife Leslie. For additional information, go to www.VisionsofAmerica.com or email him at Joseph@visionsofamerica.com.