

1776 Resource Guide

I. *1776*; released 1972.

Plot summary: set during the Second Continental Congress, this musical mixes humor with serious debate surrounding the question of independence for the American colonies. Generally accurate, the debate scenes are particularly useful in this regard. Centered on John Adams and his political ally Ben Franklin, the film shows the struggle to introduce the question of independence into Congress, speculates on how Thomas Jefferson was chosen to write the Declaration of Independence, and details a series of debates ranging from individual word choice in the Declaration to independence itself.

II. Appropriate for any age group, especially with judicious cutting. One subplot involves Jefferson's writers' block because of his desire for his wife, who eventually joins him in Philadelphia. (This incident is not historically accurate; Jefferson's wife was ill and did not travel to Philadelphia.) After some time alone with her, he turns out the Declaration. While discussing who should be assigned to author the Declaration, he and Adams both mention the fact that they "burn". Overall, these sections are fairly tame by today's standards, and they are easily cut; in fact, cutting them brings the film down to a manageable length.

III. *1776* will function best in American History classes, at the moment they cover the transition from colonies to states. It also provides an interesting opportunity to use primary documents since much of what the characters say during debate is drawn from their writings and speeches.

IV. Teachers can use *1776* to supplement work on the American Revolution. This guide provides suggestions for both political and social history focuses. In addition, it suggests some ways to help students think about and recognize some techniques filmmakers use to manipulate their stories and their viewers to make their points. Examining the film also allows students to discuss the way that history and accuracy in Hollywood are influenced and changed by the industry's demands, especially the imperative to make money.

V. This film, closely based on the Tony-winning musical, is set in Philadelphia during the weeks preceding the signing of the Declaration of Independence. It chronicles the debates of the Second Continental Congress as they discuss breaking from the rule of King George III and forming a new nation.

The principal advocates for independence include John Adams (William Daniels), a Massachusetts delegate and Benjamin Franklin (Howard Da Silva), representing Pennsylvania. Together, they work to convince the other members of Congress to support a resolution for independence. Among other tactics, they convince Henry Lee of Virginia to introduce the subject to Congress, bully Thomas Jefferson into writing the document that defines American independence, and even bring Delaware delegate Caesar Rodney from his infirm bed for the independence vote.

Large portions of the film dialogue and song lyrics come straight from letters, memoirs, documents, and debates of the characters. These transcripts allow the film to explore dimensions of these "founding fathers" that history textbooks neglect. Adams is seen as "obnoxious and disliked" while simultaneously passionate and patriotic. Franklin, while a comical figure, is

portrayed as wise beyond his years, in his understanding of human nature and the consequences of independence. The minor characters represent the interests of geographical and political factions of the colonies including farmers, loyalists, businessmen, and slaveholders; however, not all fifty-five signers are depicted on screen.

As July 4th approaches, various issues and concerns surface, many of them in song. The courier and Congressional pages sing of the horrors of war and the steep price of freedom. Likewise, the haunting song “Molasses to Rum” divulges Northern participation in the slave trade and the Southern resolve that American freedom does not mean slave freedom. While not specifically noted, slavery still existed in the North, although the Revolution and its ideas were catalysts for its abolition.

Although the outcome is known, suspense builds, reaching its climax in the final scene on July 3rd. Time is running out and a vote must be taken. There must be unanimous support for independence, for a single opposing vote will halt all further discussion on this issue. How will each colony vote? Will the United States of America at last be established?

VI. This section breaks *1776* into shorter segments, mostly suitable for a single class period. First we outline each section. Then, under the Political and Social History and Media Literacy headings, you will find suggestions for questions to ask, issues to raise, things to notice, or topics for discussion. The Projects, etc. sections contain suggestions for projects that move outside the film. These can be adapted for various age groups and class sizes and situations. Also, many of the topics or series of questions can be expanded into larger projects.

A. Introduction

0-17:15 Introduction of characters and main problems--John Adams, Congress, politics, conditions in Philadelphia in summer 1776, letters between John and Abigail Adams, Ben Franklin, Richard Henry Lee and the plan to introduce officially the question of independence. *This section is not essential and can be skipped if the teacher does an introduction and identifies the main characters for students when they first appear in later sections. However, it does contain one of the exchanges between John and Abigail Adams.*

B. Congressional Issues/Debate

17:15-52:40/59 Congressional politics and debate--politicking, divisiveness and importance of independence question, issue of how to best represent the people (their actual votes or personal understanding/interests), move for a unanimous vote and the politics of postponement. The last section (52:40-59) is the song during which the Declaration committee decides who should write the Declaration.

This section is a good choice if you want to show a single section, covering points of both social and political history as well as allowing discussion of film techniques.

C. The Political and the Personal

59-1:15:20 Jefferson's writer's block and the solution, another exchange between the Adamses, and a song for Martha Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin.

1:15:20-1:19:50 Congress--War Committee departs to visit the army.

1:19:50-1:24:55 Congressional pages and army private, song about the horrors of war.

1:24:55-1:30 Reading Declaration, War Committee returns, Jefferson, Franklin, and Adams sing about hatching a nation.

This section is the least essential. Omitting it also facilitates the removal of the Jefferson-writer's-block issue.

D. Final Debates

1:30-2:20:11 Debate on Declaration, minor and major changes, including long debate on slavery clause that threatens to make Congressional unanimity impossible. Adams' concern, uncertainty about the best course of action and solo wondering "does anybody care?" Finally, the yes vote (with a dramatic entrance by Caesar Rodney to secure Delaware's vote--note that while he was ill and did return for the vote, he was not on his deathbed, as the film depicts), a sad final dispatch from George Washington (the largest inaccuracy in the text), and the signing, which ends up with everyone posed in reference to John Trumbull's famous, and inaccurate, painting of the event.

Longer than the second section, but also a good choice as it deals head on with the debate over slavery and examines why men who claim to be against slavery would give in on the issue.

Pieces of this section could be eliminated based on what else the students have seen and which issues you would like to focus on. For instance, if they have not seen any of the exchanges between John and Abigail Adams, their last exchange here may not make much sense. The arrival of saltpeter definitely will not.

A. Introduction

Political History: How does Congress operate? How do the delegates treat each other? What characters or issues seem to cause divisions? How are famous men characterized? (Ex. Franklin, Adams, Jefferson, Hancock) How do the conditions of meeting in Philadelphia in the summer affect the Congress? What type of politicking is required to introduce the question of independence into Congress (Franklin's plan to have a Virginian, rather than Adams, introduce the measure)?

Social History: John and Abigail Adams' relationship humanizes John by showing his roles outside of Congress. Their exchanges also show some issues of living during wartime, including homefront concerns (pins, housekeeping, illness) and war supply concerns (saltpeter). Also, Abigail mentions that it takes 8 days to travel from Philadelphia to Massachusetts. How might someone have made this journey—horse, carriage, wagon? Abigail Adams could serve as a starting point for numerous discussions, such as the role women played in the war, the way the family economy, especially farming, required full use of labor from all its members, and so on. Abigail, although she did not have an extensive education, was intelligent and politically astute, equal to being her spouse's confidante and advisor. Her "remember the ladies" letter does not appear in the film but is frequently quoted because it recognizes, at an apparently early date, that women were much more than dependents or fragile beings in need of protection, as well as demonstrates Abigail's ability and willingness to stand up to her husband and argue for her own ideas. John's dismissive response presents a case in point of another set of prevalent feelings on whose thoughts were valuable in public debate.

--Franklin is having his portrait painted; why did men have portraits painted? (i.e., no photography to preserve their image, a sign of his status)

Media Literacy: Pay attention to how various characters are dressed--the type of fabric, variety of wigs and hairdos, amount of lace, quality and showiness of the overall ensemble. Those who favor independence are more plainly dressed. Those who fight most against the idea tend to be much more elegantly dressed. Speculate on why this might be. Also, note the stage version of the musical contained a song sung by the wealthy property owners, led by Dickinson and Rutledge. "Cool, Conservative Men" showcased their reluctance to risk their property and wealth on independence.

--Also, point out that the two sides of the room are arrayed more or less as for and against independence. Most glaringly, Franklin does not sit with the rest of the Pennsylvania delegation, but alone behind other state delegations that support independence.

--How are the characterizations used to humanize these famous men?

Projects, etc.: Use letters between John and Abigail Adams. This exercise could vary by age group. For younger children, give them the specific letters and have them compare what is included, left out, and rearranged by the playwright. For older students, have them locate the specific letters which apply here and perform a similar exercise, including questions about why the playwright chose these particular topics from the letters to include.

--Franklin and others utter a number of quips (Adams on three or more useless men being a Congress, for example)--can these be located in their original sources?

--Have students compare travel times in 1776 to today. (Ex. 8 days from PA to MA; an hour in a plane, four hours in a car.) This discussion could also segue into different modes and conditions of colonial travel.

--If resources are available, find statues or paintings of the men (tied to Franklin's portrait in the film). Discuss the process of painting portraits in the colonial era—what did objects included in the paintings signify? How long did people have to sit to have portraits painted? Who had their portraits painted? Are there statues nearby, outdoors or inside, that students could visit? This might be especially interesting for those who live in one of the thirteen colonies.

B. Congressional Issues/Debate

Political History: Note how debate functions; Congress follows something that approximates Robert's Rules of Order (although not to an extent that it would slow down the action too much). How similar is the set up of this Congress to our Congress today? How does debate take place today in Congress? In school? On TV? For these men, the debate is rarely personal. Is this true in debates and arguments today? How do you argue with your friends? What is their gentlemanly code of behavior? The biggest insult is to call someone a coward. What are the biggest insults today? The men begin fencing when they spar. Can you fence? How do people fight today?

--Independence is quickly identified as the key issue. How do the delegates treat the newcomer, Dr. Lyman Hall? How do they attempt to sound out his politics? How does he delay responding? Do we make friendships based on criteria such as what group someone belongs to or which activities they are good at? What else?

--Why does Lee, a Virginian, proposing independence make such a difference? Note the North/South relations—NC and SC only consider independence when a "gentleman" proposes it.

Connecticut will vote for it only if someone NOT from New England proposes it. Why?

--What type of men make up the Congress? They are not all rich; note the variety of occupations mentioned, which may or may not match up with the splendor of dress. Is there greater variety in certain areas of the country than others in terms of who gets selected as a representative?

Factions of men represent different interests—landowners, slaveholders, businessmen, clergy, farmers, gentlemen, etc.

--There are a series of questions revolving around the question of representation. The delegates seem unsure if they are to abide by directions from colony-wide votes, from legislatures, or their own opinions, which they admit are likely to be very much influenced by their own interests, such as their position in business or as landowners.

--Note the political means used to reach ends in Congress. Dickinson requires unanimity as a way to defeat independence (why does Hancock support this measure even though it jeopardizes the independence he desires?); Adams proposes a Declaration as a way to gain time to reach unanimity.

--These men have varying opinions; how do those who disagree most strongly treat each other? Note that debates contain humor and gotchas alongside serious statements of reason.

--In the exchange between John Dickinson, John Adams, and Ben Franklin, how do the various characters define Americans as like or unlike the British? (Especially Dickinson and Franklin) Franklin says, “Americans are rougher, simpler, more violent, more enterprising, less refined...”

Social History: Steven Hopkins introduces the commonality of alcohol in the colonies—drinking rum in morning wasn’t unusual. Also, alcohol was used as medicine.

--1776 has several examples of how written communication happened in the colonies—letters, written with quill pens, sent by a postal service (how was it different from ours today?) or courier, and Washington uses an army private to run dispatches to the Congress. How long did these methods take? What formats, written and otherwise, do communications take today?

--Colonial illnesses appear several times. What illnesses appear? Caesar Rodney is ill; BF has gout. (In Section A, Abigail Adams lists a number of illnesses as well.) What causes gout? How did they treat these ailments? How do medical practices differ today? Rodney wants to go home to die, not to a hospital.

--Transportation and the length of time it takes to travel. Lee is gone from May 9th to June 7th. How long does it take to go from Philadelphia to Williamsburg today? Note that Adams and Franklin have to wait for Lee’s return to learn what happened in VA; how might Washington, DC lawmakers learn about developments around the country today? See travel questions in Section A as well.

--Conditions in Philadelphia. What is the weather like? (Hot--87 degrees--and humid) How do the men keep cool? (fans) How do they get weather report? (they do it themselves) Why don’t they often open the windows? One reason—fear that word of debates would get out and cause the delegates not to give their real opinions for fear of the British or those who didn’t agree with them. Another: the flies. Why are there so many flies? Unsanitary practices (horse apples, garbage, and outhouses) Also note, despite the heat, the men remain fully or nearly fully attired. Talk about how standards of dress and formality differ or are similar today. Another difference between life then and now is outhouses (outdoor plumbing?). You can really go with this—what did people do at night? What were chamberpots? Who emptied them?

Media Literacy: Continue observing clothes--with the vote in this section, the sartorial divisions are pretty clear.

--Note the auditory clue for George Washington--each time his name is read, it is preceded by a drumroll. Why might this be?

Projects, etc.: Locate the sources for the debate dialogue in this section. Does the film bring to life the issues concerning independence in ways that textbooks do not? Is the film more effective because there are faces to put to ideas? Less effective because they sometimes seem silly?

--Find 1776 commentary on the Congress--were newspapers or pamphleteers ridiculing or supporting it? How much information about the proceedings was available to the public? What reasons might Congress have for making information available or withholding it?

--Have students research the representatives from a particular colony. What can they learn about these men's opinions? What influenced their actions? What jobs did they have? Did they have families? How did occupation or family background affect their status in the colony? What relationship did they have with the colony's government? What did they do after the Congress and after the Revolutionary War? Does the students' research match the portrayal of the men in the film?

--Have students complete a seating plan of Congress. This activity might be especially useful if the class does not view the beginning of the film. Which states sit where? Note that Franklin does not sit with the rest of the PA delegation. Several approaches: have the students draw the plan and fill it in entirely on their own; have them fill in a prepared but blank form; have them follow along on an already completed form. Using or creating a seating chart both familiarizes the students with the characters and tangibly maps out the for/against independence dichotomy mentioned under media literacy in the Introduction section. A chart could also leave spaces for notes on each character, enabling discussion of how the film presents each man, humanizing, ridiculing, deifying, etc.

C. The Political and the Personal

Political History: More political maneuvering--how does Adams arrange to get Maryland's yes vote?

--Another exchange between the Adamses. This letter is less about politics than about personality though.

Social History: TJ plays violin—18th c. culture expected men to learn other talents. What other skills did Jefferson have? What subjects was he interested in? (All of them!) Franklin also makes a good example to expand this discussion. What other talents do you have? Do you take lessons for an instrument? Play on a team? What other skills are you working on developing? What are your interests, talents, or hobbies? How could you apply these skills to other areas of your life? (I.e., Jefferson uses his instrument to combat writer's block and woo his wife; team-building skills from sports can apply on group projects, etc.)

Media Literacy: See Adams letter project mentioned in Section A. How do the filmmakers use the letters to humanize Adams, who otherwise just yells a great deal?

--Similarly, how does the idea that Jefferson suffers from writer's block humanize him? You could also pursue this subplot in light of the recent public discussion about his relationship with

Sally Hemings. Note that in reality his wife did not come to Philadelphia; he was worried about her as she was quite ill. This topic would be interesting to pursue with older students, especially if you discuss the film's genesis in the 1970s. How have images of Jefferson (and other men in the film) changed over the years? What new information or understanding has influenced how some or many Americans think about him/them? Why have they changed? Is such revision necessarily a bad thing? This type of discussion, especially centered on Jefferson, relates the type of discussion involving hypocrisy highlighted below in the Political History portion of the Final Debates section.

Projects, etc.: Continuing the letter project with regard to the Abigail/John letters.

D. Final Debates

Political History: This section is very similar to section B. The issues of representation (Hall changes his vote) returns, and political games are still in evidence, especially with South Carolina's move to withhold independence over slavery.

--The film actually does a good job with the debate over the slavery clause. Why do various people support its inclusion? (morally right to abolish slavery, hypocritical to condone something that goes against what they're fighting for, slaves are people) Why do others oppose it? (threatens their property, slaves are not people but property, northerners hypocritical in thinking they don't benefit from slavery as much as southerners--song) Economy (not just Southern agrarian system but triangle trade benefiting the North as well) v. morality (abolition, slaves as fully human)--very much an issue in all the founding Congresses. Also, note that while John Adams never owned slaves, Franklin owned several; further, Thomas Jefferson may have "resolved" to free his slaves, but he never did, blaming his economic situation. These differences between the statements in the Declaration and Founders' behavior signify a definite hypocrisy and represent a starting point for student discussion on these issues, including why certain things are cut from the Declaration and the difference that can exist between words and practices.

--The last dispatch from Washington is very dramatic, but it is not accurate. See learning guide at www.teachwithmovies.org/guides/1776.html

Social History: Given the debate over slavery (and implicitly over tobacco as an economic resource), notice who smokes pipes and who doesn't. (Hancock and another Northerner) This discussion can be carried into the present fairly easily.

Projects, etc.: Examine a copy of the Declaration that shows all the changes from draft to signed version.

--Look at the Trumbull painting the film's visual finale quotes. While the film references the painting, the painting itself, located in the Capitol, is not accurate. Why, then, is the image so many Americans have of the signing? Why might Trumbull have chosen to paint it this way? How is it inaccurate? Why include it in the film? What messages does the painting carry about the men it depicts? Does the film further those images or change them? If, as Franklin protests, they are not demigods, why end the film with a painting that has served to elevate them to such a status? A copy of John Trumbull's "Declaration of Independence" can be found at www.tcdc.com/ddiscs/bddisc1b.htm (larger, clearer image) or http://www.aoc.gov/cc/art/rotunda/declaration_independence.htm (Architect of the Capitol's

website) and an examination of its inaccuracies can be found at <http://www.americanrevolution.org/decsm.html>

Media Literacy: More humanizing--Franklin's statement about being "men", not "demigods", and Judge Wilson's (PA) desire to avoid historical notice.

--Why quote the painting while ringing the Liberty Bell? What meanings do this image and this sound carry for viewers? How do they make us feel at the end of the film?

--We know what happens after the happily-ever-after of the story. That is, less than a century after the US wins the Revolution, the North and South are fighting. How do Franklin, Jefferson, and others foreshadow the Civil War? How does the slavery debate in Congress foreshadow later debates? Do you think there should be a Civil War movie musical? There is a version for stage called *Shenandoah*, but its film version is not musical.

General

--Discuss: why make a musical about this moment in history? Compare it to other ways the summer of 1776 and the Revolution have been presented—textbooks, novels, nonfiction scholarly works, primary documents, documentaries, movies (*The Patriot*, e.g.), etc. What benefits does the musical form offer (for instance, very humanizing to see Franklin and Adams singing and almost dancing)? What are the drawbacks (loss of precise accuracy, changing or rearranging words so they rhyme, verging on the ridiculous)?

A second and related question concerns the film's release in 1972. The film was less popular than the stage version, which debuted in the late 1960s. Why might this be? The film built on a wave leading to celebrating the bicentennial in 1976, but Vietnam was very much present in American culture at the same time. How might the disillusionment and disappointment related to that war affect the way Americans felt about being patriotic and about another set of men who could be hypocritical and more concerned over their own prospects than those of the larger number of people?

Finally, and also related to both of the above, many of the men depicted in the film are depicted rather oddly, ranging across ineffectual, timid, grandiose, stubborn, lewd, drunk, and silly. These depictions do not necessarily correspond to the actual men and their ideas, actions, and motivations (Judge Wilson, for instance, seems much weaker than he actually was). How might the two contexts of the film--its participation in the tradition of musicals on stage and film and its creation during the Vietnam War and leading into the bicentennial celebrations and commemorations--have influenced these characterizations?

--Films on historical topics are a kind of public history, although they are not accorded the same status as textbooks or museums. Statues and memorials, especially if they are well interpreted, are another kind of public history. If statues or monuments to Founders or the Revolution exist nearby, consider sending the students to see them; a trip may be especially convenient if you are located in one of the thirteen original colonies. Do the statues carry a different message than the film? Do we attach different meanings to them today than those who erected them did?

Connections to larger issues

--Thomas Paine and *Common Sense* combine with the Declaration to fuel more popular support. The film deals very little with average Americans, but popular response to the Declaration and *Common Sense* would link those who wrote and those who read. Or, read *Common Sense* before watching the film. How might knowing the pamphlet have affected arguments on the street regarding Congress? Have the students pick a side, for or against independence, before watching the film, based on *Common Sense*, and note the arguments addressed in the film that support their position. This activity could also move into role-playing types of activities.

--Other connections should be based on each individual teacher's (or district's or state's) curriculum and requirements. Use those sections of the film that best lead into the material you wish to cover.

Credits:

Director: Peter H. Hunt

Producer: Jack L. Warner

Writing Credits: Sherman Edwards (play); Peter Stone (also play)

William Daniels: John Adams (MA)

Howard Da Silva: Dr. Ben Franklin (PA)

Ken Howard: Thomas Jefferson (VA)

Donald Madden: John Dickinson (PA)

John Cullum: Edward Rutledge (SC)

Roy Poole: Stephen Hopkins (RI)

David Ford: Congressional President John Hancock

Ron Holgate: Richard Henry Lee (VA)

Ray Middleton: Colonel Thomas McKean (DE)

William Hansen: Caesar Rodney (DE)

Blythe Danner: Martha Jefferson

Virginia Vestoff: Abigail Adams

Emory Bass: Judge James Wilson (PA)

Ralston Hill: Congressional Secretary Charles Thomson

Howard Caine: Lewis Morris (NY)

Patrick Hines: Samuel Chase (MD)

William Duell: Congressional Custodian Andrew McNair

Daniel Keyes: Dr. Josiah Bartlett (NH)

Leo Leyden: George Read (DE)

Stephen Nathan: Courier

Jonathan Moore: Dr. Lyman Hall (GA)

James Noble: Reverend Jonathan Witherspoon (NJ)

John Myhers: Robert Livingston (NY)

Rex Robbins: Roger Sherman (CT)

Charles Rule: Joseph Hewes (NC)

Mark Montgomery: Leather Apron

(uncredited)

Andy Albin: William Paca (MD)
William Bassett: Thomas Heyward, Jr. (SC)
Adam S. Bristol: Button Gwinnett (GA)
Jack De Mave: John Penn (NC)
Gordon Devol: Thomas Lynch, Jr. (SC)
Frederic Downs: Samuel Huntington (CT)
Peter Forster: Oliver Wolcott (CT)
John Holland: William Whipple (NH)
Heber Jentsch: Charles Carroll (MD)
Richard McMurray: Francis Lewis (NY)
Barry O'Hara: George Walton (GA)
Dick O'Shea: Francis Hopkinson (NJ)
Jordan Rhodes: William Hooper (NC)
Fred Slyter: Richard Stockton (NJ)

VII. Further Reading and Other Resources

Books

- Bailyn, Bernard. *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1967.
- Bobrick, Benson. *Angel in the Whirlwind: The Triumph of the American Revolution*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.
- Buel, Joy Day and Richard Buel. *The Way of Duty: A Woman and her Family in the American Revolution*. New York: Norton, 1984.
- Butterfield, L. H., Marc Friedlaender, Mary-Jo Kline, Eds. *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1975.
- Davidson, James West and Mark Lytle, Eds. *After the Fact: American Historians and Their Methods*. New York: Knopf, 1982.
- McCullough, David G. *John Adams*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.
- Percoco, James A. *Divided We Stand: Teaching About Conflict in U.S. History*. Westport, CT: Heinemann, 2001.
- Wills, Gary. *Inventing America: Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978.
- Wilson, Wendy S. and Gerald H. Herman. *American History on the Screen: A Teacher's Resource Book on Film and Video*. Portland, ME: J. Weston Walch,
- Wood, Gordon S. *Radicalism of the American Revolution*. New York: A. A. Knopf,

1991.

Video

Liberty!: The American Revolution. PBS Production, 1998.

Online Resources

I was not able to find any listings of biographies on Charles Thompson, but did you know that he drew the first US Great Seal? They tell all about it at <http://www.eagles.org/greatseal>. He must have been a pretty talented guy.