John Adams speaks out about the decisions behind the process of declaring independence

The following is from a letter written to John Adams many years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence in which he answers pointed questions about what went on during the process. His exact words are italicized!

**Question: How was Jefferson (at age 33) chosen to write the document?**

*"You inquire why so young a man as Mr. Jefferson was placed at the head of the committee for preparing a Declaration of Independence? I answer: It was the Frankfort advice, to place Virginia at the head of everything. Mr. Richard Henry Lee might be gone to Virginia, to his sick family, for aught I know, but that was not the reason of Mr. Jefferson's appointment.*

**Question: Where does the term “Frankfort” come from?**

As the Massachusetts delegation (which included Adams) neared Philadelphia, a group of local "Sons of Liberty" rode out to welcome them in the nearby village of Frankford.

Dr. Benjamin Rush, Thomas Mifflin, and several other patriots of Philadelphia made up this party. They and the New Englanders proceeded to a private room at a tavern and got down to business. The Philadelphians warned John Adams and his associates that they had been characterized as "four desperate adventurers" and were "suspected of having independence in view." Furthermore, Adams and company would be "undone" if they so much as uttered the word "independence" because the notion of breaking from England was unpopular in many colonies, particularly Pennsylvania. Still, the local Sons of Liberty, being radicals who were for Independence, gave the men from Massachusetts some important advice on how to sidestep their extremist reputation so as to promote their goal of American independence.

*They asked leave to give us some information and advice, which we thankfully granted. They represented to us that the friends of government in Boston and in the Eastern States, in their correspondence with their friends in Pennsylvania and all the Southern States, had represented us as four desperate adventurers. He told us "Sam Adams was a very artful, designing man, but desperately poor, and wholly dependent on his popularity with the lowest vulgar for his living. John Adams (me) and Mr. Paine were two young lawyers, of no great talents, reputation, or weight, who had no other means of raising themselves into consequence, than by courting popularity.*

*We were all suspected of having independence in view. Now, said they, you must not utter the word independence, nor give the least hint or insinuation of the idea, either in Congress or any private conversation; if you do, you are undone; for the idea of independence is as unpopular in Pennsylvania, and in all the Middle and Southern States, as the Stamp Act itself. No man dares to speak of it.*

*Moreover, you are the representatives of the suffering State. Boston and Massachusetts are under a rod of iron. British fleets and armies are tyrannizing over you; you yourselves are personally obnoxious to them and all the friends of government; you have been long persecuted by them all; your feelings have been hurt, your passions excited; you are thought to be too warm, too zealous. You must be, therefore, very cautious; you must not come forward with any bold measures; you must not pretend to take the lead. You know Virginia is the most populous State in the Union. They are very* *proud of their ancient dominion, as they call it; they think they have a right to take the lead.*

*I must confess that there appeared so much wisdom and good sense in this advice, that it made a deep impression on my mind, and it had an equal effect on all my colleagues*

**Question: How were people chosen to write the document?**

*There were three committees appointed at the same time, one for the Declaration of Independence, another for preparing articles of confederation, and another for preparing a treaty to be proposed to France. Mr. Lee was chosen for the Committee of Confederation, and it was not thought convenient that the same person should be upon both.*

*Mr. Jefferson came into Congress in June, 1775, and brought with him a reputation for literature, science, and a happy talent of composition. Writings of his were handed about, remarkable for the peculiar felicity of expression. Though a silent member in Congress, he was so prompt, frank, explicit, and decisive upon committees and in conversation - not even Samuel Adams was more so - that he soon seized upon my heart; and upon this occasion I gave him my vote, and did all in my power to procure the votes of others. I think he had one more vote than any other, and that placed him at the head of the committee. I had the next highest number, and that placed me the second. The committee met, discussed the subject, and then appointed Mr. Jefferson and me to make the draft, I suppose because we were the two first on the list.*

***Question: Why didn’t you write the document?***

*The subcommittee met. Jefferson proposed to me to make the draft.*

*I said, 'I will not,' 'You should do it.'*

*'Oh! no.' 'Why will you not? You ought to do it.'*

*'I will not.'*

*'Why?'*

*'Reasons enough.'*

*'What can be your reasons?'*

*'Reason first, you are a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason second, I am obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular. You are very much otherwise. Reason third, you can write ten times better than I can.'*

*'Well,' said Jefferson, 'if you are decided, I will do as well as I can.'*

*'Very well. When you have drawn it up, we will have a meeting.'*

**What did you like or dislike about the initial draft?**

*A meeting we accordingly had, and conned the paper over. I was delighted with its high tone and the flights of oratory with which it abounded, especially that concerning Negro slavery, which, though I knew his Southern brethren would never suffer to pass in Congress, I certainly never would oppose.*

*There were other expressions which I would not have inserted if I had drawn it up, particularly that which called the King tyrant. I thought this too personal, for I never believed George to be a tyrant in disposition and in nature; I always believed him to be deceived by his courtiers on both sides of the Atlantic, and in his official capacity, only, cruel. I thought the expression too passionate, and too much like scolding, for so grave and solemn a document; but as Franklin and Sherman were to inspect it afterwards, I thought it would not become me to strike it out. I consented to report it, and do not now remember that I made or suggested a single alteration.*

**Why did Congress alter the document?**

*We reported it to the committee of five. It was read, and I do not remember that Franklin or Sherman criticized anything. We were all in haste. Congress was impatient, and the instrument was reported, as I believe, in Jefferson's handwriting, as he first drew it. Congress cut off about a quarter of it, as I expected they would; but they obliterated some of the best of it, and left all that was exceptionable, if anything in it was.*

*I have long wondered that the original draft had not been published. I suppose the reason is the vehement philippic* (renunciation) *against Negro slavery.*

**Where did the ideas in the document originate?**

*…There is not an idea in it but what had been hackneyed (*repeatedly discussed) *in Congress for two years before. The substance of it,* (the Declaration of Independence), *is contained in the declaration of rights and the violation of those rights in the Journals of Congress in 1774. Indeed, the essence of it is contained in a pamphlet, voted and printed by the town of Boston, before the first Congress met, composed by James Otis, as I suppose, in one of his lucid intervals, and pruned and polished by Samuel Adams.*

References:

Adams, John (Charles Francis Adams ed.), The Works of John Adams, vol II, The Diary (1850) reprinted in Commager, H.S. and Nevins, A., The Heritage of America (1939); Maier Pauline, American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence (1997)