



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on August 12, 2010

William Hogeland's Declaration: A Review

A reader unfamiliar with the history of the complex admixture of conflict, compromises, condescension, and coercion that led to the “shot heard ‘round the world” would be forgiven if after reading William Hogeland’s new book, *Declaration: Nine Tumultuous Weeks When America Became Independent*, he believed that if it wasn’t for the manipulation of the Adams cousins – John and Sam – then the American War for Independence (for it was not revolutionary) never would have happened. And, furthermore, we all might have been better off if it hadn’t.



Now, is that to say that Mr. Hogeland, a prolific historian with an undeniable gift for narrative, regrets the colonies’ declaration of independence from Great Britain? One assumes not. Fortunately, as a historian, Mr. Hogeland’s personal convictions on the matter are wholly irrelevant — as he would assuredly be the first to admit. However, for much of the book Mr. Hogeland employs his enviable talent in the near discomfiting degradation of several of our nation’s most illustrious founders, particularly those whose parts in the drama of declaration were played in the early years of the war with Great Britain.

As indicated earlier, Sam Adams takes a few volleys right between the eyes. *Declaration* begins with a chapter detailing Adams’s fretting over a vote (a popular referendum) that was to be taken at the State House in Philadelphia on May 1, 1776. Hogeland sets the scene masterfully, describing the weather, the clothes, and the crowds so as to transport the reader back to that “bright but cold” day in the City of Brotherly Love.

As Hogeland tells it, however, there was little of the milk of human kindness flowing in Pennsylvania that day. The voters gathered outside the State House were “frightened and testy and ready to push and shove.” They were being asked to decide a most portentous matter: to reconcile with Mother England or declare absolute independence from her.

The crux of the matter, according to the tale recounted by Hogeland, was whether the war with Great Britain that began with that blast at Lexington should remain defensive, that is to say, only prosecuted far enough to make England repent of her constant abuses of her colony, or was the war to be waged fully and forcefully, with the goal of defeating the English occupiers and sending them back across the Atlantic at the point of a bayonet.

The advocates of those two antipodean notions of America’s conflict with Great Britain are called “reconciliationists” and “independents” respectively. It is Hogeland himself who places these labels in quotation marks, citing writings by contemporary authors using the terms accordingly.

At this point, after the stage is set and the supporting cast is in place, Hogeland introduces the first the main characters in his *dramatis personae*: Samuel Adams. Adams is described as being of “middling height (fairly short) and middling build (somewhat stocky).” In the tale told by Hogeland, Sam Adams is



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a master manipulator, a puppet master eager to maintain his control and his distance from the marionettes he keeps dangling from strings.

In Mr. Hogeland's contemptuous description of Sam Adams and his role in the ramp up to the declaration of independence from Great Britain one sees for the first, though not the last, time a demonstration of a sort of psychological biography of these important figures. Hogeland ascribes Sam Adams's behavior to this or that thought, or to this or that flaw in his character. Hogeland paints Adams with the darkest colors on his ample pallet. Phrases such as "he badly wanted" or "he felt a duty to make things like today's election go a certain way" tarnish the otherwise lustrous recasting of history offered by Mr. Hogeland's book. It is nearly impossible to identify the sources of one's own actions, much less to do so to the actions of a man who died some two hundred years ago.

Mr. Hogeland uses this same ill-advised device repeatedly. John Adams, Thomas Paine, John Dickinson, and others are subjected to Hogeland's amateur psychoanalysis and the book is worse off for it. Mr. Hogeland's rich endowment of skill in writing has no need to be bolstered by such enervating efforts. His ability to weave an appealing tapestry using bright and unusual threads is sufficient to attract readers without the somewhat Freudian misdirection.

Putting aside the flaw of placing the burden of one's own sensibilities on the shoulders of Sam Adams, John Dickinson, et al, Mr. Hogeland's depiction of the *sub rosa* alliances and flash formations of cabals and conspirators that pulled the levers, turned the pulleys, and raised the curtains on various scenes leading up to the Declaration of Independence is captivating. There is more than enough intrigue, back channel wheeling and dealing, and backstabbing to satisfy fans of any modern thriller. Hogeland has a remarkable facility for holding the attention of his readers by making them virtual "witnesses at the creation" of our Republic.

There is, to conclude, a certain anti-gestalt quality to Mr. Hogeland's *Declaration*. There are whole chapters (the last, in particular) that are genuine page-turners. One scans with excitement word after word as the votes are tallied and the players deliver their swan songs. The inclusion of the notable, though forgotten stories of the men whose names are unknown to history, but at the time were crucial to the causes they celebrated, is a testimony to Mr. Hogeland's ability and genius. These stories are more than window dressing; they are stand-alone structures in Mr. Hogeland's virtual village. As a whole, however, the book seems disjointed and partial.

Though sometimes ranging a bit farther afield than the author of a book of popular history should, Mr. Hogeland's appendices are praiseworthy. He includes over 150 pages of source material and notes, lending credibility to the events he chronicles. Such a hefty collection is remarkable for a book of this genre and one is hopeful that readers will take advantage of such a generous bibliography and turn to the primary sources of the unmatched sacrifice of lives, fortunes, and sacred honor that the Declaration of Independence demanded.

[Declaration: Nine Tumultuous Weeks When America Became Independent](#) is available in hardcover, Kindle, and iBook editions.



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