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PHYSICIANS IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Declarations of Independence — Physicians and the U.S. Body Politic, 1776–2026

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Two hundred and fifty years ago, businessman John Hancock became the first American to affix his signature to the Declaration of Independence. The second? A physician, Josiah Bartlett.

In fact, 5 of the 56 signatories were doctors, a high-water mark in the history of medical representation in American political leadership (see image). These physician-signers epitomized the multifaceted professional identities of doctors in this era. Not only — and often not primarily — medical practitioners, they played many roles in their communities. This engagement drew them into the great political and social questions of their age. Despite the proliferation of nationally important issues on which policy decisions would benefit from medical expertise today — such as vaccine schedules, health insurance, and

federal research funding — physicians have largely stepped back from the prominent national roles they played during the American Revolution.

Of the Declaration's physician-signers, Benjamin Rush was by far the most celebrated. He was also the only one with a formal medical degree (University of Edinburgh, 1768). Based in Philadelphia throughout his career, Rush became a founding father of America and American medicine, renowned for his advocacy of “heroic” medical practice involving the aggressive use of bleeding and purgatives. At the same time, he encouraged a gentler, more sup-

portive approach to people with mental illness. Rush was also a prominent supporter of the abolition of slavery, though he would in the years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence purchase and eventually manumit an enslaved man.¹

Like Boston physician Joseph Warren, Rush became an early campaigner for American independence. Roused by the 1765 Stamp Act and shaped by his medical education in Edinburgh in the late 1760s, Rush linked medical and social reform to a growing commitment to republicanism.^{1,2} When he returned to Philadelphia and established his medical practice, he became active in politics. In 1773, he cowrote a proclamation denouncing the British Tea Act — a document that helped motivate Boston's like-minded Sons of Liberty to stage their Tea Party.¹

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The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776, John Trumbull.

From the Trumbull Collection, Yale University Art Gallery. Benjamin Rush, Josiah Bartlett, and Oliver Wolcott are featured in the painting; Matthew Thornton and Lyman Hall are not.

In 1775, Rush encouraged Thomas Paine to write *Common Sense* (also suggesting the title and offering other advice and edits). That influential tract swayed many colonists to support independence.¹ A prominent physician and statesman in Philadelphia, Rush became a close friend and lifelong confidant of both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. He had more complicated relationships with both Alexander Hamilton and George Washington (even though they dined and corresponded, Rush infamously criticized Washington during the war).¹

Unlike Warren, who died at Bunker Hill, Rush survived his military service as both a physician-surgeon and a military medical leader. Among other engagements, he crossed the Delaware with Washington's troops in December 1776 and treated soldiers wounded in the Second Battle of Trenton and the subsequent Battle of Princeton.¹ In 1777, he began

serving his short turn as Surgeon General of the Middle Department of military hospitals (covering the region between the Hudson River and the Potomac River). His 1778 *Directions for Preserving the Health of Soldiers* began with what would become a classic observation: "Fatal experience has taught the people of America that a greater proportion of men have perished with sickness in our armies than have fallen by the sword."¹ Indeed, the vast majority of American deaths in the war resulted from disease.

Rush drew parallels between an ideal republican body politic and a healthy (equilibrated) body of internal organs.² During congressional debates on price controls in February 1777, he deployed medical metaphors, urging the use of "the most powerful tonic medicines" for the nation.¹ Yet after his short stints as a congressman and a military medical leader during the war, Rush largely eschewed formal political positions for the

remainder of his life. Instead, he saw his task as promoting the education and advancement of the country. He played a central role in the reconciliation of Adams and Jefferson. He advocated for a new American medicine (distinct from European precedents), predicated on the unique conditions in which the citizen-patients of his emerging country found themselves.² And he envisioned the medical profession playing an important role in the nation's advancement. As one of his biographers noted, medicine was "a discipline deeply concerned with the social as well as physical well-being of the country."²

Of the five physician-founders, Rush was the only one who achieved lasting recognition for both his medical and his political work. The lives of the four others show the diversity of physicians' careers during the revolutionary era. New Hampshire's Josiah Bartlett — who signed the Declaration immediately after Hancock — later served as chief justice of his state's superior court and as its first governor. He also helped establish the New Hampshire Medical Society.³ His fellow Granite State physician, Matthew Thornton, was the second-to-last signer of the Declaration. Having also held office as a judge, in 1776 he chaired the committee that drafted New Hampshire's constitution, the first ratified by an American colony.³

Georgia's Lyman Hall was born in Connecticut. He trained as a minister before switching to medicine and eventually moving to Georgia, where he became a leader of the effort to convince Georgians to support independence. After the war, he served as a judge and then governor, and he cofounded the

University of Georgia.³ And Connecticut's Oliver Wolcott completed 2 years of a medical apprenticeship before pursuing roles as high sheriff, judge, legislator, militia leader, and eventually, like Bartlett and Hall, governor. He and Bartlett were 2 of just 16 men who signed both the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation.³

Unlike Rush, none of these other physician-signers had attended medical school. Instead, they had trained through apprenticeship. Pursuing available opportunities, they gained recognition as community leaders and won selection as delegates to the Continental Congress. Bartlett, Hall, and Wolcott are also known to have been supported by the labor of enslaved people — as were a majority of the signers of the Declaration. Wolcott did manumit his one enslaved man. Hall, in contrast, worked to remove from the Declaration the proposed clause that would have condemned King George III for maintaining the slave trade.³

Despite the prominent positions Rush and the other physician-signers achieved in American political history, subsequent generations of physicians have largely abandoned these roles. Exceptions, of course, exist. Samuel Latham Mitchill, who in 1797 cofounded



An audio interview with Justin Barr is available at [NEJM.org](https://www.nejm.org)



the nation's first medical journal, *New York's Medical Repository*, was elected as both a U.S. congressman and a senator. Jerome V.C. Smith served as mayor of Boston from 1854 to 1855, during his long tenure as editor of this *Journal*. Yet few physicians have sought high office. No physician has been elected president, though William Henry

Harrison briefly attended medical school in Philadelphia (where he studied under Rush).⁴ One physician served on the Supreme Court: Samuel Freeman Miller, appointed by Abraham Lincoln in 1862.⁴

Between 1789 and 1889, a total of 4.7% of the members of Congress were physicians. Between 1889 and 1982, the percentage dropped to 1.1%, despite the rising status of physicians in American society.⁴ Physician representation in Congress held steady at 1.1% from 1960 to 2004, even as medical concerns and health policy (e.g., the passage of Medicare and Medicaid; the advent of managed care) commanded increasing national attention.⁵ The authors of a 2004 analysis expressed their hope that “given the growing political polarization and partisanship in the United States... public esteem may provide the opportunity for physicians to become the next generation of congressional leaders.”⁵

Neither a reduction in political polarization nor a radical increase in physician congressional leadership has come to pass. Our 119th Congress currently includes 20 physicians (3.7%), an increase from recent decades, along with a smaller number of dentists, nurses, optometrists, pharmacists, and allied health professionals. The physicians who have served have often advocated for reforms to health care policies and have brought diverse political perspectives to relevant issues. But no physician has since achieved the political power and influence once held by Warren or Rush. The key players in setting national health policy have not been physician-legislators.

The current American landscape contrasts starkly with that of

1776, when doctors led in society and politics, serving as accoucheurs to both their patients and their new country. Writing in 1787, Rush noted that the nation remained a work in progress: “The American war is over; but this is far from being the case with the American revolution. On the contrary, nothing but the first act of the great drama is closed. It remains yet to establish and perfect our new forms of government; and to prepare the principles, morals, and manners of our citizens, for these forms of government.”¹ This call for engagement still resonates. As our nation continues to grapple with issues for which medical expertise is sorely needed, physicians may wish to reconsider their independence from national politics.

This is the third in a series of articles exploring the roles of physicians, medicine, and disease in the American Revolution at its 250th anniversary.

Disclosure forms provided by the authors are available at [NEJM.org](https://www.nejm.org).

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