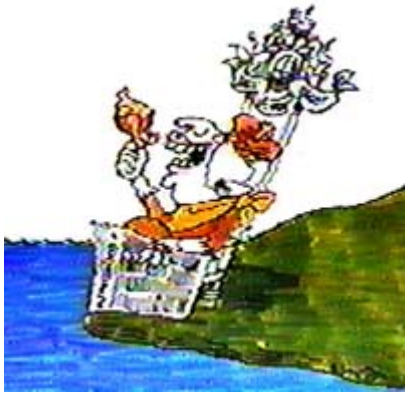
No More Kings



On the Fourth of July, 1975, just before I turned nine, I marched in my town's bicentennial parade wearing a hand-sewn, Girl-Scout-badge-earning, yellow calico dress and a puffy white bonnet trimmed with lace. My mother took pictures of me on the front lawn, posed with my brother Jack—in knickers, a tricorn hat, and a leather vest that would later double as part of his Halloween hippie costume—pointing a plastic musket at my head. Bang, click.

Figure 1: King George III from "No More Kings." Copyright 1975 ABC.

I'm sure Jack and I learned a lot from dressing the parts, but most of what we learned about the Revolution that year came from watching *Schoolhouse Rock*, whose American history animated shorts debuted on ABC's Saturday morning lineup in 1975. Even today, I can remember the Preamble to the Constitution only by singing it, and when I lecture about manifest destiny I'm still haunted by "Elbow Room" ("Oh, elbow room / elbow room / Got to, got to get us some elbow room. / It's the West or bust / in God we trust / There's a new land out there . . . ").

What did Watergate-era nine-year-olds need to know about the American Revolution? Watching *Schoolhouse Rock* I learned who wrote the Declaration of Independence, the names of battles and generals, and the nastiness of George III. Given how much television I watched on Saturday mornings, eating Kellogg's Frosted Flakes in my pajamas, I actually *did* learn these things. I memorized every song. And, at a time when I wasn't allowed to watch the nightly news because my parents didn't want me to see pictures from Vietnam, what I learned about the American Revolution in between episodes of *Scooby Doo* and *The Land of the Lost* didn't give them much to worry about. For all its whimsicality, *Schoolhouse Rock* was, in the end, fairly traditional political history, stories of great men and great deeds. (It has also generated a cottage industry of Web pages, including some where the nostalgic can sing along.)


Figure 2: Liberty's Kids copyright 2000. Courtesy of DIC Entertainment, L.P.

Next spring, a new generation of nine-year-olds will have a chance to watch the Revolution as a televised cartoon. What they'll learn will be altogether different. On Memorial Day 2002, PBS will launch *Liberty's Kids*, a forty-part animated children's series set in revolutionary Philadelphia. The storyline, which begins in 1773 and ends in 1787, follows the adventures of James and Sarah, two young teens working as apprentices in Ben Franklin's print shop, along with Moses, a free black artisan, and Henri, a young French orphan. Walter Cronkite—best known to Americans of my generation as the host of CBS' Saturday morning kids' news spots, *In the News* (which inspired *Schoolhouse Rock*)—will star as the voice of Franklin.

Liberty's Kids is the brainchild of Kevin O'Donnell, a well-known animation producer, and Andy Heyward, chairman and CEO of DIC Entertainment, a children's entertainment company (and former Disney subsidiary) that owns *Inspector Gadget, Madeline, Sonic the Hedgehog, Captain Planet*, and *Where on Earth is Carmen Sandiego?* O'Donnell, who admits to a skimpy knowledge of American history, first began to think about an animated American history series after Heyward, just back from a family trip to Washington, D.C., gave out copies of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as party favors at a lavish birthday party. Handling the fake parchment documents, O'Donnell found himself inspired, and soon the idea for an American history program, originally titled *Poor Richard's Almanac*, was pitched to PBS.

It's easy to be cynical about *Liberty's Kids*. The scripts, not to mention the premise, are peppered with anachronisms. And the "comprehensive Publishing, Home Entertainment and Merchandising program" promised in DIC's press release raises the specter of Founding Fathers Pokemon cards. (Okay, maybe that wouldn't be so bad.) But there's also something deeply appealing about the series. Stanford historian Jack Rakove, who serves as consultant, confesses, "If you ask from a historian's vantage point, how does this correspond to contemporary scholarship? Well, probably, not that well. But if you ask, what is it that students of this age ought to be introduced to so that they have a rough idea of the Revolution, it's actually pretty good."

Like *Schoolhouse Rock, Liberty's Kids* is as much about citizenship as it is about history. O'Donnell wants viewers "to understand that America is an ideal, and that they are as central to its success as anyone else." PBS' John F. Wilson thinks "*Liberty's Kids* will bring history and civics alive." Stretching over forty episodes and, inspired by two decades' worth of social history, the series also goes far beyond *Schoolhouse Rocks'* self-congratulatory celebration of the American Revolution. Kids watching *Liberty's Kids* will meet not only George Washington and John Adams, they'll also meet Phyllis Wheatley, the African American poet. As O'Donnell puts it, viewers of *Liberty's Kids* will be asked not only to admire what courageous American revolutionaries accomplished,

but also to “confront the scars of the nation.”

In one early episode, Moses’s brother, Cato, is sold at an auction in Virginia and Moses himself is captured by a plantation foreman. Both Cato and Moses eventually escape, but Cato refuses to return with Moses to Philadelphia; instead, he takes up an offer by Virginia’s royal governor, Lord Dunmore, granting freedom to slaves who take up arms against the colonists. “If I can win my freedom by helping the British, so be it,” a bitter Cato tells Moses. “At least *I* will be the master of my own fate.” Meanwhile, James and Sarah visit the House of Burgesses where they listen to Patrick Henry deliver his famous speech: “Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!” In a final scene, as Moses, James, and Sarah travel back to Philadelphia, James reads Henry’s speech aloud. To James, the speech is brilliant; to Sarah it’s hogwash. “All that talk of freedom and liberty? Look what happened to Moses!” But Moses has the last word: “I believe, someday, all my people will drink from the cup of liberty, just like Patrick Henry said.”

A *Schoolhouse Rock* short about Virginia in 1775 would have taught 1970s American schoolchildren to memorize Patrick Henry’s “Give me liberty or give me death!” speech in much the same way that we absorbed the Oscar Mayer weiner jingle (*Schoolhouse Rock*, not surprisingly, was the product of a New York advertising agency, McCaffrey & McCall). *Liberty’s Kids* wants today’s young viewers to think harder about what Henry had to say, to really wrestle with the paradox of slaveowners complaining about being enslaved by the British. No doubt it’s a richer story, and better history. But, especially at a time when we are all turning off the nightly news to shield our own children from new horrors, the part of me that still wants to eat Frosted Flakes in my pajamas sometimes wishes I could sing Patrick Henry’s speech instead.

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