

Chapter 14

Historians and the American Revolution

Interpretations of the past are often influenced by the way people view their own times. Americans have seen their own Revolution and interpreted its causes differently in each generation. Immediately following the Revolution, Americans needed to find symbols that united them. Thus, the interpretations of the Revolution, popularized in thousands of July 4th speeches, were written into the history books. The revolutionaries were viewed as heroes who risked their lives and fortunes in a noble cause; the English were demonized as evil men who tried to crush colonial liberties.

The need for symbols of national unity continued. Even as the tensions between North and South divided the nation, each side claimed to follow the examples of their Revolutionary ancestors. After the Civil War, the need for unity again expressed itself in the glorification of the men who led the fight for independence. But, in the early part of the 20th century scholars began to view their historical past with a far more critical eye. Concerned by the social and economic problems of their own age they found evidence of economic and social factors influencing the debate between England and the colonies. "The struggle," Andrews Hacker wrote, "was not over high sounding political and constitutional concepts. It was over...the survival or collapse of English mercantile capitalism." Other historians emphasized the class struggle theme. They found evidence of class conflict in the colonies and saw that British policies favored a colonial elite. The Revolution, according to this view "became as much a war against the colonial aristocracy as a war for independence."

Economic and social interpretations of the Revolution were widely accepted during the Great Depression of the 1930s. During the late 40s and 50s, however, after America met the challenges of German Nazism and Russian Communism, historians began to take another look at colonial society and discovered evidence previously overlooked. Robert Brown concluded there was "no evidence of class conflict that was serious enough to justify revolution" and detailed studies of Virginia and Massachusetts concluded that most colonial Americans were middle class and ruled by democratic governments. The Revolution, this school of "consensus" historians argued, was essentially conservative rather than radical. It was fought to maintain liberties and privileges long enjoyed by the colonists and threatened by British policies.

In more recent years yet another major interpretation of the Revolution has been developed based on an interest in the power of ideas. Bernard Bailyn's pioneering research in the pamphlets and other writings of the Revolutionary era revealed that the colonists were almost obsessed by a fear of government power and ready to read in any of England's actions "nothing less than a deliberate assault...against liberty both in England and America." The colonial leaders were able to read evil intent into every act by Parliament or the King and thus found real or imagined reasons for initiating the war against England.

The following excerpts represent brief sampling of the major interpretations of the Revolution discussed in this chapter. Neither they nor the material provided in this unit could lead to any firm conclusions on the causes of the Revolution. They can, however stimulate serious and careful thinking about the cause of the Revolution and the nature of history.

The Heroic School—George Bancroft

The men of Boston, whose fathers came to the wilderness for freedom to say their prayers would not fear to take up arms against a preamble (set of laws) which implied their servitude....These men were more than of a noble blood, proving by their spirit that they were of a race Divine. They gave their life in testimony to the rights of mankind bequeathing to their country an assurance of the success in the mighty struggle which they began. They fulfilled their duty not from accidental impulse of the moment; their action was the slowly ripened fruit of Providence and of time. The light that led them on was combined of rays from the whole history of the race from the example of Him (Jesus) who laid down his life on the cross for the life of Humanity; from the religious creed which proclaimed the Divine presence in man.²⁴

An Economic Interpretation—Andrew Hacker

The events of 1763-75 can have no meaning unless we understand that the character of English imperial policy never really changed: that Pitt and his successors at White Hall were following exactly the same line that Cromwell had laid down more than a century before. The purpose of their general program was to protect the English capitalist interests which now were being jeopardized as a result of the intensification of colonial capitalist competition, and English statesmen yielded quickly when no fundamental principle was at stake, but became insistent only when one was being threatened. If in the raising of a colonial revenue lay the heart of the difficulty, how are we to account for the quick repeal of the Stamp Tax and the Townsend Acts and the lowering of the molasses duty? And, on the other hand, how are we to account for the tightening of enforcement on the Acts of Trade and Navigation at a dozen and one different points, the passage of the Currency Act, the placing of iron on the "enumerated" list, English seizure of control of the trade, and the attempt to give the East India Company a monopoly over the Colonial tea business?

The struggle was not over high-sounding political and constitutional concepts: over the power of taxation or even, in the final analysis, over natural rights. It was over colonial manufacturing, wild lands and furs, sugar, wine, tea, and currency, all of which meant, simply, the survival or collapse of English mercantile capitalism within the imperial-colonial framework of the mercantilist system.²⁵

The Class Struggle—Merill Jensen

The American Revolution was far more than a war between colonies and Great Britain; it was also a struggle between those who enjoyed political privileges and those who did not...Colonial radicalism did not become effective until after the French and Indian War. Then, fostered by economic depression and aided by the bungling policy of Great Britain and the desire of the local governing classes for independence within the empire, it became united in an effort to throw off its local and international bonds. The discontented were given an opportunity to express their discontent when the British government began to enforce restrictions upon the colonies after 1763. The colonial merchants used popular demonstrations to give points to their more orderly protests against such measures as the Stamp Act, and it was only a stop from such riots, incited and controlled by the merchants, to the organization of radical parties bent on the redress of local grievances which were of far more concern to the masses than the more remote and less obvious effects of British policy of more than ordinary ability, men who were able to create issues when none were furnished by Great Britain, and who seized on British acts as heaven-sent opportunities to attack the local aristocracy – too strongly entrenched to be

²⁴George Bancroft, *History of the United States of America from the Discovery of the Continent*, New York, 1890, Volume III, pp. 382-83.

²⁵Andrew Hacker, *The Triumph of American Capitalism*, quoted in Wahlke, ed. *The Causes of the American Revolution*, D.C. Heath, Lexington, MA, 1973, pp. 10-11.

overthrown on purely local issues – under the guise of a patriotic defense of American liberties. Thus, used as tools at first, the masses were soon united under capable leadership in what became as much a war against the colonial aristocracy as a war for independence.

The American Revolution thus marks the ascendancy of the radicals of the colonies, for the first time effectively united. True, this radical ascendancy was of brief duration, but while it lasted an attempt was made to write democratic ideals and theories of government into the laws and constitutions of the American states.²⁶

A Democratic Movement—Robert Brown

[After] the Tea Act and the Coercive Acts, there was no doubt whatever that the British intended to curtail colonial democracy as a necessary step toward recovery of British authority and the prevention of colonial independence. The result was the very thing the British had tried to prevent – American independence.

Obviously democracy played an important part in the events before 1776, not as a condition to be achieved but as a reality which interfered with British policies. If the British had been successful, there would undoubtedly have been much less democracy in Massachusetts – hence the interpretations that the Revolution was designed to preserve a social order rather than to change it. We search in vain for evidence of class conflict that was serious enough to justify revolution; we do not have to look far for copious quantities of proof that colonial society was democratic and that the colonists were attempting to prevent British innovations.²⁷

Ideology and Mutual Suspicions—Bernard Bailyn

The colonists believed they saw emerging from the welter of events during the decade after the Stamp Act a pattern – whose meaning was unmistakable. They saw in the measures taken by the British government and in the actions of officials in the colonies something for which their peculiar inheritance of thought had prepared them only too well, something they had long conceived to be a possibility in view of the known tendencies of history and of the present state of affairs in England. They saw about them, with increasing clarity, not merely mistaken, or even evil, policies violating the principles upon which freedom rested, but what appeared to be evidence of nothing less than a deliberate assault launched surreptitiously by plotters against liberty both in England and in America. The danger to America, it was believed, was in fact only the small, immediately visible part of the greater whole whose ultimate manifestation would be the destruction of the English constitution, with all the rights embedded in it.

The opponents of the Revolution – the administration itself – were as convinced as were the leaders of the Revolutionary movement that they were themselves the victims of conspiratorial designs. Officials in the colonies, and their superiors in England, were persuaded as the crisis deepened that they were confronted by an active conspiracy of intriguing men whose professions masked their true intentions. Thomas Hutchinson had little doubt that at the root of all the trouble in the colonies was the maneuvering of a secret, power-hungry cabal that professed loyalty to England while assiduously working to destroy the bonds of authority and force a rupture between England and her colonies. The beliefs and fears expressed on one side of the Revolutionary controversy were as sincere as those expressed on the other. The result was an escalation of distrust toward a disastrous deadlock: "The

²⁶Merrill Jensen, *The Articles of Confederation*, quoted in Edwin Rozwenc and Donald Schultz, *Conflict and Consensus in the American Revolution*, Boston, D.C. Heath Co., 1964, pp. 47, 49-50.

²⁷Robert Brown, *Middle-Class Democracy and the Revolution in Massachusetts, 1691-1780*, New York, Harper & Row, 1969, pp. 404-405.

Americans," Burke said, "have made a discovery, or think they have made one, that we mean to oppress them: we have made a discovery, or think we have made one, that they intend to rise in rebellion against us. We know not how to advance; they know not how to retreat. Some party must give way."²⁸

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Define or identify and briefly show the importance to the chapter of each of the following:

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| a. reasons interpretations change | d. "men of more than noble blood" | f. "redress of local grievances" |
| b. immediate and underlying causes | e. "manufacturing, wild lands and furs" | g. missing class conflict |
| c. 4 different interpretations | | h. "escalation of distrust" |

Determining the Causes of an Event

All events have causes rooted in the social, economic, political, or ideological context of their times. A good explanation of the Revolution will not only consider these factors, but will explain the numerous events leading up to the actual outbreak of the fighting. It should explain all of the major events and account for the actions of the participants.

2. Find the thesis or main point of each interpretation of the American Revolution:

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|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| a. Heroic school | d. Democratic Movement |
| b. Economic Interpretation | e. Ideology and Mutual Suspicions |
| c. Class Struggle | f. Your own |

3. Outline an argument using a single interpretation of the American Revolution and show how it can account for three of the following:

- the controversy over taxation and trade regulations
- colonial violence and British response
- the colonists' statements of their objections to England's policies
- the fallacies of at least one of the other interpretations

4. Develop and expand your outline into an essay of not less than 1,200 words. Be sure you include a thesis, foreshadow your main arguments, use logic and facts to support the arguments, and end with a conclusion that summarizes your paper.

²⁸Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Belknap Press, Cambridge, 1967, pp. 58-59, 85-93.