

## LEGACY OF REVOLUTIONS: THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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All nations like to celebrate their origins, but the narrative generated in the United States is fortuitously cohesive, commemorating the exertions of a single generation. Across the globe, by contrast, other realms can produce only sprawling accounts. China's, an astounding four millennia in length, embraces the rise of ancient dynasties, the Nationalist Revolution in 1911, and the Communist Revolution in 1949. Britain's covers the Norman invasion (1066), the Magna Carta (1215), the Glorious Revolution (1688), and the Act of Union (1707). Mexico's two founding moments, independence in 1821 and a revolution in the early twentieth century, are separated by a gap of ninety years, a wide disconnect in the plot line. Canada eased into nationhood so gracefully that it hardly has a story to tell.

If the birth of United States was relatively brief, it was more complex than appears in the common telling. Political leaders envisioned one type of *revolution*: a natural *revolving* of the wheel, not a massive overthrow of the established order. Yet America's Revolutionary War was in fact a gangly affair that featured diverse players and a convoluted plotline. So-called "Tories," who supported the Crown, included not only well-heeled merchants but also tenant farmers who pitted themselves against their rebellious "Whig" landlords. In the Southern backcountry, neighbors fought neighbors in brutal internecine warfare. Native American nations, carefully calculating how their actions might best curb Euro-American expansion, chose to support one side or the other. Enslaved African Americans also tried to play the war to their best advantage—some fled to the British hoping to be freed, while others served with the rebelling colonists, enticed by promises of freedom which might or might not be honored at war's end.

The war was bloody. Some 25,000 Americans perished on the battlefield, in prisons, or from war-related diseases. Per capita, that would amount to three million Americans today. This revolution, the total war of its day, impacted civilian populations on every level. In the South, reported General Nathanael Greene, "the whole country" was being "laid waste by the Whigs and Tories who pursue each other with as much relentless Fury as Beasts of Prey." Another American general, William Moultrie, wrote after one campaign that a countryside once rich with livestock and wild fowl was "destitute of all. ... Not the vestiges of horses, cattle, hogs, or deer, &c. was to be found. The squirrels and deer of every kind were totally destroyed." After the war, survivors did not wish to dwell on the myriad human tragedies that clouded victory. In the words of historian John Shy, "Much about the event called the Revolutionary War had been very painful and was unpleasant to remember; only the outcome was pleasant, so memory, as ever, began to play tricks with the event."

To serve the interest of national unification, the story of the American Revolution had to be simplified, sanitized, romanticized, and in the end mythologized. Consciously, not haphazardly, notable Americans took on the task. Noah Webster, who would later declare linguistic independence from Great Britain with his groundbreaking *American Dictionary of the English*

*Language*, wrote in 1790, less than a decade following the Revolutionary War: “Every child in America should be acquainted with his own country... As soon as he opens his lips, he should lisp the praise of liberty, and of those illustrious heroes and statesmen, who have wrought a revolution in her favor.” And so it would be. With the advent of public education in the early Nineteenth Century, young Americans were presented with a steady diet of patriotic tales, suitably whitewashed and carefully crafted to produce sound morals and national pride.

In gentrifying their revolution, Americans in the young republic drew a contrast with revolutions elsewhere. Following the French Revolution, with its guillotines, and the Black Haitian Revolution, so terrifying to American slaveholders, the word *revolution* took on new and dangerous connotations. Americans would have none of this; theirs had been a simple family affair, a child casting off parental control. It ended peacefully, with no tumultuous aftershocks. It created a nation based on the treasured ideal of freedom and ruled by the people themselves.

But political discord, perhaps inevitably, hampered attempts at unification. While all could agree that their revolution was a noble endeavor, Americans from the outset have sharply contested its meaning. On September 5, 1787, while delegates from the states were busily drafting a new constitution that would bind these separate bodies together under a “vigorous” and “energetic” government, a writer for the *Pennsylvania Gazette* reported: “The Year 1776 is celebrated for a revolution in favor of *Liberty*. The year 1787, it is expected, will be celebrated with equal joy, for a revolution in favor of *Government*.” Yet if some favored the new scheme, others did not. Americans calling themselves Federalists focused on the need for an operational government, while opponents believed that the proposed constitution sacrificed the liberties promulgated in the Declaration of Independence and fought for during the war. Here, in the debates over ratification, was an initial fault line: “liberty” versus “government.”

Each side got something from this opening round: Federalists secured ratification, but the Constitution’s opponents pushed for, and soon enshrined, ten amendments now known as the Bill of Rights. As complex and divisive questions emerged in the 1790s, however, the fissure grew. Were federal powers expressly limited to those laid out in the Constitution, or did they include *implied* powers, without which the government would flounder once again? And if the federal government appeared to overreach, could the constituent states rein it in? The body politic bifurcated, each side convinced that the other was hell-bent on undermining the Revolution’s gains.

Emblematic of that bifurcation was the changing nature of Fourth of July celebrations, which marked the nation’s declaration of independence in 1776. By the end of the war, these had become ritualized affairs. Early in the morning, bells or cannons announced the beginning of commemorative festivities. Militia or volunteer units marched in parade, followed by a procession of the people. A prominent citizen then preached a secular gospel, and people responded by singing hymns. With all the proper trappings, here was a civic *holy day*—the first national *holiday*, “the Sabbath of our Freedom.” By the late 1790s, however, patriotic Americans of opposing persuasions were celebrating the Fourth of July with parallel parades and

competitive street theater, burning effigies of political opponents and even fighting in the streets.

In the mid-Nineteenth Century, a second fault line literally split the nation in two—slavery. The hypocrisy of fighting a war for liberty while enslaving other humans had been apparent from the outset, but the price of unity at the close of the Revolution was allowing chattel slavery to persist. If that was a pragmatic necessity, it was also, as many have noted, the nation’s “original sin.” In 1852 Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave and ardent abolitionist, delivered a Fourth of July oration lambasting the duplicity of the Revolution. He opened with traditional tribute:

Fellow Citizens, I am not wanting in respect for the fathers of this republic. The signers of the Declaration of Independence were brave men. ... The point from which I am compelled to view them is not, certainly, the most favorable; and yet I cannot contemplate their great deeds with less than admiration. They were statesmen, patriots and heroes, and for the good they did, and the principles they contended for, I will unite with you to honor their memory.

But he closed with hellfire damnation:

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sound of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants brass fronted impudence; your shout of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanks-givings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy ... This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.

Polemicists for the slave-owning South, on the other hand, mimicked Revolutionary cries of “tyranny.” By limiting slavery’s expansion, the North was acting like Parliament, imposing its will on others.

During the Civil War, with men dying by the hundreds of thousands, President Abraham Lincoln paid tribute to the nation’s beginning: “Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” —for Lincoln, *all men* included those held in bondage. Jefferson Davis, President of the Southern Confederacy, held that the “people” in 1776 were only “men of the political community.” He chose to emphasize a different passage in the Declaration of Independence: “Whenever any form of government” failed to protect people’s rights, “it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it.” The South could legitimately secede from the Union. When Northern soldiers invaded, they were “reenacting the blunders that statesmen in Great Britain committed.” The revolutionary response, Davis proclaimed, was the same: “Southern valor still shines as brightly as in the days of ‘76.”

Polarized camps ever since have laid claim to the Revolution's heritage. One has viewed it as a golden age, subsequently undermined by degenerative influences; the other as an inspirational beginning, but only that. Its promise would unfold. While Jefferson Davis was historically correct when he said that the "people" in 1776 referred exclusively to free white men, that needed correction. African-Americans, women, and diverse minorities had to be included if the promise of the Revolution was to be realized.

Inclusionary moves inevitably triggered reactionary responses. After the Civil war, when former slaves were granted citizenship and immigrants flooded into the United States from southern and eastern Europe, lineage societies like the Sons of the American Revolution and Daughters of the America Revolution set a standard for the *true* American: pedigree dating from the Revolution and white. In the mid-Twentieth Century, when African-Americans tried to cash in on promises of equality that remained unfulfilled, they met a fierce backlash that evolved, with time, into Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again."

At each and every juncture, both progressives and conservatives call upon America's founding moment to bolster their cause. The culture wars of today are fought, in part, by contesting the legacy of the American Revolution. Interpreters at George Washington's Mount Vernon and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello have resurrected slave quarters, highlighting the core contradiction of the Revolution but angering those who prefer an uplifting message. Exhibits at Philadelphia's Museum of the American Revolution vividly depict the roles that African-Americans, Native Americans, and women played in the Revolution—but this "inclusiveness," says the *Wall Street Journal*, creates "strange proportions" that "de-sacralize the Revolution" and "weaken the event's symbolic power." They have "less to do with the war's significance than with today's preoccupations with identity-based tensions."

Historians join the fray. While academics probe once-forgotten constituencies, popular authors produce a never-ending stream of bestselling biographies of iconic "Founders"—capitalizing the F is the norm. There is a new and humanizing twist, however. Joseph Ellis, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*, views the traditional "Founding Fathers" more like brothers. They squabbled and sometimes misbehaved and evidenced "their mutual imperfections and fallibilities, as well as their eccentricities and excesses," yet Ellis still concludes that "they comprised, by any informed and fair-minded standard, the greatest generation of political talent in American history. They created the American republic." Ironically, despite the subtitle, his narrative entirely omits the Revolutionary *War*.

Reverence for the Founders spills over to the Supreme Court. For the last quarter century, conservative justices have espoused a judicial doctrine they call "originalism": the Constitution must be interpreted according to the intent of its framers or the meaning of the text in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. This produces strange and inconsistent results. Despite the constitutional proscription against "cruel and unusual punishments," capital punishment is deemed permissible because hanging was a common practice back then—but so were branding of hands and public lashing for minor offenses, punishments that no judge, even an originalist, would

sanction today. Opponents of originalism uphold what they call a “living constitution,” in which meanings can adapt with the times. Again, one school looks backward, the other forward—but even those who favor a more flexible Constitution freely weaponize quotations from the Founders to buttress their arguments.

Out-of-court as well as within, Americans argue contemporary issues in constitutional terms. The Bill of Rights, drafted in 1789 and ratified in 1791, is widely regarded as the final act of the Founding Era, the last word of the esteemed “Revolutionary Generation.” The second of those ten amendments reads: “A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.” Separating the two components of this amendment is a disputed comma. For gun-safety advocates, that comma links the dependent and independent clauses of the sentence, the first providing the reason for the second—the entire text refers to militias, they maintain. Gun-rights advocates argue that the comma is essentially a semi-colon—the amendment makes two distinct statements, the first about militias and the second about (private) gun ownership. The actual issue for our times, triggered by gun violence and mass shootings, is the regulation of gun ownership, but arguments center on a controversial punctuation mark penned at a time when single-shot muskets were the norm, not automatic rifles firing hundreds of rounds per minute.

Yet, importantly, both sides are scrutinizing the same bedrock document. Since the revered Founders produced a Constitution that is universally honored, that document provides a playing field for contesting any issue. Trust in “government” might be at an all-time low, but faith in the Constitution endures. Following the election of Barack Obama in 2008, right-wing activists, assuming the label “Tea Party” from the event that sparked the Revolutionary War, waved pocket-sized copies of the Constitution at their street demonstrations. They might not grasp its pro-tax and pro-government historical purpose, but they felt in a general way that the federal government taxed too heavily and violated their “constitutional rights.” Eight years later, in reaction to the election of Donald Trump, liberals called upon the same Constitution, interpreted differently. Fearful of Trump’s dictatorial manner and ambition, they saw in it an antidote that provided for the separation of powers, a circumscribed executive, and periodic elections. The myriad, incessant references from all sides are like applause, and, like applause, reassuring.