

Type of Historian:

Notes:

The War for Independence was not a Social Revolution

(Selections from *A People's History of the United States*)

By Howard Zinn

Around 1776, certain important people in the English colonies made a discovery that would prove enormously useful for the next two hundred years: they found that by creating a nation, a symbol, a legal unity called the United States, they could take over land, profits, and political power from favorites of the British Empire. In the process, they could hold back a number of potential rebellions and create a consensus of popular support for the rule of a new, privileged leadership.

When we look at the American Revolution this way, it was a work of genius, and the Founding Fathers deserve the awed tribute they have received over the centuries. They created the most effective system of national control devised in modern times, and showed future generations of leaders the advantages of combining paternalism with command.

Starting with Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia, by 1760, there had been eighteen uprisings aimed at overthrowing colonial governments. There had also been six black rebellions, from South Carolina to New York, and forty riots of various origins. By this time also, according to Jack Greene, there had emerged "stable, coherent, effective and renowned local political and social elites." And by the 1760s, this local leadership saw the possibility of directing much of the rebellious energy against England and her local officials. It was not a conscious conspiracy, but rather was an accumulation of tactical responses.

After 1763, with England victorious over France in the Seven Years' War – American's French and Indian War

– and with their consequent expulsion from North America, the French no longer threatened ambitious colonial leaders. These leaders now had only two rivals left: the English and the Indians. The British, wooing the Indians, had declared Indian lands beyond the Appalachians out of bounds to whites with the Proclamation of 1763. Perhaps once the British were out of the way of the colonists, the Indians could be dealt with. Again, this was not a conscious forethought strategy by the colonial elite, but rather was a growing awareness as events developed.

With the French defeated, the British government could turn its attention to tightening control over the colonies. It needed revenue to pay for the war, and looked to the colonies for that. Also, the colonial trade had become more and more important to the British economy, and more profitable: it had amounted to about 500,000 pounds in 1700 but by 1770 was worth 2,800,000 pounds. So, the American leadership was less in need of English rule, and the English more in need of the colonists' wealth. The elements were there for conflict.

The war had brought glory for the generals, death to the privates, wealth for the merchants, unemployment for the poor. There were 25,000 people living in New York – there had been 7,000 in 1720 – by the time the French and Indian War ended. A newspaper editor wrote about the growing "number of beggars and wandering poor" in the streets of the city. Letters in the papers questioned the distribution of wealth: "How often have our streets been covered with thousands of barrels of flour for trade, while our near neighbors can hardly procure enough to make a dumpling to satisfy hunger?"

Gary Nash's study of city tax lists shows that by the early 1770s, the top 5 percent of Boston's taxpayers controlled 49 percent of the city's taxable assets. In Philadelphia and in New York, wealth was more and more concentrated: court-recorded wills showed that by 1750 the wealthiest people in these two cities were leaving to their descendents 20,000 pounds, equivalent to about \$2.5 million today.

In Boston, the lower classes began to use the town meeting to vent their grievances. The governor of Massachusetts wrote that in these town meetings "the meanest, lowliest inhabitants by their constant attendance would generally be the majority, and would far outvote the gentlemen, merchants, substantial traders and all the better part of the inhabitants."

What seems to have happened in Boston is that certain lawyers, editors, and merchants of the upper classes who were outside the ruling circles close to England – men like James Otis and Samuel Adams – organized a "Boston Caucus" and through their oratory and their writing "molded laboring-class opinion, called the 'mob' into action, and shaped its behavior." This is Gary Nash's description of Otis, who, he says, was "keenly aware of the declining fortunes and the resentment of ordinary townspeople, and so mirrored – and molded – popular opinion."

Using the Lower Classes

We find in this early period a forecast of the long history of American politics to come as upper-class politicians mobilized lower-class energy for their own purposes. This was not purely deception; it involved, in part, a genuine recognition of lower-class grievances, which helps to account for its effectiveness as a tactic over the centuries. As Nash puts it:

James Otis, Samuel Adams, Royal Tyler, Oxenbridge Thacher, and a host of other Bostonians, linked to the artisans and laborers through a network of neighborhood taverns, fire companies, and the Boston Caucus, espoused a vision of politics that gave credence to laboring-class views, and also believed the participation of artisans and even laborers in the political process to be entirely legitimate.

This accumulated sense of grievances against the rich in Boston may account for the explosiveness of mob action after the Stamp Act of 1765. Through this Act, the British were taxing the colonial population to pay for the war with the French, in which colonists had suffered for the purpose of expanding the British Empire. That

summer, a shoemaker named Ebenezer MacIntosh led a mob in destroying the house of a rich Boston merchant named Andrew Oliver. Two weeks later, the crowd turned to the home of Thomas Hutchinson, a symbol of the rich elite who ruled the colonies in the name of England. They smashed up his house with axes, drank the wine in his wine cellar, and looted the house of its furniture and other objects. A report by colony officials to England said that this was part of a larger scheme in which the houses of fifteen rich people were to be destroyed, as part of "a war of plunder, of general leveling and taking away the distinction of rich and poor."

It was one of those moments in which fury against the rich went further than leaders like Otis wanted. Could class hatred be focused against the pro-British elite, and deflected from the nationalist elite? In New York, that same year of the Boston house attacks, someone wrote to the New York Gazette: "Is it equitable that ninety-nine – or, rather, nine hundred and ninety-nine should suffer for the extravagance and grandeur of one, especially when it is considered that men frequently owe their wealth to the impoverishment of their neighbors?" The leaders of the Revolution would worry about keeping such sentiments within limits.

In the countryside, where most people lived, there was a similar conflict of poor against rich, one which political leaders would use to mobilize the population against England, granting some benefits for the rebellious poor, and many more for themselves in the process. The tenant riots in New Jersey in the 1740s, the New York tenant uprisings of the 1750s and 1760s in the Hudson Valley, and the rebellion in northeastern New York that led to the carving of Vermont out of New York State were all more than sporadic rioting. They were long-lasting social movements, highly organized, involving the creation of counter-governments. They were aimed at a handful of rich landlords, but with the landlords far away, they often had to direct their anger against other, closer farmers who had leased the disputed land from the owners.

In North Carolina, a powerful movement of white farmers was organized against wealthy and corrupt officials in the period from 1766 to 1771, exactly those years when, in the cities of the Northeast, agitation was growing against the British, which crowded out any attention paid to class issues. The movement in North Carolina was called the Regulator Movement, and it consisted, says Marvin L. Michael Kay, a specialist in the history of that movement, of "class-conscious white farmers in the west who attempted to democratize local government in their respective counties." The Regulators referred to themselves as "poor industrious peasants," "laborers," "the wretched poor," and as being "oppressed" by "rich and powerful scheming monsters."

A contemporary account of the Regulator Movement in Orange County describes the situation:

Thus were the people of Orange insulted by the sheriff, robbed and plundered, neglected and condemned by the representatives and abused by the magistracy; obliged to pay fees regulated only by the avarice of the officer; obliged to pay a tax which they believed went to enrich and aggrandize a few, who lorded it over them continually; and from all these evils they saw no way to escape, for the men in power and in legislation were the men whose interest it was to oppress, and make gain of the laborer.

In that county in the 1760s, the Regulators organized to prevent the collection of taxes as well as the confiscation of the property of tax delinquents. Officials said that "an absolute insurrection of a dangerous tendency had broke out in Orange County," and made military plans to suppress it. At one point seven hundred armed farmers forced the release of two arrested Regulator leaders. The Regulators petitioned the government on their grievances in 1768, citing "the unequal chances the poor and the weak have in contentions with the rich and powerful."

The result of all this was that the assembly passed some mild reform legislation. In light of that, however, came an act "to prevent riots and tumults," and the governor prepared to crush them militarily. In May of 1771, there was a decisive battle in which several thousand Regulators were defeated by a disciplined army using cannon. Six Regulators were hanged. Kay says that in the three western counties of Orange, Anson, and Rowan, where the Regulator movement was concentrated, it had the support of six thousand to seven thousand men out of a total white taxable population of about eight thousand.

One consequence of this bitter conflict is that only a minority of the people in the Regulator counties seem to have participated as patriots in the Revolutionary War. Most of them probably remained neutral. Fortunately for the revolutionary movement, the key battles were being fought in the North, and here, in the cities, the colonial leaders had a divided white population; they could win over the mechanics, who were a kind of middle class, who had a stake in the fight against England, who faced competition from English manufacturers. The biggest problem was to keep the property-less people, who were unemployed and hungry in the crisis following the French war, under control.

In Virginia, it seemed clear to the educated gentry that something needed to be done to persuade the lower orders to join the revolutionary cause, to deflect their anger against England. One Virginian wrote in his diary in the spring of 1774: "The lower class of people here are in tumult on account of reports from Boston, and many of them expect to be pressed & compelled to go and fight the British!" Around the time of the Stamp Act, a Virginia orator addressed the poor: "Are not the gentlemen made of the same materials as the lowest and poorest among you? Listen to no doctrines which may tend to divide us, but let us go hand in hand, as brothers."

It was a problem for which the rhetorical talents of Patrick Henry were superbly fitted. He was, as Rhys Isaac puts it, "firmly attached to the world of the gentry," but he spoke in words that the poorer whites of Virginia could understand. Henry's fellow Virginian Edmund Randolph recalled his style as having "simplicity and even carelessness... his pauses, which for their length might sometimes be feared to dispel his listeners' attention, were all the more riveting as he raised the expectation."

Patrick Henry's oratory in Virginia pointed to a way to relieve class tension between upper and lower classes and form a bond against the British. This was to find language inspiring to all classes, specific enough in its listing of grievances to charge people with anger against the British, vague enough to avoid class conflict among the rebels, and stirring enough to build patriotic feeling for the resistance movement.

Common Sense

Tom Paine's *Common Sense*, which appeared in early 1776 and became the most popular pamphlet in the American colonies, did this. It made the first bold argument for independence, in words that any fairly literate person could understand: "Society in every state is a blessing, but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil."

Common Sense went through twenty-five editions in 1776 and sold hundreds of thousands of copies. It is probable that almost every literate colonist either read it or knew about its contents. Pamphleteering had become by this period the chief theater of debate about relations with England. From 1750 to 1776 four hundred pamphlets had appeared arguing one or another side of the Stamp Act, or the Boston Massacre, or the Tea Party, or even general questions of disobedience to law, loyalty to government, rights, and obligations.

Paine's pamphlet appealed to a wide range of colonial opinion angered by England. But it caused some tremors in aristocrats like John Adams, who were with the patriot cause but wanted to make sure it didn't go too far in the direction of democracy. Paine had denounced the so-called balanced government of having two houses – those of Lords and of Commons – as a deception, and called for single-chamber representative bodies where the people could be represented. Adams denounced Paine's plan as "so democratic, without any restraint or even an attempt at any equilibrium or counter-poise, that it must produce confusion and every evil work." Popular assemblies needed to be checked, Adams thought, because they were "productive of hasty results and absurd judgments."

Paine himself came out of "the lower orders" of England – a stay-maker, tax official, teacher, poor emigrant to America. He arrived in Philadelphia in 1774, when agitation against England was already strong in the colonies. The artisan mechanics of Philadelphia, along with journeymen, apprentices, and ordinary laborers, were

forming into a politically-conscious militia "in general damned riff-raff – dirty, mutinous, and disaffected," as local aristocrats described them. By speaking plainly and strongly, Paine could represent those politically-conscious lower-class people as he opposed property qualifications for voting in Pennsylvania – but his great concern seems to have been to speak for a middle group. "There is an extent of riches, as well as an extreme of poverty, which, by harrowing the circles of a man's acquaintance, lessens his opportunities of general knowledge."

Once the Revolution was under way, Paine more and more often made it clear that he was not for the crowd action of lower-class people – like those militiamen who in 1779 attacked the house of James Wilson. Wilson was a Revolutionary leader who opposed price controls and wanted a more conservative government than was given by the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776. Paine became an associate of one of the wealthiest men in Pennsylvania, Robert Morris, and a supporter of Morris's creation: the Bank of North America.

Later, during the controversy over adopting the Constitution, Paine would once again represent urban artisans, who favored a strong central government. He seemed to believe that such a government could represent some great common interest. In this sense, he lent himself perfectly to one myth of the Revolution – that it was on behalf of a united people.

The Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence brought that myth to its peak of eloquence. Each harsher measure of British control – the Proclamation of 1763 not allowing colonists to settle beyond the Appalachians, the Stamp Tax, the Townshend taxes, including the one on tea, the stationing of troops and the Boston Massacre, the closing of the port of Boston and the dissolution of the Massachusetts legislature – escalated colonial rebellion to the point of revolution. The colonists had responded with the Stamp Act Congress, the Sons of Liberty, the Committees of Correspondence, the Boston Tea Party, and finally, in 1774, the setting up of a Continental Congress – an illegal body, forerunner of a future independent government. It was after the military clash at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, between colonial Minutemen and British troops, that the Continental Congress decided on separation. They organized a small committee to draw up the Declaration of Independence, which Thomas Jefferson wrote. It was adopted by the Congress on July 2, and officially proclaimed July 4, 1776.

By this time there was already a powerful sentiment for independence. Resolutions adopted in North Carolina in May of 1776, and sent to the Continental Congress, declared independence of England, asserted that all British law was null and void, and urged military preparations. About the same time, the Massachusetts town of Malden, responding to a request from the Massachusetts House of Representatives for all towns in the state to declare their views on independence, had met in town meeting and unanimously called for independence: "We therefore renounce with disdain our connection with a kingdom of slaves; we bid a final adieu to Britain."

"When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands they should declare the causes...." This was the opening of the Declaration of Independence. Then, in its second paragraph, came the powerful philosophical statement:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government.

It then went on to list grievances against the king – "a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states." The list accused the king of dissolving colonial governments, controlling judges, sending "swarms of officers to harass our people," sending in armies of occupation, cutting off colonial trade with other parts of the world, taxing the colonists without their consent,

and waging war against them, "transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation and tyranny."

All this, the language of popular control over governments, the right of rebellion and revolution, indignation at political tyranny, economic burdens, and military attacks, was language well-suited to unite large numbers of colonists, and persuade even those who had grievances against one another to turn against England.

Some Americans were clearly omitted from this circle of united interest drawn by the Declaration of Independence: Indians, black slaves, women....

To say, however, that the Declaration of Independence by its own language limited life, liberty, and happiness to white males is not to denounce the makers and signers of the Declaration for holding the ideas expected of privileged males of the eighteenth century. Reformers and radicals, looking discontentedly at history, are often accused of expecting too much from a past political epoch – and sometimes they do. But the point of noting those outside the arc of human rights in the Declaration is not, centuries late and pointlessly, to lay impossible moral burdens on that time. It is to try to understand the way in which the Declaration functioned to mobilize certain groups of Americans, ignoring others. Inspirational language to create a secure consensus is surely still used in our time to cover up serious conflicts of interest within that consensus, and to cover up, also, the omission of large parts of the human race.

When the Declaration of Independence was read, with all its flaming radical language, from the town hall balcony in Boston, it was read by Thomas Crafts, a member of the Loyal Nine group, conservatives who had opposed militant action against the British. Surprisingly enough, four days after the reading, the Boston Committee of Correspondence ordered the townsmen to show up on the Common for a military draft. The rich, it turned out, could avoid the draft by paying for substitutes; the poor had to serve. This led to rioting, and shouting: "Tyranny is tyranny let it come from whom it may!"

Victory over Britain

The American victory over the British army was made possible by the existence of an already-armed people. Just about every white male had a gun, and could shoot. The Revolutionary leadership distrusted the mobs of poor. But they knew the Revolution had no appeal to slaves and Indians. They would have to woo the armed white population.

This was not easy. Yes, mechanics and sailors, some others, were incensed against the British. But general enthusiasm for the war was not strong. While much of the white male population went into military service at one time or another during the war, only a small fraction stayed. John Shy, in his study of the Revolutionary Army, says the army officers "grew weary of being bullied by local committees of safety, by corrupt deputy assistant commissaries of supply, and by bands of ragged strangers with guns in their hands calling themselves soldiers of the Revolution." Shy estimates that perhaps a fifth of the population was actively treasonous. Adams had estimated a third opposed, a third in support, a third neutral.

The Americans lost the first battles of the war – Bunker Hill, Brooklyn Heights, Harlem Heights, the Deep South – but they won small battles at Trenton and Princeton. Then came the turning point, a victory in the big battle at Saratoga, New York, in 1777. Washington's frozen army hung on at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, while Benjamin Franklin negotiated an alliance with the French monarchy, which was anxious for revenge on England. The war turned to the South, where the British won victory after victory, until the Americans, aided by a large French army, with the French navy blocking off the British from supplies and reinforcements, won the final victory of the war at Yorktown, Virginia, in 1781.

Through all this, the suppressed conflicts between rich and poor among the Americans kept reappearing. In the midst of the war, in Philadelphia, which Eric Foner describes as "a time of immense profits for some colonists

and terrible hardships for others," the inflation – prices rose in one month that year by 45 percent – led to agitation and calls for action. One Philadelphia newspaper carried a reminder that in Europe "the people have always done themselves justice when the scarcity of bread has arisen from the avarice of forestallers. They have broken open magazines – appropriated stores to their own use without paying for them – and in some instances have hung up the culprits who created their distress."

In May of 1779, the First Company of Philadelphia Artillery petitioned the Assembly about the troubles of "the middling and the poor," and threatened violence against "those who are avariciously intent upon amassing wealth by the destruction of the more virtuous part of the community." That same month, there was a mass meeting, an extralegal gathering, which called for price reductions and initiated an investigation of Robert Morris, a rich Philadelphian who was accused of holding food from the market. In October came the "Fort Wilson riot," in which a militia group marched into the city and to the house of James Wilson, a wealthy lawyer and Revolutionary official who had opposed price controls and the democratic constitution adopted in Pennsylvania in 1776. The militia was driven away by a "silk stocking brigade" of well-off Philadelphia citizens.

It seemed that the majority of white colonists – who had a bit of land, or no property at all – were still better off than slaves or indentured servants or Indians, and could be wooed into the coalition of the Revolution. But when the sacrifices of war became bitterer, the privileges and safety of the rich became harder to accept. About 10 percent of the white population – large landholders and merchants – held individually 1,000 pounds or more in personal property and 1,000 pounds in land at the least. These men owned nearly half the wealth of the country and held as slaves one-seventh of the country's people.

The Continental Congress, which governed the colonies through the war, was dominated by rich men, linked together in factions and compacts by business and family connections. As Ronald Hoffman says: "The Revolution plunged the states of Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and, to a much lesser degree, Virginia into divisive civil conflicts that persisted during the entire period of struggle." The southern lower classes resisted being mobilized for the Revolution. They saw themselves under the rule of a political elite, win or lose against Britain.

Social Control

In Maryland, for instance, by the new state constitution of 1776, to run for governor one had to own 5,000 pounds of property; to run for state senator, 1,000 pounds. Thus, 90 percent of the population was excluded from holding office. And so, as Hoffman says, "small slave holders, non-slaveholding planters, tenants, renters and casual day laborers posed a serious problem of social control for the Whig elite."

With black slaves constituting 25 percent of the population – and in some counties 50 percent – fear of slave revolts grew. George Washington had turned down the requests of blacks, seeking freedom, to fight in the Revolutionary Army. So when the British military commander in Virginia, Lord Dunmore, promised freedom to Virginia slaves who joined his forces, this created consternation. A report from one Maryland county worried about poor whites encouraging slave runaways:

The insolence of the Negroes in this county has come to such a height, that we are under a necessity of disarming them, which we affected on Saturday last. We took about eighty guns, some bayonets, swords, etc. The malicious and imprudent speeches of some among the lower classes of whites have induced them to believe that their freedom depended on the success of the King's troops. We can therefore be neither too vigilant nor too rigorous with those who promote and encourage this disposition in our slaves.

Even more unsettling was white rioting in Maryland against leading families who supported the Revolution but who were suspected of hoarding needed commodities. The class hatred of some of these disloyal people was

expressed by one man who said "it was better for the people to lay down their arms and pay the duties and taxes laid upon them by the King and Parliament than to be brought into slavery and to be commanded and ordered about as they were." A wealthy Maryland landowner, Charles Carroll, took note of the surly mood all around him: "There is a mean, low, dirty envy which creeps through all ranks and cannot suffer a man the superiority of fortune, of merit, or of understanding in fellow citizens. Any of these is sure to engender a general ill will and dislike upon the owners." Despite this, Maryland authorities retained control. They made concessions, taxing land and slaves more heavily, letting debtors pay in paper money. It was a sacrifice by the upper class to maintain power, and it worked.

In general, throughout the states, concessions were kept to a minimum. The new constitutions that were drawn up in all states from 1776 to 1780 were not much different from the old ones. Although property qualifications for voting and holding office were lowered in some instances, in Massachusetts they were increased. Only Pennsylvania abolished them totally. The new bills of rights had modifying provisions. North Carolina, providing for religious freedom, added that "nothing herein contained shall be construed to exempt preachers of treasonable or seditious discourses, from legal trial and punishment." Maryland, New York, Georgia, and Massachusetts took similar cautions.

The American Revolution is sometimes said to have brought about the separation of church and state. The northern states made such declarations, but after 1776 they adopted taxes that forced everyone to support Christian teachings. William G. McLoughlin, quoting Supreme Court Justice David Brewer – who said in 1892 that "this is a Christian nation" – says of the separation of church and state in the Revolution that it "was neither conceived of nor carried out. Far from being left to itself, religion was embedded into every aspect and institution of American life."

One may look, in examining the Revolution's effect on class relations, at what happened to land confiscated from fleeing Loyalists. It was distributed in such a way as to give a double opportunity to the Revolutionary leaders: to enrich themselves and their friends, and to parcel out some land to small farmers to create a broad base of support for the new government. Indeed, this became characteristic of the new nation; finding itself possessed of enormous wealth, it could create the richest ruling class in history, and still have enough for the middle classes to act as a buffer between the rich and the dispossessed.

Edmund Morgan sums up the class nature of the Revolution this way: "The fact that the lower ranks were involved in the contest should not obscure the fact that the contest itself was generally a struggle for office and power between members of an upper class – the new against the established." Looking at the situation after the Revolution, Richard Morris comments: "Everywhere one finds inequality." He finds that "the people" of that most praised phrase "We the people of the United States" did not at its conception include Indians or blacks or women or white servants. In fact, there were more indentured servants than ever, and the Revolution "did nothing to end and little to ameliorate white bondage."

Carl Degler says: "No new social class came to power through the door of the American Revolution. The men who engineered the revolt were largely members of the colonial ruling class." George Washington was the richest man in America. John Hancock was a prosperous Boston merchant. Benjamin Franklin was a wealthy printer. And so on. On the other hand, town mechanics, laborers, and seamen, as well as small farmers, were swept into "the people" by the rhetoric of the Revolution, by the camaraderie of military service, by the distribution of some land. Thus was created a substantial body of support, a national consensus, something that, even with the exclusion of ignored and oppressed people, could be called "America." It seems that the rebellion against British rule allowed a certain group of the colonial elite to replace those loyal to England, give some benefits to small landholders, and leave poor white working people and tenant farmers in very much their old situation.