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The Forces That Shaped
Modern America

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As historians Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood and others have recently argued, there was already in existence in England a body of political thought that fitted snugly the social and cultural differences the American people were beginning to feel. The writings of the so-called Commonwealthmen of the early eighteenth century, men like John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, bitterly attacked the court faction in the English government of their time. What they disliked especially about the court group was its separation from the people, its aristocratic pretensions, and, above all, its corruption and love of display and luxury—just those things the Americans were beginning to see separating them from their mother country. These “country” Whig writers developed a whole reform ideology of republicanism, which became, in the course of the Revolution, the primary source of American ideas about good government and the good society. The heart of the country philosophy was the preservation of the freedom of the citizen and the need to protect that liberty against the ever-present tendency of governmental power to encroach upon it. Significantly, this body of political ideas was almost entirely ignored in eighteenth-century England—yet another way in which colonies differed from their mother country.

In sum, by the early 1760's the colonists were ready in a vague natural sense for the parting of the ways with Britain. What remained was for something to happen that would cause them to be fully aware of those vague differences and to force them to develop consciously those “country” ideas they had been ruminating over for years. The occasion came after 1763, when Britain sought to find a new basis for its relations with the continental colonies. Then the differences between the two peoples were translated into political and ultimately into military terms. That is the story of the coming of the American Revolution.

A New Kind of Revolution

ON AT least two scores, the American Revolution was something new under the sun. Although most of the major powers of Europe boasted overseas colonial empires, never before had a colonial people successfully rebelled against the mother country. But once it was done by the United States, the example was not ignored. Within a century after the Revolution, France, Spain, and Portugal lost portions or all of their New World empires through colonial rebellion. Nor have the echoes yet ceased. In 1945, one sour Englishman in Batavia during the rebellion of the Indonesians against the Dutch remarked, “That damned American Revolution . . . is still giving us trouble.”

Despite its precedent-setting character, however, the American revolt is noteworthy because it made no serious interruption in the smooth flow of American development. Both in intention and in fact the American Revolution conserved the past rather than repudiated it. And in preserving the colonial experience, the men of the first quarter century of the Republic's history set the scenery and wrote the script for the drama of American politics for years to come.

I. CAUSES WERE CONSEQUENCES

Though the colonists had long been drifting away from their allegiance to the mother country, the chain of events which led to the Revolutionary crisis was set in motion by external factors. The shattering victory of the Anglo-American forces over the French in the Great War for the Empire (1754–63), as Lawrence Gipson has re-

christened the French and Indian War, suddenly revealed how wide the gulf between colonists and mother country had become. The very fact that the feared French were once and for all expelled from the colonial backdoor meant that another cohesive, if negative, force was gone. At least one friend of Britain, looking back from the fateful days of 1776, thought that "had Canada remained in the hands of the French, the colonies would have remained dutiful subjects. Their fears for themselves in that case," he reasoned, "would have supplied the place of the pretended affection for this nation. . . ." What actual effect the removal of the French produced upon the thinking of the colonists is hard to weigh, but there can be little doubt that the Great War for the Empire opened a new era in the relations between the colonies and the mother country.

Great Britain emerged from the war as the supreme power in European affairs: her armies had swept the once-vaunted French authority from two continents; her navy now indisputably commanded the seven seas. A symbol of this new power was that Britain's ambassadors now outranked those of France and Spain in the protocol of Europe's courts. But the cost and continuing responsibilities of that victory were staggering for the little island kingdom. Before the war the annual expenditures for troops in America and the British West Indies amounted to £110,000; now three times that sum was needed to protect the western frontier, suppress Indian revolts and maintain order. Furthermore, the signing of the peace found Britain saddled with a debt of £130 million, the annual charges of which ran to another £4 million. Faced with such obligations, the British government was compelled to reassess its old ways of running an empire, particularly in regard to the raising of new revenues.

Before the war, the administration and cost of the Empire were primarily, if not completely, a British affair. Imperial defense on the high seas was in the hands of the Royal Navy, and though the colonies were called upon from time to time to assist in the war with France, the bulk of the fighting was sustained by British troops. In return, the colonies had acquiesced in the regulation of their trade through a series of so-called Navigation Acts, which were enacted and enforced by the British authority; no revenues, however, except

those collected as import or export duties, were taken from the colonies by Britain.

Under the pressure of the new responsibilities, the British authorities began to cast about for a new theory and practice of imperial administration into which the colonies might be fitted as actively contributing members. Prior to the war the government had been willing to protect the West Indian sugar interests at the expense of the rest of the Empire. But now, in the interest of increased revenue, the old protective duty, which was much too high to bring any return, was cut in half, thus permitting French molasses to compete with British West Indian in the English and colonial markets. In 1766, this molasses duty, in a further effort to increase revenue, was cut to two thirds of what it had been before the war. In short, the need for imperial revenues, not private interests, was now dictating legislation. The Stamp Act of 1765 and the Townshend duties of two years later were similar efforts to spread the financial burdens of the Empire among the beneficiaries of the British triumph over the French.

It seemed only simple justice to London officialdom that the colonies should share in the costs as well as the benefits to be derived from the defeat of the ancient enemy. At no time, it should be noticed, were the colonies asked to contribute more than a portion of the price of their own frontier defense. The stamp duty, for instance, was envisioned as returning no more than a third of the total military expenditures in America; the remainder would be borne by the home government. And because the colonists had difficulty scraping together the specie with which to pay such duties, the British government agreed to spend all the revenue obtained from the stamp tax in the colonies in order to avoid depleting the scanty colonial money supply. Nor were Americans heavily taxed; it was well known that their fiscal burden was unique in its lightness. In 1775 Lord North told the House of Commons that the per capita tax payments of Britons were fifty times those of the Americans. It was not injustice or the economic incidence of the taxes which prompted the colonial protests; it was rather the novelty of the British demands.

The new imperial policies of the British government caught the Americans off guard. Reveling in the victory over the French, the colonists confidently expected a return to the lax, uninterested ad-

ministration of the prewar years and especially to their old freedom from any obligation to support the imperial defenses. Therefore, when the first of the new measures, the Sugar Act of 1764, became law, the Americans protested, but on a variety of grounds and without sufficient unity to command respect.¹ By the time of the Stamp Act in the following year, however, the colonists were ready.

The essential colonial defense, from which the colonies never deviated,² was a denial that the British Parliament had any right in law or custom to lay taxes upon the colonies for revenue purposes. Such taxes, the colonials insisted, could only be levied by the colonial legislatures. Actually, this expression of the colonial constitutional position was as novel as the imperial policy. Never before had there been an occasion for such an assertion simply because England had heretofore confined her colonial legislation to the regulation of trade. It is true that the Pennsylvania Charter of 1681 specifically reserved to the British Parliament the right to tax the colony; but since Parliament had never used this power, the colonists had a case when they said the new British taxes were historically unknown and therefore unconstitutional. The details of this controversy, in which merit is by no means the exclusive possession of either side, do not concern us here. The important fact is not whether the Americans or the British were right in their respective readings of imperial constitutional history, but that the colonials believed they were right and acted accordingly. Regardless of the constitutional niceties involved, it is patent that the English had waited too long to assert their authority. Too many Americans had grown accustomed to their untrammled political life to submit now to new English controls. In brief, the colonists

¹ For example, although the preamble of the Sugar Act explicitly cited revenue as one of the objects of the law, only two of the colonies, North Carolina and New York, denied the right of Parliament to tax them. The rest of the colonial protests were on other, nonconstitutional grounds.

² American history books once expressed the view that the American constitutional argument, as described above, was not finally arrived at until after the Townshend Acts. The implication is that the colonists shifted their arguments to meet new demands from the British. However, since the publication of Edmund S. Morgan's "Colonial Ideas of Parliamentary Power, 1764-1766," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, V (July, 1948), such a view is no longer tenable. He has shown quite conclusively that during the Stamp Act crisis the colonial leaders already reached, in one step, their ultimate position—namely, no taxes, except duties for trade regulation, could be levied upon the colonists by the British Parliament.

suddenly realized that they were no longer wards of Britain, but a separate people, capable of forging their own destiny.

This conviction runs all through the polemics of the Revolutionary crisis. For underlying the constitutional verbiage which Englishmen and Americans exchanged were two quite different assumptions about the nature of the British Empire and the character of the American people. Whereas Englishmen saw America as a part of an Empire in which all elements were subordinate to Britain, the Americans, drawing upon their actual history, saw only a loose confederation of peoples in which there were Britons and Americans, neither one of whom could presume to dictate to the other. The colonials, in effect, now felt themselves Americans, not displaced, subordinate Englishmen. Jefferson suggested this to the King himself when he wrote in his *Summary View of the Rights of British America*: "You are surrounded by British counsellors. . . . You have no minister for American affairs, because you have none taken from us." Furthermore, even after 1776 many a Loyalist exiled in Britain found the English annoying and strange—evidence of the fact that residence in America had worked its influence even upon those loyal to the Crown. "It piques my pride, I must confess," wrote one expatriated Loyalist, "to hear us called 'our colonies, our plantations,' in such terms and with such airs as if our property and persons were absolutely theirs, like the 'villains' in their cottages in the old feudal system."

The imperial view so confidently advanced by Grenville and others of the British administration came too late; the Americans were not interested in making a more efficient Empire to be manipulated from Whitehall. Because of this basic conflict in assumptions, American demands continued to leapfrog ahead of British concessions right up to the Carlisle Peace Mission in the midst of the Revolutionary War. Even ministerial assurances in 1769 that there would be no further imperially imposed taxes³ failed to divert the colonial drive toward

³ In May, Lord Hillsborough officially informed the colonial governments that the Cabinet "entertained no design to propose to Parliament to lay any further taxes on America for the purpose of raising revenue." At about this time, however, the British people were paying per capita taxes of 25s., though Americans paid only 6d., according to the estimate of Lord North.

equality with Britain. The child was truly asserting himself, and, as so often happens, the parent was reluctant to strike him down.

Measured against the age of Hitler and Stalin, the British overlords of the eighteenth century appear remarkably benign in their dealings with the colonies in the years after 1763. For it is a fact that the colonies were in revolt against a potential tyrant, not an actual one. As the American Tory Samuel Seabury wrote in 1774, the colonists were convinced that the ministers of the Crown "have laid a regular plan to enslave America; that they are now deliberately putting it in execution. This point has never been proved," Seabury added, "though it has been asserted over, and over, and over again." As Bernard Bailyn has pointed out in a survey of some 400 tracts from the Revolutionary era, Americans were convinced that a conspiracy was afoot in Britain to deprive them of their liberties. Historians, however, can find no real basis for such fears. To the politically sensitive colonists, who had steeped themselves in the "country party" philosophy of the early-eighteenth-century pamphleteers, the intention behind the British legislation of the pre-Revolutionary years seemed all too clear. For in the country party philosophy, which, after the Revolution, would become the philosophy of republicanism, any government of power was a constant danger to individual liberty. And England with a court party of wealth, power, and corruption was perceived by Americans as a growing and obvious threat to liberty. On the other hand, the British could never bring themselves to enforce, with all the power at their command, what they believed was the true nature of the Empire, that is, the subordinate position of the colonies. More than once General Thomas Gage, commanding the British troops in America, reported that his forces were too scattered to preserve proper order and government in the colonies. "I am concerned to find in your Lordship's letters," he wrote from New York in 1768, "that irresolution still prevails in our Councils; it is time to come to some determination about the disposition of the troops in this Country."

Part of this irresolution was born of British confusion as to what should be the government's purpose, as the hasty repeals of the stamp and Townshend duties testify on the one hand, and the remarkably inept Tea Act reveals on the other. Part of it stemmed from the fact

that within their own house, so to speak, were Americans: at times Lord Chatham himself, at all times Edmund Burke, Colonel Isaac Barré, John Wilkes, and Dr. Price, who insisted that Americans possessed the rights of Englishmen. "The seditious spirit of the colonies," George Grenville wryly complained on the floor of Commons in 1776, "owes its birth to the factions in this House."

Divided as to aims and devoid of strong leadership, the British permitted the much more united colonists, who were blessed with superb and daring leadership, to seize and hold the initiative. Not until the very end—after the destruction of the tea at Boston Harbor in 1773—did the patience of the British ministry run dry. By then, however, the years of acrimony, suspicion, and growing awareness of the differences between the two peoples had done their work, and the harsh coercive measures taken against Massachusetts only provoked counterviolence from all the colonies. Lexington and Concord, Bunker Hill and Independence Hall, were then not far behind.

By implication, the interpretation of the coming of the Revolution given here greatly subordinates the role of economic factors. Since the economic restrictions imposed upon the colonies have traditionally played a large role in most discussions of the causes of the Revolution, they deserve some comment here. Those who advance an economic explanation for the Revolution argue that the series of economic measures enacted by Britain in the century before 1750 actually operated to confine, if not stifle, the colonial economy. Therefore, it is said, the colonies revolted against Britain in an effort to break through these artificial and externally imposed limits. On the surface and from the assumptions of twentieth-century economic life, the mercantilistic system appears severe and crippling and worthy of strong colonial opposition.

Yet empirical investigations of the effects of the system by modern historians do not find much merit in the argument. Lawrence Harper and others have conclusively shown that the limitations placed on colonial manufactures by British laws did not seriously harm American interests or restrict American economic aspirations. The Navigation Laws, it is true, placed a burden upon colonial trade, especially of staples like tobacco and rice, perhaps amounting to as much as \$7 million a year, according to one calculation. Yet very few objections

to the Navigation Laws appear in the voluminous literature thrown up by the crisis. In fact, so acceptable did the system seem to that jealous American, Benjamin Franklin, that in 1774 he suggested to Lord Chatham that all the basic Navigation Laws be re-enacted by the colonial legislatures as an earnest of colonial loyalty. Furthermore, in October of that year, the first Continental Congress publicly declared the colonies willing to "cheerfully consent to the operation of such acts of the British Parliament, as are bona fide, restrained to the regulation of our external commerce, for the purpose of securing the commercial advantages of the whole empire to the mother country, and the commercial benefits of its respective members. . . ." In short, the navigation system was acceptable. Certainly laws the repressive nature of which no one was disturbed about can hardly be accepted as the grounds for a revolution.

No better economic argument can be made for taxation as a cause for the Revolution. Despite the tradition of oppressive taxation which the myth of the Revolution has spawned, the actual tax burden of the colonies was much heavier in the seventeenth century than in the years immediately before the conflict. On a per capita basis, taxes were five times greater in 1698 than they were in 1773. The lightness of the British taxes in the pre-Revolutionary period is also shown by the fact that the duty on molasses in 1766 was only a penny a gallon, or less than the duty the federal government imposed in 1791. As Lord North pointed out in 1775, taxation of the Americans was neither excessive nor oppressive.

From the unconvincing character of the economic explanations for the coming of the Revolution, it would appear, therefore, that the underlying force impelling the break was the growing national self-consciousness of the Americans. "The Revolution was effected before the war commenced," John Adams remarked years afterward. "The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people. . . ." The origins of the "principles and feelings" which made the Revolution, Adams thought, "ought to be traced back . . . and sought in the history of the country from the first plantations in America." For a century and a half the Americans had been growing up and now they had finally come of age. Precisely because the Revolution was the breaking away of a young people from a parent, the substance of the

Revolution was political. The argument concerned the question of parental authority, because that is the precise point at which tension appears as the child approaches maturity and seeks to assert his independence. Unfortunately for Britain, but like so many modern parents, the mother country had long before conveniently provided the best arguments in favor of freedom. And the colonists had learned the arguments well. For this reason, the rhetoric of the Revolutionary argument was in the language of British political and constitutional thought, though not, significantly, that of the ruling "court party."

As children enjoying a long history of freedom from interference from their parent, the Americans might well have continued in their loose relationship, even in maturity, for they were conservative as well as precocious. History, however, decreed otherwise. Britain's triumph in the Great War for the Empire put a new strain on the family relationship, and so intense was the pressure that Americans could not fail to see, as the argument increased in acrimony, that they were no longer members of the English family, but rather a new people, with their own separate destiny. Some Americans saw it earlier than others;⁴ a good many saw it by 1776. John Penn, while in England in 1773, was struck by the English ignorance "with respect to *our* part of the world (for I consider myself more American than English). . . ." To South Carolinian Henry Laurens, the Boston Port Act hit at "the liberty of all Americans," not just at that of the people of Massachusetts. Once they were convinced of their essential difference as a people and that British obduracy would not melt, Americans could not accept the old familiar arrangements. Anything less than their independence as a people was unacceptable; it would take Englishmen another generation to realize that the disagreement was as deep as that.

At no time during the ten-year crisis, however, were most Americans spoiling for a rupture with England merely for the sake of a

⁴As early as 1768 Benjamin Franklin voiced the opinion that England would have to treat the colonies as equal with herself or forgo any connection. England, he said, was supreme in everything or in nothing insofar as the colonies were concerned. He thought it was supreme in nothing. In which case, he said, "the colonies would then be so many separate states, only subject to the same king, as England and Scotland were before the Union." John Adams and Lord Camden, the English statesman, also came to this view in the course of the crisis.

break. Indeed, no one can run through the constitutional arguments of that day without being struck with the reluctance—almost misgivings—with which Americans reached the conclusion of independence. After attending the Continental Congress in 1774, Washington, for example, was “well satisfied that” independence was not “desired by any thinking man in all North America.” And, as late as July 6, 1775—over two months after the embattled farmers made their stand at the “rude bridge”—Congress denied any “designs of separation from Great Britain and establishing independent states.”

This was no heedless, impetuous overthrow of an oppressor; rather it was a slowly germinating determination on the part of Americans to counter and thwart a change in their hitherto established and accepted ways of governing. Except for the long-deferred assertion of independence, the whole corpus of Revolutionary rhetoric—and nothing lends itself more to radicalism than words—was conservative, expressive of the wish to retain the old ways as they understood them. The demands made upon Britain were actually pleas for a return to the old relationship: repeal the Stamp Act, the Townshend Acts, the Mutiny Acts; restore trial by jury as abrogated by the expanded admiralty courts; remove the restrictions recently placed upon western migration. One needs only to run through that famous list of grievances in the Declaration of Independence to be forcefully reminded that what these revolutionaries wanted was nothing but the *status quo ante bellum*.

“We have taken up arms,” the Continental Congress carefully explained in July, 1775, two months after Lexington, “in defense of the freedom that is our birth-right, and which we ever enjoyed till the late violation of it. . . .” These men had been satisfied with their existence, they were not disgruntled agitators or frustrated politicians; they were a strange new breed—contented revolutionaries.

2. NEW GOVERNMENTS IN OLD CHARTERS

“You and I, my dear friend,” exulted John Adams to Richard Lee in 1776, “have been sent into life at a time when the greatest lawgivers of antiquity would have wished to live. How few of the human race have ever enjoyed an opportunity of making an election of govern-

ment . . . for themselves or their children!” Actually, of course, the new nation was not born, like a Venus fresh from the sea, unencumbered by history. But John Adams was not exaggerating when he referred to the novelty of the opportunity. And insofar as posterity is concerned, the governments which were erected by the Revolutionary states expose, better than any treatise can, the prevailing political and constitutional views of the Revolutionary Fathers. Even more important is the fact that these early conceptions of what constituted just government continued to be accepted, in subsequent years, as the basic assumptions and ideals of American political philosophy, the economic and historical realism of John C. Calhoun to the contrary notwithstanding.

When the allegiance to the British Crown, which heretofore had been the juridical source of governmental authority in America, was dissolved, a new legal basis for government was needed. The search for one, however, was not long or difficult since it lay conveniently at hand in the familiar political philosophy of John Locke, the English theorist of the seventeenth century. In his works, the Americans had earlier found the justification for their Revolution, a version of which Jefferson had elegantly embodied in the Declaration of Independence. The Lockean conception which the Americans now borrowed was that the true origin of government was a compact among the governed. Unlike Europeans, eighteenth-century Americans can be pardoned for their ready acceptance of the Lockean theory as historically valid, since all around them they witnessed governments coming into being by virtue of agreement. The Mayflower Compact, formed at the settlement of Plymouth, was only the most formal variety of innumerable compacts by which Americans agreed to live together in the forbidding wilderness.

During the Revolutionary era, therefore, when Americans were compelled to lay down a new juridical basis for their government, they naturally turned to the compact. The Maryland Convention of 1776 could speak for almost all the states when it asserted “that all government of right originates from the people, is founded in compact only, and instituted solely for the good of the whole.” For most modern Americans, the just powers of government still derive from the compact of the people.