

FAREED

Age of
Revolutions

Progress and Backlash
from 1600 to the Present

ZAKARIA

THE REAL AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Industrial United States

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION WAS CURIOUSLY UNREVOLUTIONARY. In a sense it was not even a *revolution*—that is, a comprehensive social, economic, and political transformation—but rather a struggle for national independence. True, the politics of the country changed, with a monarchy being cast off in favor of a republican form of government. But the economic and social structures of American society stayed largely intact after 1776. Plantation owners continued to rule the South. Even up north, the “gentlemen revolutionaries” violently suppressed efforts to promote radical change—for example, crushing Shays’ Rebellion, an anti-tax revolt in Massachusetts. Before and after the Declaration of Independence, the individual states retained much of the autonomy they had enjoyed as colonies. Slavery endured. Women remained second-class citizens. Indigenous people continued to lose territory as the ex-colonists moved ever more aggressively into Native lands.

The American Revolution did emphasize liberty and equality, but the United States’ distinctive egalitarian culture (at least for free, white men) was nothing new. That sensibility had existed since the first colonists arrived in North America and was more a product of the wide-open western frontier than a consequence of the American Revolution. The task of trying to survive in the wilderness and seize

land from indigenous peoples fostered a spirit of cooperation. Plentiful land also allowed for a high degree of economic equality among whites. In 1774, the American colonies had greater income equality than their mother country, even when enslaved people are included in the calculations. Most crucially, at least in the North, there was no European-style manorial system of great estates and aristocratic privilege that had to be dismantled. America did not need a great social revolution to overcome feudalism; it simply never imported these relics of the Old World in the first place. This is what Tocqueville meant when he said that Americans “arrived at a state of democracy without having to endure a democratic revolution,” and were “born equal, instead of *becoming* so.”

Much of the American Revolution’s spirit—against monarchies, in favor of individual rights derived from God and reason—may have been new and radical, but the basic political and social structure of society remained remarkably stable. Two of the greatest historians of the American Revolution, Edmund Morgan and Bernard Bailyn, argued that the revolutionaries were actually demanding a restoration of the rights that they had enjoyed as Englishmen before Parliament abrogated them. The political scientist Samuel Huntington argued that the American Revolution in essence extended a preexisting “Tudor polity,” a weak and decentralized system whose councils, legislatures, and legal formulas the early colonists brought with them from seventeenth-century England. Even today, America’s unusual system—which divides powers between different branches of government and different levels of government—bears the hallmarks of that Tudor system.

Socially, the American Revolution served more to reaffirm than subvert existing hierarchies. According to Bailyn, the American revolutionaries sought not to eradicate social or economic inequities but to “purify a corrupt constitution and fight off the apparent growth of prerogative power.” After the Crown and Parliament had encroached too far, the revolutionaries pursued the narrow goal of severing this external connection. Far from trying to radically transform society

like the French would do shortly, the American revolutionaries were trying to preserve it from forces they viewed as arbitrary and despotic.

But the United States would eventually get a real revolution. Once it reached American shores, the Industrial Revolution utterly remade American society, changing not only the forces of production but also basic relationships among people. Innovations in transportation, manufacturing, and communication reshaped daily life. The nation urbanized rapidly, the locus of work moved outside the home, and civic associations based on new identities sprang up. Regional disparities widened as locations with factories leaped forward. America's Industrial Revolution, which had proceeded in fits and starts since before the Founding, truly took off after the 1860s and also coincided with the biggest change in the young country's history: the end of slavery. And while it was not a direct cause, it is fair to say that industrialization massively shifted economic and technological power to the North, giving the Union an edge in the Civil War. Subsequent industrialization redefined political coalitions in the United States, creating the left-right divide we know today.

When one of the first railroad tracks was laid in the United States on July 4, 1828, the honor of breaking ground belonged to the only surviving signatory of the Declaration of Independence. Charles Carroll, age ninety-one, proclaimed, "I consider this among the most important acts of my life, second only to my signing the Declaration of Independence, if even it be second to that." For those few who had lived through both the American Revolution and the first stirrings of industrialization, it was genuinely unclear which event was more momentous. In the 2020s, with two centuries of hindsight, we can now say definitively: the Industrial Revolution changed American society more than the American Revolution did.

EAGLE ON THE HORIZON

How did America come to industrialize? In large part, it piggybacked on British success. More accurately, it stole British intellectual

property
can fact
manager
that the l
on the e
industria
works fa
soured h
paid \$48
ara. the f
helped p
can man
Massachu
orized th
US. Brit
invention
in the ex
tries, me
Startin
outpace t
trial pote
ating the
passenge
journey t
steambo
and depl
inventors
Samuel A
the baser
two year
patent fo
ments on
When
advantag