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How revolutionary was the American Revolutionary War?: An examination and analysis of two schools of thought and the causes and political impetus behind the American Revolution

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HOW REVOLUTIONARY WAS THE AMERICAN
REVOLUTIONARY WAR ?

DECKER

How Revolutionary Was the American Revolutionary War?
An Examination and Analysis of Two Schools of Thought

and the Causes and Political Impetus Behind the
American Revolution

(TITLE)

BY

James D. Decker

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ABSTRACT

This work examines the American Revolution in relation to its revolutionary character as defined by social scientists. Two approaches to the war are reviewed. The Non-Revolutionary school holds that the American Revolutionary War was not a true revolution politically, economically, or socially. The True Revolutionary school holds that the war was a true revolutionary movement.

Following a discussion of revolution by Mark Hagopian, Louis Gottschalk, Hannah Arendt, and Samuel P. Huntington, this work uses Huntington's approach to revolution to assess the American Revolution against the merits of the two presented schools of thought.

The American Revolutionary War is seen as nonrevolutionary according to some criteria, but it is also seen as a true revolutionary movement according to others. The struggle for freedom as a main motivation for the American patriots, and the foundation of new political and social institutions which were laid by the conflict are the two criteria, following Huntington and Arendt, used to conclude that the American war met the conditions of revolution set forth by contemporary social scientists.

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I. Introduction

The American Revolutionary War began on April 19, 1775, when a band of colonial Minutemen clashed with a group of British redcoats in a battle at Lexington and Concord in New Hampshire. By July 4, 1776, the colonies had written and adopted a Declaration of Independence from the British monarchy. The war advanced, and by 1778, the Americans had signed an alliance with France which greatly aided the colonists' struggle. With the support of the French, the Americans posted victories in major battles throughout 1782. On November 30, 1782, the British and Americans signed a preliminary peace treaty in Paris, France. They signed a final peace treaty on September 3, 1783, in Paris. The Americans had been victorious in their struggle for independence.¹

How revolutionary was the American Revolutionary War? This question has been debated by scholars for nearly 200 years. The American fight for independence was a movement in which the American colonies waged and successfully won a war against the British monarchy and which culminated in the founding of a new country.

Out of this controversy have grown major schools of thought concerning the character, political impetus, and consequences of the American Revolutionary War. Some scholars, among them Eric Robson, believe that the American

movement toward revolution was not a "true" political, social, and economic revolution. Other scholars, including George Bancroft, believe that the American Revolutionary War was a "true" revolutionary movement. Bancroft and others point to post-revolutionary changes they regard as important political, social, and economic reforms that justify calling the American independence movement a true revolutionary movement. These two schools remain the major interpretations of the American independence movement.

This research piece strives to examine and analyze these two major schools in order to evaluate the relative position of each. Using various definitions and approaches to revolution, this work examines a historical event and applies a definition of revolution to discover to what extent the event meets current criteria of a political revolution. Political scientists may then apply this approach to the study of other conflictual events in an attempt to better understand the complex reality which is revolution.

Chapter II offers a discussion with evidence on why some scholars feel that the war was not truly a revolution. It reviews four propositions: the war was basically an economic, not political struggle; the skirmishes were with colonial governments and not against a united colonial government; the British abandoned the war effort; and no fundamental changes resulted from the war. Chapter III presents four arguments from scholars believing the war

truly was a revolution. These points of debate are that the American Revolutionary War was a struggle for human independence; it promoted the growth of a unified nation; new institutions and governmental processes were founded; and its success alone made it a revolution. Chapter IV assesses the merits of both schools' propositions utilizing Samuel P. Huntington's approach to revolution. Chapter V presents a new way of looking at the American Revolution by viewing various propositions from both schools of thought and selecting the ones which are supported if one uses Huntington's political institutions approach as a referent.

It is the goal of this paper to shed new light and offer new views upon the political causes and the revolutionary character of the American Revolutionary War. The American Revolutionary War was chosen because it is a well documented historical event, and because the American system of government has been stable and effective for over two hundred years. Due to the rise in the number of skirmishes worldwide, from the revolutionary struggle in the Philippines to the religious revolution raging in Iran, this work is timely in its discussion of revolution. It is an attempt to utilize varying theories of revolution in order to try politically, economically, and socially to explain why the event occurred and whether it can be called a revolutionary movement. Over two hundred years since its happening, it is still valid to ponder: just how revolutionary was the American Revolutionary War?

II. An Examination of the Non-Revolutionary School of Thought - The American Revolution Viewed as Not a True Revolutionary Movement

The Non-Revolutionary school holds that the American Revolutionary War was not a true revolution. Its proponents are Eric Robson, among others, who foster the idea that the American Revolution was not really a revolution at all. This school, hereinafter identified as the Non-Revolutionary School, holds that the American Revolution did not bring about substantial, dramatic changes to the American scene but, in fact, constituted a continuum of growth from the British heritage. King George III is seen not as a king with a taste for tyranny but as a responsible ruler who exercised authority which was legally his. The Non-Revolutionary School contains four major factors which argue that the American war was not a true revolutionary movement. These factors are that economic concerns of the period were important and overwhelming factors, the struggle for power between the colonial governments and the crown affected the war by pointing out the division in the colonies, British Parliament finally "gave in" to the American revolutionaries, and post-revolutionary society in the United States was not dramatically different from pre-revolutionary society.

CAUSES

Economic Concerns

Captain Evelyn, a British Regular officer serving in Boston before the American Revolution, sensed an economic problem surrounding the relations between the colonies when he wrote to his father in 1775:

"The true causes of it [tension between the British and the colonists] are found in the nature of mankind; and I think it proceeds from a new nation, feeling itself populous, wealthy, and strong; and that [colonists] being impatient of restraint, are struggling to throw off that dependency which is so irksome to them."²

The colonists were convinced that it was to their benefit economically to be independent of Great Britain.

The British were convinced that such a step would mean the destruction of the British Empire. It was felt that if the colonists were to succeed, more countries and colonies would follow. George III retorted in 1779 that if America should succeed in its revolution:

"[T]he West Indies must follow then, not independence, but must for its own interest be dependent on North America; Ireland would soon follow the same plan and be a separate state, then this Island [Britain] would be reduced to itself, and soon would be a poor island indeed, for reduced in her trade merchants would retire with their wealth to climates more to their advantage, and shoals of manufacturers would leave this country for the new Empire."³

Between 1763 and 1775, a flurry of Parliamentary legislation persuaded almost every interest in the colonies to share in dissatisfaction with Great Britain and the crown. British policy was concerned with the reform of the

colonial system of defense. The question of who should fund it brought up the problem of the relative powers of Parliament and local governments. Illegal trade was also a major problem.⁴ The colonists could only meet their financial commitments to the British through the use of illegal trade. The use of legislation and trade restrictions helped to provoke the colonists to seek action against the British.

The colonists believed the laws of trade which had been enacted by the British were heavily weighted in favor of England. Some Non-Revolutionary school proponents have argued that the real cause of the American Revolution was as much a revolt against the limitations and penalties that hindered free enterprise and the economy under colonial regulation with Great Britain as it was a struggle for political independence. Economically, it can hardly be denied that the American colonies had outgrown the British colonial empire. The British attempt to fit the American colonies into the system of colonialism by more control was made too late, and it ignored the diversity which characterized the American lands.⁵

Under imperial direction private enterprise and economic policies were allowed to flourish until the acts of Parliament in the 1760's and 1770's began to chip away at this economic freedom. This erosion of the free market economy led to frustration and dissatisfaction with the British monarchy.⁶

From 1760 until the beginning of the Revolution itself, the British government enacted a series of economic laws which promoted anti-British thought in the minds of the colonists. In 1765, the Stamp Act passed the British Parliament and required revenue stamps to be placed upon newspapers, pamphlets, cards, dice, papers involved in court proceedings, academic degrees, licenses, permits to sell liquor, and other commercial documents. The money generated from the stamps was to be remitted to Britain for the expenses needed to run and protect the colonies. The colonists reacted harshly to the Stamp Act. The British program abridged the range of privileges the colonies had long enjoyed, asserting the priority of British over American interests in regulation of maritime trade, the occupation of the west, and the conduct of government. Through a united backlash against the Stamp Act, the colonists were able to defeat the act before it could go into operation.⁷ The Stamp Act symbolized the economic background surrounding the American Revolution. The Townshend Acts, the Tea Act of 1773, and the Intolerable Acts were also examples of economic splits with the British.

According to Robson and others, the American revolutionary movement was not a revolution. It was not fought over high sounding political and constitutional concepts, such as the power of who has the right to tax or national rights. Instead, it was mainly concerned with colonial manufacturing, wild lands and fur trade, sugar,

tea, and other economic commodities. The struggle involved the nonpolitical survival or collapse of the British capitalist system within the colonial framework of worldwide capitalism, not a revolutionary movement.⁸

Political Skirmishes with Colonial Governments

Proponents of the Non-Revolutionary school hold that the American colonies, while situated upon the same continent, were not united. However, most favored remaining part of the British empire. The House of Representatives of Massachusetts Bay, for example, in its Circular Letter of 1768, written in opposition to the Townshend Acts which were designed to tax many commodities, made it clear that the people in the colony preferred taxation by the Parliament of Great Britain without representation to any such taxation with representation, while in their own later constitutions only two states applied the same principle. The colonies had begun to levy taxes in their own assemblies and wished to continue to do so, rather than have taxes or internal legislation imposed upon them from outside.⁹

"No taxation without representation" is not in itself an adequate explanation of the beginnings of the American Revolutionary War, though it was a slogan capable of exciting people to action at the time. Its main effect was to lend additional emphasis to the real grievance, and to enlist support from the sympathetic in Great Britain for the need for more adequate consideration from Parliament and the

crown. The fundamental cause underlying the beginnings of the American Revolutionary War can be traced to the demand for self-government and home rule and not to underlying social and political instabilities to the extent with which true revolutionary movements have been studied. Robson believes that the origins of the movement are best expressed in the metaphorical phrasing of Alexander Graydon, who stated:

"When the nuturing season is past, the young of all kinds are left to act for themselves. Even man, by a law of his own pursuing, that of nature, has appointed a time for enfranchisement of youth; and America had perhaps completed her years of minority."¹⁰

A main motive of the colonial people was shown in their reiterated claims that their assemblies were equal in status and power to the British Parliament, and in their constant endeavor to set limits on the supremacy of Westminster. One author has gone so far as to describe the American Revolutionary War as having been a test of equality of strength between the legislature of the mighty empire of Great Britain and the various colonial assemblies, which hardly describes what one would term revolutionary.¹¹

Despite the progressive enlargement of its empire, the British failed to develop a rational system of colonial administration. The colonies were originally founded as private business enterprises conducted by corporations and proprietors, and the crown at first exercised only a distant supervision over them. As the colonial expansion in North America grew, both the crown and Parliament showed a

disposition to control and wield power in colonial affairs, but the efforts of each soon diminished in importance in relation to the economic concerns of the mother country. As long as Great Britain's interest in the colonies was primarily commercial, the political concerns of the colonies were secondary. Only after the American colonies had become increasingly self-sufficient did the British begin to force more political control over the colonial governments.¹² By virtue of incessant struggle and the fact that they represented the body of inhabitants rather than an outside influence, the assemblies of the colonies won a dominant position in the minds of the colonists. Clashes between British Parliament and colonial governments, while important factors in the reasons behind the American Revolution, were not revolutionary in nature.

The British Government Abandoned the War Effort

Adherents of the Non-Revolutionary school of thought believe one of the main reasons the British lost the insurrection was the lack of decisiveness of the British government. Robson and others believe that Parliament, due to internal struggles, basically quit supporting the British war effort in North America and that this subsequently led to an American victory.

Past campaigns in North America relied heavily upon local supplies from the colonies, but the British were in a position where they had to fend for themselves. Lord

Rawdon, a British political figure, posed the fundamental question in January, 1776, when he stated that the Americans could not last beyond the war campaign "if you give us the necessary means of carrying on the war with vigor."¹³

General Grant, a British officer, restated this line of reasoning when in 1779 he quipped to Admiral Byron, "Tis not enough to put soldiers ashore in order to make them useful to the King's service - they must be provided with what is necessary for their support and subsistence."¹⁴

The eighteenth century system of government in Great Britain was ill-suited for the conduct and problems associated with a foreign war. Even when ministers agreed upon definite measures, the ordinary routine of administration hampered action, and there was a lack of coordination between departments and in the supervision of preparations for the war effort. Coordination was paramount if troops were to be prepared and dispatched with speed, and in its absence, delays and inadequacy prevailed. Each governmental department in Great Britain was separate and self-contained, and the ministers were responsible directly to the crown only. Such a system was so poorly designed that an effective, vigorous war strategy was nearly impossible in the days before mass communications. The successful execution of plans depended upon efficient organization and cooperation which did not exist between departments, and this became all too apparent during the American Revolutionary War. The military suffered the

effects of the British governmental weaknesses in North America. The system was characterized by the uncertain and tardy arrival of reinforcements and supplies. Planning and execution of military operations in the colonies became difficult until supplies arrived, a situation which severely hampered British military effectiveness.¹⁵ The British government by its disorganization thus was a cause of British defeat in the Revolutionary movement.

It is a maxim in war to be clear about one's objective and the rest will follow, given sufficient resources and activity. Throughout most of the war, the British ignored this maxim and were uncertain about their main motive. Was it to conciliate, or to subdue the Americans? Was it to negotiate peace or to pursue war? Too vigorous a policy would ruin the chance of settlement while too lenient a handling of the colonists could only encourage them. By pouring in troops and supplies to the decisive points, isolating the main areas of disaffection, and dealing effectively with each one, the rebellion could have been crushed before France ever entered the war.¹⁶ The indecisiveness of the British government help lead to American victory.

The American colonies were lost through absence of common sense. The British shuffled between policies of firmness and appeasement until it was too late to apply either. Even so, in marked contrast to almost every insurrection waged by Great Britain, Britain began the

American Revolutionary War favorably placed in both standing and resources. Britain failed to use against fellow kinfolk the preventive measures that would have been taken at once against an ordinary enemy, and she failed to exploit colonial military weaknesses.¹⁷ This led to the British Parliament and the crown giving up the struggle on February 27, 1782. George III later said in 1782 of the abandonment:

"The dreadful resolution of the 27 February last of the House of Commons has so entirely removed the real cause of the war to the utter shame of that branch of the legislature that it would be madness not to conclude peace on the best possible terms we can obtain."¹⁸

CONSEQUENCES

The Revolution Ushered in No "Revolutionary" Changes

The American Revolutionary War was not a "true" revolution because the society which existed prior to the war was not drastically different from the society which emerged after the United States won its independence. The Non-Revolutionary school points to the conservatism of the Declaration of Independence and the institutions provided for by the United States Constitution as examples of historical continuity from British to American government and the overwhelming application of British governmental principles to the new American nation.

The American Declaration of Independence, in contrast to the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, is essentially a technical, legalistic,

conservative document. It is a list of specific historical instances, and is directed not to the regeneration of mankind. It is closely tied to time and place, and the special affection for the "British brethren" is freely admitted. It is a document concerned primarily with the duties and acts of a particular king and certain segments of his subjects.¹⁹ However, is this a document of revolutionary language and proportions?

The more the Declaration of Independence is reread in context the more plainly it appears to be a document of imperial legal relations rather than a piece of political and revolutionary philosophy. The desire to remain loyal to the principles of British constitutionalism explains why the document is directed against the king. Most of the Declaration of Independence enumerates George III's failures, excesses, and crimes in violation of the laws of Great Britain. One indictment after another makes sense only if one presupposes the framework of British constitutionalism.²⁰

The American Revolutionary War was not truly revolutionary because the system which was implemented after the war drew upon much of the British system of government. The eighteenth century British constitution and the United States Constitution are strikingly similar. The American president is the chief and only executive, as was the king in eighteenth century Britain. A cabinet officer in the United States may retain office, even when disagreeing with

policy, because his primary duty is to carry out the orders of the Chief Executive. This was the exact Cabinet practice in Great Britain during this period. That government survives and must be carried on is the key to the British attitude before and the American attitude after the American Revolutionary War.²¹ The revolutionary character of the post-revolution society in the United States was, at most, negligible due to the fact that the United States Constitution broke no new ground in political or revolutionary thought.

To the advocates of the Non-Revolutionary school, the American Revolutionary War has been viewed as a kind of affirmation of faith in ancient British institutions. It has been described as an historical event with no sweeping social changes. If this helps to illustrate American lack of interest in political philosophy, it also helps to account for the value which Americans still attach to the inheritance from the British constitutional history: trial by jury, due process of law, representation before taxation, habeas corpus, freedom from attainder, independence of the judiciary, the rights of free speech, petition, assembly, and the narrow definition of treason.²² These aspects, adapted from British heritage, point to the fact that the American Revolutionary War was not truly revolutionary because the colonists adopted many political concepts from the British.

In summary, students of the Non-Revolutionary school,

including Robson and others, believe that the American Revolutionary War was not a true revolution but was instead mainly an economic and power struggle. This power struggle was won by the colonies, largely due to the British abandonment of the war effort. The results of the war were also not revolutionary, because the new post-war society in the United States was not dramatically different or radically new.

III. An Examination of the True Revolutionary School of Thought - The American Revolutionary War Viewed as a True Revolutionary Movement

A second school holds that the American Revolutionary War not only created the American confederation but molded permanent characteristics of the culture which would develop within it. Its proponents include George Bancroft, Charles M. Andrews, and Edmund S. Morgan. The revolutionary movement is viewed as a watershed event in world history and an epic struggle to gain greater freedom for the American colonists. Students of this school of thought believe that the American Revolutionary War was truly revolutionary. To substantiate its claims, the True Revolutionary school points to the basic struggle for human independence, the growth of a unified nation after the rebellion, the introduction of new institutions, and the overall success of the colonists.

CAUSES

A Struggle For Human Independence

In general, revolutionary movements ran their course in Latin America in the nineteenth century, and Europe after World War I, producing newly independent countries such as Czechoslovakia and Ireland. Since that time, revolutionary movements for independence have been carried out against

European colonial rule in Africa and Asia. The leaders of such movements have often looked to the American Revolutionary War as an example to follow, and have characteristically been befriended by the United States.²³ The American Revolution was a major influence upon later revolutionary movements, including the French Revolution.

The great revolutionary period in the world occurred roughly from 1770 to 1848; this was the era of European revolutions and the revolutions of Western civilization. The American Revolutionary War was part of this process, and was the opening movement of the European phase of revolution. There are similarities between the American Revolution and the revolutionary movements in Europe in the eighteenth century. The colonists of North America rebelled against the legal authority of the British crown and Parliament, they passed from moderate to more radical stages, and they reached the point of impasse and secession from the British empire. This secession was an event which many Americans were unwilling to accept, so that the war of independence was at the same time an internal struggle. Victorious after a long struggle for independence, partly due to the intervention of France, the revolutionary Americans set up new governments according to new principles. To a large extent these governments were operated by people who could not have achieved prominence had the colonies remained British.²⁴

It is in "ideology" that resemblances between the

American experience and the French and European revolutions are the most evident. The modern tenets of liberty and equality, natural rights, and the sovereignty of the people were first proclaimed by the colonists of North America during the American Revolutionary War. The Declaration of Independence announced that "all men are created equal" with equal rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." There has been much discussion of what Thomas Jefferson meant by inserting "happiness" into this document. While the Americans had not really been "unhappy" under British rule, most scholars of the eighteenth century point to the fact that "happiness" was a common idea among advocates of the European Enlightenment. It was a revolutionary belief that people could and may take action to improve their conditions, even against the established authorities of law, state, church, or society. The Declaration of Independence asserted that governments only exist to protect the rights affirmed, and that when governments fail in this function, the people "may alter or abolish it (the government)."²⁵ This is a formula for revolution, a formula based upon the idea that independence is paramount to any type of governmental structure.

Other parallels between the American Revolutionary War and so called "true" revolutions, such as the French Revolution, remain which deal with the essential goals of equality, liberty, and independence. There was an undeniably transatlantic ideology common to the

revolutionary era of Western civilization. The Americans thought like Europeans. Their main cultural background was English and European, somewhat modified from living in a new and diverse environment. They drew their ideas from the same sources as Europeans, their own experiences in affairs, the churches, and modern philosophers of natural law such as Grotius and John Locke. There can be many types of restraints from which a desire for liberty may arise, and many kinds of inequalities or injustices from which equality, and subsequent independence can be made ideal.²⁶ The American Revolutionary War could and did announce a revolutionary program for Europe with independence as its main theme.

Americans came to realize that their relation to the state was not simply a matter of faith; they instead relied upon independence and individualism as important ideological and revolutionary concepts. This revolutionary change involved the adoption of republicanism matched by and ultimately sustained by a basic transformation in the social structure. The American society was to be governed, as it had not in the past, by the principles of equality and independence that are central to republican thinking.

Great consequences were expected to flow from such an egalitarian, independence-minded society. If every person realized that his associations with other people and the state depended solely on his merit, then as former Massachusetts Governor Thomas Powell told the new Americans,

there would be an end to jealousy and the likelihood for "unequal Dominion" that had beset communities from time immemorial. This approach to government and its emphasis on the independence of the individual was seen as a positive revolutionary goal.²⁷

Reform or revolt is bound to follow attempts by a privileged class to conduct affairs according to unchanging rules and formulas. There is a belief that the colonies had developed a constitutional organization on equal footing with that of Great Britain and one that was, in principle, far in advance of the British system. The colonies were qualified to cooperate with the mother country on terms similar to those of an alliance of free nations such as the British now experience today. Unfortunately Great Britain could not see or was unwilling to recognize this fact, and consequently the North American colonies became the scene of political unrest. The American Revolutionary War was successful because rebels or revolutionaries tend to die for something worth dying for - the future - but their enemies die to preserve the present. The American revolutionaries had an ideal for living called independence; it can hardly be said that in 1776 the British upper classes were governed by the yen to be of service to the future of the human race. Independence was a call to arms, a major rallying point around which to wage a revolutionary struggle.²⁸

The American Revolutionary War was revolutionary because of its impact on other revolutions due to the major

emphasis upon the concept of independence. Independence was a revolutionary concept, both in scope and ideology, which was first made widely popular by the American Revolutionary War.

The Growth of a Unified Nation

George Bancroft believes that the American Revolutionary War was a true revolution because the colonies, all with distinct traits and resources, banded together to fight against the British. Before the beginnings of the insurrection with the British, the colonies were feeble settlements in the wilderness scattered along the coast of a continent, little connected with each other, and almost unknown to most of the outside world. The American colonies were part of the British empire, but they were different from other colonial lands. England was the mother of their language, the home of their cultural traditions, the source of their laws, and the country to which the citizens centered most of their affections, and yet the colonies were an offshoot of the British isles rather than an integral part.²⁹

The bond which held the colonies together was an intense belief in the individual and in free choice. The natives from other countries were received as citizens, and political liberty, as a birthright, was the talisman which blended differences. People of all nationalities renounced their former allegiances and became Americans.³⁰

From the beginnings of the American Revolution, there was a deeply felt belief by the colonists that they were indeed creating a new world of republican ideas which would unite the various geographic colonies into a single whole. Republicanism meant more than the elimination of the monarchy and the introduction of an elective system of government. It added a moral dimension that involved the very character of the new American society. "We are now really another people," exclaimed Thomas Paine in 1792.³¹ This remark was a response to the growth of the American colonies into a unified, interconnected nation. The acknowledgement of a new breed of citizen helped to connect inhabitants throughout the American colonies.

The Americans were, intellectually and culturally, a separate people from the British. Thomas Paine remarked of the new differences between the Americans and the British when he said, "Our style and manner of thinking have undergone a revolution more extraordinary than the political revolution of the country. We see with other eyes; we hear with other ears; and think with other thoughts, than those we formerly used."³²

The American Revolutionary War was intended to form a new era in human existence and give a new turn to human affairs. Americans began to view the Revolution and its consequences in revolutionary terms. The American Revolutionary War would mean nothing less than a reordering of eighteenth-century society and politics as the colonists

had known and come to despise them.³³ A reordering of society was thus necessary, and a unified approach to colonial politics was the emphasis chosen, an approach which utilized Republicanism as its main tool.

Nationalism has been the great begetter of revolutions. It has stirred one people after another in Europe, Asia, and Africa. As people grow proud of their traditions, language, and identity, they strike for independence. In the United States, it was the growth of national consciousness that led to the beginnings of a new country.³⁴ Nationalism was a unifying force with a revolutionary impact.

New Institutions and Governmental Processes Were Founded

The American Revolutionary War was not simply a war for independence from colonial bondage. A military victory against the British was of a prerequisite, but it was only one of the important aims of the revolutionary movement in the colonies. "A bare conquest over our enemy is not enough," wrote a New Hampshire revolutionary, "and nothing short of a form of government fixed on genuine principles can preserve our liberties inviolate." Thomas Jefferson also believed that the revolution was more than a mere colonial war when he remarked, "In truth, it is the whole object of the present controversy," referring to the desire for a new form of government.³⁵

Of all the forms of government the American colonists

had heard of, none appeared to be so well calculated to preserve liberty and to secure the most advantages of a civil society as the British system. Despite the fondness for the British system, the colonists believed that there were serious flaws in the existing governmental process which were mended by the revolution. The elective franchise was more equally diffused in the United States. No longer were there decayed boroughs and unrepresented towns. Representation, which was to be universal in nature, conformed more nearly to the population. The legislative assemblies were to be chosen by ballot and the time for convening was to be fixed by fundamental law.³⁶ These were fundamental, substantial changes in the way the government was to be run.

The American Revolutionary War refuted the balance of powers within the political structure under British rule. The resulting political and structural changes in the institutions of the United States were revolutionary in four ways.³⁷

First, in May of 1776, to help bring about the overthrow of the chief obstacle in the war of independence, the Pennsylvania Assembly, Congress resolved that all governments exercising authority under the crown of Great Britain should be suppressed, and that "all the powers of government (be) exerted under the authority of the people of the colonies...." John Adams described this as "the most important resolution that ever was taken in America." Later

that same year, the Declaration of Independence spelled the concept out in terms of equality of men, the sovereignty of the people, and the right of the people to change their governments as they pleased.³⁸ This was the first time in history that the founding of a new government had allowed for the seeds of its own destruction if the public so decided.

Second, the American Revolutionary War ended the power of a central sovereign government over the colonies. Under the existing system, Great Britain had had the power to appoint and remove governors, members of the upper houses of colonial legislatures, judges, and other officials. Parliament had the power to veto colonial legislation, to review cases appealed from colonial supreme courts, and to use armed force. This power was eliminated by the victory of independence and was a major factor in the process of revolution in the American colonies.³⁹

Third, the Articles of Confederation introduced a federal system government. The states at the time were able to govern their citizens as they pleased, many by the majority of the voters within the state.⁴⁰ This was the beginning of the federal system in the United States, a vastly different arrangement from the unitary system in Great Britain.

Fourth, the states made fundamental changes in their constitutions from British rule. The hierarchy of appointed legislature, executive, and judicial officials which had

served as a check upon the elected legislatures was gone. The elective legislature became the supreme law-making power in every state, and the lower houses became the dominant branch of the assembly. The appointive houses of colonial times became elective senates, which in theory were supposed to represent property holdings. They were conceived as checks to the lower houses, but their power was far less than it had been during the pre-war years.⁴¹ These changes broke new ground in the type and organization of government and had a pronounced influence upon the writing of the United States Constitution in 1787.

The war moved the colonies away from the British system while retaining much of what the Americans believed was positive from the British influence. As J. Franklin Jameson commented:

"The stream of [American] revolution, once started, could not be confined within narrow banks, but spread abroad upon the land. Many economic desires, many social aspirations were set free by the political struggle, many aspects of colonial society profoundly altered by the forces thus let loose."⁴²

One of the consequences of the war which was set free from British domination was the organization of government and institutions. The changes from British to American rule were deep and profound, and these changes were incorporated into a theory based upon the supposition that the American Revolutionary War was an authentic revolutionary movement.

CONSEQUENCES

The American Revolutionary War was truly revolutionary because those who instigated it were able to look back upon what they had wrought to say that it was a positive movement. Those who made the revolution went on to create new political institutions and a new political order. Alone among the revolutions of modernity, the American Revolution did not give rise to the pathetic and poignant myth of "a revolution betrayed." It spawned no literature of disappointment and it left behind no frustrated dreams nor expectations unfulfilled.⁴³

A revolution is a major political phenomenon that requires prudence, a careful calculation of means and ends, a spirit of sobriety - the kind of emotion exemplified by the calm, legalistic document of the Declaration of Independence. Revolutions thus cannot be governed by the spirit of a mob. Mobs and mob actions will almost always be one element of a revolution, but if the revolution is not to degenerate into a rebellion, mob actions must be marginal to the central political drama. It is likely that only a self-disciplined people can dare undertake so radical a political enterprise as a revolution. This comes very close to saying that a successful revolution must be accomplished by people who want it but do not desperately need it - the condition of the American colonies in 1776. One could even go so far as to state that a successful revolution is best accomplished by a people who do not really want it at all,

but find it impossible not to press for it. The American Revolution was such a reluctant movement.⁴⁴

The success of the American Revolution is evaluated by four main developments. First, the Americans' secession from the British empire was an event of paramount importance in the scheme of world history due to its major impact upon the British colonial system. Due to the American victory, the British colonial system was dealt a harsh blow. It was the beginning of the decline of the British influence worldwide. Second, the formation of a united system of states under a unified Constitution signaled a new era in the types of government the countries of the world could adopt. Third, democratization of the country, state by state, greatly influenced the movement. Fourth, the development of a democratic mindset and political theory would shape the new nation for decades. A new nation "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" was born.⁴⁵

How successful was the American Revolutionary War?

Perhaps Bernard Bailyn expressed it best when he wrote:

"The Founding Fathers were mortals, not gods; they could not overcome their own limitations and the complexities of life that kept them from realizing their ideals. But the destruction of privilege and the creation of a political system that demanded of its leaders the responsible and humane use of power were their highest aspirations. To note that the struggle to achieve these goals is still a part of our lives - that it is indeed the very essence of the politics of our time - is only to say that the American Revolution, a unique product of the eighteenth century, is still in process. It will continue to be, as long as men seek to create a just and free society."⁴⁶

The American Revolutionary War was a revolutionary movement in the political and economic sense of the term. It was a revolutionary struggle for economic, political, and social identity. As a revolutionary movement, the American Revolutionary War was a struggle for human independence. Out of different colonies grew a new, unified country and fresh political and governmental processes. Finally, it was a true revolution in that those who initiated it wanted a revolutionary change but were not in desperate need of one, thus it was a revolution in the political sense.

IV. Critique of the Non-Revolutionary and True Revolutionary Schools

Evaluation of each of the two schools of thought is influenced by the definition of revolution which one chooses to apply. There are many approaches to the concept of revolution. Among the contemporary approaches are those set forth by Mark Hagopian, Louis Gottschalk, Hannah Arendt, and Samuel P. Huntington.

APPROACHES

Mark Hagopian

Applying Marxist theory, Hagopian views the concept of revolution from an economic standpoint. Utilizing part of Hegel's theory of the dialectic, Marx concluded this tension between two forces progresses. As old tensions are resolved, new tensions ultimately rise and the process continues. A tension between the thesis and antithesis was resolved by a synthesis of the two opposing views, which then would become a new thesis to be opposed by a new antithesis. Marx used this dialectic to describe history. He believed the final breakdown of the dialectic system would be severe and abrupt form of clash of classes.⁴⁷

Revolution would come out of economic collapse, according to Marx, because of several factors. Marx viewed a society's economic system as primary, with political,

moral, legal, cultural, and religious systems as secondary. Because the ruling class wants to maintain its power, the role of the state is to keep the other social classes at bay and perpetuate the ruling class power structure. Marx also stated that the class which rules the society also has at its disposal the intellectual force or means of mental production in a state. This fact effectively blocks or clouds the perceptions of the masses and produces what Marx termed a "false consciousness." 48

Marx believed that all ruling classes would eventually be overthrown. Revolution in a society is grounded in two crucial assumptions. The first is that the advancement of technology will eventually outstrip the ruling class of its power. At that point, the ruling class becomes an obstacle in the path to progress and a better society. Technology makes the ruling class and its system obsolete. The second major assumption is that the ruling class possesses little ability to adapt to changing economic, social conditions, and to maintain the status quo. 49

Marx, Engels, and later Hagopian believed that every civilization creates its own successors by producing a class which will eventually rise up and seize power. The challenger class will represent the whole society and move to change the existing politico-economic system. Scholars of Marx dispute whether he foresaw possibilities of peaceful revolution. Political power, according to Marx, is an important and valued resource and struggle and seizure will

almost assuredly involve violence. Specifically, Marxist revolution involves the transition from one type of economic, political system to another. However, the proletarian revolution will involve establishing a society in which there are egalitarian, democratic principles. An economic cataclysm, inescapably intertwined with political, social, and religious beliefs will lead to a "true" revolution, resulting in a society based upon equality according to Karl Marx.

Louis Gottschalk

Louis Gottschalk assumed that a major component of revolutionary movements was that of demands. A demand which helps create a revolution consists of two parts. The first type of demand may be termed "provocation", which is a situation in which the masses are so dissatisfied as to press for extensive, sweeping changes.⁵¹

The second type of demand is termed "solidified public opinion." Provocations must be so widespread as to cause people to react. The fact that a person recognizes he is discontented will not lead him to revolution unless he is also aware that many others have the same feelings and are likely to unite with him. Therefore, provocations, together with the solidifying of public opinion, are factors which create demands for major political, economic, and social change.⁵²

Another element in Gottschalk's theory involves what he

terms "hopefulness" or a certain degree of confidence that a revolutionary movement will be successful. The concept of hopefulness can be broken into two parts. The first is the existence of a program of reform. Intellectuals aided by the courts, schools and universities, and the media, use these programs to create awareness in the masses. Thus, the people are able to see how reform is possible and may push for revolutionary changes. However, programs of reform do not work by themselves; they need the cooperation and guidance of trusted leaders, which is the remaining part of the concept of hopefulness. A trusted leader must not only serve as the spearhead in the attack upon the existing regime, but must also assume leadership roles if the movement should succeed. Without substantial leadership, movements that had glorious beginnings toward revolution seem to fade. It can be argued that leadership is a main ingredient in successful revolutions.⁵³ People need leaders, and leadership provides a substantial dose of the hopefulness defined in Gottschalk's theory.

The final concept in Gottschalk's approach to the definition of a revolution involves the weakness of the surrounding ruling forces. Gottschalk believes that this is the necessary and immediate component of revolutionary movements. Despite the universal demand for drastic change and hopefulness of success, unless those who wish to maintain the existing order are weakened to the point where they can no longer maintain themselves, there is little

likelihood of successful revolution. Weakness may spring from disagreement between ruling groups, conflict with the clergy, or disaffection with the military. Economic factors such as hunger, poverty, corruption, may cause weaknesses. Whatever the factors which ultimately lead to ruling class weaknesses, Gottschalk holds that it is almost a truism that if the ruling class is weak and the working class is strong and developed, there will be a revolution.⁵⁴ Conservative or ruling class weakness is thus a major component in the revolution theory of Gottschalk.

Hannah Arendt

Hannah Arendt writes that the meaning of revolution must be viewed as a quest for freedom. Arendt adheres to freedom in a philosophical way, and she postulates that there is a "positive" as opposed to a "negative" freedom. Negative freedom is a view which encompasses an absence of restraints, a type of society in which the individual's needs and inclinations can receive free expression. Positive freedom involves the self realization of the individual in terms of his moral autonomy and self direction. Positive freedom is the version of freedom in which people have or gain the capacity to participate in the making of political decisions.⁵⁵

Revolution, as opposed to a revolt, is distinctive because in its second phase it attempts to set up a new political order. Revolt involves no "positive" principle

while revolution can lead to the emergence of what Arendt calls authentic human freedom. Revolution is the concept of a new beginning, a completely new set of institutions to structure and facilitate political participation. A pure revolution is almost exclusively a political affair, because the political realm is the only realm where people can be truly free. Most historical revolutions have failed to establish free institutions which are the chief moral obligations behind revolutionary movements. What has caused this shortcoming is the intervention of the so called "social question." Arendt believes the political essence of revolutions has been overwhelmed by the socioeconomic factors of the time.⁵⁶

Arendt sees the revolutionary situation as creating a power vacuum in which two main groups vie for control. Revolutionary councils, built from the grass-roots, are the closest to pure democracy. The other main antagonist is the party or preexisting revolutionary force. Instead of joining with the democratic movements throughout the country, leaders, party and/or revolutionary decide to "governmentalize" the councils and effectively stifle the true revolutionary character of the movement. This, coupled with the increasing pressures in a society to deal with the social question, condemns most revolutions to miss the opportunity of laying the groundwork for a truly free society.⁵⁷

Samuel P. Huntington

Revolution, according to Samuel P. Huntington, is created from a crisis in the movement toward political modernization. Political modernization is distinct from other forms of mobilization in that it incorporates groups into the political process which were traditionally outside the political arena and did not participate in the political decisions. Traditionally, apathetic strata of society develop an awareness of the political decisions and the politics of the world around them. Huntington calls political modernization the "democratization of the political consciousness," if not of political institutions themselves.⁵⁸

Political development also plays a vital role in Huntington's theory of revolution. Political development involves the creation of political institutions which are sufficiently adaptable, complex, autonomous, and coherent to promote social and economic change in the society.⁵⁹ A revolution is most likely to occur, according to Huntington, when the political development of a society is not advanced to such a degree as to handle a major movement in the political modernization of a society.

The most fertile atmosphere for revolutions is in societies where there is a lag between some social and economic aspects of development, and where the political modernization has moved ahead of political development. A

revolution closes this gap by destroying the old political institutions, redefining the political community, accepting new concepts of political legitimacy and new political values, taking power by a new political elite, and creating new, stronger political institutions. All revolutions involve some modernization in the sense of expanding political participation, while some revolutions also involve the concept of political development by creating new patterns and new institutions of political power and order.⁶⁰

A revolution may be the collapse of unresponsive governments, but in a truly "successful" revolution, the new society creates a novel political order. A successful revolution has built political institutions capable of handling the increased demands of a broadened level of political participation. Because Huntington believes the Western countries have already achieved some positive outcomes in political modernization and political development, he sees the underdeveloped or transitional societies as the most frequent or probable sites for revolutionary movement.⁶¹

Huntington's view of revolution as a process of modernization utilizes the classes Marx emphasized. The middle class intelligentsia in the urban setting (lawyers, civil servants, teachers, physicians and businesspeople) are the most effective revolutionary class because this group dominates the political attitudes and values in a society. The rapid expansion of a middle class due to modernization

in a society is often a highly destabilizing influence. The other major class which influences and works in making a revolutionary change in society is the rural peasantry. The urban center is in constant opposition; and the countryside is a changeable variable. A tradition-bound rural area can be a bastion of order which squelches the revolutionary character of the urban middle class or it can be a catalyst in a revolutionary movement. Through modernization, the peasantry comes to understand what "true" suffering is and how it can be eliminated. Then, and only then, does the societal crisis reach revolutionary proportion.⁶²

Discussions in relation to the American Revolutionary War

Utilizing ideas from Marx, Hagopian sees the proletariat as the social class which recognizes the moral wrongs of capitalism and rejects them. However, in the American experience, the revolutionary class, not the proletariat, was the ruling class. The outcome of the war was not the complete overthrow of capitalism but was instead a new way of approaching it.⁶³ Where Hagopian and Marxism fade in relation to the American Revolution is the overemphasis upon economic stratification and class struggle. Hagopian's interpretation of the historical dialectic and revolution are approaches in studying human and societal events which do not adequately describe the American experience.

Gottschalk's theory is one in which the American Revolutionary War can be comfortably placed. The American Revolution contained provocations in the form of high taxation, misgovernment, and exclusion from certain governmental decisions. However, the provocations in America were of such a nature, namely noneconomic, that Gottschalk's approach is not the best approach to discuss in relation to the American Revolution. Historical causation is a workable theory but not a good fit in studying the American Revolutionary War.

When discussing the American Revolutionary War, Arendt views the war as fitting the true meaning of revolution. While social differences existed in colonial America, the killing edge of poverty was absent to a large degree. This allowed the founding fathers to concern themselves with the establishment of free and lasting institutions. The American Revolution became more truly revolutionary than the French or the Russian because the political situation was never really affected by the social problems or the need of the masses to rid themselves of the weight of overwhelming poverty and oppression. The American experience led to the Constitution and a successful federal political structure.⁶⁴

Arendt runs into difficulty in her use of the term "freedom" which is hard to define and contains moral overtones. She uses freedom almost as a synonym for political participation⁶⁵, a choice which is not without criticism. The essence of revolution, according to Arendt,

is the creation of a stable, free, republican constitutional society. This theory fits well into the historical interpretation of the American Revolutionary War.

Huntington's approach states that the most fertile ground for revolution is where there is a lag between social and economic development and where modernization has moved ahead of the political development in a society. Huntington wrote of political order in changing societies, a category which comfortably encompasses the American colonies of the 1700's. Because of this, Huntington's approach appears to fit the best of the four discussed here when the American Revolutionary War is probed. By applying this approach to the two schools of thought, it becomes possible to evaluate the revolutionary character of the American Revolution. This is a valid research question because it seeks to explore a historical event and compare it to a contemporary definition of revolutionary movement. Political scientists who deal with lofty concepts like revolution may look at the American Revolutionary War under this examination and draw conclusions that the war was a true revolutionary movement according to Huntington's political institutions approach.

EXAMINATION

A Critical View of the Non-Revolutionary School

To use Samuel P. Huntington's political institutions approach to evaluate the Non-Revolutionary school of thought is to highlight political modernization and political

development. Groups of people in society usually left out of the political sphere were allowed to participate, and many were incorporated into the political process. New strata of society developed an awareness that the political decisions and politics had a direct impact upon their lives and they became more politically involved. A major feature which meets Huntington's criteria is that United States institutions were adaptable, complex, autonomous, and promoted social and economic change in society. Old political institutions were destroyed, new patterns of legitimacy were formed, the Americans redefined their political community, there was a growth of a new political elite, and stronger governmental institutions were created.⁶⁶ All of these above factors correlate with Huntington's approach to revolution.

On the other hand, in looking at the American Revolutionary War and its outcomes, one can point to evidence to which Huntington's approach to revolution does not apply. The conservative nature of the new American government formed after the war was such, according to Robson, that it was basically an affirmation of the British constitutional system of old. If true, the political institutions formed were not really new as required or specified by Huntington's approach. Also, it may be argued that the same elites still governed the nation after the end of the war.⁶⁷ Proponents of the Non-Revolutionary school believe that the new rulers perpetuated old British elites

and were not a new political elite as specified by Huntington.

A Critical View of the True Revolutionary School

Huntington's approach can also be used to evaluate the True Revolutionary school. When looking at this school against Huntington's ideas, some features of the American Revolutionary War meet the criteria of the Huntington approach. Political modernization involves the incorporation of heretofore unintegrated groups into the political arena. The American Revolutionary War led to a new system of government with new laws, new institutions, and increased freedoms for more people. The American colonies had become more modernized politically and had pushed for reforms. The British Parliament, however, would not yield much of its power⁶⁸ when a situation such as this exists, according to Huntington's approach, it becomes natural for the people of a society to revolt against the ruling authority. Many Americans felt the need for more representation and more of a voice in the affairs of state, but the British would not bend.

There can be some argument the war was purely economic in nature, but it can be seen that many instances of political discrimination, such as the Intolerable Acts, used against the Americans. The British system of governing had virtually reached an impasse with the American colonies. Before the American Revolution the colonies had been

basically autonomous and self contained, but as the colonies grew in stature and economic importance, they began to gain a belief that they were indeed creating a new society based upon republican ideas and individual freedoms. Against this belief system, after the war, the new United States formed a system of government which more closely resembled the type of government which the colonists had been advocating. For example, the elective franchise was much more equally diffused in the United States than in Great Britain.⁶⁹ More emphasis was also placed on individualism, freedom, and property rights.

The True Revolutionary school and the Huntington model are closely intertwined. Old political systems were destroyed and new patterns of legitimacy were created. Many of the points surrounding new institutions being formed, such as federalism, were discussed by Huntington and proponents of the True Revolutionary school. A re-evaluation of the political economy and the rise of a new political elite points to the similarity between Huntington and the True Revolutionary scholars. When viewed side by side, the two approaches are closely related.

When social scientists attempt to describe and explain human events, differing opinions arise as to how various aspects of the term revolution relate to the American Revolutionary War. Using Huntington as a referent, it has been shown that the war had distinctly revolutionary features.

V. An Interpretation of the American Revolutionary War

As with any interpretation of an historical event, there are some points which are well documented and support assumptions with ample detail, while others lack adequate evidence to sustain critical analysis. It is important to have a framework from which to evaluate. If one uses Samuel P. Huntington's political institutions approach, it appears the American Revolutionary War was a true revolution.

After having examined two major schools of thought using Huntington as a framework, the two branches of thought can be integrated by a marriage of the strongest documented aspects of each. There has been much written and discussed in reviewing the American experience to suggest that economics played a role in the ultimate decision to rebel. The economic difficulties between the colonies and the British empire were very strong. In the years between 1763 and 1775, there was a large amount of British legislation passed which dealt directly with the trade policies of the two bodies. What happened, according to many scholars, is that the Americans simply outgrew their British overseers. When the British, by force, attempted to bring the American back in line with the rest of the colonial empire of the day, an economic backlash against the British choke-hold on the colonies occurred.⁷⁰

Much of the American Revolutionary War was fought over

manufacturing and the fur trade and many of the colonists were driven to revolt by disagreements with the British over commodities such as tea, sugar, and stamps.⁷¹

The American Revolution was the result of a domestic struggle in Great Britain between the crown and the British Parliament. The colonists rebelled against a legal authority and passed stages of increased radicalism until revolution was born. These same Americans felt the desire for a better way of life and a quest for freedom and independence which they could not gain under the hands of the British.⁷²

The American Revolution was fought by those in the United States who felt they had something to die for. The struggle for freedom, the ideal of independence, and the strong belief that the relationship between government and daily life could be improved more led the colonists to take up arms. The American Revolution contained a strong element of the drive for freedom and independence. As Charles M. Andrews wrote, this drive is a basic reason people seek to rebel; they desire to make their own way and be in control of their own destinies.⁷³

The American government created new institutions. It created a new concept that the government of the United States would be drawn from the people and gain its power from the people, it signaled the decline of a central government, it was accompanied by the birth of federalism, and from it arose a system of checks and balances throughout

the government. From all this a new constitution was born.⁷⁴ These factors broke ground in how a society could and should be conducted.

The U.S. Constitution capped the American revolutionary period and it was unique and profound in its scope. The Americans built upon the British system of law and society while adding to it elements which were new and untried. The written document, itself, is a point around which the American constitutional system and the British system differ. As stated in the Declaration of Independence, a new nation was formed upon institutions and principles "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." This was a truly revolutionary idea.

From this it can be seen that the True Revolutionary and Non-Revolutionary schools laid the foundation for a new interpretation of the American Revolutionary War. Out of these two distinct approaches has evolved a new way of looking at an important historical, political event.

This work has underscored the complex interpretations and approaches surrounding the American Revolutionary War. It has provided an examination of a political, historical event and has thus added to the political scientist's ability to discuss, define, and chronicle the phenomenon which is revolution. The complexity of the term "revolution" and the multiplicity of factors surrounding the American Revolutionary War suggest that the two major

schools of thought regarding the American Revolutionary War do not adequately explain the event.

Upon examination of this war, one comes away with a strong appreciation of how difficult it is to define revolution in political, economic, and technical terms, and how hard it is adequately to describe and dissect historical, political events. The review of the American Revolutionary War determined that if one uses Huntington's approach, one can conclude that the war was a true political revolution. It was also a movement tempered by some nonrevolutionary factors such as concern over the economy and a "half-hearted" adversary in Great Britain.

In the final analysis, it becomes apparent the American Revolutionary War contained non-revolutionary overtones but was a political phenomenon of important proportions. Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard described the significance of the American Revolutionary War when they wrote:

"It [the American Revolution] was in truth an economic, social, and intellectual transformation of prime significance - the first of those modern world-shaking reconstructions in which mankind sought to cut and fashion the tough and stubborn web of fact to fit the pattern of its dreams."⁷⁵

The American Revolutionary War was a true revolution, an event which signaled and presented a new era in the discussion of revolutionary movements.

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