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Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution

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Celebrations abound on each Fourth of July all over the United States, festivities which mark the anniversary of America's Declaration of Independence from Britain. This most patriotic day is remembered so fondly as the Americans casting off the British and demanding liberty. This is perhaps true in many respects, but so clear a cause does not exist for the American Revolution.

The purpose of this paper is to examine several plausible causes and consequences for the American revolt against Britain. The most popular causes seem to be: the tyrannical actions of the Mother country; social change within and economic factors affecting the colonies; and the religious and intellectual views shaping the colonists. Likewise, the most obvious consequences include: separation of the Americans from their British parents and a subsequent written constitution; poverty after the American Revolution and the end of the Feudal order; the rise of a secular orthodoxy; and the ascension of democratic and revolutionary ideals, leading to the French and Russian Revolutions. Out of these, perhaps the most important cause and consequence of the American War for Independence was, and still is, the mindset and character of the American people.

To Escape the British Tyrants

The view that the colonists broke away from their hated British oppressors is fairly widespread, and even supported in much of the literature on the Revolutionary Era. This treatment of American independence is often referred to as the Whig Interpretation. In this light, the Declaration of Independence was a direct action of liberty-minded colonists against a tyrannical Mother country.¹ One presumption about a colony is that it is to be subordinate to the Mother country and obedient to its laws, whether favorable or

not. By that token, a dependency is not supposed to have the political upper hand or be independent-minded.² Despite the assertion that colonists are not to possess their own autonomous thoughts and actions, the American settlers did just that. Britain was not as into political dominance as it was commercial exploitation and the colonies, as a result, were left to their own. And left to their devices, the Americans were able to be productive, both socially and politically.³ The distance between Britain and the Americas, as well as the deprivation of English meddling in American affairs, made the eventual British interference unwelcome.

The French and Indian War marked not only a British victory, but also a new phase in American Colonial History. The colonists believed that the British triumph had been their own, and looked ahead to the spoils of war; this included expansion and land acquisition. If the Americans are to be considered as part of the British Empire, then their attitudes toward growth are understandable. But according to the British government, the colonists were not as eager to contribute to the cost of the war from which they claimed victory. The subsequent acts and taxes imposed on the colonists, i.e. the Proclamation Act, Sugar Act, and Stamp Act, were, in the eyes of Britain, a means of raising revenue to pay the accrued debts.⁴ Here, the Americans, as English subjects, should not have been grieved to bear some of the financial burden. The colonists did not share this opinion, however, for they believed the British government as desirous of extortion and restriction, especially considering that the American-born Englishmen were not represented by the English parliament.⁵ Moreover, the colonists' independent mindset would not tolerate the changes that England attempted to implement. The Americans were not alone in their apparent misery, and it seems that the Mother was not treating the

adopted much worse than the natural inhabitants of the empire; the British subjects in England were also subjected to maltreatment, which was provoked by the king and enforced by parliament. The Americans saw the meddling as a personal affront to their achievements at successful liberty-making, and as a result, an attack on the public welfare.⁶ Many believed the logical course of action was to speak out against such monstrosities and some conceived of action against the Mother country.⁷

One assembly that gathered to address grievances against the so-called justifiable taxation was the Stamp Act Congress. The members present maintained their loyalty as British subjects while discussing the inequities of the Stamp Act of 1775. The whole argument stemmed from the issue of taxation without representation of subjects who “are entitled to all the inherent rights and liberties of his natural born subjects within the kingdom of Great Britain.”⁸ In addition to meetings and rallies, popular opinion seemed to also be expressed in speeches, and even, perhaps more importantly, in writings. Patrick Henry’s famous speech calling for liberty was a rally cry after all attempts had been made to reason with Great Britain.⁹ When the Mother country did not give in to the colonists, the Americans no longer saw the need to remain part of the empire. The Declaration of Independence from Britain seemed the next logical step. And this written statement, like Patrick Henry’s speech, informed the king that he had neglected them, ignored their pleas, and continued to inflict harm. Therefore, the colonists desired independence, because “a prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.”¹⁰

Several results accompany the Whig Interpretation to the American Revolution, the first of which was a need for a permanent government. The setting in motion of the

new government with the drafting of the Constitution was as glorious as the fight for liberty by Washington and the revolutionaries.¹¹ The drafting of a constitution and the collective decision of the masses to govern themselves paved the way for the rise for democracy. The newly created United States became a model for many others to follow, such as the Comoro Islanders who sloughed off Arab control of their lands.¹²

The breakaway from Britain was a fulfilling event to be sure, but the colonists were, from that point onward, truly responsible for themselves. Since colonization, the American inhabitants had been British citizens, under British laws and social institutions, with changes to them along the way. But freedom allowed the Americans to take full command of their affairs, and thus acquire a sense of political individualism. The nation symbolized collectively what it viewed about its citizens individually. Each citizen must have the opportunity to exercise his freedoms and to seek happiness. Nevertheless, the newly established democratic government was set up so that individuals' desires did not encroach upon each other, and so that the branches of government did not become authoritarian.¹³

The Progressive Interpretation

The Whig Interpretation seems a cut and dry explanation for American independence from Britain, but that idea has been thwarted by proponents of the socioeconomic theory of the Revolution. The Whig Interpretation gives the impression that the British were tyrants, draining the life blood out of the colonies. The socioeconomic view does not flatter the colonists so much. The Americans did not want to assist the British in paying for a war in which they, the colonists, were benefactors. The socioeconomic version of the story does not make the independent-minded

Americans appear patriotic; rather, they looked like white collar criminals escaping taxation. Yet, they seemed so sincere with their pleas for liberty.¹⁴ Regardless of the reasons for the colonists' refusal to pay British dues, the Americans were in a state of poverty after ending their relationship with Britain. England, on the other hand, did not suffer such distress. In fact, England thrived because it was such a lively nation.¹⁵

The colonies were just as dynamic as England, or so it would seem after examination of the socioeconomic interpretation. This theory suggests, in one respect, that a great amount of the struggle during the colonial period existed between the Americans, rather than just between the colonists and Britain. The Americans were divided in their philosophies, political tendencies, and economic frustrations.¹⁶ The tensions between the colonists were not exclusive to any point in colonial history; in fact, they were present throughout the period. The British were not the only villains, according to this interpretation. The aristocratic colonials lorded over the economically disadvantaged, and this governance extended to the political sphere. The majority of the colonial population had few opportunities to make social gains.¹⁷

Some of the research on the Progressive Interpretation, the label for the socioeconomic version of the American Revolution, shows that in the late 1600s and the majority of the 1700s, colonial society began its road to implosion. The Americans continued to develop the settled areas and populations increased within these developments. The population increases also brought about an elevation in religious and ethnic variation. The growth of cities created economic opportunities, but these prospects were not appreciated by the upper classes.¹⁸

Having possession of a great deal of wealth was not satisfactory for many of the settlers. Those on top wanted even more wealth and status. The desire of some to be greater and to dominate the social and political scenes led to factions within colonial society. Moreover, the wealthy elite wanted no part of sharing the land of opportunity with rising stars. The traditional privileged had wealth, political clout, and social standing, and when newcomers habited the colonies and began to acquire the same, long-time status holders were resentful. Eventually, having wealth seemed to be more important than having ancestral social standing, and political competition ensued between these groups.¹⁹

The colonial elites found themselves in the midst of losing their own importance when confronted with the reality of the up and coming classes. One social interpretation maintains that the bourgeoisie led the Revolution in the hopes of saving their own status. They headed institutions such as the Sons of Liberty and the Second Continental Congress, for example. In this light, the Revolution served to make the wealthy even more so and to push the down-trodden even more downward.²⁰ But this version is antagonistic to the war as a means of securing liberation and creating an egalitarian society.

On the other side of the socioeconomic theory lies the postulation that the serious class divisions did not exist between the colonists, at least not until much later in American history. Rather, the colonists resented British taxation because it threatened the security of their property. The institution of being propertied equated with the term liberty, and the majority of Americans experienced this sort of economic security. That was the beauty of being in America as opposed to England, and why the colonists

perceived paying taxes to the British as a threat.²¹ Here, the colonists were united in their opposition to social and economic ruin.

The unity of the colonists to preserve their economic situation was antagonistic to the aristocratic feudalism of Europe. This analysis does not cast the bourgeois colonials against their economically successful neighbors, nor against the financially disadvantaged. Instead, the Europeans were the bourgeois upstarts, and the class-consciousness malady did not negatively affect the Americans. Rather than allowing internal strife to inflict them, the colonists thrived in their communities.²²

In 1782, Crèvecoeur wrote that the colonies did not have the extremely poor of society clamoring to be seen by the very wealthy. The common colonial man did not have to obtain approval from aristocrats or ecclesiastics, which was far different from the European order of the day. He pointed out that “we have no princes for whom we toll, starve, and bleed; we are the most perfect society now existing in the world. Here man is free as he ought to be; nor is this pleasing equality so transitory as many others are.”²³ Crèvecoeur also noted that Americans did not have to vie for positions of social rank, for all were capable of obtaining the same social and economic greatness. In the 18th century, America was seen, at least through his eyes, as the land where “the idle may be employed, the useless become useful, and the poor become rich.”²⁴

There are several problems with the Progressive Interpretation, starting with the equality of all in the colonies. The rhetoric of liberty did not extend to all colonials equally. Suffrage was not afforded to all, nor was equal representation in the newly established governments. Apparently, the lower classes did not experience the same

political or economic opportunities as the upper classes;²⁵ this says nothing about the treatment of Blacks.

The viewpoint that the war was the result of the brewing tensions within colonial society also has its limitations as a cause of the American Revolution. Concrete evidence that the social, economic, and demographic variables within Colonial America were the determining causes of the American Revolution is evasive. The increase in the population and the stratification of society did not directly keep the colonists at odds, nor did the amount of opportunity or accumulation of wealth. These were not all-encompassing factors. Rather, the colonies were different and the rate, manner, and intensity of social development within them varied. Even inside a single colony, the diversity was colossal. Perhaps in some colonies, and even within some colonial societies, there was equality. The same is true for the socioeconomic turmoil within others. Therefore, it is not possible to say that the American Revolution was directly caused by socioeconomic factors, although they were major components.²⁶

The Whig Interpretation of the American Revolution cannot be cast aside in favor of the Progressive Interpretation; but neither can the Progressive Theory be accepted in lieu of the Whig. It is difficult to see which of the two clearly caused the Revolution. Colonial society was ripe with tension that no doubt opened the colonists up to civil conflicts. There could just as easily have been one catastrophe to upset colonial society as a whole host of problems, but no matter how many internal issues the colonists found themselves up against, the problems no doubt compounded the political strain with Britain.²⁷

Religious and Enlightenment Influences

Religion and Intellectual ideas also greatly impacted the course of the American Revolution, and although they can be considered social developments, they deserve to be treated separately. The American Revolution, like other revolutions, changed the social order into a dynamic system that is based on the synthesis of old and new ideas, whereby a moderate organism was created.²⁸ Likewise, the colonists did not see the need to be radical where religion was concerned, “because religion was already revolutionary.”²⁹

Perhaps the colonists’ disinterest in the establishment of a single colonial religion stemmed from the distaste of the Church of England. Even though some settlements within the colonies practiced the Anglican faith, they were not admired. The ever-changing America was taking on a secular mindset.³⁰ Religion existed in the colonies, but just not in a homogeneous manner. In fact, the variety of religions was conducive to the growth of Liberalism and helpful to the revolutionary spirit. The colonial clergy were not of the same mindset as those in Europe; in effect, the colonial show of defiance to tradition helped prevent radical theology.³¹

The Great Awakening also lent a hand to the displacement of tradition in the minds and hearts of the colonists. This agitation existed throughout the colonies, extending to the social sphere, and profoundly affected the civil influence in religious matters.³² The Great Awakening did not remove the essentials from New England Puritanism; rather, it replaced one type of Puritanism with another. But the tone of the new form of Puritanism was not radically different from other religious sects throughout the colonies.³³ Even the Great Awakening, with all of its enthusiasm, did not create

extremism. In other words, the colonists did not act as revolutionaries for religion; they acted in favor of liberation.³⁴

It is hard to imagine multiple religious denominations coexisting under colonialism. Even with the rebellious independence of the colonial clerics against the domineering Church of England, numerous religious groups would seem to clash under the social strain, but in the colonies they did not. According to Ramsay, the various religious sects in colonial America were all concerned for their civil liberties, not supplanting one another. Peace was not always present among these groups, but the desire for liberty seemed more important than any discontent. It looks as if the enemy existed outside the colonies rather than from within.³⁵

The liberty-minded colonials cast off traditional religious teachings, yet the ideals that fostered religious and civil independence stemmed from Enlightenment values, primarily rationalism. The writing of the Constitution was a natural culminating task for a people so set on thinking for themselves.³⁶ Their actions were not unnatural; breaking away from British rule was practical, and as rational men it made more sense than remaining under the control of a tyrannical Mother country.³⁷ But the American Revolution did more than simply free the colonists and pave the way for a democratic government.

The intellectuals in America created a glorious democracy based on Enlightenment principles. The revolutionary experience was observed by Europe, and rational Europeans wanted to emulate the Americans, for the former saw the latter as putting theory into practice. France in particular watched the Americans throughout the 1780s.³⁸ The American Revolution became an even greater significance to the French by

the 1790s. The revolutionary principles did undermine the notion of a perfect America, however. The problem with the European application, specifically the French and Russian Revolutions, of Enlightenment principles was that Europeans acted out of an urgency to destroy their pre-revolutionary social ills. The Americans, on the other hand, lived contentedly prior to the revolution;³⁹ they just did not want the British to have control of their comfort levels.

The desire of European intellectuals to follow the American example of putting theory into practice is a significant consequence of the American Revolution. But there are more positive ramifications of the intellectual cause as a whole. The colonial Americans who devised their democratic government and synchronized social institutions were obviously intelligent, rational men. They were necessary for such a smooth movement to take place. Thus, government and constitution making were areas of intellectual growth. Yet the intelligent and cogent men also became a product of the Revolution. For example, military tactics had to be learned and shared and as new knowledge was acquired affecting all aspects of life, advancements were made. Surgical and other medical procedures are but some examples of areas that made serious gains from battlefield experiences.⁴⁰

Perhaps the most noteworthy intellectual consequence of the American Revolution was the spread of the study of arts and sciences. Much of this came about from the “various orations, addresses, letters, dissertations, and other literary performances which the war made necessary.”⁴¹ Other opportunities stemmed from “the marches of armies and the operations of war [that] gave birth to many geographical inquiries and discoveries which otherwise would not have been made.”⁴² Ramsay went

on to declare that more intellectual pursuits have arisen in America since the Declaration of Independence, and the Revolution itself was responsible.⁴³ America, therefore, came into itself intellectually while the world watched and acquired some of that knowledge.

All of the said causes and consequences in this piece seem logical and supportable, but if one of them is absolutely correct then it serves to discard the others. Nevertheless, all of them can be thought of as important contributors to the Revolution and its aftermath. All of these causes and consequences have a distinct place in the order of the day when the American character itself is considered.

The American Character as a Cause and a Consequence of the American Revolution

Each and every one of the aforementioned causes and consequences is valid, but only if examined as a constituent rather than an individual cause. The political, socioeconomic, and intellectual, to include religious, causes come together in the American character. The colonists had to have a united disposition in order for such a revolution to be successful. It is that same frame of mind that has kept it so.

The political nature of the American Revolution is fused with the general nature of the American temperament, creating a political character. Although Adams found the cause of the colonial revolt to be the strained connection between the Mother country and her colonies, he told Jefferson that the Americans had a revolutionary mindset prior to ever engaging in battle.⁴⁴ According to Ver Steeg, “when nationhood became a reality, political patterns that had been practiced for a century were institutionalized.”⁴⁵ But Colonial American political thought was deeply intertwined with the structure of colonial social institutions in general.

Just as the Whig Interpretation is legitimate when fused with the colonial mindset, so too is the socio-economic interpretation. For example, the New World had a vast amount of lands to be claimed, and the desire to own land was an attractive prospect to most Europeans. The method of settling the wilderness of the New World fostered the shaping of the American liberal mindset.⁴⁶ This liberalism is also the reason why the American Revolution cannot be fairly compared to the French Revolution. Although one of the proposed consequences of the colonial revolt is said to be other European revolutions, colonial Americans did not experience such economic upheavals; nor were Americans forced to pay exorbitant manorial rents.⁴⁷ The amount of land to be settled, along with the diverse groups who settled it, supports this claim. Colonial land ownership by most classes was a reality in the formative years, a practice that dominated the construction of economic thought in the British colonies. In the provincial system, Americans were already categorized as “optimistic, self-confident, buoyant, pragmatic,”⁴⁸ and these descriptors are still in place today.⁴⁹

The phenomenal unity of thirteen very different colonies allows Americans to have such unique descriptors. American unity would really seem unlikely if it had been examined prior to the Revolution, particularly because of the very nature of colonial societies. Add to that the diversity *within* each colony, not to mention between them, and a chaotic communication system emerges.⁵⁰ John Adams even remarked on the diversity within the colonies saying, “the colonists had grown up under the constitutions of government so different; there was so great a variety of religions; they were composed of so many different nations; their customs, manners and habits had so little resemblance.”⁵¹ An explanation to this unity for revolution is in order.

The rationalization for the unification of such diverse peoples is that the great leaders who formed the new nation were not of imperial stock; they were forged from the decades of a growing American character.⁵² John Adams' marvel at the concord of the colonies is perhaps expected. He was a Patriot, a founding father, who was part of that general mindset; therefore, he may not have been able to see it develop around him. Crèvecoeur, on the other hand, an outsider and Loyalist, provides a more noteworthy explanation for the "collective" American individualism.

Crèvecoeur wrote of a new American race emerging from the blend of Europeans. He noted that this type of man is unique to the colonies because of the types of marriages that existed within them. Essentially, an American can claim descent from many different nations, and all within his immediate family. A man could have a French father and an English mother, and then marry a Native American woman. The offspring of that union could declare a multicultural heritage. But no matter the mixture, the colonist is an "American who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds."⁵³ Crèvecoeur also predicted the forthcoming upheaval brought about because of this new race of people. Ironically, he understood the American need to entertain new ideals, along with the desire to divorce the Mother country, although he did not approve of it.⁵⁴

Crèvecoeur's description of the American individual in the early 18th century adequately supports the theory of a general frame of mind as the cause of the American Revolution, and this outlook stemmed from Liberalism. This Liberalism, in large part, was of English heritage, brought to the colonies with the settlers and passed down

through the generations. Naturally, their American-born descendants maintained part of their inherited Liberalism, but English Liberalism did not exclude the growth of a specifically American Liberalism. The colonists had to apply their ideas to their own circumstances, and, what is more, it was their unique conditions that molded their forms of thought.⁵⁵

Just as the American mind developed to fit its own social context, there was more than one social context in the colonies, and therefore more than one type of American mind. This defining American trait of diversity in frame of mind fits well with the vastness and variety of the different levels of American society. The fact that immigrants continued to arrive, people with their own cultures, customs, and traditions, necessitates the development of a distinctly American form of thought. It does not seem likely that British descendants would be able to maintain a strictly British form of thought, especially if the generations had come into contact with other ways of understanding their world.⁵⁶ The uniqueness of the American character, a development that resulted from the cross-cultural interactions, was set in motion in the decades prior to the American Revolution.⁵⁷ In other words, all of the cultural and sub cultural groups within the colonies did not all of a sudden decide to develop an American identity on the eve of the Revolution in order to unite against their common foe.

While Enlightenment ideas are attributed to helping the revolutionaries, Ver Steeg argues that the general mindset of the American, with his ideas of liberty, was not a product of the Enlightenment; instead, “the Enlightenment supplied words and concepts for expressing an attitude of mind to which Americans had, in fact, subscribed for several centuries.”⁵⁸ The Americans were already embarking on a growing nationalism, even

when they were considered provincial English citizens.⁵⁹ Nationalism is an idea, part of a mindset, an intangible thing that was promoted and maintained by the American colonists.

Nationalism, which had been fostered throughout the century before the Declaration of Independence, provoked Thomas Jefferson to declare that the American youth need not obtain his education outside of America. His description of the ills of a European education supports the idea of a long-established American identity. His illustration of the completely contrasting mannerisms of Europeans from those of the Americans sustains the fact that if Americans were simply extensions of the Mother country, then they would in fact share commonalities. But Jefferson declared this to be quite the opposite, saying that a student in Europe “returns to his own country a foreigner, unacquainted with the practices of domestic economy necessary to preserve him from ruin.”⁶⁰ He went on to say that an “American coming to Europe for education loses in his knowledge, in his morals, in his health, in his habits, and in his happiness.”⁶¹ Apparently the habits so native to Americans had been passed down from one generation to another, and were part of the general American mindset; thus, the colonists could not rightly call themselves extensions of the Mother country.

If the outlook of the American colonists can be considered a cause of the Revolution, then it should also be the lingering consequence, especially if wrapped in political, socioeconomic, and intellectual rhetoric. The American colonists fought the war for independence to escape British tyranny, according to the Whig Interpretation, but just after the war, in 1787, Benjamin Rush declared, “the American war is over but this is far from being the case with the American Revolution. On the contrary, noting but the first

act of the great drama is closed.”⁶² Rush was absolutely correct in his forethought, for the newly independent Americans began to set in motion the political system that is still strong today, and placed as a model on the world’s center stage.

Historians agree that the American social character continued to develop, just as did that of American political thought.⁶³ American individualism helped the colonies grow into their own and fostered Nationalism, but after the colonists acquired their independence, the individual character of the Americans became, in some respects, an expectation, along with Nationalism. Patrick Henry provides a clear example of the set-in-stone American character. He declared, “I am not a Virginian, but an American.”⁶⁴ No matter what state an American lives in, he is part of a national identity, and has been since the Revolution, if not before. And patriotism has not lessened over the decades since independence, as is evident by the remembrances of September 11, 2001. Nelson argues that the revolutionary spirit continues in the minds and hearts of Americans because the generations since the Revolution have been reminded of their forefathers’ struggles, along with the need to propagate the sentiment.⁶⁵ Subsequent generations of Americans have had no trouble living up to their expectations.

The American character was the cause, and is the continued effect, of the American Revolution. The Whig Interpretation describes the colonists as Englishmen who wanted to be free because of the tyranny of the Mother country; but it was the American character that created the courage to stand up collectively and demand liberty. The Progressive Interpretation pits the upper and lower classes of colonists against each other, and ties land ownership into the demand for freedom; but colonial society did not have a feudal structure. An American identity developed out of a social equality. The

Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality, to include freedom of religion, were present in America prior to the Revolution, and they continue to thrive today.

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