Teaching the Revolution

*by Carol Berkin*

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*Engraving of the Boston Massacre, by Paul Revere, Boston, 1770. (The Gilder Lehrman Collection)*

For most Americans, young and old, the history of the American Revolution can be summed up something like this: In 1776, all the colonists rose up in unison to rebel against a tyrannical king and the horrible burden of unfair taxes the British had imposed upon them for over a hundred years. During the long war that followed, citizen soldiers shivered in the cold, shared the hardships together, admired George Washington, and won the war singlehandedly against the most powerful army in the world. Then they created a democracy and everyone lived happily ever after.

Except for the part about shivering in the cold, this myth is just that, a myth. But, like all good teachers, I am resourceful, and so I would like to use this myth as a starting point for this essay. Let me begin with the image that the Revolution was a spontaneous reaction to decades of oppression by the British government—especially unfair taxation. The British, like the French, Dutch, Portuguese, and Spanish, were empire builders and created imperial policy designed to enrich and empower the hub of that empire, what Americans would rightly call the Mother Country. The operating economic theory of the time was mercantilism and its tenets were simple: a nation’s goal was to be as self-sufficient as possible so that no wealth, primarily gold and silver, flowed out of its borders and to produce something other nation’s wanted so that wealth would flow into its treasuries. Like the old 1960s joke, who ever had the most toys when they died, won the game of life. To achieve this goal, European nations conquered lands and created colonies—where new, marketable raw materials and precious metals might be discovered that could be sold and where staple agricultural products could be produced that would feed the Mother Country. From the beginning, therefore, the colonies existed for the sake of the Mother Country—it was the logic of this imperial era.

Rules were set to ensure that the colonies served the larger goal of national glory: colonies were forbidden to trade with the enemy—or to pay heavy import taxes if they did; they were forbidden to ship goods or produce in enemy ships; they were forbidden to engage in manufacturing activities that competed with citizens of the Mother Country; they were forbidden to create laws or institutions that ran counter to the laws and institutional structures in the Mother Country. In exchange for loyalty and obedience, the citizens of the British colonies would enjoy the protection of the British army and navy and the Constitutional guarantees of the “rights of Englishmen.”

England, however, tried to build its empire on the cheap. Indeed, it found a million ways to govern in a manner Uncle Scrooge McDuck would approve. Unlike France or Spain, its Crown was never willing to finance colonies, either in their settlement or their operating costs. They left this to trading companies, wealthy patrons, even dissident religious groups—and by the eighteenth century, the cost of running each colony fell squarely upon the residents who were taxed by their local representative assemblies—assemblies made up of colonists like themselves. From the building of roads, to the dredging of harbors, to the royal governor’s salary—the daily costs of the colonies were paid by local taxation rather than the British treasury. So cheap was the British government that it failed to enforce its own trade regulations with any vigor; given a choice between financing customs collectors to prevent smuggling and a judicial apparatus to try offenders, the Crown preferred to look the other way at infractions in a policy humorously dubbed “Benign or Salutary Neglect.”

Colonists—seeing the cookie jar unguarded—did just as we might suspect. New Englanders, in fact, built a thriving economy on a mixture of legitimate trade with British West Indian islands and illegitimate trade with the Caribbean possessions of rival nations. Over decades, smuggling became respectable practice; John Hancock, Boston’s richest merchant, was also its most notorious—or admired—smuggler. And local assemblies—who had thrust into their hands what eighteenth-century men called “the power of the purse,” that is, taxing power—were quick to see this as a benefit not a burden. The elite colonists who dominated these assemblies shifted as much of the tax burden to frontier farmers and the middle classes, reaped the benefits of deciding how surpluses would be spent, and used their authority to pay—or not pay—the governor’s salary as a wedge to secure his support on measures he was not supposed to endorse.

On occasion, the British government woke from its long imperial nap and tried to rationalize its management of the colonies. In the seventeenth century, James II created the Dominion of New England, merging New York and the New England colonies into one administrative unit. But English politics was none too stable; James was driven into exile, his Dominion governor was promptly imprisoned by the colonists, and the megacolony was dissolved. The heavy hand of the Crown sometimes came down on particular legislation, usually involving currency or banks, but on the whole Salutary Neglect was the preferred relationship of the eighteenth century. Small wonder that America’s leadership toasted the glories of membership in the British Empire.

The French and Indian War changed all this, as you know. This was the first Great War for Empire—rivaled only by the struggle against Napoleon over a half century later—and Britain drained its every financial resource to defeat its enemy. In the end, Britain won—and found it a pyrrhic victory. Its treasury was empty; it owed money to creditors; and its budget for the military was growing rather than declining for it had to protect its position against a new French challenge. On the streets of London, citizens rioted to see wartime taxes reduced. The new young king had a crisis on his hands.

We all know what followed: salutary neglect was replaced by concerted, though clumsy efforts to tighten control over American trade, new taxes—and the first direct tax—were imposed by Parliament, smugglers were arrested and tried . . . and the claim of tyranny emerged.

But was there tyranny? Consider this: the Sugar Act did not increase the duty on foreign molasses, it lowered it, slashed it in half in fact; the real shock to the New England smugglers was that the government declared its intention to enforce the import tax and to prosecute smugglers. What happened to those smugglers? The British government allowed local juries of their peers to try them—and those peers promptly declare them all innocent. John Hancock, caught red-handed, was not only found innocent but celebrated as a hero after the trial. Did the British government retaliate? Only mildly. Frustrated after multiple trials of this sort, it created Vice Admiralty courts, perfectly legal, to try the offenders in a less friendly environment.

But the biggest hue and cry of tyranny arose because of the Stamp Act and the Townshend Acts. The Stamp Act was an innovation; not an infringement of rights, but an assertion of authority that had long lay dormant—and thus lost its potency. When Americans protested—when they harassed stamp officials, physically attacked customs men, destroyed stamps—the British “tyrants” responded by repealing the hated act. They chose the same path with the Townshend Acts, which were also an innovation—and a dicier one—because they laid import taxes on British goods. Almost no revenue was collected from these taxes—and the colonists continued to reach into their pockets not to pay the Crown but their own local legislatures’ taxes.

How did the British handle the protests, the violence, the organized resistance led by colonial legislators? Did they arrest the ringleaders of resistance? No. Did they close down the newspapers that carried diatribes and learned discourses against British policies? No. Did they restructure the colonial governments? No. Did they arrest the men who met in illegal political bodies such as the Stamp Act Congress and the Continental Congress, or declare them ineligible to serve in local offices? No. Their response was to ignore petitions, refuse to engage in negotiations or discussions—and to generally display a bewilderment at the colonists’ failure to understand how an empire worked.

Not until thousands of dollars’ worth of property was destroyed in Boston harbor did the government (many of whose members were investors in the East India Tea Company) retaliate. For the British, as it would be for the Founding Fathers of the United States, the sanctity of private property was worth protecting.

It is amazing to me how patient and tolerant British officials remained over the turbulent 1760s and 1770s. It was not until 1775, when British troops marched toward Lexington and Concord, that orders were given to arrest the two men considered to be prime ringleaders of rebellion, Samuel Adams and John Hancock. Patrick Henry was not arrested for declaring “give me liberty or give me death”; *Common Sense* was not confiscated nor was the press that printed it shut down. Arrogant, foolish, self-interested the members of Parliament and the king might have been—but they were victims of their own commitment to the British constitution and its guarantee of rights. In the end, the tyranny revolutionaries decried was the imperial system itself; that is, the notion that colonies existed for the welfare of the Mother Country.

The second element of the myth is the unanimity of support for the Revolution. Did all Americans—north and south; white, red, and black; female and male; rich and poor—greet the Declaration of Independence with uniform enthusiasm? After the divisive experiences of the Vietnam war and the current divisions over the war in Iraq, it is appealing to think that there was an overwhelming consensus for independence. But it was not so. John Adams famously said that “one third supported the war, one third opposed it, and one third had no opinion.” But here, as in many cases, Adams exaggerated. It is far more likely that, at the beginning of the struggle, many more than one third of the colonists hoped desperately to remain neutral in a battle between Mother Country and rebellious Americans. Their assumption was that, no matter who was in power, they would have to pay taxes—why risk their lives over who that would be? Many a farmer equipped his home with two flags, the British and the American, and prepared to raise the appropriate one as an army marched by. As the war progressed many of these neutral colonists did join the American cause, but this, as John Shy and Charles Royster have shown, was not an ideological or political choice: the British army behaved so badly everywhere it went, looting, raping, destroying, that it literally drove colonists into the revolutionary camp.

But let us take a closer look at those who supported, and those who opposed, the movement for independence. To do this, I would like you to imagine the Revolution as a prism with many sides, and I would like to focus on what we would call “self-interested” motives. This is not to say that men and women chose their sides in the war solely for economic reasons or to satisfy ambitions. Ideas also influenced Americans—and ideas shaped how Americans articulated their choice for rebellion or loyalty and how they understood that choice to reflect their values and ethics. Bernard Bailyn has shown us that by 1776, most of the Revolution’s leadership believed that the British government had sunk deeply into decadence and tyranny and had broken the contract between governors and the governed that John Locke had so eloquently described as the only basis for legitimate government. And we also know that leading loyalists, who opposed independence, believed the Revolution was the creation of demagogues and men with thwarted ambitions; to them, the renunciation of the Crown and “the greatest constitutional government the world had ever known” was wholly unjustified. But the critical choice to rebel or remain loyal depended greatly upon where one stood in relation to others within the society, upon the material realities that shaped one’s perspective.

Who then were more likely to become revolutionaries? Let me suggest four broad groups: smugglers and urban workers; planters; legislators; and African Americans, both slave and free. Let’s start with the most obvious: smugglers. As you know, British policies after 1763 struck hardest at the New England colonies. With little of value to trade directly to England—no rice, no wheat, little tobacco—New England’s leading citizens made their profits by competing with the Mother Country in the shipping trade. The post-1763 policies like the Sugar Act of 1764 carried the threat of more regulation, more restrictions, and eventual economic disaster. Merchants like Hancock found ready allies in those urban workers, distillers, lumber jacks, and shipbuilders whose livelihoods also depended upon the smuggling made possible by salutary neglect. Not surprisingly, Boston became the center of protest, of reprisals, and of rebellion.

What about planters? Again, legend has it that tidewater planters led the way in calling for independence. Yet, current historiography suggests that, in Virginia at least, the Virginians we think of as founding fathers were reluctant rather than eager revolutionaries. Three things propelled them into the revolutionary camp: first, the great burden of debt they owed English and Scottish merchants who provided credit for the purchase of land, slaves, and especially luxury goods that men like Jefferson craved. Second, pressure from ordinary farmers and backcountry settlers who wanted the right to move onto Indian lands—a right denied by the Proclamation Line of 1763. As the protest against Great Britain grew during the 1770s, as the tension mounted, wealthy tidewater planters feared that a war was inevitable and, as they put it in letters to one another, they could either lead it or be trampled under the feet of patriots in the western counties. Third, the provocative policies of Virginia’s royal governor, Lord Dunmore, whose proclamation offering freedom to the slaves of “traitors” raised the specter of slave revolt and race war.

Legislators—those men who ran the assemblies in each colony—had good reason to join the Revolution by 1775. There were two routes to power and status in the colonial political world: appointment to office by the king or his representative, the governor, and election to office in the colonial assembly by the white male property owners who enjoyed the right to vote. Historians know that the same wealthy families dominated these assemblies, with fathers passing down to sons the duty—and privilege—of serving. Many were lawyers or had legal training; most had an education far superior to the ordinary colonist; and, through marriage, many were part of interlocking families. By mid-century the assembly was the de facto supreme power in most colonies; British policy trends after 1763 threatened this supremacy. As Britain realized that the assemblies had evolved into mini-parliaments, assuming extensive rights, efforts were made to reassert the authority and sovereignty of the English Parliament. In the end—and far too late—the king authorized independent salaries for governors and judges, removing the bargaining power that the assembly had used effectively to force the governors to bend to their will. Each effort on Britain’s part—independent salaries and especially the reorganization of the Massachusetts government as part of the Coercive Acts—threatened the position of this colonial political elite. And it drove many of them into rebellion.

Finally, many enslaved and free blacks supported the Revolution. The rhetoric of the Revolution—“liberty and equality”—gave hope to free African Americans that they might receive better treatment within their communities. For the enslaved, rhetoric mattered less than the fact that service in the military, offered late and unenthusiastically by the revolutionaries, provided a route to freedom for many.

Who opposed the war for independence? Loyalists might be considered in five groups: royal office holders, merchants who traded directly with England, slaves, backcountry farmers of the Lower South, and Native Americans.

Let’s begin with office holders. Winning appointment to a royal office was the second route to political power. These posts included governors, lieutenant governors, attorney generals, and judges of the vice admiralty courts. Salaries were generous; status was high; and one did not have to stand for office and woo voters. Most royal officers remained loyal, not simply because of their pocketbooks but because their positions gave them a different perspective on Britain’s problems and policies. And because in the eighteenth century taking an oath of loyalty, as they did for their offices, meant something almost sacred.

Then, while many New England merchants depended upon the Caribbean trade, there were others, in New York and Philadelphia as well as New England, who made their livings from the sale of British manufactured goods. Family connections, religious ties, or simple good fortune made these men able to establish credit with major British manufacturers or middle men. Their warehouses were stocked with everything from carriages to panes of glass to iron tools and bolts of cloth. These men would be bankrupt if the trade were cut off by war or disrupted by independence.

Enslaved African Americans appear in both categories, patriot and loyalist. And their presence on both sides of the war reminds us dramatically that the Revolution was not one revolution but many. While Patrick Henry declared that he would prefer death to slavery, his own slaves shared his sentiment. But their war was not against unfair taxation or royal tyranny; it was against the more immediate tyranny of the lash. For slaves, the old Arab proverb surely applied: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. The formula was usually reasonably simple: if a master was a loyalist, the slave was a revolutionary; if the master was a patriot, the slave made his or her way whenever possible to the welcoming arms of the British army.

The Revolution was different for Indians, or Native Americans, as well. Most understood that the colonists were land hungry and would not honor tribal claims if they stood in the way of westward settlement. The British had shown their willingness to search for diplomatic resolutions to territorial disputes; the Proclamation Line was, in fact, one of the few truly statesmanlike decisions of the post–French and Indian War era. Given a choice between the two, Cherokees and Mohawks, and most of the Iroquois confederation, threw in their lot with the British. Thus they were fighting their own war for independence—a war far different from that of Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin.

By far the largest group of active loyalists was the white colonists of the Carolina and Georgia backcountry. It is this group that gives the Revolution yet another dimension: civil war. And it adds irony as well. The tidewater patriots took up arms against the British claiming “no taxation without representation” and yet, for decades they had refused to allow backcountry farmers to organize counties, and thus denied them representation in the colonial assembly. Having no political voice, these farmers found themselves denied any benefits of tax revenues: no decent roads were built linking them with the coast; no courthouses were constructed. The only colonial official they saw regularly was the tax collector! After years of petitioning, these frustrated citizens took matters into their own hands and in 1775—the same year as Lexington and Concord—North Carolina farmers armed themselves and marched on the tidewater government. This Regulator Movement was easily defeated—but the following year, as news of independence spread, the farmers armed themselves again and signed up to fight for the British. The war that ensued in the lower South was violent and brutal; colonist killed colonist, sparing neither women nor children.

So, the unanimous uprising of colonists against a tyrannical Britain proves to be a myth. In its place, a complex event, a multitude of wars for independence and liberty rather than a single one. This is a more interesting story—and one that acknowledges the way in which race and class complicated colonial society even as it complicates American society today.

But there is more to deconstruct in the myth that began this talk. Did Americans win the war on their own—did grit, determination, patriotism, and a righteous cause prove enough? Of course, the answer is no. Americans armed themselves and outfitted their troops with money borrowed from France, Holland, and Spain. The recognition of the United States by France transformed a rebellion into a war of national liberation, and the entrance of France into the war forced the English to fight on two fronts rather than one. Finally, it was the French navy that provided the vital strategic and tactical support for the American effort. Yorktown would not have played out as it did without French ships blocking Cornwallis’s retreat to safety.

The reliance on European allies does not diminish the American victory. It does add a global dimension to the struggle, and it requires us—and our students—to remember the imperial context in which the Revolution took place.

The last element of the myth is that the revolutionaries promptly created a democracy. Such a political system would have appalled all but the most radical of the revolutionary leadership. To men like John Adams, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson, democracy equated to “mob rule”; they had joined a revolution to create a republic, that is, a government based on the sovereignty of the people, whose laws were made by an elected representative legislature. This in itself was enough to mark them as radicals; but they were men of the eighteenth century, not the twenty-first. They believed that an active political voice was a privilege not a right; it belonged only to adult white males who had “a stake in society”—that stake was property. The logic of their restriction made perfect sense to them: only a citizen who had something to lose could be counted on to vote for candidates, make or administer laws, or adjudicate disputes responsibly and without destructive whim or passions. For the Founding Fathers, democracy was one of the three great threats to the survival of a republic, one of three paths to tyranny: the tyranny of the one (a king or dictator), the tyranny of the few (an oligarchy), and the tyranny of the many (democracy). It would be almost fifty years before the credo of egalitarianism developed a firm foothold in American culture, producing universal white male suffrage, the abolition movement, and a host of humanitarian reforms.

Why is this such an important element of the myth to debunk? Because it leaves the struggles, defeats, and victories of ordinary white men, of African Americans, and of women during the over two hundred years since the Constitution was written without historical context. If indeed the nation began as a democracy, how do we explain to our students the necessity of the abolition movement, a war to end to slavery, and the twentieth-century granting of the franchise to women? By accepting the revolutionary leaders and the framers of the Constitution as men of their time we can lay the groundwork for teaching the struggle to create democracy that is the engine of so much of our national history.

All nations have birth myths; the United States is not alone in this. But in most cases, as in this one, the reality of the birth of that nation is far more interesting, and indeed more powerful than the myth. As historians and teachers of American history, we have the enviable duty of presenting our students with that reality. Who could ask for a better job?

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