In Search of Reality: A Book Review Essay in the Bicentennial

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“Who shall write the history of the American Revolution? Who can write it? Who shall ever be able to write it?”
—John Adams

As the Bicentennial draws to a close, a number of Americans have no doubt grown weary of hearing about another “new” book on the American Revolution. The sheer number of such works, especially in the last few years, has been enough to numb all but the most enthusiastic students of that event. Yet, despite this outpouring of monographs, something is missing: a volume drawing this mass of detail into an interpretative narrative offering the reader an understanding of the broad parameters of the Revolution and its meaning for a generation of Americans separated from it by a gulf of two hundred years.

It is ironic that we lack, as yet, a libertarian interpretation of one of the great libertarian movements in history. And, though liberals or conservatives have hardly distinguished themselves in this regard, it is also ironic that one of the better interpretations, though now a bit dated, is that of an American Marxist.

In the absence of such a libertarian interpretation, it may perhaps be useful to take a few of the recent volumes and to discuss some of the information they provide so as to illuminate several significant questions about the Revolution. While falling far short of an interpretation, it does offer the reader some suggestions on some materials out of which to build his own.

There are three basic questions about the American Revolution: Why did it occur? How were the colonies able to gain their independence from the world’s then most-powerful state? and What were results within America of that effort to break free of the controls of Great Britain? In seeking to get beneath the rhetoric to the underlying reality, we must keep in mind that revolutions are not static events, but rather a shifting series of coalitions that may culminate in something quite different than what was imagined by those against whom the revolution began or what was contemplated by those who initiated it.

Despite its Marxist bias, Herbert Aptheker’s study remains probably the most useful one-volume interpretation of the Revolution. The book has its minor factual errors, but Aptheker has a knack for asking the right kind of questions. One of the strong points of his approach, growing perhaps out of Marxism’s development as a heresy of 19th-century liberalism, is his unwillingness to sort out causes—economic, social, intellectual, political, religious, ideological—for any purposes other than analysis.

Unlike some of the so-called consensus, or new conservative, historians Aptheker argues that the Revolution was something more than simply a “conservative colonial rebellion.” There were social tensions in American society, also a result of the colonial relationship, that extended the issue of “no taxation without representation” to long-standing quarrels within a number of colonies as well as between the colonies and England. He saw the importance of the Revolution as a movement joining the great mass of the people and the need to smash the myth that it was the work of a minority.

Aptheker appreciated the dynamic quality of the revolutionary coalition: that it consisted of various groups and points of view and that its tactics shifted as it moved from protests to the development of revolutionary institutions based upon the ideological legitimacy. His treatment of the military aspect stresses David Ramsay’s idea of a “people’s war” as a revolutionary struggle and the extent to which much of the fighting also involved the internal suppression of the Tory
In treating the diplomacy of the war, he recognized the international aspect of the struggle, the importance of British popular opinion, the significance of the antiwar movement in Great Britain, and the Revolution’s repercussions upon other parts of the empire such as Ireland and Canada. Long before it was “radical chic” to do so, Aptheker emphasized the role of blacks and women. Finally, his discussion of the social and economic changes brought about by the Revolution served to illuminate the extent to which it was, indeed, a true social revolution. It was evident that blacks, women, and Indians did not benefit from the extension of equality that accompanied it, but on the whole it represented an expansion of liberty then unknown in other parts of the world.

The why of the Revolution relates to the years prior to 1776. Perhaps Rothbard’s two volumes are a good place to begin that exploration, for taken together they cover from the beginning of the 18th century to 1775. Salutary Neglect discusses internal events in each of the 13 colonies; intercolonial developments, including money problems, the postal service, freedom of the press, religious trends, and the growth of libertarian thought; and relations with England culminating in the peace treaty of 1763 ending the French and Indian War.

If there is any omission in Rothbard’s narrative it is with respect to the larger significance of some of the social developments during this period, but it serves as an excellent basis with which to approach Rowland Berthoff and John M. Murrin’s seminal essay, “Feudalism, Communalism, and the Yeoman Freeholder: The American Revolution Considered as a Social Accident,” found in the Kurtz and Hutson volume. They suggest that while American society was too primitive in the 17th century to sustain attempts at feudalism, these claims were, with considerable success, revived in the next century. New England’s freeholders and communal land pattern resisted such “parasitism,” to use Stanislav Andreski’s term rather than the usual “neo-feudalism,” or “feudal revival,” for it involved none of the reciprocal responsibilities of real feudalism but was simply an effort to use the State to enforce vast claims. In the middle and southern colonies, however, these claims began to bring in huge sums (best thought of as taxes, not rent) for landlords prior to the Revolution and underlay much of the agrarian discontent that ranged from tenants through the yeomanry to the upper gentry. Along this line of thought, several of the essays in the Young volume offer some insights, especially Gary B. Nash’s “Social Change and the Growth of Prerevolutionary Urban Radicalism,” Edward Countryman’s “ ‘Out of the Bounds of the Law’: Northern Land Riots in the Eighteenth Century,” and Ronald Hoffman’s “The ‘Disaffected’ in the Revolutionary South.”

Rothbard’s Advance to Revolution covers in detail the dozen years leading to the fighting at Lexington and Concord. This includes such areas as the British army and the western lands, efforts to enforce mercantilism, ideology and religion—including a description of English radicalism and John Wilkes—the massive American protests against the Stamp Act, the renewed protest against the Townshend Acts, the Regulator uprisings in the Carolinas, and the final stage of the protest after the Tea Act, culminating in the Continental Congress and intercolonial organization against England. He concludes with sections on the expansion of libertarian thought, the revolt in Vermont, and “The Revolutionary Movement: Ideology and Motivation.”

Rothbard is especially high in his praise of the Knollenberg volumes, and they can, indeed, be read with profit for those who like detail carried to the extent of voluminous footnotes. A major aspect of Whig ideology was the opposition to a standing army, placing confidence instead in a people’s militia consisting of the yeoman freeholders. This was a constant theme of Whig pamphleteers such as John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon earlier in the 18th century and was echoed by the Americans. Given the rising tide of autocracy throughout Europe and the Whig protest against it in England led by men such as Wilkes, Knollenberg’s argument that a major reason for stationing troops in America was not so much for use there, as to have them ready to transfer to England, takes on a broader meaning than he discusses. Denied a standing army at home, the Crown hoped to keep it ready in America, to use against any extended protest. Is it accidental that, as E. P. Thompson has recently discussed, for a large part of a century English governmental policy had aimed at gun control, which meant taking arms from the old militia yeomanry, nationalizing the militia away from local control and doing the same with the police, with the rationale that this expanded group would protect the people? That debate is, of course, still with us, and can be traced back to ancient China, where in 124 B.C. bow and arrow control was suggested as a way to protect people. Both Machiavelli
and James Harrington, the great militia advocates upon which the Whigs drew, had warned that the decline of liberty in Rome and after had dated from the time arms and protection passed from a yeomanry militia to a volunteer, professional army. Knollenberg also offers considerable evidence, as does Rothbard, for the Revolution as a majority movement. The former also points out that, quite apart from ideology, the nonimportation agreements were a boon to American artisans, giving them a protected market. Finally, he provides several extended quotations from some of the yeoman farmers, a most important group in that predominantly agrarian society, about which we have all too little data.

It is at this point that Merrill Jensen’s *The Founding of a Nation* is quite useful, as probably the most thorough one-volume study of those 13 years before the Revolution. Most of all, Jensen offers us some insight into the shifting nature of the revolutionary coalition. Revolutions are always based upon a broad number of groups protesting the actions of the old regime, and the first protests are invariably initiated, or at least sanctioned, by sections of the elite within a society. That was certainly true of the wide-scale protest against the Stamp Act, but in the ensuing riots some more conservative elements drew back. In the protest against the Townshend Acts the organizational initiative increasingly passed to “popular” leaders in the more urban areas such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston. Eric Foner’s essay in the Young volume and his *Tom Paine & Revolutionary America* provide an excellent description of the rising demand for equality in Philadelphia, emerging as the great port in the empire behind London.

Organized riots and violence have received considerable emphasis in recent years and are touched upon in a number of the works discussed here. Two of the more specific studies are Richard Maxwell Brown’s “Violence in the American Revolution,” in the essays edited by Kurtz and Huston, and Dirk Hoerder’s “Boston Leaders and Boston Crowds, 1765-1776,” in the Young volume. Also in the latter is an extensive new study of agrarian protest, Marvin L. Michael Kay’s “The North Carolina Regulation, 1766-1776: A Class Conflict.”

The final phase of the revolutionary protest began in 1773 and gave evidence of a growing involvement by the vast agrarian sector. As Jensen shows, long before specific American leaders began to talk of independence that subject came up in anonymous letters and columns in colonial newspapers. As Young observes in the introductory and concluding sections of his volume, some historians have suggested that last protest was really a qualitative break with what came before. The yeomanry, armed militia that organized in the New England countryside and elsewhere, were less interested in fine constitutional points than in defending themselves. Jensen argues that the Continental Congress and some of its policies were efforts to do something in the area of policy before the farmers took matters into their own hands.

If there has been anything closely resembling an interpretation of the coming of the Revolution in vogue during the last decade it is the work of Bernard Bailyn. Rothbard echoes a segment of the historical profession in his praise of this “influential” work and of Bailyn’s “discovery” of the importance of the libertarian writings of the Whig pamphleteers, Trenchard and Gordon. Other historians, such as Staughton Lynd, acknowledge Bailyn’s rapid rise to prominence but question to what extent he has really increased our understanding of the Revolution.

No one denies that the writings of such Old Whig pamphleteers, the “country ideology” of the “Commonwealthman,” played an important part in the thinking of later American colonials. But one has to be a bit skeptical of the breadth of Bailyn’s reading on the Revolution when he says, in 1967, that as he studied the pamphlets and other writings of the revolutionary generation he was “surprised” as he “discovered” that, more than by the work of John Locke, the Americans had been influenced by the writings of the Whig pamphleteers such as Trenchard and by Gordon’s *Cato’s Letters* and *The Independent Whig*.

How could Bailyn be surprised at having discovered this relationship in the late 1960’s? In 1789 David Ramsay’s *History of the American Revolution* mentioned “those fashionable authors, who have defended the cause of liberty. Cato’s Letters, the
the American Revolution mentioned “those fashionable authors, who have defended the cause of liberty. Cato’s Letters, the Independent Whig, and such were common. . . .” Writing in 1816 of the era of the 1770’s John Adams observed, “Cato’s Letters and the Independent Whig, and all the writings of Trenchard and Gordon, . . . all the writings relative to the revolutions in England became fashionable reading.” In 1953, in *Seedtime of the Republic*, Clinton Rossiter noted, “No one can spend any time in the newspapers, library inventories, and pamphlets of colonial America without realizing that *Cato’s Letters* rather than Locke’s *Civil Government* was the most popular, quotable, esteemed source of political ideas in the colonial period.” In 1959, of course, Caroline Robbins wrote of *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealth*, and two years later in *The AntiFederalists* Jackson Turner Main also called attention to Trenchard and Gordon as important sources for the thinking of the American revolutionaries. Finally, in 1965, two years before Bailyn, in the introduction to *The English Libertarian Heritage*, an editing of the writings of Trenchard and Gordon, David Jacobson cited the information above with respect to Adams, Ramsay, and Rossiter.

It is certainly true that Bailyn has given added emphasis to, and expanded our knowledge of, those intellectual relationships, but that is hardly the same thing as having discovered them. Even Bailyn (p. 54) touches upon the point that the pamphleteers drew upon other thinkers such as Locke for their arguments. They were thus popular conveyors of ideas, much as implied by the fact that contemporaries Ramsay and Adams both used the word “fashionable” in describing them.

Even if Bailyn had discovered this relationship, it is hardly an “interpretation” of the origins of the Revolution, but rather one facet of that event, the knowledge of which helps us to understand the whole. How is it that one aspect of the Revolution has been elevated to the level of an interpretation, and in less than a decade has become the interpretation of the origins of the American Revolution? The answer, I think, primarily lies in large part that Bailyn’s approach to ideas and causation fit so nicely with the dominant outlook in intellectual circles, which tends to downplay social and economic conflict, that is the struggle over power, in the American past, present, and thus, future.

Thus, early in his study (p. vi) Bailyn states, “Study of the pamphlets confirmed my rather old-fashioned view that the American Revolution was above all else an ideological, constitutional, political struggle and not primarily a controversy between social groups undertaken to force changes in the organization of the society or the economy.” Does he really believe that it is possible to separate ideology (a cluster of ideas about reality and what ought to be) and political and constitutional issues from a social and economic context? Ideas do not have an existence independent of some context and subject. And, given the reality of a state and government, differences in social and economic outlook must inevitably be confronted in the political arena and often as constitutional questions if the society has institutionally developed in that direction.

But, as one might have suspected, Bailyn cannot in his own study confine himself to that arbitrary, and impossible, distinction. He tells us, for example: “‘Rights’ obviously lay at the heart of the Anglo-American controversy: the rights of Englishmen, the rights of mankind, chartered rights. But ‘rights,’ wrote Richard Bland—that least egalitarian of Revolutionary leaders—‘imply equality in the instances to which they belong and must be treated without respect to the dignity of the persons concerned in them.’” (p. 307.) Bailyn then goes on to mention that “equality before the law” was a “commonplace” argument of the time but that a “broader applicability” was “seized upon” and “developed” later. He even touches upon the debate over equality in Pennsylvania in 1776, which is brilliantly discussed by Foner in his volume on Tom Paine. What is apparent, however, is that not only was equality the major issue (one must read all of Trenchard and Gordon to see how often they return to that theme in various forms and issues), but that the political aspect of that debate resulted from differences over a concept of human nature, and over the proper social and economic relationships.

There is, of course, a vast literature stretching far back on this subject of the sociology of knowledge as it is often called, including Wilhelm Dilthey, Karl Mannheim, and W. A. Williams, to name three examples, offered simply because the last is a wellknown historian of the American past and has linked his approach sequentially with the other two. (I would apologize to the sophisticated reader for going over all this except for Bailyn’s atavistic resurrection of such methodology and the elevation by some of his work to the interpretation of the coming of the Revolution.)

It appeared that Bailyn was moving beyond such arbitrary distinctions about ideology, for in “The Central Themes of the American Revolution: An Interpretation,” in the Kurtz and Hutson volume, he cited Clifford Geertz’s work “Ideology as a Cultural System” and in those terms criticized “disembodied abstractions” or “the formal arguments of the constitutional
“Cultural System” and in those terms criticized “disembodied abstractions” of the formal arguments of the Constitutional lawyers.” But in a more recent paper, “Lines of Force in Recent Writings on the American Revolution,” he returns to the political-constitutional versus socioeconomic dichotomy that had characterized his earlier work, in a criticism of those who would emphasize those factors. This is not the place for a full-scale critique of Bailyn’s methodology, but such an analysis is long overdue. A good beginning is Joseph Ernst’s “‘Ideology’ and an Economic Interpretation of the Revolution” in the essays edited by Young.

Which brings us to how the Americans won their independence! It is evident that the American involvement in Vietnam has very much affected the whole conception of the nature of the Revolution as a military struggle, as once held by a number of historians. For those who like the “heroic-narrative” approach to history, the over 1,300 pages of Page Smith’s study devoted mostly to the fighting itself will provide many an evening’s entertainment. As a former field officer he gives us a magnificent sense of the battles and, in emphasizing so many of the contemporary accounts, not only lets the combatants speak for themselves but uncovers a great mine of data for those who lean toward greater analysis and interpretation. Though he deals primarily with the regular forces, Smith offers us more than just glimpses of “the guerrilla war at sea” and of the American militia and irregulars “swarming” around the British unit as they penetrated the countryside. Actually, the volumes contain a great deal more in the way of interpretation, and commentary upon strategy, than Smith himself may imagine is the case, and those efforts are almost always perceptive.

Dave Palmer’s *The Way of the Fox* takes the analysis of strategy as its starting point. Though he tends to link decisions to Washington more than was always the case, Palmer demonstrates the considerable degree to which the Americans made assessments of tactics and strategy a significant part of their victory and the extent to which much of that had been achieved by 1777–78. He even observes that some historians such as Richard B. Morris (and Page Smith is another) have questioned whether any formal alliance with France was necessary to win the war, and he agrees it was not. In raising that question, Palmer stumbles onto one of the most significant fissures, or fault-lines, within the American Revolutionary coalition—one that has escaped much attention, though he too fails to follow up on it in any detail. The American leadership in 1777–78 was less interested in British peace overtures than in the French alliance, because they still held out hopes for independence and empire and planned yet another assault to gain Canada. The war would drag on almost three more years before the advocates of an American empire would concede that that vision was, for the time being, beyond their grasp.

In retrospect, it becomes evident that a major turning point in the interpretation of the Revolution as a military struggle occurred with the publication of John Shy’s essay, “The American Revolution: The Military Conflict Considered as a Revolutionary War,” which first appeared in the Kurtz and Hutson volume and is now reprinted in the former’s *A People Numerous and Armed*.

The influence of Vietnam on thinking about the Revolution becomes starkly apparent when we learn that his essay grew out of an invitation in 1965 “to take a small part in a contract-research project for the Pentagon on ‘Isolating the Guerrilla’ from his civilian supporters.” Shy justified taking the modest stipend by thinking that the American Revolutionary War had few lessons for our own time.” It is impossible to believe, after reading his essay, that he would still think that is the case. Though the long arm of the Pentagon reached even to bringing in the services of an historian studying an almost two-hundred-year-old war, his study, Shy “now suspect(s) was never read by anyone of influence, perhaps not even by Sir Robert Thompson and the others who prepared a slim volume of conclusions and recommendations allegedly based on the historical case studies prepared by the rest of us.” One thing, however, is certain: the Americans in Vietnam did not enjoy any greater success in isolating the guerrilla from his civilian supporters than had the British in the American Revolution!

Again, we are confronted with the tremendous importance of the militia in the American victory in the Revolution. As Shy comments:

The British and their allies were fascinated by the rebel militia. Poorly trained and badly led, often without bayonets, seldom comprised of the deadly marksmen dear to American legend, the revolutionary militia was much more than a military joke, and perhaps the British came to understand that better than did many Americans themselves. The militia enforced law and maintained order wherever the British army did not, and its presence made the movement of smaller British formations dangerous. Washington never ceased complaining about his militia—about their
smaller British formations dangerous. Washington never ceased complaining about his militia—about their undependability, their indiscipline, their cowardice under fire—but from the British viewpoint, rebel militia was one of the most troublesome and predictable elements in a confusing war. The militia nullified every British attempt to impose royal authority short of using massive armed force. The militia regularly made British light infantry, German jager, and tory raiders pay a price, whatever the cost to the militia itself, for their constant probing, foraging, and marauding. The militia never failed in a real emergency to provide reinforcements and even reluctant draftees for the state and Continental regular forces. From the British viewpoint, the militia was the virtually inexhaustible reservoir of rebel military manpower, and it was also the sand in the gears of the pacification machine.

Despite his careful scholarship and often-brilliant insights, Shy at times lapses into amazing oversights and errors. Certainly it is a minor slip when he (note 23) errs in giving the proper title of Adrian Leiby’s *The Revolutionary War in the Hackensack Valley* (it is cited properly in another essay). But Shy tells us only “one noteworthy point: in the only intensive study made of a single community during this period (Bergen County, New Jersey), it is apparent that the local and bloody battles between rebel and loyal militia were related to prewar animosities between ethnic groups, political rivals, churches, and even neighbors. . . .” One wonders why he limits himself to such a narrow interpretation of Leiby’s work, which goes far beyond just those points to demonstrate the creation over a five-year period of an American militia that in the end was a tougher group than either the American or British regular units. The study offers an enormous amount of evidence for Shy’s major thesis about the American militia.

It is often said that it is impossible to maintain a paid, independent, parttime defense force of citizens. But there, in the midst of the Revolution, with the British across the river in New York, we see it happening! After spending much time on an encampment a mile outside his county at Washington’s command, and receiving all kinds of orders from regular army officers but no food for his men, the heroic farmer-guerrilla leader of the Dutchmen, Major John M. Goetschius, took his men home, complaining that he was paid by the county (in hard currency, one presumes, since the Dutch farmers had long since declined script), and that their first task was to protect the home area from the British again raiding the locale.

In another essay, “Hearts and Minds in the American Revolution:...” (note 1) Shy makes a terrible error about the minority myth of the American Revolution. He accepts the idea that John Adams was talking about the American Revolution instead of American opinion about the French Revolution when Adams estimated that a third of the Americans were for the Revolution, a third averse, and a third neutral. That, in itself, is nothing new, since many historians have made that error. But then Shy criticizes John Alden and R. R. Palmer, suggesting they were wrong in their exposure of the misreading of the Adams letter and indicating there are two other letters in which Adams makes one-third estimates. Here, indeed, is a new twist to the debate-the argument that the correctors of the misreading are themselves mistaken! If Shy will reread the letters, I venture to say he will agree that Alden and Palmer were correct about that one-third, one-third, one-third letter, and that, while the other two letters do mention about a third pro-British with respect to the American Revolution, there is no mention of any neutral or “lukewarm” third, but rather that twothirds or more of the Americans, and Adams gave regional and time-span breakdowns, were pro-American.

It is apparent that historians have only begun to scratch the surface of the full story of the militia in the Revolution, the military history of which has been dominated by the story of the Continental army. Several of Shy’s essays suggest the possibilities for such research. Sociologically, the regular army, apart from the officers, was composed to a considerable extent of lower-class individuals who had found no niche within the society, numbers of foreigners and immigrants, and even British deserters. Those percentages increased when each winter some New Englanders went back to their farms until spring. The militia, on the other hand, very nearly reflecting Whig theory, was comprised essentially of the yeomanry.

Here we see another of the fissures within the revolutionary coalition. Conservative Whigs like Washington wanted a standing, regular army that could fight traditional 18th-century type battles and that could be ordered to invade Canada. He could never find enough men and materials to carry out that vision. But the army, throughout the war and culminating in the Newburgh Conspiracy, was not above bringing considerable pressure on the civilian authorities.

The militia also had an impact on politics, and much of the equalitarian thrust of the Revolution came from that source. British
interrogation of American prisoners indicated, what the Americans later found in Vietnam, that men often join a cause not for explicit ideological reasons but to move up in the world. Before simply labeling that as crass opportunism, it should be recalled that opportunity and ambition are very much a part of the drive for equality, and an individual does not conveniently leave those behind but takes them with him into an emerging war crisis.

Shy’s essay, “American Strategy: Charles Lee and the Radical Alternative,” is an important reassessment of the enigmatic Lee and his awareness as a Whig about the role of the militia. As a radical Whig, Lee was more concerned with liberty and republicanism internationally, certainly within the British Empire, than the more conservative Whigs who thought in terms of one country. On the other hand he was less interested in trying to conquer Canada than with extending liberty within America. In the Whig tradition, Lee early saw the potential of a militia in a people’s war. If those ideas were never fully utilized, in the end, what the militia would or would not do set the parameters beyond which those who dreamed of empire found themselves restrained. The influence of the Whig opposition to a standing army carried over into the 1780’s, as did the politics of the militia. Richard Kohn has suggested that the militia tended to vote anti-Federalist, while the advocates of the standing army idea, veterans of the regular army, did the opposite.

The relationship of the army and the militia to internal affairs and social changes brings us to the last question: What was occurring during and after the fighting as a result of the Revolution? Several of the articles in both the Kurtz and Hutson and the Young volumes discuss not only events before the war but during and after as well, such as its impact on blacks, Indians, and women. While the revolutionary coalition agreed in its opposition to the inequalities of the British system, the more conservative thought of themselves as simply replacing those who had been at the top. A large group of Americans, of which Paine is representative, were committed to the idea of equality—in terms of the dignity of a human being, opportunity, and before the law—rather than to a new inequality. At the extreme end of the coalition were those who advocated a much broader kind of social leveling, perhaps best thought of as egalitarianism. The positions were quite evident in the debate during the summer of 1776 in Philadelphia over the radical constitution for Pennsylvania, as Foner’s study on Paine indicates. That fact ought to be kept in mind when talking about the meaning of equality in the Declaration of Independence, written in that city during the same time.

In this context, two other studies are extremely valuable: Gordon Wood’s *The Creation of the American Republic*, which offers a massive amount of material to follow that debate up to 1787, and Jensen’s *The American Revolution Within America* which, along the lines of this interpretation about the importance of equality, summarizes his scholarship in a number of books over more than three decades.

What emerges is a picture reminiscent of what had been predicted by some of the more perceptive Tories who had feared for the individual shorn of any protection and faced by a population increasingly embracing an unrestrained, majoritarian statism. Those who lean toward the Articles of Confederation because it placed sovereignty at the state rather than the national level miss the crucial point. If there are no limits to that power, but only popular legislative leaders appealing to the majority for more power, such as to print more paper money, then what is left of individual rights? There is nothing inherently virtuous about government at the state and local level to prevent that from happening. Indeed, it was Madison’s argument that increasing the number of factions at the national level might be the best way to try to prevent such egalitarianism. The effort to check one part of government with another, and the Bill of Rights, were both methods to protect the individual from the tyranny either of a tyrant or of a majority.

The end result was an equalitarian compromise, accepted by most anti-Federalists as well as most Federalists. Those egalitarians appreciated how difficult it would be to keep the thrust of either inequality or egalitarianism in check. But if the new government had temporarily slowed the latter, the creation of such a large bloc of potential power raised another that had concerned Americans such as John Adams and had been evident during the war in the vision of those men who had dreamed of American control of Florida and Canada: empire.

Which brings us to the final book, William Appleman William’s *America Confronts a Revolutionary World*. Unlike the other volumes that deal exclusively with the Revolution itself, his does not. Rather it is an effort to help Americans to look back, to get a sense of the meaning of it all, so that perhaps with a better understanding we might move toward the future together.
For those whose lives and outlook have been very much shaped by William’s work, and I am one, there is not all that much in this book that he has not said elsewhere. But that is beside the point. Americans, certainly all libertarians, need to confront William’s critique.

Like his other work, there is much here about the American empire abroad, but that is not the central message. He is much less concerned with what we have done to others, than with what we have done to ourselves. To begin with, he and Murray Rothbard would seem to agree that the Articles of Confederation perhaps offered a much better chance for liberty without empire. That may or may not be true. A large and expanding nation does not have to become an empire any more than a smaller state need more rapidly move toward majoritarianism freed of any legal restraints.

William’s second major point is that it might have been better if, instead of thinking in terms of empire, men like Lincoln and Seward had let the South go its own way in 1861. If one really believes in the idea of self-determination central to the Revolution, that was the only consistent policy to take. Certainly it was after that centralizing war that, as Alexander Stephens pointed out, the empire shifted into high gear.

It is at the point of assessing our options that I begin to take issue with Williams. Expansion need not be the same as empire. The empire has grown as the power of the State has increased, and war, as Randolph Bourne noted, has been a key factor in both. The State’s involvement in the economy has vacillated between mercantilism and what Williams has called “corporate syndicalism” and may be entering a situation of bureaucratic domination. But none of those have much to do with creating a freer market by getting the state out of economics, and limiting its power, as libertarians desire.

Twelve years ago in *The Great Evasion* Williams courageously began to explore the alternatives open to us. That in itself was more than most intellectuals ever dare. For a decade I have hoped he would expand upon his ideas for a decentralized socialism that, as I have thought about it, has become increasingly a contradiction in terms. I still hope he does so. In the meantime, libertarians, and radicals like Williams, can agree that we have to dismantle the power of the State over all our lives. That is no small challenge.

And that common goal leads us ironically back to the meaning of the American Revolution. The American revolutionaries were simultaneously dismantling the power of a State, exercising self-determination, expanding equality of opportunity and before the law, and undercutting inequality and egalitarianism, both of which need the State to survive. If we are to regain our liberty, we shall need to study carefully that Revolution of our forefathers, for there is no surer roadmap to both the promise and the pitfalls.

References


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Judith Bennett’s Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women’s Work in a Changing World, 1300-1600, investigates how women used to brew and sell the majority of ale drunk in England. Historically, ale and beer (not milk, wine, or water) were important elements of the English diet. If you find it useful to include comparisons to other books, keep them brief so that the book under review remains in the spotlight. Avoid excessive quotation and give a specific page reference in parentheses when you do quote. Remember that you can state many of the author’s points in your own words. Finally, e-books are easier to purchase and with the facility of online purchase, anyone gets an ebook whenever s/he wants. It was environment-friendly as it requires no papers, ink and saves the trees that would have been used to produce papers. On the other hand, many excellent books have been published only on paper based. Thus, if you would like to read them on your mobile devices, unfortunately, you could not avail them. In addition, many old books are not published any longer even paper based. You can find them only in the library. For example, in my University years, I had to read a boo...

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