

The Central Themes of the American Revolution: An Interpretation

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The American Revolution not only created the American political nation but molded permanent characteristics of the culture that would develop within it. The Revolution is an event, consequently, whose meaning cannot be confined to the past. Whether we recognize it or not, the sense we make of the history of our national origins helps to define for us, as it has for generations before us, the values, purposes, and acceptable characteristics of our political institutions and cultural life.

To allow, therefore, the bicentennial celebration to degenerate into the hucksterism and confusion that threaten to overwhelm it would be a national humiliation. For when all the medallions have been struck, the pageantry performed, the commercial gimmicks exploited, and the market-tested historical hackwork published, there still remain the questions of what, in the context of the knowledge now available, the event was all about and what bearing it should have on our lives--questions that will surely be answered in some way or other, but not necessarily by those who are informed enough to distinguish fantasy from reality, partisan arguments from historical fact. A great many books have been published on the Revolution in the past fifty years, and a veritable library of documents has been unearthed. But none of this spontaneously generates understanding. What--that makes any difference--does this mass of information tell us that an earlier generation did not know? Where does our knowledge fall away, and myth and wish fulfillment take over? Can we at least identify some of the misunderstandings and distorting presumptions that beset this segment of American history?

If the essays in this book do no more than clarify the boundaries of our knowledge and isolate some of the more paralyzing tangles in our thinking, they will justify themselves as a contribution to the bicentennial events. I trust they will do much more. My own aim in what follows is simply to state in the most general terms my personal understanding of the major themes of the history of the Revolution and to clear up, if I can, confusions that have arisen since these themes were first suggested.

I

To grasp the full importance of the central theme that emerges from the recent writings one must step back a full generation and note the striking incoherence that lay at the heart of the imposing interpretation, or bundle of interpretations, that then prevailed. On the one hand there was a general agreement on the importance of what was called "the natural rights philosophy," perhaps most memorably summarized in Carl Becker's chapter of that title in his book *The Declaration of Independence*, and of the force of British constitutional ideas, described by Charles H. McIlwain and Randolph G. Adams. Almost all writers who attempted general assessments of the origins and meaning of the Revolution found it necessary somewhere in their accounts to attribute an elemental power to these abstract ideas of Locke and the great Continental reformers and to the principles of British constitutionalism that embodied the precepts of natural law. Somehow, through a process that was never explained, the formal legal precedents, some of them extraordinarily abstruse, and the abstractions propounded in the texts of the philosophes were transformed into political and psychological imperatives when certain actions were taken by the English government, and the result was resistance and revolution. The first state governments were presumably constructed in conformity with these beliefs and principles, though in the only work then available that attempted to analyze those new constitutions, Allan Nevins's *The American States During and After the Revolution, 1775-1789* (1924), it was impossible to discover the precise relationship between these overarching ideas and the constitutions that were actually written. In some sense too the Federal Constitution embodied these principles and beliefs, though the best descriptions then available of what had actually happened failed to establish with any precision the connections between these ideas and the decisions reached by the Convention.

There were some writers who were concerned with the problem of how ideas and beliefs relate to what men do, but their presumptions were such that, instead of solving the problem realistically, in the end they simply destroyed it, and with it the possibility of understanding why there was a Revolution. For these writers the primary forces at work were social and economic: they really determined the outcome of events, though adroit politicians had used the famous ideas of the time to agitate an otherwise inert public opinion. Thus in 1923 Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., by then the target of McIlwain's sharp criticism, criticized a book of C. H. Van Tyne's on the causes of the Revolution by deploring his lack of emphasis on the truly important things--trade, currency, the impact of new commercial regulations--and above all his lack of recognition of the role of propaganda in the Revolutionary movement. By propaganda, Schlesinger explained, he meant not "the constitutional grievances recited in state papers and the more serious pamphlets"; that sort of thing, he said, should only be touched on "lightly," for, as he had already explained,

"the popular view of the Revolution as a great forensic controversy over abstract governmental rights will not bear close scrutiny." It was a mistake to believe "that pamphlets were more potent in shaping colonial opinion than the newspapers." Pamphlets contained sustained arguments, appeals to reason, logic, principles, and intellectual coherence, while what really mattered were "the appeals to passion and prejudice to be found in broadsides, bits of popular doggerel, patriotic songs, caricatures, newspapers, slogans, emblems, etc. 1

Now what is centrally important in this is not the surface contradiction between, on the one hand, a belief in the force of abstruse points of constitutional law and of natural-rights principles and, on the other, the systematic exclusion of ideas and beliefs from an effective role in affairs except as propagandistic weapons. More important are the differing presumptions upon which the two viewpoints rested. The students of constitutional law and Enlightenment ideas assumed that the force of beliefs and ideas is somehow related to their cogency, to the quality of the argumentation that supported them, or to the universality of their appeal. The other writers made the quite opposite assumption that, because they could not see how abstract ideas, reason, belief, indeed the whole realm of intellection and conviction, could constitute motives, such elements could not in themselves influence events at all and therefore in themselves could explain nothing about what actually happened and why. Ultimately they assumed, though they did not discuss the point, that there is only self-interest, and self-interest in turn is shaped by the social and economic forces that determine the external character of people's lives.

All of this--which first became clear in a few key books that appeared almost simultaneously fifty years ago 2 -- is worth recalling because it provides the proper perspective within which to understand the central themes of recent writings on the origins and meaning of the Revolution. For we have come to understand the errors of both of these approaches of the 1920s, which have shaped all subsequent writing on the subject until our own time, and thereby found the way forward, I believe, to a more satisfactory view of the Revolution and of its bearing on the subsequent course of American history.

We know now that Enlightenment ideas, while they form the deep background and give a general coloration to the liberal beliefs of the time, were not the ideas that directly shaped Americans' responses to particular events or guided the specific reforms they undertook, nor were they perceived in the American colonies in quite the same way they were perceived elsewhere. And we know too that the abstruse points of constitutional law that so engaged the mind of John Adams and the other high-level polemicists did not determine the outcome one way or another; they did not in themselves compel allegiance to the American cause or lead people to rebel against the constituted authorities. In the foreground of people's minds was a whole world of more immediate, more commonplace, and more compelling ideas, and they related to behavior in a way the writers of the twenties could not have conceived.

These ideas, compelling because they were part of an elaborate map of social reality, part of a pattern that made life comprehensible, have a long derivation, and though drawn indirectly from the whole of European political culture, they are directly the products of a series of creative moments in British political and cultural life. The starting point was the struggle between king and Commons in the early seventeenth century, which secured the rule of law and the principle of the consent of the governed expressed through representative institutions as necessities for legitimate governance. But though these principles remained fundamental in the pattern of British liberal thought and though the seventeenth-century ideas of consent and of parliamentary privilege were drawn on repeatedly in the Eighteenth century by colonial assemblies seeking the legislative autonomy of the House of Commons, it is wrong to think of these early seventeenth-century ideas as the effective doctrines of eighteenth century American politics or of the American Revolution. These ideas were overlaid with an array of new conceptions and concerns later in the seventeenth century, in the score of years surrounding the Exclusion Crisis, 1679 to 1681, that gave them much of what to the eighteenth century was their modern tone and that transformed them, in the context of the 1770s, into precepts of rebellion. These few years of desperate struggle over the effort to exclude the future James II from the succession to the throne saw not merely the drafting of Locke's two treatises on government, which to later generations would appear to summarize the whole of English liberal thought before Bentham and Mill, but also the forging of clusters of much more specific ideas on the nature of political freedom and on its social preconditions, illustrated by a fresh view of English history proving the ancient lineage of the liberal state and by a vivid portrayal of the destructive political effect of corruption. And everywhere in this late seventeenth century world of ideas there was fear -- fear that a free condition of life was a precarious thing, ever beset by power-hungry, corrupt enemies who would destroy it.

Almost -- but not quite -- all of the ideas and beliefs that shaped the American Revolutionary mind can be found in the voluminous writings of the Exclusion Crisis and in the literature of the Glorious Revolution that in effect brought that upheaval to a peaceful conclusion. There remains still another decisive moment in the shaping of the Revolutionary mind. The terms of settlement of the Glorious Revolution, based on a broad consensus in English public life, forced the extremists of left and right to the margins of English politics, where they remained, after the

rocketing instability of the reigns of William III and Anne, to form the shrill and articulate opposition to the government of that fantastically successful political operator, Robert Walpole. It was here, in the writings of the early eighteenth-century opposition of both left and right - the left carrying forward with embellishments most of the radical notions of the seventeenth century, the right nourishing a nostalgia for a half-mythical rural world of stable hierarchical relations, but the two converging from these opposite poles to blast the bloated Leviathan of government they saw developing before them -- it was in this populist cry against what appeared to be a swelling financial-governmental complex fat with corruption, complaisant and power-engrossing -- in this shrill alarm of alienated intellectuals, outraged moralists, and frustrated politicians, that English liberal thought took on the forms that would most specifically determine the outbreak and character of the American Revolution and that thereafter in vital respects would shape the course of American history.

These notions, ultimately derived, as I have suggested, from the early seventeenth century, fundamentally redeveloped in the Exclusion Crisis, but now in the early eighteenth century given definitive shape by the political opposition, had great power; they carried great conviction; and they fitted neatly the peculiar circumstances of American political life. Bearing into the new, modern age of Walpole the traditional anti-statist convictions of seventeenth-century liberalism, the opposition's program was yet distinct in its insistence that all power -- royal or plebiscitarian, autocratic or democratic -- was evil: necessary, no doubt, for ordered life, but evil nevertheless in the threat it would always pose to the progress of liberty. The opposition's claims were distinct too in their insistence that the primary wielders of power must be kept apart, sealed off from collusive contact with each other in institutions defined by the principles of "mixed" government. And they were distinct, finally, in their heightened emphasis on the dangers of corruption -- the corruption of massed wealth, the corruption of luxury, the corruption of indolence and moral obtuseness, all of which threatened to destroy the free British constitution.

To Americans in distant provinces, faced with local governments that seemed at times to violate the basic precepts of political freedom; ultimately governed not by visible human beings they could acknowledge as natural leaders but by an unseen, capricious, unmanageable, but fortunately quite benignly neglectful sovereign; and bred into an intensely Protestant culture whose deep-lying moralism was repeatedly stirred by waves of evangelical fervor -- to such people, all of this made the most profound kind of sense, and it shaped the colonists' political awareness in a hundred different ways. Repeatedly through the middle years of the eighteenth century factional leaders responded to local crises by invoking these ideas -- not testing their limits or probing their implications, not even applying them systematically, and with little sense that they might serve one segment of political society more than another, but drawing on them almost casually, and repeatedly, when it seemed appropriate in attacking the power of the state. Then, in the 1760s and 1770s, when the colonists believed themselves faced, not as heretofore with local threats generated by the ambitions of inherently unstable factions, but with an organized pan-Atlantic effort of highly placed autocrats to profit by reducing the free way of life the colonists had known -- a "design" set on foot by manipulators of the colossus "at home" -- they were led by the force of these ideas, now integrated as they had not been before and powerfully reinforced by Continental writings on the laws of nature and of nations and by the latest formulations of the English radicals, into resistance and revolution.

The noble ideas of the Enlightenment and the abstracted details of constitutional law were everywhere present in the responses of the colonists, but they do not form the immediate, instrumental grasp of their minds. They do not explain the triggering of the insurrection. That is explicable only in terms of that elaborate pattern of middle-level beliefs and ideas that formed for these colonial Britishers the map of social and political reality -- a map, originally formed within early seventeenth-century English libertarianism, fundamentally reshaped during and just after the Exclusion Crisis, modernized for the eighteenth century by the political opposition, the alienated intelligentsia, and the vigilant moralists of Walpole's time, and diffused by an intricate process of cultural dissemination throughout the political culture of the American colonies.

PAY SPECIAL ATTENTION TO THE SECTION -- BEGIN

But how, precisely, did these notions relate to political behavior? How facile and how unreal were our predecessors' unexamined assumptions either, on the one hand, that formal discourse and articulated belief bear directly on political processes or, on the other hand, that ideas are only epiphenomenal, superstructural, not the shapers of events but their rationalizations, and effectual only when wielded by propagandists whose professions are different from their true intent and whose aim is to manipulate the minds and so direct the actions of ignorant and suggestible masses. Both views are wrong, both lead to hopeless confusion in interpreting an event like the Revolution. But both are resolvable into the concept of "ideology," which draws formal discourse into those "maps of problematic social reality," those shifting patterns of values, attitudes, hopes, fears, and opinions through which people perceive the world and by which they are led to impose themselves upon it. Formal discourse--the contents of the innumerable essays, sermons, pamphlets, and state papers of the Revolutionary period--is indeed powerful in

politics and profoundly significant as historical documentation, but not because in some simple sense it constitutes motives or is a form of weaponry. Formal discourse becomes politically powerful when it becomes ideology: when it articulates and fuses into effective formulations opinions and attitudes that are otherwise too scattered and vague to be acted upon; when it mobilizes a general mood, "a set of disconnected, unrealized private emotions," into "a public possession, a social fact"; when it crystallizes otherwise inchoate social and political discontent and thereby shapes what is otherwise instinctive and directs it to attainable goals; when it clarifies, symbolizes, and elevates to structured consciousness the mingled urges that stir within us. ³ But its power is not autonomous. It can only formulate, reshape, and direct forward moods, attitudes, ideas, and aspirations that in some form, however crude or incomplete, already exist.

It is in these terms that ideas--not the disembodied abstractions of the philosophes or the formal arguments of the constitutional lawyers, but the complex and integrated set of values, beliefs, attitudes, and responses that had evolved through a century and a half of Anglo-American history and that achieved a new level of coherence and force in the polemics that followed the Stamp Act--may be understood to have lain at the heart of the Revolutionary outbreak and to have shaped its outcome and consequences. The colonists--habituated to respond vigorously to acts of arbitrary rule; convinced that the existence of liberty was precarious even in the loosely governed provinces of the British-American world and ever beset by its enemies; more uncertain than ever of what the intricate shufflings in the distant corridors of power in England portended; and ever fearful that England's growing corruption would destroy its capacity to resist the aggressions of ruthless power seekers--saw behind the actions of the English ministry that threw off the delicate balance of Anglo-American politics and that threatened to impose arbitrary power in America not merely misgovernment and not merely insensitivity to the reality of life in the British overseas provinces but a deliberate design to destroy the constitutional safeguards of liberty, which only concerted resistance--violent resistance if necessary--could effectively oppose. Within the ideological context of the time and in communities whose overall political structure was fragile and prone to conflict and breakdown and in which direct, "mob" action against obnoxious authorities was familiar, forceful resistance became for many psychologically imperative, as did the generation-long effort that followed to build still stronger bastions against the inevitable aggressions of power.

The outbreak of the Revolution was not the result of social discontent, or of economic disturbances, or of rising misery, or of those mysterious social strains that seem to beguile the imaginations of historians straining to find peculiar predispositions to upheaval. Nor was there a transformation of mob behavior or of the lives of the "inarticulate" in the preRevolutionary years that accounts for the disruption of Anglo-American politics. The rebellion took place in a basically prosperous if temporarily disordered economy and in communities whose effective social distances (despite the successful revival of a few commercialized "feudal" proprietorships) remained narrow enough and whose mobility, however marginally it may have slowed from earlier days, was still high enough to absorb most group discontents. Nor was it the consequence simply of the maturing of the economy and the desires of American businessmen for greater economic autonomy, or of the inevitable growth of infant institutions and communities to the point where challenges to the parental authority became inescapable: neither economies nor institutions nor communities are doomed to grow through phases of oedipal conflict. There was good sense in the expectation occasionally heard in the eighteenth century that American institutions in a century's time would gradually grow apart from England's as they matured, peacefully attenuating until the connection became mere friendly cooperation. American resistance in the 1760s and 1770s was a response to acts of power deemed arbitrary, degrading, and uncontrollable--a response, in itself objectively reasonable, that was inflamed to the point of explosion by ideological currents generating fears everywhere in America that irresponsible and self-seeking adventurers--what the twentieth century would call political gangsters--had gained the power of the English government and were turning first, for reasons that were variously explained, to that Rhineland of their aggressions, the colonies.

Inflamed sensibilities--exaggerated distrust and fear--surrounded the hard core of the Anglo-American conflict and gave it distinctive shape. These perceptions and anxieties made accommodation at first difficult and then impossible. By 1773 there was a widespread suspicion, primarily in New England but elsewhere as well, that the source of the conflict could be traced to actions taken by Gov. Thomas Hutchinson of Massachusetts and a few of his colleagues in office. This long-respected scion of four generations of enterprising New England leaders, it was believed, had deliberately misinformed the British ministry on the intentions and opinions of the colonists in order to advance his personal interests with the venal gang in Whitehall. Conversely, Hutchinson himself and most of the ministry believed that a clique of ruthless colonial demagogues headquartered in Boston was deliberately misinforming the American populace on the ministry's intentions in order to advance their own interests. Perhaps only Benjamin Franklin, who loved England, though somewhat despairingly, and who yet knew himself to be the embodiment to all the world of the hopes and possibilities of America, fully understood not only the substantive issues on both sides of the controversy but also the haze of misunderstandings that surrounded it. Believing--since he

was no ideologue himself--that given sufficient time America's natural wealth and power would make its claims to British rights irresistible, he attempted, in one of the most revealing and consequential episodes of the early 1770s, to head off the approaching struggle by manipulating popular fears for what he took to be the general good. By arranging for the circulation of certain of Hutchinson's private letters of the late 1760s, he publicly documented the general suspicions of the governor's "deliberate misrepresentations" and, in thus pinning the blame for the conflict on Hutchinson, sought to exonerate the ministry and gain time for fresh approaches to reconciliation. But though Franklin's calculations were in this as in everything careful and sharp, he failed, in his happy expatriation in England, to gauge correctly the intensity of the political and moral passions of the majority of his countrymen. The publication of Hutchinson's letters, bound, in the circumstance, to be considered incriminating, far from easing the conflict, in fact intensified it, for the "revelation" gave visible, human, and dramatic form to what previously had only been general, vague, and disputable surmises; it "proved" to an outraged public that purpose, not ignorance, neglect, or miscalculation, lay behind the actions of the British government and that reconciliation was therefore unlikely. Only Franklin, characteristically, landed on his feet: while the publication of Hutchinson's letters destroyed the Massachusetts governor and intensified the growing conflict, it helped transform the hitherto ambiguous Pennsylvanian into a popular Revolutionary hero.

All of which, as an explanation of the primary cause of the Revolution, is no more "intellectual" or "idealist" or "neowhig" than locating the origins of World War II in the fear and hatred of Nazism. It does not minimize the longterm background of the conflict but presumes it; it does not drain the Revolution of its internal social struggles, its sectional divisions, and its violence; it does not minimize the social and political changes that the Revolution created; it does not deny --indeed it alone explains--the upsurge of reformist zeal that is so central a part of the Revolution; nor does it rob the military struggle of its importance. It merely explains why at a particular time the colonists rebelled and establishes the point of departure for the constructive efforts that followed.

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II

Such, in my view at least, is the central theme of the origins of the Revolution. But this is, of course, only a beginning of an understanding of the meaning of the Revolution as a whole and of its role in shaping the course of American history. Yet seeing the origins of the Revolution this way makes it possible to approach that ultimate stage of maturity in historical interpretation where partisanship is left behind, where the historian can find an equal humanity in all the participants, the winners and the losers, where he can embrace the whole of the event, see it from all sides, mark out the latent limitations within which all the actors were obliged to act, and trace the influence of the event until it fades indistinguishably into the flow of history that succeeds it. It makes it possible, I believe, to understand the loyalists.

For a century and a half after the Revolution the loyalists' story was the subject of the fiercest and blindest partisanship that can be found anywhere in American historiography. The earliest patriotic chroniclers of the Revolution saw the loyalists as the worst of all enemies: traitors, betrayers of their own people and homeland. Just as they portrayed the Founding Fathers as flawless paragons commanding the almost universal allegiance of the population, so they saw the loyalists--those they could not simply ignore--as craven sycophants of a vicious oligarchy, parasites of the worst corruptions of the ancien régime, and they simply blasted them into oblivion. Conversely, Tory historians in England, followed in a modified way in our own time by certain of the more scholarly "imperialist" historians, saw the loyalists much as the loyalists saw themselves, as sensible embodiments of law and order and of a benign rule against which a deluded and hysterical mass, led by demagogues, threw themselves in a frenzy. In very recent years, it is true, the polemics have subsided, and the writing on the loyalists is more informative than it has ever been before, but this more objective writing is largely descriptive, often enumerative if not quantitative in its approach, and it fails to grasp the central interpretative problem that is posed by the lives of the loyalists. For if we are now able to see the peculiar patterns of fears, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and aspirations that underlay the Revolutionary movement, we have not yet made clear why any sensible and well-informed person could possibly have opposed the Revolution. And until that is done, until, that is, we also look deliberately from the point of view of the losers at what only later would appear to have been the progressive development, we will not understand what that development was all about; we will not understand the human reality against which the victors struggled, and hence we will not have the story whole or entirely comprehensible.

There are no obvious external characteristics of the loyalist group, aside from the natural fact that it contained many crown officeholders: a multitude of individual circumstances shaped the decisions that were made to remain loyal to England. Nor are the inner characteristics of this large group obvious. The loyalists were neither especially corrupt nor especially stupid nor especially closed to the possibilities of the future. Many of them, aside from the

one point in their politics, are indistinguishable from the many obscure "patriots" whose involvement with events was superficial and who simply drifted marginally one way instead of the other in response to immediate pressures. Yet within the loyalist group as a whole, and particularly within its leadership, there appears to have been an essential if rather elusive characteristic, or set of characteristics, that is distinctive and that, properly understood, illuminates the affirmative side of the Revolutionary movement that the loyalists resisted at such great cost. Committed to the moral as well as the political integrity of the Anglo-American system as it existed, the loyalists were insensitive to the moral basis of the protests that arose against it. Habituated for the most part to seek gains through an intricate and closely calibrated world of patronage and status, they did not respond to the aroused moral passion and the meliorative, optimistic, and idealist impulses that gripped the Revolutionaries' minds and that led them to condemn as corrupt and oppressive the whole system by which their world was governed. They did not sense the constrictions of the existing order, often because they lived so deeply within it, or the frustration it engendered in those who failed to gain the privileges it could bestow. They could find only persistent irrationality in the arguments of the discontented and hence wrote off all of their efforts as politically pathological. And in a limited sense they were right. For the Revolutionary leaders, in their effort somehow to control a world whose political logic was a product of the system it explained, groped for conceptions that could not exist within the received framework of political ideas. They drew on convictions that ran deeper than logic and mobilized sources of political and social energy that burst the boundaries of received political and social wisdom. All of this is reflected in the loyalists' hopeless efforts to come to terms with the developing Revolution. They were outplayed, overtaken, by-passed.

Loyal officials who had risen within the narrow and complex passages of the old political system could not govern a morally aroused populace; they could not assimilate these new forces into the old world they knew so well. Thus Thomas Hutchinson, in refusing to approve a bill of 1771 prohibiting the slave trade in Massachusetts, said he could not believe that the motives of the supporters of the bill were what they said they were, namely, "a scruple . . . of the lawfulness in a merely moral respect of so great a restraint of liberty"; after all, he wrote, technically in the eyes of Massachusetts law slaves were no worse off than servants bound "for a term of years exceeding the ordinary term of human life": they could not lawfully be executed by their masters, and it was even conceivable--though he admitted the point had never been determined--that they might own property. 4

Failing to carry the new, ideologically explosive politics with them by arguments and tactics that were familiar to them, failing often even to comprehend the nature of the forces that opposed them, and lacking both the means and the desire to control the turbulent communities by brute power, the loyalist leaders were forced to become devious simply to survive. Inevitably they appeared hypocritical, ultimately conspiratorial, though in fact most of them were neither. As the pressure mounted, their responses narrowed. Their ideas became progressively more rigid, their imagination more limited, until in the end they could only plead for civil order as an absolute end in itself, which not only ignored the sources of the conflict but appeared unavoidably to be self-serving. There is no better testimony to the newness of the forces that were shaping the Revolutionary movement than the failure of the loyalists to control them.

III

Some such understanding of the loyalists must have a place in a general history of the Revolution consistent with what we now know of its origins. A further and perhaps more difficult challenge lies in interpreting within the same general theme the years that followed Independence and that culminate in the permanent construction of the national government. For the developments of those years are of a different order from those of the years that preceded Independence. The central and unifying themes shift; the approach that allowed one to understand the main events of the earlier years no longer serves for the later: a different kind of analysis and a different focus of attention are required.

The dominant fact of the earlier years had been the intensification of the ideological passions first ignited by the Stamp Act crisis and their final bursting into open insurrection. Thereafter the ideas, fears, and hopes that had first become decisive in the attacks on the British government were turned to positive uses in the framing of the first state constitutions, in the transforming of regressive social institutions that had been casually accepted in the ancien régime, and in directing Americans' efforts to new goals altogether: in education, in law, in religion, and in the distribution of land. But the Revolutionary spirit was changing as the original élan slowly filtered through the ordinary activities of life. The initial outburst, in which in some degree the majority of the colonists shared, could not be sustained, nor could the agreement on essentials that had brought together quite disparate groups. Passions cooled as ordinary life reasserted itself and cultural, sectional, and social differences, some of them newly created by the war and the displacement of the loyalists, became important. In the 1780s and 1790s the essential themes of American history became immensely more complicated than they had been in the years before 1776, and they

cannot be understood in essentially ideological terms. The creation of the American republic in the period between 1776 and the end of Washington's administration is not a story primarily of developments in the inner lives of people's minds, beliefs, and sensibilities, nor is it simply the working out of the ideas and aims that had earlier accounted for the break with England. It is the product of a complicated interplay between the maturing of Revolutionary ideas and ideals and the involvements of everyday life--in politics, in business, and in the whole range of social activities.

A single characteristic of this later Revolutionary period predominates. Despite depressions, doubts, and fears for the future and despite the universal easing of ideological fervor, the general mood remained high through all of these years. There was a freshness and boldness in the tone of the eighties, a continuing belief that the world was still open, that young, energetic, daring, hopeful, imaginative men had taken charge and were drawing their power directly from the soil of the society they ruled and not from a distant, capricious, unmanageable sovereign. It was not simply that new forms of government were being devised. A new civilization, it was felt, a civilization whose origins could now be seen to have lain in the earliest years of settlement, was being created, free from the weight of the past, free from the corruption and inflexibility of the tangled old-regime whose toils had so encumbered Americans in the late colonial period. Some sense of this had existed before Independence, but unevenly, polemically, and without a generalized sanction. On a few rare occasions writers and preachers like Jonathan Mayhew had sketched a vision of future American grandeur; a sense of American separateness had begun to be felt and expressed and had been reinforced now and then from abroad; and in Congregational circles the sense of special mission that had gripped the minds of the Puritan settlers had in modified form persisted. But these had been scattered responses and expressions, constrained within the limits of a provincial culture that, like Scotland's, had centered in the distant and ancient complexity of London.

If the colonists in the 1760s had been a "youthful" people, their mood had surely belied it. Nothing so clearly documents the transforming effect of the Revolution as the elevation of spirit, the sense of enterprise and experimentation, that suddenly emerged with Independence and that may be found in every sphere of life in the earliest years of the new Republic. This expectant stretching and spirited, hopeful striving can be found in all the activities of men: in the brilliantly imaginative provisions made for opening up new lands in the West and for settling new governments within them--provisions that erased in one bold, cleansing stroke the whole sordid, corrupt, and ineffective mess that the English government had made of that problem; in the surge of people westward, hopefully risking security for new and quite unknown possibilities; in the vast outburst of commercial enterprise, spilling out into the once-restricted markets of the West Indies and Spanish America, out to the continent of Europe, to Alaska, to Russia, and even to China; in experimental finance and path-breaking forms of banking; in bold if not always successful diplomacy; and above all in continuing experiments in government ranging from the recasting of public institutions and of the forms for recruiting leaders to the separation of church and state, federal relations among states, and a new concept of citizenship. Far from the 1780s being a conservative or "counterrevolutionary" period that culminated in a Thermidor at Philadelphia and far from that decade being dominated by self-searching despair for the future of republican hopes, those years witnessed a vast release of American energies that swept forward into every corner of life. But in no simple way. The pattern is a complex one, in which ideological impulses move through the ordinary affairs of life, shape them, and are themselves reshaped by the pressures they meet.

In no area were these pressures more complex than in social organization. The background had been notably complex. For a century and a half conditions of life in these frontier communities had weakened the whole range of social reinforcements of traditional order; yet, with complicated variations, a quasi-traditional order had existed, as had traditional beliefs and expectations, most forcefully the sense that a proper social organization was hierarchical, with more or less clearly articulated levels of superiority and inferiority, respected both in principle and practice. The Revolution made changes in all of this, but not gross changes and not even immediately visible changes. There was no "leveling" of the social order and no outright destruction of familiar social institutions. "Democracy," in its modern form, was not created, in fact or theory, though the essential groundwork was laid. While the war, like so many wars before and since, transformed the economy and sped up mobility in significant ways, and while the displacement of the loyalists and the confiscation of much of their property created room at the top and sources of profit that had not existed before, no sweeping egalitarianism--in status, in wealth, or in power--was imposed. Newcomers to position and influence arrived more quickly and rose higher than they could have done earlier, but social distances remained much as before: narrow perhaps and rather easily bridgeable by European standards, but in local terms highly visible and palpably restrictive. And while the creation of new governments multiplied the available public offices and new men were everywhere seen in seats of power, and while the people as a whole were constitutionally involved in the processes of government as never before, sociopolitical elites whose origins went back a century persisted, apparently unaffected, in local communities, north and south.

And yet--everything was changing. The pressure of culturally sanctioned expectations had shifted to emphasize the status of the individual as against the community and the integrity of his rights as against those of the state. The quasitraditional society of the colonial period was not immediately destroyed, but the erosions that circumstance had made were not only multiplied, deepened, and broadened but ideologically reinforced as they had never been before. The effect upon a released society, developing economically, demographically, and institutionally at a fantastic rate, was transforming. The process of America's swift emergence as a distinctive society in the early nineteenth century we have scarcely begun to understand, but it is at least clear that the society Tocqueville found in America was the product, not of a sudden brutal Revolutionary wrench, but of the gradually evolving interplay between a libertarian ideology and the circumstances of life in a wildly expanding frontier world.

The Convention at Philadelphia was a product of the same subtle interplay. The document it produced was neither a repudiation of '76, nor an instrument devised to protect aristocracies threatened in the states, nor the mark of a slaveholders' plot. It is a second-generation expression of the original ideological impulses of the Revolution applied to the everyday, practical problems of the 1780s. Young men, almost none of whom had played a major role in the struggle that had led to Independence, began with--took for granted--what their predecessors had finally achieved and proceeded far beyond them, in circumstances that no one had foreseen. The old ideas and attitudes are there, but now they are diffused, changed, viewed from different angles, and applied to new problems. The fear of power is there, but so too is the inescapable need to create a government potentially more powerful than any yet known--a government complete with its own independent treasury based on the right to tax, a government equipped with all the apparatus of coercion that had proved so fearful a bane to the subjects of despotic regimes. New safeguards must be built; new possibilities explored in the balance of freedom and power. Consent of the governed and the idea of the actual representation of people are there as fundamental principles of government, but so too is the belief that the subjects of this government were not only people but states as well, whose sovereignty must both be preserved and dissolved in this newer and greater creation. The very concept of sovereignty must therefore be probed, and provision now deliberately made for just that inconceivable monster in politics--imperium in imperio, states within a state--that right-minded, liberal men had refused to consider barely a decade before. New, awkward, strange political, economic, and constitutional urgencies are everywhere there, impelling forward to an unknown terrain minds formed in an earlier world. The results were daring, too daring and too threatening for some, but they gave workable and hopeful solutions to inescapable problems, solutions devised by young minds using old notions in new experimental ways. In this sense the Constitution of 1787 was the prototypical creation of the age: hopeful, boldly experimental, realistic, and faithful to the urges that had led to Revolution.

IV

Such a view of the central themes of the Revolution--neither whig nor tory, idealist nor materialist, liberal nor conservative: a view that might best perhaps be called anthropological--helps one go beyond the immediate events of the Revolution itself and assess the most general meaning of the event in the broad sweep of eighteenth-century history and to isolate its impact on the overall course of American history.

There had been nothing inevitable in the outbreak of revolution. Deep flows of potentially revolutionary beliefs and apprehensions had moved through the delicate structure of mideighteenth-century American politics--as they had through the more deeply stable politics of England--but there had been no necessity for them to break through the channels of civility; the "dysfunctions" that may have existed could have continued to function "dysfunctionally" for ages untold. Even when an explosion was generally expected, some knew ways to avoid it. Burke knew the way; so too, at least in the earlier years of crisis, did the preeminent victim of the Revolution, Thomas Hutchinson. But they, and others like them, lacked the power, and those who had the power lacked the wisdom and the concern to avoid the confrontation. What was inevitable--what no one could have restrained--was America's emergence into the modern world as a liberal, more or less democratic, and capitalist society. That would have happened in any case. But that this emergence took place as it did--that it was impelled forward by a peculiar ideological explosion generated within a society less traditional than any then known--this crucial fact has colored the whole of our subsequent history, and not only our own, but the world's.

How different elsewhere the process of modernization has been, and how important the differences are! In France too political modernization came through an eighteenth-century revolution, but there the prevailing ideas were radically egalitarian, directed to the destruction of a resistant, highly stratified social order dominated by a deeply entrenched, parasitic nobility and capable of implementation only through a powerful, revolutionary state. The French Revolution created a new state system more elaborate and more effective than the one it had overthrown, a state justified both by the dominant theories of revolution and by the undoubted fact that only such a power could

dislodge the privileged world of the French ancien régime. In Germany two generations later an attempted liberal revolution failed altogether: its leaders could not break through the corporatist barriers that protected the urban workers or animate a sunken, conservative peasantry by appeals to laissez-faire. Traditionalism thereafter deepened in Germany and produced in the end a dynamic industrial regime politically so paternalistic and socially so regressive that it constituted a threat to liberalism everywhere.

But it is the contrast with England that is ultimately most revealing. For England's was the parent political culture, and there too, as in America, well before the end of the eighteenth century, social and economic changes had eroded the traditional order and laid the groundwork for a modern liberal state. But the state that in fact resulted in nineteenth-century England was profoundly different from the American state; the two societies differed as much in politics as in social organization. The constitutional starting point had been the same: a balance of socioconstitutional forces in a theoretically "mixed" monarchical state. But England's political modernization, which eliminated the crown and the House of Lords as effective political forces and elevated a slowly democratized and increasingly representative House of Commons to absolute power, moved gradually, through decades of change. Its creators were the most pragmatic and the least theoretical of politicians; they were more Tory than Whig, and their goal was stability through socio-economic upheavals and war. Burke's and the Rockinghams' "economical reform" and Pitt's fiscal reorganization were pragmatic responses to political pressures and the urgencies of war; they served no systematic effort to recast politics or the structure of the state. But they began the destruction of the system of "influence" through which the government of England for so long had been managed. And that was the merest beginning. Multiplying through the reigns of three weak and feckless kings, consolidated by threats from abroad and stresses at home, increments of change in England added bit by bit to the transforming of the eighteenth-century constitution. By the time of Peel's ministry of 1841 much was formally the same, but the essential structure had been rebuilt. All the powers of the state--executive, legislative, and administrative--had become concentrated in the majority leadership of the House of Commons, which was increasingly responsive to a broadening political world. The modern constitution, politics, and state--Bagehot's "cabinet government" supplemented by universal suffrage, national political parties, and an independent civil service--had evolved slowly and had gradually reshaped for modern use the system that Walpole had built. Somewhere deep within it there lay scattered elements of the configuration of ideas, fears, beliefs, and attitudes that had so engrossed the thoughts and so fired the imagination of opposition groups in eighteenth-century England and America; but they were now antique fragments, recognizable only by experts, cemented haphazardly into the new radicalism of Bentham, the Chartists, and Mill.

In America, however, this earlier opposition ideology survived intact and fundamentally shaped the emerging state. The modernization of American politics and government during and after the Revolution took the form of a sudden, radical realization of the program that had first been fully set forth by the opposition intelligentsia--the political moralists, the uncompromising republicans, the coffeehouse journalists, and the nostalgic Tories--in the reign of George the First. Where the English opposition, forcing its way against a complacent social and political order, had only striven and dreamed, Americans, driven by the same aspirations but living in a society in many ways modern, and now released politically, could suddenly act. Where the English opposition had vainly agitated for partial reforms in the fierce debates that had raged over the duration of Parliaments, over restraints on the press, over standing armies, and over the force of wealth and patronage in corrupting the guardians of popular rights, American leaders moved swiftly and with little social disruption to implement systematically the outermost possibilities of the whole range of radically libertarian ideas. In the process they not only built permanently into the modern American state system the specific constitutional and political reforms that had been so passionately and so vainly sought for so long in opposition circles, but also infused into American political culture two inner drives, two central spirits, that would distinguish it ever after.

They are the major themes of eighteenth-century radical libertarianism brought to realization here. The first is the belief that power is evil, a necessity perhaps but an evil necessity; that it is infinitely corrupting; and that it must be controlled, limited, restricted in every way compatible with a minimum of civil order. Written constitutions; the separation of powers; bills of rights; limitations on executives, on legislatures, and courts; restrictions on the right to coerce and to wage war--all express the profound distrust of power that lies at the ideological heart of the American Revolution and that has remained with us as a permanent legacy ever after. While in England the use of power became more concentrated in the passage to the modern state, and while in France and Germany it became more highly structured and more efficient, in America it became more diffused, more scattered, more open to suspicion, less likely ever to acquire a stable, unchallenged role in the conduct of public life.

The distrust of power, generated deep within the ideological origins of the Revolution, runs through the entire course of American history and is as potent an element in our national life today, when the instruments of power are so fearfully effective and the actuality of the state so overwhelming and inescapable, as it was two hundred years ago.

Equally a part of our contemporary struggles is the second great theme that derives from the sources of Revolutionary ideology: the belief that through the ages it had been privilege --artificial, man-made and mansecurd privilege, ascribed to some and denied to others mainly at birth--that, more than anything else except the misuse of power, had crushed men's hopes for fulfillment. Not all of the early eighteenth-century English opposition had been gripped by this belief. All elements had been concerned with corruption and with power, but this broad populist animus had drawn together quite different groups that shared only their common hatred of the Leviathan State and their fear of the swollen politico-financial powers that, they believed, had created it. Some had been liberal--believers, that is, in the Jeffersonian ideal of the atomic individual and of a free community of independent yeomen freeholders; but some had been reactionary, or at least, like Bolingbroke, romantically nostalgic: they had sought not a broadening of the individual's self-determination but a return to a lost society of articulated statuses and elaborated hierarchies in which privilege counted for more rather than for less than it did in the modernizing world of eighteenth-century England. Americans had almost never shared these latter views, even in the proprietary and plantation colonies where the social reality might have seemed most congruous; and when the Revolution moved from the negative, critical phase of the years before Independence to the constructive era that followed, this reactionary strand of thought was simply ignored, to be taken up only occasionally thereafter by men who scarcely knew the context from which it was derived; and the radical-libertarian impulse swept forward. The dominant belief struck at the heart of the privileged world. Everywhere in America the principle prevailed that in a free community the purpose of institutions is to liberate men, not to confine them, and to give them the substance and the spirit to stand firm before the forces that would restrict them. To see in the Founders' failure to destroy chattel slavery the opposite belief, or some self-delusive hypocrisy that somehow condemns as false the liberal character of the Revolution--to see in the Declaration of Independence a statement of principles that was meant to apply only to whites and that was ignored even by its author in its application to slavery, and to believe that the purpose of the Constitution was to sustain aristocracy and perpetuate black bondage--is, I believe, to fundamentally misread the history of the time.

To condemn the founders of the Republic for having tolerated and perpetuated a society that rested on slavery is to expect them to have been able to transcend altogether the limitations of their own age. The eighteenth century was a brutal age. Human relations in British society were savage in a hundred different ways. In the placid countryside and sleepy market towns of eighteenth-century England, J. H. Plumb writes, the starving poor were run down by the yeomanry, herded into jails, strung up on gibbets, transported to the colonies. No one cared. This was a part of life like the seasons, like the deep-drinking, meat-stuffing orgies of the good times and bumper harvests. The wheel turned, some were crushed, some favoured. Life was cheap enough. Boys were urged to fight. Dogs baited bulls and bears. Cocks slaughtered each other for trivial wagers. . . . Death came so easily. A stolen penknife and a boy of ten was strung up at Norwich; a handkerchief, taken secretly by a girl of fourteen, brought her the noose. Every six weeks London gave itself to a raucous fete as men and women were dragged to Tyburn to meet their end at the hangman's hands. The same violence, the same cruelty, the same wild aggressive spirit infused all ranks of society. . . . Young aristocrats --the Macaronis--fantastically and extravagantly dressed, rip-roared through the town, tipping up night watchmen, beating up innocent men and women. Jails and workhouses resembled concentration camps; starvation and cruelty killed the sick, the poor and the guilty. . . . Vile slums in the overcrowded towns bred violent epidemics; typhoid, cholera, smallpox ravaged the land.⁵

Chattel slavery was brutal and degrading, but as far as the colonists knew, slavery in one form or another had always existed, and if it was brutal and degrading, so too was much else of ordinary life at the lower levels of society. Only gradually were men coming to see that this was a peculiarly degrading and a uniquely brutalizing institution, and to this dawning awareness the Revolution made a major contribution. To note only that certain leaders of the Revolution continued to enjoy the profits of so savage an institution and in their reforms failed to obliterate it inverts the proportions of the story. What is significant in the historical context of the time is not that the liberty-loving Revolutionaries allowed slavery to survive, but that they--even those who profited directly from the institution--went so far in condemning it, confining it, and setting in motion the forces that would ultimately destroy it. For they were practical and moderate men, though idealistic and hopeful of human progress. Their mingling of the ideal and the real, their reluctance to allow either element to absorb the other altogether, their refusal, in a word, to allow the Revolutionary movement to slide off into fanaticism, is one of the Revolution's most important features. And of this, as of so much else, Jefferson is the supreme exemplar: in him a ruthless practicality mingled so incongruously with a sublime idealism that his personality seemed to his enemies, as it has seemed to modern historians concentrating on his "darker side," to have been grossly lacking in integrity. All of the Founders hoped to create a free society in America; not all of them could, or would, recognize, as Jefferson did, that this could only end in the destruction of chattel slavery. And those who recognized this and who strove to break the hold of this vicious institution so long before its condemnation became a common moral stance acted within a system of priorities that limited what they could achieve.

The highest priority was reserved for whatever tended to guarantee the survival of the republican nation itself, for in its continuing existence lay all hopes for the future. Most of the Revolutionary leaders hated slavery--not one of them ever publicly endorsed it--but they valued the preservation of the Union more. A successful and liberty-loving republic might someday destroy the slavery that it had been obliged to tolerate at the start; a weak and fragmented nation would never be able to do so. The haters of slavery were also limited in what they could accomplish by their respect for property, which like personal liberty was also part of the liberal state they sought to create. And they were, finally, fearful of the unforeseeable consequences in race relations that would result if the slaves--to the colonists still mysteriously alien, politically backward, and at least latently hostile people--were suddenly set free. It took a vast leap of the imagination in the eighteenth century to consider integrating into the political community the existing slave population, whose very "nature" was the subject of puzzled inquiry and who had hitherto been politically nonexistent. But despite all of this, from the very earliest days of the Revolutionary movement the agonizing contradiction between chattel slavery and the freedom of a liberal state was seen, and the hope was formed that somehow, someday, the abhorrent practice of owning men would be destroyed. In the year of Jefferson's death slavery still existed, but it was "a crippled, restricted, peculiar institution," destroyed in the North, forbidden in the Northwest, compressed deeper and deeper--and more and more explosively--into the South. If the Free Soilers of the 1850s, like the Republican platform writers of 1860, exaggerated the Founders' political commitment to the outright abolition of slavery, they correctly sensed the antislavery temper of the Revolutionary age. The ideological continuity between Jefferson and Lincoln is direct; however much their approach to the question of race may have differed, both deeply believed that slavery was "wrong and ought to be restricted"; both groped for ways of advancing that restriction; neither would destroy the Union to effect it.⁶

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

NOTES

1. *American Historical Review*, XXVIII (1922- 1923), 328; *New Viewpoints in American History* (New York, 1922), 179.
2. Besides Schlesinger *New Viewpoints*, chap. 7, and Becker *Declaration of Independence*, both published in 1922, Charles H. McIlwain, *The American Revolution: A Constitutional Interpretation* (New York, 1923) and Randolph G. Adams, *Political Ideas of the American Revolution* (Durham, N.C., 1922).
3. Clifford Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System," in David E. Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent* (Glencoe, Ill., 1964), 64
4. Hutchinson to Lord Hillsborough, Boston, May 1, 1771, C.O. 5/768/195, Public Record Office; George H. Moore, *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts* (New York, 1866), 131-132.
5. J. H. Plumb, *Men and Centuries* (Boston, 1963), 9-10.
6. William W. Freehling, "The Founding Fathers and Slavery," *AHR*, LXXVII (1972), 91. (Mr. Freehling's formulation in general seems to me excellent, and I have followed it closely in this paragraph.) Major L. Wilson, "The Free Soil Concept of Progress and the Irrepressible Conflict," *American Quarterly*, XXII (1970), 769-790.