Introduction

The Revolution at 250: A Special Issue

JOHANN NEEM AND ANDREW SHANKMAN

The 250th anniversary of the American Revolution is approaching at a time when the nation is fractured and divided. No doubt, there are those who stoke our divisions in order to benefit from them. Yet there is a deeper question: To what extent are our current divisions shaped by the nature, character, achievements, and limits of the American Revolution whose semi-quincentennial we will soon commemorate? Can we tell the story of the American Revolutionary era so that we do full justice to the complexity of the events and the broad mosaic of peoples who shaped and were shaped by it? How do we as historians provide the true complexity of this past while contributing to and advancing our present and ongoing civic conversations?

What follows is our effort to assist K–12 educators, graduate students, professors, public historians, and interested citizens to engage productively with the coming anniversary, to grapple with it, interrogate it, argue with it, and to celebrate the conversations that the American Revolution produced. To do so, we asked five leading scholars of the Revolution—Timothy Breen, Kathleen DuVal, Leslie Harris, Michael Hattem, and Serena Zabin—to participate in a conversation that would address the complicated and messy American Revolution that produced the nation. By having our five scholars do so, we also had faith and confidence that their conversation would guide us to a thoughtful and affirming engagement with our complex moment of 2025, and perhaps even to some form of solidarity. We were delighted and excited to see that the contributors provided diverse, and sometimes contradictory, views, but that they also pointed to ways forward, where what we often take to be competing viewpoints become complementary.

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We are grateful for the contributors' honesty and the time they took to offer such considered responses to our queries. We did not know where this conversation would lead. Instead, we asked the contributors to participate in an iterative process. We posed an initial question, but our subsequent questions were based on what we learned from their answers. We also shared the answers to each question with the contributors, allowing them to draw on and respond to each other. The result is a conversation that developed over time, rather than simply a series of answers to predetermined questions.

Following the conversation, Tom Cutterham offers an "Engaging Historiography" essay that considers the "Critical Period" between the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783 and the ratification of the Constitution. Scholars have long mined the Critical Period to understand the issues that inspired the Constitutional Convention. Cutterham argues that recent scholarship on commerce and international relations, and on the western borderlands and Indigenous history, have transformed our understanding of the Critical Period. Whereas once we might have seen the movement for the Constitution as largely a question of internal U.S. politics, Cutterham concludes that we now must place conversations about a stronger federal union and citizenship within the larger and more complicated global context that recent historians have presented to us.

We hope that this special issue is not just fun to read but will spark ideas that can shape conversations in classrooms, public historical sites, and even dinner tables around the country as we go about making sense of what our Revolution means to us today, two hundred and fifty years after the Declaration of Independence.

The Revolution at 250: A Conversation

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Question 1: What do you consider the most important insight historians have offered about the American Revolution in the decades since the Bicentennial? In other words, if you were in a college course about the American Revolution today, how would it look different than it did in 1976?

T. H. Breen

The interpretation of the American Revolution has changed substantially since the Bicentennial. The development is welcome not only because it brings complexity to complacent narratives of independence, but also because it challenges self-serving stories about the nation's origins that have recently become the source of partisan political claims that have little historical merit. However, the shift in how we now view the Revolution cannot be reduced to a single transformative insight. Rather, I would submit that three separate but complementary trends have dominated a rapidly evolving field. One disclaimer is necessary. It would be misleading to suggest that the lines of inquiry that I discuss come close to exhausting a list of exciting, innovative research appearing on such diverse subjects such as legal, economic, scientific, and imperial history.

The most striking change is the attention to people who have long been left out of the revolutionary story. We have long known—or should have known—that race and racism have had a profound impact on the origins of our political culture. The extraordinary work of Edmund S. Morgan, Ira Berlin, David B. Davis, and Winthrop Jordan forced scholars to give

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proper attention to discomforting topics that with rare exception—Benjamin Quarles, for example—were ignored.[1]

What is impressive about more recent work is that enslaved people are not treated simply as an abstract mental category, as the object of discrimination and marginalization. We have come to appreciate that they possessed agency. As a result of this insight, researchers increasingly pay attention to complex patterns of interaction, to strategies of resistance and borrowing. Historians such as James Merrell and Richard White demonstrated how Indigenous peoples structured these cultural conversations. No current discussion of the revolutionary period could disregard Colin Calloway's impressive writings. Nor Rosemarie Zagarri's study of women. Much of the new work on women, African Americans, and Indigenous peoples has been woven provocatively by Gary Nash and Woody Holton's splendid surveys that provide inclusive stories of Americans struggling to understand the full meaning of independence.[2]

A second interpretive shift relates to how we constitute the physical boundaries of the revolutionary experience. This is no longer a story of thirteen British colonies declaring political independence. Bold comparative books such as J. H. Elliott's *Empires of the Atlantic World* have helped historians to escape traditional narratives that depict American developments as somehow exceptional. In addition, from a comparative perspective, one looks to the Caribbean to understand more fully how slavery developed in an economic and physical environment quite

1. Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1961). Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975); Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA, 1998); David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York, 2006); Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1969).

2. Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia, 2007); Gary Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (New York, 2005); Woody Holton, *Liberty Is Sweet: The Hidden History of the American Revolution* (New York, 2021). James Merrell, *The Indians' New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors From European Contact Through the Era of Removal* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1989); Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region* (Cambridge, MA, 1991); Colin Calloway, *The Scratch of a Pen: 1763 and the Transformation of North America* (New York, 2006).

different from that of the mainland. The brilliantly pioneering work of Julius Scott invited historians to pay close attention to how enslaved people communicated ideas about resistance and liberation.[3]

The literature on the Caribbean—often described as Atlantic history—has exploded over the last several decades. Trevor Burnard, Vincent Brown, and Laurent Dubois—just to name three leading figures in the field—help us to think of the period in terms of the movement and aspirations of people rather than of political regimes. Harvey Whitfield and others have extended the field of comparative inquiry to Canada. The reconsideration of interpretive space also has brought the land west of the original colonies into the revolutionary conversation. Impressive studies by Kathleen DuVal and S. Max Edelson point the way. Alan Taylor's *American Revolutions: A Continental History* brings much of this new research together in a manner that a general reader can appreciate.[4]

A third topic that has received renewed attention is the drafting and ratification of the United States Constitution. This development may come as a surprise. After all, the subject has not wanted for historical interpretation. It once was claimed that the delegates to the Philadelphia convention brought forth a miracle. Charles Beard rejected that sort of hagiography. An exuberant celebration of the Founding Fathers easily survived iconoclastic arguments. Perhaps because of the recent insistence by some jurists that we should concentrate discussion of federal regulations and rights claims on the alleged original meaning of the Constitution, scholars have returned to an analysis of the political maneuvering and deal making that shaped this fundamental document. Michael J. Klarman's *The Framers' Coup* provides valuable insights into how deep

3. J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830* (New Haven, CT, 2006); Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (New York, 2018).

4. Trevor Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves: Plantation Societies in British America* (Chicago, 2015); Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge, UK, 2020); and Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipaition in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004); Harvey Amani Whitfield, *North to Bondage: Loyalist Slavery in the Maritimes* (Vancouver, 2016); Kathleen DuVal, *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution* (New York, 2016); S. Max Edelson, *The New Map of Empire: How Britain Imagined America before Independence* (Cambridge, MA, 2017); Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History 1750–1804* (New York, 2016).

divisions were more or less resolved. These historians remind us that the Founders were fully conscious of the evil of slavery and its impact on the structure of the new republican government. And perhaps more significant, they demonstrate how the federal constitution stifled genuine democracy, a heritage that haunts us to this day. Jack Rakove, James Oakes, and Mary Sarah Bilder have extended the constitutional analysis in fruitful directions. Perhaps most significant in this literature is the poignant recognition of slavery's long and unfortunate impact on American political culture.[5]

Certain aspects of an account of interpretative change are less inspiring. Very little of the new literature seems to have affected in more than a superficial way the books on the American Revolution that dominate the popular market. Almost all of these best-selling studies celebrate a small group of military and political leaders who took up the challenge of independence and in the name of the people devised a republican system of government. No doubt, these leaders deserve our respect. But one might have expected at a moment in our history when the fundamental tenets of a society based on the rule of law are threatened that Americans would grow skeptical of accounts that could have been published long before the Bicentennial and. in its place, give credence to the messy, often creative struggles that actually brought forth a new nation.

Kathleen DuVal

In recent decades, historians have portrayed a cast of characters that is much larger than most historians of the Revolution imagined in 1976. Of course, this kind of broadening has happened in all fields of U.S. history since the 1970s. Expanding the people considered important to the history of the American Revolution has been critical for changing how historians understand the Revolution from its beginnings, through the war, to outcomes in the 1780s and beyond, for all kinds of people who lived in and near the thirteen British colonies that rebelled.

Expanding the cast of characters did not start in the 1970s. There have been historians writing about Black men's military participation in the

5. Michael Klarman, *The Framers' Coup: The Making of the United States Constitution* (New York, 2016); Jack N. Rakove, *Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution* (New York, 1997); Paul Finkelman, *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson* (Armonk, NY, 1996); and Mary Sarah Bilder, *Madison's Hand: Revising the Constitutional Convention* (Cambridge, MA, 2017).

Revolution as far back as William C. Nell's *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (1855), and this work continued in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by such historians as George Washington Williams, Carter G. Woodson, Herbert Aptheker, John Hope Franklin, and Benjamin Quarles. Considerably less scholarly but still importantly for generations of girls (including myself), children's books have long highlighted Betsy Ross alongside George Washington and Benjamin Franklin.[6]

In recent decades primary research and monograph-writing on the American Revolution has—as in so many fields—gotten deep and wide enough that history teachers and writers of survey books have more than enough material to integrate into large-scale narratives. A comparison of Robert Middlekauff's *The Glorious Cause* (1982) with Woody Holton's *Liberty Is Sweet* (2021) is illuminating. Both are sweeping stories spanning over 750 pages from the Seven Years' War through the Constitution. Both give attention to the Boston Tea Party, Washington's military strategy and tactics, and the Siege of Yorktown. Both are good reads as well as useful to glean when writing lectures. But in every part of Holton's book, the cast of characters is wider. "Founding Fathers" are still there, but they make decisions within the world they inhabited, which included men and women different from themselves. Both Middlekauff and Holton constructed their syntheses from the scholarship of their time, and their surveys show where we have come.[7]

Of course, it's possible to ignore what the rest of us have been doing and keep writing the old way. Joseph Ellis's most recent book nods to the past fifty years of scholarship on the American Revolution with seven thin two-page profiles of a few people beyond the traditional men leading Congress and the Continental Army, including George Washington's enslaved valet, William Lee, and Catherine Littlefield Greene, the wife of

6. William C. Nell, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (Boston, 1855); George Washington Williams, *A History of the Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion, 1861–1865: Preceded by a Review of the Military Services of Negroes in Ancient and Modern Times* (New York, 1888); Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro in Our History* (Washington, DC, 1922); Herbert Aptheker, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (New York, 1940); John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of American Negroes* (New York, 1947); Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*.

7. Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763–1789* (New York, 1982); Holton, *Liberty Is Sweet*.

General Nathanael Greene. But the book's clear message is that the real history of the Revolution is still that of George Washington and Nathanael Greene.[8]

Going from sidebar histories to a truly integrated narrative is a process, not a completed project. Every time I teach my American Revolution lecture course, I hope I get a little further from the sidebar approach, and I suspect new syntheses will as well, and in new directions we cannot predict.

Leslie M. Harris

As I sit down to answer this question, I am realizing how much of my answer is dictated by the fact that my training and early career are rooted in the 1980s and 1990s, a period of time when the American Revolution was in the grip of the examination of republicanism and other ideologies, and at a time when the historical profession was still deeply divided between social history, political history, and (perhaps) intellectual history. Those latter divisions not only indicated methodologies; they often signaled which historical subjects were being studied. So, for example, although I consider parts of my first book project a study of how African Americans understood the meaning of labor and morality in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—an intellectual history of ideas among African Americans that were deeply informed by the Revolutionary era and republicanism as we then thought about them, and a history of political activism—I know that most people understood and still understand that book as a "social history." Because it did not hew to isolating ideas from people, perhaps; because it combined ideas and lived experience; but even more so, because African American history and intellectual history did not overlap.[9]

Many believed then (and perhaps still believe) that African American thoughts/thinking/ideologies about the meaning of the American Revolution had little to no importance—particularly if they were not written down, and even if they were clearly enacted. This exclusion was deepened by a historical literature of the Revolution and of republicanism that did not address the meaning of slavery as a lived experience for white

8. Joseph Ellis, *The Cause: The American Revolution and Its Discontents, 1773–1783* (New York, 2021).

9. Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863* (Chicago, 2003).

enslavers of people of African and Native descent, and how that experience deeply influenced a revolutionary ideology that railed against enslavement to England.[10]

The literature of republicanism interrogated many (perhaps too many!) aspects of the early republic, including economics, and yet slavery, whites as enslavers (including via investment in slavery as well as direct owners of enslaved people), and enslaved people were completely absent from discussions of republican morality. Probably the most influential book on the meaning of slavery to North American and then U.S. ideologies of freedom is still Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975)—a book that largely concludes its main narrative action a century before 1776. And to be honest, if it were not for the controversies around the *New York Times*' *1619 Project*, I probably would not be returning to the American Revolutionary era at this stage of my career. For despite the breadth of my first book, on African Americans in New York City from 1626 to 1863, I have, as a historian of African Americans, most often felt profoundly alienated from the historical literature on the Revolutionary era. So—I hope that our conversation on these issues will perhaps lift some of my pessimism, and reveal that (a) more has happened in the field than is indicated by our most recent controversies; and (b) perhaps it is time for a deeper engagement, either by myself or my students, in this period, in terms of research and writing.[11]

With that apologia out of the way: The strongest areas of growth in the study of the American Revolution during my career have been attention to the role of women and gender, and attention to the American Revolution as part of a series of revolutions that led to the beginning of the end of the enslavement of people of African descent in the Americas. The former, I think, has been well accepted and is well understood in the framework of the limits and possibilities of the American Revolution. This is no doubt due to the work of path-breaking historians such as Linda Kerber (*Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* [1980]; *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies* [1998]); Mary Beth Norton (*Liberty's Daughters* [1980]; *Founding Mothers and Fathers*

10. Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1967); and Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1969).

11. Morgan, *American Slavery American Freedom*; Nikole Hannah-Jones, ed., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York, 2021).

[1996]); and other books and innumerable essays by a wide range of scholars. Kerber's *Women of the Republic* and Norton's *Founding Mothers and Fathers*, as well as Ruth Bloch's 1987 *Signs* essay "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," deal directly with the "ideological origins" school of the American Revolution that emerged in the 1960s, most well represented by Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood. Bailyn, Wood, and others overturned the materialist interpretation of the American Revolution for the world of ideas, and especially ideas in print, to which few women and even fewer African Americans had access. By taking on republicanism, ideology, and the Constitution in their works, Kerber, Norton and other women's historians claimed a space within the prevailing interpretations from the 1960s to the early 2000s. Most important probably is Kerber's concept of "Republican Motherhood," and her deep interrogation of what it meant to be a female citizen during this time. Norton's work incorporates Revolutionary ideologies with lived experiences of women more thoroughly and insistently. As Norton states in her acknowledgements to *Founding Mothers and Fathers*, "As an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, I studied political theory and intellectual history. . . . While at Harvard [for graduate school] . . . I became enthralled by social history. . . . I was drawn to the newer field of women's history . . . and the study of gender." Her first book, *Liberty's Daughters*, examines what she calls "the familial realm"; *Founding Mothers and Fathers* "combines an earlier interest in political theory and intellectual history with my more recent fascination with social history and especially women and gender." Norton's brief statement of her intellectual journey remains, I think, important to the advancement of our understanding of the revolutionary era, and not just for women's history.[12]

Two other elements besides excellent scholarship led to the incorporation of women and gender into the historical literature on the revolutionary era. To the degree that the literature on the Revolution overwhelmingly

12. Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1980); and Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies* (New York, 1998); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800* (Boston, 1980); and Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers* (New York, 1996), ix; Ruth Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society* 13, no. 1 (1987), 37–58. Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*; Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*.

focuses on whites as actors and thinkers, the category of "women in the American Revolution" was and perhaps still is presumed to refer to white women. Even within that category, literate white women who parallel the elite Founding Fathers are easier to incorporate into the ideological turn of the scholarship of that era. I wonder about the degree to which educated, middle-class, and elite women are still over-represented in our understanding of women and gender in that era. Even when we look at Black women, probably the most well-known Black woman is the extraordinary Phillis Wheatley. Both Norton's *Liberty's Daughters* and Catherine Adams and Elizabeth Pleck's *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England* attempt to expand our understanding of who constituted colonial and revolutionary women. Norton brings the social history of Black and white women together; and Adams and Pleck work to move our understanding of Black women in this era beyond the "single role model" of Phillis Wheatley, elevating in their book "other individuals even prior to Wheatley who served as major sources of inspiration." These women might include Elizabeth Freeman, Ona Judge (recovered in Erica Armstrong Dunbar's extraordinary work *Never Caught*), and Belinda Sutton (her petition demanding reparations for her enslavement is viewable online with context at the Royall House and Slave Quarters website https://royallhouse.org/slavery/belinda-sutton-and-her-petitions/). Including all of these women and many others in our understanding of the revolutionary era, as Norton's *Liberty's Daughters* modeled, is critical to a fuller understanding of this era.[13]

Second, the scholars who are most well known for their contributions to women and gender in the Revolutionary era—Norton and Kerber—were students of leading figures: Norton, a student of Bailyn; and Kerber, of Richard Hofstadter. It continues to be important to think about how intellectual genealogies allow for the fostering, development, and embrace of certain scholars and their scholarship, too often at the expense of others. Power and influence matter.

The second major area of growth is understanding how the American Revolution fits into an era of revolution in the Atlantic world. At its most expansive, by including antislavery and decolonization movements of the

13. Catherine Adams and Elizabeth Pleck, *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England* (New York, 2010); Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge* (New York, 2018).

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the abolition of slavery, and the broader definitions of republican and democratic citizenship that developed beyond North America, that reframing potentially becomes a challenge to American exceptionalism narratives of freedom, democracy, and equality. Most importantly, it de-centers the traditional Founding Fathers of the United States as able to see everything that would be made possible by their separation from Great Britain, and demonstrates that the greater radicalism occurred at times far from North America. As I began writing this response, I had reason to examine the American Historical Association conference program from 1989, the first professional conference I ever attended. There were a number of panels marking the anniversary of the French Revolution. Not a single panel had a paper that included "Haiti" in its title. There was one panel entitled "Black Radicals on Revolution: [W. E. B.] DuBois, [C. L. R.] James, and [Walter] Rodney"; it's very likely that panel addressed Haiti. But I would hazard a guess that today, it would be much more likely that such a conference would bring these and other budding republican nations into conversation with each other, bridging European and Euro American histories with African and African American histories, and across a much broader range of the Americas as well. Certainly, in teaching my African American history course, I treat the historical changes sparked by the Revolutionary era as inaugurating a wide-ranging examination of society that questioned slavery, the economy and government and redefined humanity and citizenship in ways that moved far beyond U.S. North America and envisioned freedom and democracy beyond that embedded in the U.S. at its founding. I was aided in this thinking at the beginning of my teaching career (in 1995) by historians of Africa: Philip Curtin's *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex*; and my colleague Kristin Mann at Emory University helped me to think comparatively in ways that I did not experience in graduate school. Kristin and I team-taught a course on comparative slavery in the Americas that helped me envision much beyond the "thirteen British colonies." Through her example, I delved deeply into "the Atlantic world" as a critical part of my teaching of African American history. Of course, I was also building on a long tradition of African diasporic scholarship as well (Earl Lewis's 1995 *AHR* article "To Turn As On a Pivot: Writing African-Americans into a History of Overlapping Diasporas" maps this terrain well).[14]

14. Philip Curtin, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History* (Cambridge, UK, 1990); Earl Lewis, "To Turn As On a Pivot:

A standout public history moment that integrated the U.S., French, and Haitian revolutions was the 2011 New York Historical Society exhibition "Revolution! The Atlantic World Reborn" and the accompanying book, edited by Thomas Bender, Laurent DuBois, and Richard Rabinowitz. Although Atlantic world history was well entrenched among academic historians, it's unclear how much this set of ideas has reached the general public, and particularly in terms of thinking about the Revolutionary era.[15]

Michael D. Hattem

Because the 1980s effectively marked the end of "interpretive schools" in Revolution historiography, the biggest changes in historians' approach to the Revolution in the decades since the Bicentennial have been, in some sense, more conceptual than interpretive. And perhaps no concept has done more to shape Revolution historiography in that time than the expansion of boundaries. Despite the growing presence of post-New Left historians in academia at the time of the Bicentennial, many students were still being taught the Revolution from the nationalist, Whiggish perspective with its focus on the thirteen colonies, the Revolution's "big ideas," and even bigger "Founding Fathers." In the decades since, however, historians have brought the concept of expanding boundaries to bear on the Revolution in a variety of ways that have challenged and, to some extent, dismantled the old perspective.[16]

Historians began focusing on expanding the Revolution's "cast of characters" in the 1960s as progressive teachers at both the college and secondary level began taking representation into account and incorporating African American history into their courses. Those efforts have continued apace into the twenty-first century as historians have increasingly sought to include historically marginalized groups in their scholarship and their teaching. Historians have also expanded the chronology of the Revolution aided somewhat by the conception of the "long eighteenth century." By the 1990s, however, this chronological expansion contributed to a major shift in focus from the causes of the Revolution, which occupied the minds of historians in the two decades prior to the

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Writing African-Americans into a History of Overlapping Diasporas," *American Historical Review* 100 (June 1995), 765–87.

15. Thomas Bender, Laurent DuBois, and Richard Rabinowitz, *Revolution! The Atlantic World Reborn* (New York, 2011).

16. Michael D. Hattem, "The Historiography of the American Revolution," digital timeline, https://bit.ly/AmRevHistTL.

Bicentennial, to its consequences. Unlike the scholarship produced in the early decades of the Cold War, these two changes have worked in kind to allow historians to shine more light on the Revolution's shortcomings than on its successes. In part, this has had the effect of stressing continuity rather than change (or at least the downplaying of the amount of change that occurred). In addition to the expansion of historical subjects and chronology, historians have also expanded the Revolution spatially, as globalization has seemingly contracted the space of the world around them. This impulse helped spur early Americanists' adoption of "the Atlantic world" as a coherent historical space (a concept that also pre-dates the Bicentennial). By the twenty-first century, the Atlantic perspective has come to be augmented by a "neo-imperial" approach that attempts to situate the Revolution within the broader global context of the British Empire. Most recently, the "continental approach" (or its shorthand parlance "Vast Early America") has built on the ethos of these earlier attempts while shifting its lens to the west rather than the east.[17]

All these changes in historiography have shaped contemporary college courses on the Revolution in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Today's students taking a course on the Revolution are more likely to encounter a richer tapestry of subjects, spaces, and questions than pre-1976 students. Of course, adding something to a course also means taking something out. Students today are less likely to spend significant amounts of time learning about the military history of the War for Independence than earlier generations. Similarly, they are less likely to spend more time on the causes of the Revolution than on its consequences. And they are less likely to spend a great deal of time on elite high politics and revolutionary ideology.[18]

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17. David Waldstreicher, "The Revolutions of Revolution Historiography: Cold War Contradance, Neo-Imperial Waltz, or Jazz Standard," *Reviews in American History* 42 (Mar. 2014), 23–35. For a different take that sees change not continuity as a defining factor in these recent historiographical shifts, see Johann N. Neem, "From Polity to Exchange: The Fate of Democracy in the Changing Fields of Early American Historiography," *Modern Intellectual History* 17 (Sept. 2020), 867–88.

18. Jane Kamensky, "Two Cheers for the Nation: An American Revolution for the Revolting United States," *Reviews in American History* 47 (Sept. 2019), 308–18.

For sure, anti-exceptionalism and a skepticism of nationalism, especially after the 1980s, have been underlying factors in driving this post-Bicentennial conceptual expansion of the Revolution. And college courses have reflected these historiographical changes. Informed by this expanded geography and sense of continuity, today's students are more likely to encounter an American Revolution that has become less American and less revolutionary. The expanded chronology and focus on consequences also make it more likely they will engage with the broader "Revolutionary era" rather than the more traditional conceptions of "the Revolution" as a discrete event that were often built on more truncated notions of where the Revolution happened and who made it happen.

But changes in historiography alone do not account for changes to college courses on the Revolution. One might argue that changes in the material contexts in which historians teach have also affected how the Revolution is taught. Just as the introduction of microfilm to academia in the 1950s had a discernible impact on scholarship, so too has the advent of digitization in academia in the last few decades. Thanks to PDFs, online databases, and other digital sources, historians have been able to introduce more atomized content into their courses. For example, instead of assigning a few entire books offering broad, general analytical takes on the Revolution, students are much more likely to be assigned a variety of journal articles and book chapters covering various topics. Similarly, this digitization revolution has also made it much easier to assign a variety of primary sources in courses as well as multimedia content. Ultimately, the degree to which course content has been atomized allows today's instructors much more freedom in crafting their courses. That, along with the historiographical changes described above, perhaps best summarize how courses on the Revolution have changed since the Bicentennial. While the early, pre-Bicentennial years of the Cold War fostered a Revolution largely monolithic in its meaning, the subsequent expansion of historians' perspectives on the Revolution and the ways in which they can teach it have created an American Revolution from which it is possible to take a greater variety of meanings than ever before. How fully that possibility has been realized, however, is another discussion entirely.[19]

19. Brendan McConville, "Early America in a New Century: Decline, Disorder, and the State o f Early American History," *Journal of the Historical Society* 5 (Dec. 2005), 461–82.

Serena Zabin

In 1975, I was a first grader in the public schools of Lexington, Massachusetts. My father took me and my older brother to see the re-enactment of the battle on Lexington Green, and incidentally, to see Gerald Ford, who came too. I know that I was obsessed with the "I-Can-Read" book *Sam the Minuteman,* but although I eagerly read about a boy and his yeoman dad, I could not imagine myself as the kid who fired a gun for freedom. I wanted to be one of those girls who got to run out onto the Green after the guns stopped and wipe the gore off their fathers' faces. Just in case they needed a last-minute re-enactor that day, I wore a little mob cap and a calico dress, but I'm guessing my mother drew the line at woolen underwear. Sadly, I had to stay on the sidelines.

I happened to be back in Lexington for the weekend of the 247th anniversary of the Lexington battle, and it was instructive to see what had changed and what had not. I was not surprised to see far more attention to African-descended soldiers than I remembered from my youth. In 1975, a Black re-enactor took on the role of Prince Estabrook, an enslaved man who sustained a wound in that engagement but who lived to fight through several more battles. But while Prince Estabrook has been the subject of a local book, a large monument, and, of course, live re-eanactment, a wider story of Black Massachusetts in the eighteenth century is just emerging. For Patriots' Day 2022, the Lexington Historical Society opened a new exhibit on Black Lexingtonians in one of its historic houses. Building on community-based research and spearheaded by Robert Bellinger, it is clearly part of a contemporary conversation about the relationship between slavery and freedom that the *1619 Project* has brought to public attention.[20]

I was struck, also, by more subtle changes that pointed to other essential interventions that historians have made in the last fifty years. As I watched a re-enactment of the British retreat to Boston, I noticed many

20. "Slavery Reinterpretation Exhibition," Lexington Historical Society, accessed Apr. 19, 2022, https://www.lexingtonhistory.org/exhibitions/slavery-reinterpretation. Alice Hinkle, *Prince Estabrook, Slave and Soldier*, 1st ed. (Lexington, MA, 2001). The most influential work on Massachusetts slavery in public history is being done by the Royall House in Medford, Massachusetts ("The Royall House and Slave Quarters," *The Royall House and Slave Quarters*, accessed Apr. 19, 2022, https://royallhouse.org/). See, for example, Margot Minardi, "Why Was Belinda's Petition Approved?," *The Royall House and Slave Quarters* (blog), Dec. 27, 2017, http://www.royallhouse.org/why-was-belindas-petition-approved/.

women in the ranks of soldiers. Deborah Sampson, a woman sneaking into a man's world, may well have been their model. But I suspect also that their presence was evidence that some of the rigidities around gender (and re-enactment) have begun to shake loose. I also saw plenty of children (both boys and girls) dressed in imitation of Continental army soldiers, and a few girls dressed in my own childhood outfit of print calico. I resisted the urge to talk with the children about ways in which their outfits encapsulated exciting new histories of dry goods and India and fashion, but I did think about how much more central their gendered (and gender-bending) play is to our understanding of the American Revolution.[21]

Every reader of the journal knows that 1980 was a watershed moment for women's history, when both Mary Beth Norton and Linda Kerber published their field-defining books. As the presence of the female reenactors hinted, in the last forty years women's history moved from the sidelines to which a previous generation had tried to keep it. Norton's and Kerber's work made it possible for other historians to see how political arguments over taxes had women's trading and shopping practices at their center. We have come to see how much eighteenth-century warfare depended on women's bodies and labor regardless of their political loyalties.[22]

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21. Alfred Fabian Young, *Masquerade : The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier* (New York, 2004); Alex Myers, *Revolutionary*, repr. ed. (New York, 2015); T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (Oxford, UK, 2004); Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011); Jonathan P. Eacott, "Making an Imperial Compromise: The Calico Acts, the Atlantic Colonies, and the Structure of the British Empire," *William and Mary Quarterly* 69 (Oct. 2012), 731–62.

22. Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*; Kerber, *Women of the Republic*. Adams and Pleck, *Love of Freedom*; Catherine Cangany, "Fashioning Moccasins: Detroit, the Manufacturing Frontier, and the Empire of Consumption, 1701–1835," *William and Mary Quarterly* 69 (Apr. 2012), 265–304; Patricia Cleary, *Elizabeth Murray : A Woman's Pursuit of Independence in Eighteenth-Century America* (Amherst, MA, 2000); Dunbar, *Never Caught*; Sara T. Damiano, *To Her Credit: Women, Finance, and the Law in Eighteenth-Century New England Cities* (Baltimore, 2021); Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor, *The Ties That Buy: Women and Commerce in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia, 2011). Lauren Duval, "Mastering Charleston: Property and Patriarchy in British-Occupied Charleston, 1780–82," *William and Mary Quarterly* 75 (Nov. 2018), 589–622; Rachel B. Herrmann, *No Useless*

The enormous scholarship on women's work, from army washerwomen to enslaved childminders, has shifted our perceptions of the Revolutionary War so that even tactical decisions, such as Sullivan's War in Iroquois Country, now require attention to gender.

Gender historians have also reinterpreted the broader political implications of the American Revolution. Here, perhaps, the work has had less impact than they might have hoped, although not because the scholarship itself is any less robust. Some of the most exciting work has been an exploration of why and how women's political contributions (Indigenous and Black as well as white) got pushed off the table.[23]

As the work of this one local historical society makes clear, the expansion of characters in the story of the American Revolution has been enormously consequential over the last half century. People are by no means the only important expansion of the field; historians have also offered insights about the geographic and temporal span of the Revolution that completely and effectively reshape its story. But most important, perhaps, has been their argument that neither war nor politics have ever been the

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Mouth: Waging War and Fighting Hunger in the American Revolution (Ithaca, NY, 2019); Paul E. Kopperman, "The British High Command and Soldiers' Wives in America, 1755–1783," *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 60 (Spring 1982), 14–34; Maeve Kane, "'She Did Not Open Her Mouth Further': Haudenosaunee Women as Military and Political Targets during and after the American Revolution," in *Women in the American Revolution*, ed. Barbara B. Oberg (Charlottesville, VA, 2019), 83–102; Barbara Clark Smith, "Food Rioters and the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 51 (Jan. 1994), 3–38; Barbara B. Oberg, ed., *Women in the American Revolution: Gender, Politics, and the Domestic World* (Charlottesville, VA, 2019); Judith L. Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies: Patriots and Loyalists in Revolutionary New York* (Philadelphia, 2002); Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indigenous Prosperity and American Conquest: Indian Women of the Ohio River Valley, 1690–1792*, 1st ed. (Chapel Hill, NC, 2018); Holly A. Mayer, *Belonging to the Army: Camp Followers and Community during the American Revolution* (Columbia, SC, 1996); Sarah M. S. Pearsall, "Women in the American Revolutionary War," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Revolution*, ed. Edward G. Gray (New York, 2012); Serena Zabin, *The Boston Massacre: A Family History* (Boston, 2020).

23. Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*; Jan Ellen Lewis, *Family, Slavery, and Love in the Early American Republic: The Essays of Jan Ellen Lewis*, ed. Barry Bienstock, Annette Gordon-Reed, and Peter Onuf (Williamsburg, VA, 2021); Linda K. Kerber, "The Paradox of Women's Citizenship in the Early Republic: The Case of Martin vs. Massachusetts, 1805," *American Historical Review* 97 (Apr. 1992), 349–78.

sole preserve of white men, and they certainly were not during the Revolution.

Question 2: In your responses to the first question, there was a shared sense that our understanding of the Revolution had expanded in three ways—geographically, temporally, and in its "cast of characters." As a result, Michael Hattem concluded, scholars today focus more on the Revolution's consequences than its causes. Do you agree? Does our expanded scope of analysis also help us explain the Revolution's causes? Can it help us to understand more fully why the British Empire broke apart when it did?

Breen

There is no question in my mind that the most recent treatments of the American Revolution have focused on its consequences, usually drawing attention to the failure of the new republic to make good on the promise of rights and equality put forward in the Declaration of Independence. But the shift of attention to the run-up to revolution raises a different set of issues not necessarily connected to matters of expanded geography or human diversity. The challenge is devising a better understanding of the unraveling of an imperial system and the mobilization of a sufficient number of colonists to mount effective resistance to Great Britain.

Although political history seems currently out of fashion, we might start by interrogating a revolutionary narrative that has a history almost as long as the nation itself. We still accept a teleological story that usually begins with the coronation of George III. And then, assuming that the American people were becoming increasingly unhappy with imperial rule—a pressure cooker model of revolutionary ferment—we jump from the Stamp Act Crisis, to the Boston Massacre, to the Tea Party, to Bunker Hill, as if each incident moved the American people ever closer to independence.

There is not a lot of evidence to sustain this interpretation. The eighteenth-century British government was remarkably successful in putting down scattered regional protests in Ireland, England, and Scotland. The Stamp Act Crisis, for example, was a typical challenge to central authority generally solved through a mixture of carrots and sticks. To be sure, some American gentry leaders worried that parliamentary legislation threatened their own power, but as Governor Francis Bernard wisely

noted, the so-called revolutionaries of the 1760s could easily have been bought off with an honorary title. More to the point, ordinary colonists—even in New England—did not view the celebrated moments of confrontation as much more than one-off problems, addressed without involving a crisis of imperial governance. Not until 1774 did normal grumbling about taxes trigger a genuinely revolutionary response.[24]

Confusion about the origins of revolutionary mobilization may result from a historiographic insistence that movement toward independence was an entirely rational process. To explain the breakup of empire, we turn to ideas—some centuries old—about corruption, loss of virtue, and constitutional precedents, as if the colonists who risked their lives at places such as Bunker Hill were inspired by principles that once energized the English Civil Wars. We are led to believe that it was reasoned discourse in the public forum that distinguished the American Revolution from the frighteningly rebarbative rhetoric of the French Revolution or more modern attacks on colonialism. Arguments for this sort for American exceptionalism deserve tougher analysis.

No doubt, gentry leaders spoke in these highly, legalistic intellectual terms. If one is attempting to comprehend large-scale resistance to British authority, however, one needs to explore the realm of emotion, a growing sense of disrespect, resentment over a perception of rejection, and a feeling of injustice. An appeal to base passions does not mean that principles about liberty and rights did not matter. They mattered a great deal, but they did so with particular intensity for ordinary men and women who already felt marginalized within the empire, who asked plaintively "why do we not enjoy the same rights as do the people who happen to live in England?"

As the social scientist Craig Calhoun argues in "Putting Emotions in Their Place," "there seems little doubt about the importance of emotions to movement participation and to the shaping of collective action and specific events." He adds, "Bedeviling this discussion is a tendency to see emotions as somehow 'irrational,' either explicitly or simply implicitly because of the opposition to 'rationalistic' analytic approaches." From this perspective, a publication such as *The Crisis* (1773–1774)—an angry, violent attack on monarchy that reached as many American readers as did

24. Francis Bernard to the Earl of Hillsborough, Feb. 4, 1769, in *Papers of Francis Bernard, Governor of Colonial Massachusetts, 1760–69*, ed. Colin Nicolson (6 vols., Charlottesville, VA, 2007–2022), 5: 187.

Thomas Paine's more celebrated *Common Sense*—deserves as much scholarly attention as do the famous pamphlets about the colonists' constitutional rights. So too, does the curiously troublesome *Chronicle of Our Times* (1768–1769).[25]

Finally, a distinction should be drawn between political independence and cultural independence. Within the revolutionary story the two concepts are often conflated. It is true that the men elected to the Continental Congress found it hard to make a full political break with Great Britain. Once it was done, however, it was done. Former colonists were free to organize a new republican government. Cultural independence was much more difficult to achieve, even to imagine. The ties of language, religion, literature, and commerce proved stronger than the most fervent revolutionaries anticipated.

DuVal

Interpretations of the causes of the American Revolution have changed less than interpretations of its consequences. Historians by and large still agree with Carl Becker's century-old observation that the Revolution was about not only "home rule" but also "who should rule at home." Countless scholars have both deepened Becker's focus on conflict among white men and broadened the historical actors. Woody Holton's 1999 *Forced Founders*, for example, showed how the Virginia elite moved toward revolution in part because of threats they perceived to both their access to Native land and their ability to profit from enslaved labor—they had concerns about both home rule and who would rule at home. The flexibility of the framework of these worries turns out to fit quite well with recent scholarship, including the changes in intellectual history that Leslie Harris points toward in her first response. Slavery and race deeply informed the ideology of the "founders," and the writings, actions, and ideologies of women and men of all kinds shaped both the Revolution and understandings of it.[26]

25. Craig Calhoun, "Putting Emotions in Their Place," in *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*, ed. Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta (Chicago, 2001), 48–49.

26. Carl Lotus Becker, "The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760–1776" (PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1909), 22; Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999).

Most scholars of the Revolution, whatever their focus, continue to see its causes as embedded in local as well as transatlantic power struggles. Broader analyses of differing expectations of who should rule fit well with the traditional chronology of Revolution scholarship from the crown's "benign neglect" through its changes to governance, taxes, and land policy following the Seven Years' War. This overall chronology and interpretation is flexible enough to fit with studies of a broadened range of places and people as they moved toward (or against) revolution. And these general arguments work with historiographic changes on the consequences of the war. Indeed, questions of who should rule at home dominate U.S. history from the beginning of the republic to today. There simply hasn't been much reason to overturn scholarly agreement on causation.

The various expansions of the scope of Revolution scholarship also have helped to bridge the previous gap between "causes" scholarship and "effects" scholarship. In the late twentieth century, military historians pointed out that other historians of the Revolution were writing about only causes and results. Despite claiming to be scholars of the Revolution, most spent little time on the actual Revolutionary War. Expanding the peoples and places of study has allowed for a new generation of studies that bring together the scholarship of military history with other approaches to tell deep and fascinating histories of how different people lived through and affected the course of the war itself.[27]

Harris

It's not surprising to me that historians focus more now on the consequences than the causes of the Revolution. The most pressing political debates today are about those consequences: The definitions of democracy, freedom, citizenship, and equality that emerged from the Revolutionary era are still being debated across society broadly. Many of the most acclaimed works for the general public on the Revolutionary era and the "Founding Fathers" laud the positive aspects of the era and the visionary reach of the Founders in terms of expanding the basis of citizenship and democracy. Within the historical profession, we seem to have a sharp generational break over the significance of the profoundly conservative outcome of the Revolution. Most historians today see the continuation of slavery, the gendered and racialized inequality of

27. John W. Shy, "Introduction to the Original Edition," in *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence*, rev. ed. (1976; repr., Ann Arbor, MI, 1990), 3.

citizenship, and the foundation of the nation in Native American land dispossession and genocide as the most important elements of this conservatism. In other words, it was not enough that democracy and freedom embraced white men alone in the population: the limits of the Revolution made it less than revolutionary. And even those limits were bound up in a larger conservatism around the meaning of democracy and human equality that affected everyone, including those white men. To take only one example, the protests against "taxation without representation" in the lead-up to the break with England ultimately led to the enshrinement in post-war state constitutions that voters own property in order to vote. Today, we can still see the impact of this eighteenth-century connection in the way we view home ownership as a central hallmark of U.S. culture (regardless of the increasing difficulty in doing so), though the idea that voters need to own a certain amount of property in order to vote is extraordinarily foreign to our current understanding of democracy and citizenship.

This is just one set of partially outlined outcomes of the Revolution that appear to have greater bearing on our current realities than the causes of the Revolution. In addition to pointing out the limits of the Revolution, however, the long road to full citizenship and equality for non-white men and white and non-white women points to more important lessons on societal change. One is that the outcome of revolutionary rethinking of society for one group can lead to unintended consequences. Although he does not address in a deep or meaningful way the role of non-whites or women in defining the outcomes of the Revolution, Gordon Wood's *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* does address the surprise of the Founding Fathers when their ideas about democracy and society led white men who were less educated and wealthy than them to turn away from indentures and jobs as servants. The Founders had envisioned a world in which perhaps the sons of Revolutionary-era working-class and immigrant men and women would achieve a new level of participation in society as political and economic leaders, after attending Harvard or Princeton for a suitable education and becoming gentlemen. For them, the revolution was about releasing *opportunity*, not upsetting the hierarchy completely (sound familiar?). They were surprised when the laborers of their generation did not wish to wait but sought their own path to greater wealth and political influence, perhaps by owning their own businesses or land, but also by avoiding servile work. Benjamin Quarles, Ira Berlin, Gary Nash, James Horton, Sylvia Frey, Shane White,

Cassandra Pybus, and many others have charted similar movements among enslaved and newly free African Americans during the Revolutionary era and the early republic. Black men, women and children did not simply await the creation of the United States as a nation of freedom that didn't include them or depend on gradual emancipation in the aftermath of the Revolution. Instead, they claimed freedom by leaving with the British or by demanding from the new nation the freedom they had earned through Revolutionary War service (even when their freedom-loving owners tried to negate it). They negotiated for freedom or simply left enslavers ahead of the turgid schedule laid out in gradual emancipation laws and moved to cities where they could combine in community for greater protection. Although not everyone was able to seize freedom for themselves and their families, many in this generation did, and began establishing institutions that would fight to end slavery where it continued—in the southern states. They left behind coercive institutions when they could, such as predominantly white religious denominations or schools that sought to keep them at a lower level physically (from separate church pews to enslavement), economically, politically, and intellectually. Enough whites in New York State viewed these changes with alarm to limit Black male suffrage as slavery ended there in the 1820s. These struggles continue today as we debate the limits not of *citizenship* per se, but the meaning and implications of ideas about human *equality* begun in the Revolutionary era.[28]

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28. Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1991; repr. New York, 1993), especially 179–80. Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*; Ira Berlin, "The Revolution in Black Life," in *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred F. Young (DeKalb, IL, 1976), 349–82; Berlin and Ronald Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville, VA, 1983); Gary B. Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720–1840* (Cambridge, MA, 1988; James O. Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860* (New York, 1997); Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, NJ, 1991); Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770–1810* (Athens, GA, 1991); Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston, 2006). See also Robert G. Parkinson's review essay on several of these books and others and their place in the literature on the Revolution in *Journal of the Early Republic* 27 (Fall 2007),

In terms of the historical profession, I think we also have to look to the rise of social history in the 1960s and 1970s, and the massive changes in the literature of the antebellum period and the Civil War era to understand the focus on the consequences rather than the causes of the American Revolution. Perhaps the causes of the Revolutionary War do not lend themselves as well to the concerns of social historians of the last fifty years. And the attention to the centrality of slavery, race, and racism among the main issues of the antebellum and Civil War eras also shifts attention away from the struggle between Great Britain and the thirteen colonies. Although slavery and race are certainly *part* of the story of separation from England, their importance really comes to the fore afterwards, as revelatory of the limits of revolution in the short term, and its implications in the long term.

The Founding Fathers themselves knew that much had been left unfinished, and not least those most heavily invested in enslaved people. Thomas Jefferson, who lived into the resurgence of slavery in the early decades of the nineteenth century, was more than prescient in his understanding of the fault line at the center of the nation: the moral compromise the thirteen original states made when they chose to enshrine the right to own human beings in the Constitution. He witnessed the 1820 Missouri Compromise as the "fire bell in the night" that troubled the sleep of one who thought he had set the new nation on a steady path of success. The calls of thinkers like Adam Smith, Lafayette, and others to strip slavery out of the new nation at its founding had gone unheeded and would lead to another century of turmoil and violence as the nation struggled to live up to its own stated ideals.

Hattem

To be clear, in my first response, I argued that students taking a course on the Revolution today are more likely to spend more time on consequences than causes, which is the product of a long-term historiographical shift. Perhaps the first great example or sign of this shift at that time was the work on republican motherhood, including Linda Kerber and Mary Beth Norton's books in 1980, which sought to understand the impact of the Revolution on the lives of women. In the decades that followed, the

546–55, as well as his book *The Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2016). This list is suggestive rather than complete.

consequences of the Revolution on other marginalized groups has been a predominant theme in the study of the Revolution and early America generally. Similarly, a new burst of political history that addressed the long Revolutionary era emerged in the 1990s that very much focused on the popular politics unleashed by the Revolution in the early national period.[29]

Concern over the perceived long-term lack of interest amongst scholars in the Revolution was reflected in the organization of three national conferences hosted by major institutions in the 2010s calling for Revolution studies to be "reborn." That said, the 2000s saw a small number of important works published that addressed the causes and course of the Revolution from new cultural perspectives. T. H. Breen re-examined popular politics during the imperial crisis through the lens of transatlantic consumer culture, Sarah Knott and Nicole Eustace uncovered the role of emotion in the Revolution, Brendan McConville recovered a culture of royalism in the late colonial and prerevolutionary periods, and Benjamin Irvin looked at the ways in which the Continental Congress tried to assert its legitimacy. These works drew on the broader perspectives of the so-called "New New Political History" in the 1990s and 2000s, which used the lenses of the public sphere and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* to expand the prevailing sense of popular politics and "political culture." They offered windows into cultural breaks with Britain that help us think through answering the most important question regarding the coming of the Revolution: How did we get from 1763 to 1776 in just thirteen years? In other words, given the wide acceptance of John Murrin's Anglicization thesis, cultural breaks can help explain how the political break could have occurred so suddenly. More recent scholarship addressing causes (or the more consciously nebulous "coming") of the Revolution has built on this work by exploring the roles of race, slavery, conflicting visions of imperial governance and political economy, honor, printing, memory, family, and more in ways that are informed by the past few decades of early national history. There have also been a number of recent books exploring moments within the imperial crisis, several important works on the war and wartime (including the experience of Indigenous peoples), and a number of popular histories aimed at the coming of the Revolution and/or independence. At the same time, there is much recent public interest in the argument that slavery played a direct role in

29. Kerber, *Women of the Republic*; Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*.

motivation for colonial support for independence. This serves as an example of how the expanding lens of early national political history in the 1990s and 2000s has impacted current perceptions on the coming of the Revolution, even if the public's growing consensus around the latter argument at least temporarily outstrips that of academic historians. Therefore, despite the broader turn toward the early national period in the last few decades, there does appear to be some renewed interest in the causes (or "coming") and course of the Revolution that is unavoidably informed by what has come before (but not *too* before). Continuing to think about methods and moments of "de-Anglicization" that occurred during the imperial crisis and the war—as Kariann Yokota and Sam Haynes have done in the early national period—holds out significant promise for producing in aggregate new ways of thinking about how and why the Revolution occurred when it did.[30]

30. "The American Revolution Reborn: New Perspectives for the Twenty-First Century," hosted by the McNeil Center for Early American Studies and the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, May 30–June 1, 2013; "'So Sudden an Alteration': The Causes, Course, and Consequences of the American Revolution," hosted by the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Apr. 9–11, 2015; and "The American Revolution: People and Power," hosted by the Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif., May 15–16, 2015. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*; Brendan McConville, *The King's Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688–1776* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006); Nicole Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2008); Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009); Benjamin H. Irvin, *Clothed in Robes of Sovereignty: The Continental Congress and the People Out of Doors* (New York, 2011). While Bernard Bailyn's *Ideological Origins* may be called an early example of a study in "political culture," it is decidedly heavier on the former with a relatively loose grounding in Geertzian ideas about the latter. The works mentioned in this paragraph, for the first time, went looking for the cultural threads that ran through the coming of the American Revolution. One might even include among them Jon Butler's *Becoming America: The Revolution before 1776* (Cambridge, MA, 2000). Parkinson, *The Common Cause*; Staughton Lynd and David Waldstreicher, "Free Trade, Sovereignty, and Slavery: Toward an Economic Interpretation of American Independence," *William and Mary Quarterly* 68 (Oct. 2011), 597–630; Steve Pincus, *The Heart of the Declaration: The Founders' Case for an Activist Government* (New Haven, CT, 2016); Justin du Rivage, *Revolution Against Empire: Taxes, Politics, and the Origins of American Independence* (New Haven, CT, 2017); Craig Bruce Smith, *American Honor: The Creation of the Nation's Ideals during the Revolutionary Era* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2018); Joseph M. Adelman, *Revolutionary*

But perhaps that renewed interest is not surprising given its timing. It took enough time to pass whereby new generations of scholars could approach the origins and causes of the Revolution without feeling the need to frame their work in relation to the political binaries and scholarly paradigms that emerged out of the early Cold War era. Beginning in 1965, the succession of two-hundredth anniversaries of imperial crisis events that culminated in the Bicentennial of 1976 (not to mention the Cold War) helped drive the increase of scholarly interest and work on the causes and course of the Revolution. Today, we are less beholden to the rigid binaries and paradigms of Cold War scholarship. As I have argued recently in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, an important feature of the most recent scholarship is the lack of a shared argument or methodology, which can provide short-term scholarly gains but in the long term often limits new perspectives and possibilities.[31]

Networks: The Business and Politics of Printing the News, 1763–1789 (Baltimore, 2019); Michael D. Hattem, *Past and Prologue: Politics and Memory in the American Revolution* (New Haven, CT, 2020); Christopher F. Minty, *Unfriendly to Liberty: Loyalist Networks and the Coming of the American Revolution in New York City* (Ithaca, NY, 2023). On moments of the imperial crisis, see Zabin, *The Boston Massacre*; Eric Hinderaker, *Boston's Massacre* (Cambridge, MA, 2017); Zachary McLeod Hutchins, ed., *Community without Consent: New Perspectives on the Stamp Act* (Hanover, NH, 2016). On wartime, see T. H. Breen, *The Will of the People: The Revolutionary Birth of America* (Cambridge, MA, 2019); Donald F. Johnson, *Occupied America: British Military Rule and the Experience of Revolution* (Philadelphia, 2020); T. Cole Jones, *Captives of Liberty: Prisoners of War and the Politics of Vengeance in the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, 2020); Aaron Sullivan, *The Disaffected: Britain's Occupation of Philadelphia during the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, 2019); John Gilbert McCurdy, *Quarters: The Accommodation of the British Army and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, 2019). On recent popular histories, see Richard R. Beeman, *Our Lives, Our Fortunes and Our Sacred Honor: The Forging of American Independence, 1774–1776* (New York, 2013); Ellis, *The Cause*; Joseph J. Ellis, *Revolutionary Summer: The Birth of American Independence* (New York, 2013); as well as Rick Atkinson, *The British Are Coming: The War for America, Lexington to Princeton, 1775–1777* (New York, 2019); Nathaniel Philbrick, *Bunker Hill: A City, a Siege, a Revolution* (New York, 2013). There have also been multiple popular works of note on the wartime period as well.

31. Sam W. Haynes, *Unfinished Revolution: The Early American Republic in a British World* (Charlottesville, VA, 2010); Kariann Akemi Yokota, *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Postcolonial Nation* (New York, 2011); Michael D. Hattem, "Revolution Lost? Vast Early America, National

Just over fifteen years ago, Pauline Maier wrote in *Historically Speaking* about "disjunctions in early American history." The first, and most important, of these was "between colonial and Revolutionary history." That gap seems to be closing in recent years as new, vast approaches to the colonial and early national periods has been applied in broad strokes to the Revolution as a whole. But in many ways, there has also been a gap between the Revolution and the early national period, at least methodologically. There has been an urge to think of the Revolution as a kind of Year One, which bestowed upon the early national period an important and initially useful sense of freshness as well as a sense of heightened stakes that reinvigorated the field's relevance in the wake of the inevitable declension of Revolution studies that occurred by the end of the 1980s. But I do believe we are beginning to see that gap bridged as the expanded scope of analysis of both early national political history and of the field of early American history generally are brought to bear on the Revolution.[32]

Zabin

I do think that recent historians of the Revolution have focused more on its consequences than its causes. Woody Holton's *Liberty Is Sweet* is a great example of that. And this emphasis on consequences addresses Americans' desire to understand how we got to our current moment. On what foundation have we built the United States? If that foundation is white supremacy, as Rob Parkinson has shown, it is only logical to ask how anti-Black racism and Native dispossession have continued to thread their way into the present.[33]

Yet in some ways the editors' follow-up question is more challenging: Does the expansion of the story of the American Revolution really change our understanding of its causes? Perhaps the question is not whether nonelites felt excluded from colonial politics (as that ancient formulation of home rule vs. who should rule at home once asked), but whether the breakup of the British Empire is really about politics at all. For my own thinking, I have broken the issue down into three options, each of which may have something to offer:

History, and the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 78 (Apr. 2021), 269–74.

32. Pauline S. Maier, "Disjunctions in Early American History," *Historically Speaking* 6 (Mar./Apr. 2005), 19–22.

33. Holton, *Liberty Is Sweet*; Parkinson, *The Common Cause*.

1. Either politics were central to the breakup of the British Empire, and the world of politics was not only inhabited by white men, or
2. There were non-political causes for the origins of the American Revolution that put these other people at their center, or
3. The expanded cast makes little difference to the question of causation.

To start with the third and perhaps least satisfying option: Yes, we might note, white women boycotted the drinking of tea and the wearing of imported fabrics, but was that not a secondary rather than a starring role? The Stono rebellion, supported by Spanish colonial governors, did not unsettle the British Empire; why should we think that the Black Virginians who flocked to Dunmore were any more effective? This third option has the most potential to acknowledge the enormous extent of racial and gendered power in the eighteenth-century British colonies. White men set and enforced the laws and policies of the British Empire; there was little scope for the disenfranchised apart from (overwhelmingly male) crowd actions. If we are looking for how the actions of the unfree contributed to the breaking away of thirteen of Britain's colonies, we will be disappointed. The American Revolution was not the Haitian Revolution.

Back to the first option, then—and a willingness to reconsider what politics means. Our "expanded scope" does help explain the causes of the Revolution in new ways; historians certainly see the American Revolution in a global and imperial context, one that includes Indigenous nations and Indigenous power. Most obvious but still central to our understanding is the 1763 Proclamation Line. In *The Scratch of a Pen* Colin Calloway beautifully laid out how the British government frustrated land speculators—and there's more going on here than the greed of already wealthy men like George Washington. I think it's worth remembering that Scots–Irish settlers, who never were in the habit of quietly acquiescing to British regulations, were thrilled to squat on those trans-Appalachian lands.[34]

We also now look at the Atlantic and the continental worlds together and appreciate the overlap in the causes of their conflicts. Vincent Brown's book on Tacky's War in 1760s Jamaica helps us see that the long war between England and France is also part of an even longer struggle

34. Calloway, *The Scratch of a Pen*, 91–111.

between enslavers and the enslaved. In truth, I think we have known that the arguments over slavery and the slave trade have been part of the fundamental story for a long time. And without question, as Leslie Harris noted, the *1619 Project* has led historians and non-historians to believe that this is a cause that *matters* to our understanding of the American Revolution, not just one item in a litany of factors that we might acknowledge but not really grapple with.[35]

It seems obvious to many of us now that the politics of slavery were as important as arguments over taxes and representation. The Somerset decision, Jefferson's comments on the slave trade in the draft of the Declaration of Independence, and Dunmore's proclamation all fit into even a narrow definition of "political," as would a number of freedom petitions from Black men in the 1770s, most of them from Massachusetts. But overwhelmingly, these are arguments about the system of slavery, not about the inclusion of more people in eighteenth-century British politics.

But most intriguing—and here is option #2—is the possibility that the stresses of the British Empire between 1763 and 1775 exposed the workings of imperial power to a wide range of people, and once that veil had been ripped away, many could not forget what they had seen. I've long been interested in the moments when ordinary people—those who do not consider themselves particularly able to shape the contours of their lives—really see the structures that shape and hold them clearly. Is it possible that these imperial crises expanded what they could perceive? That ordinary Bostonians, now surrounded by soldiers in 1768–1772, suddenly saw what it meant to live in the British Empire? That in 1763 the Odawas and others truly realized the extent of British parsimony—or settler greed? That the politicization of tea and fashion exposed those sinews of empire? Politicians' decisions on their own cannot explain the Revolution, because popular responses to those decisions become fundamental causes in their own right.

To be honest, we don't yet know what this option might mean for people who were not free. Even if we accept the argument put forth by Benjamin Quarles and others that most enslaved people during the Revolution were primarily seeking freedom for themselves and their families, what choices can we see unfree women making that we can read as their response to politics? Judith Van Buskirk has argued that in the North, some Black men quickly joined the Continental Army because they were

35. Brown, *Tacky's Revolt*.

committed to the cause, but historians cannot use that litmus test on anyone but able-bodied men of a certain age.[36]

To extend the idea just a bit further, I'm especially interested right now in the upheaval that the evacuation of Boston in 1776 might have revealed to enslaved Bostonians. Suddenly the empire didn't look so powerful to the loyalists; their worlds were turned upside down, and the lives they had known were disrupted. What did this revelation mean to those enslaved by those loyalists? I am exploring the fate of Black Massachusetts residents who left for Canada in that evacuation: Did they go of their own free will, or were they still enslaved as they traveled on those transport ships? Did the novel scene of desperate loyalists and a starving British army also spark a new realization of the tenuous nature of the British Empire? I suspect that these upheavals might help us explain how this expanded cast contributed to the coming of the American Revolution.

Question 3: In our prior question, we asked about how the expanding cast of characters and geographies might help us understand the Revolution's causes. Several of you suggested that we need to focus more closely on specific times and places, rather than get lost in timelines that, to quote Tim Breen, makes the Revolution appear "teleological" or "rational." We need to understand moments that, as Serena Zabin put it, "exposed the workings of imperial power to a wide range of people." If that's the case, from the perspective of your own scholarship and the subject(s) that you study, what event do you see as the tipping point after which there was no turning back—and why?

Breen

Lurking behind the currently trendy phrase "tipping point" may be older concepts that once haunted the literature of the American Revolution: inevitable, or even, providential, for example. The assumption was that there was a guiding hand directed the people toward their pre-destined goal—liberty, democracy, and independence. During the nineteenth century George Bancroft, drawing on Hegel's writings, championed this sort

36. Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (1961, repr. Chapel Hill, NC, 1996). Judith L. Van Buskirk, *Standing in Their Own Light: African American Patriots in the American Revolution* (Norman, OK, 2017).

of interpretation. Thankfully, we no longer perceive revolutionary history as the workings of some mysterious Geist.

Nevertheless, we should be wary of searching for a tipping point. The notion that there was a transformative moment when the course of events could not be altered denies human agency, especially during times when the prospect of avoiding crisis may have seemed slim. To argue that one particular occurrence shaped the flow of history involves a kind of post hoc logic, like the ability accurately to predict yesterday's stock market results. The ordinary people we study did not know what the future would bring. Some colonists feared that stationing British troops in Boston in 1768 and the subsequent "massacre" in 1770 would lead to a violent confrontation with Britain. The crisis was at hand. But then, calm returned, colonists rushed back to the consumer marketplace, and Samuel Adams worried that he could not keep the flame of popular protest burning. In 1776, after fighting had begun, several members of the Continental Congress argued for a negotiated settlement. There was still time to turn back. At every stage in the conflict, contingencies were at play.

Still, ignoring the scattered urban protests that quickly fizzled out and discounting the learned pamphlets that had little impact on ordinary Americans, one would surely conclude that a key moment was Parliament's decision to punish the entire city of Boston for the destruction of the tea. The Coercive Acts made it possible for white Americans to imagine an organized rebellion. Large numbers of ordinary colonists decided during the spring of 1774 that Britain's treatment of Boston was unjust, not only because it represented an unprecedented level of intervention—an army of occupation, the cutting off of all commerce, and the curtailment of local government—but also because it sparked a deeply emotional reaction, a sympathetic sense that innocent strangers were suffering for a shared cause. The entire year 1774 might be described as the instant when Americans discovered on a personal level what it meant to be a colonist, as someone who was not quite equal to an English person, as marginalized, disrespected, as second-class subjects in an empire that had long been a source of identity and pride.

Although we seldom think of American revolutionaries from this perspective, we might consider whether writers such as Franz Fanon—perhaps other post-colonial scholars as well—help us better to understand how feelings of injustice, resentment, and indignation energized rebellion against imperial authority. Indeed, historians once examined the American Revolution from a comparative perspective—for example, Crane

Brinton, John Elliott, R. R. Palmer, and Patrice Higonnet—and thus avoided depicting the American Revolution solely within an American narrative. It is curious that historians of the American Revolution often condemn notions of American exceptionalism and then have little of significance to say about the French or Russian revolutions, let alone colonial liberation movements throughout the world.[37]

I would suggest that it is time to interpret the American Revolution in broad imperial terms. Instead of thinking of a peculiarly American event, we might treat revolution as an analytic category in its own right. After all, in most recent accounts of the run-up to independence the central characters are Americans. We chronicle how they reacted to each provocation from the Stamp Act to the arrival of General Gage in Boston. But a moment's reflection reveals that it was not the colonists who were taking the lead in resistance. It was the king and Parliament who sparked one crisis after another. American historians like to quote the heroic speeches of Edmund Burke and Isaac Barre that warned of the dangers of imperial overreach. However moving their rhetoric may have been, Lord North always had the votes to pass the acts that colonists deemed oppressive. The results were not even close.

The members of Parliament had little incentive to negotiate with the Americans. After all, the British Empire possessed the strongest military in the world. It had just defeated the French, and in a mood that blended aggression and complaisance, British political leaders did what imperial administrators have often done when challenged by dependent subjects—they relied on state violence to obtain their own ends. As one man informed the members of Parliament, he "was of opinion that the town of Boston ought to be knocked about their ears, and destroyed." In a word, empires mattered. They mattered a lot. It would be a mistake for future historians of the American Revolution to discount the workings of imperial power.[38]

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37. Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, rev. ed. (1938; repr., New York, 1965); Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*; R. R. Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution* (Princeton, NJ, 2014); Patrice Higonnet, *Sister Republics: The Origins of French and American Republicanism* (Cambridge, MA, 1988). And more recently, Patrick Griffin, *The Age of Atlantic Revolution: The Fall and Rise of a Connected World* (New Haven, CT, 2023).

38. *American Archives: Consisting of a Collection of Authentik [sic] Records, State Papers, Debates and Letters…,* 4th Series, 6 vols. (Washington DC, 1837–53), I: 46.

DuVal

The question of a tipping point toward revolution is a vital one for understanding the Revolution. In class, I teach Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* as what persuaded countless people that what had previously been an impossible thought was actually common sense. Its clear and persuasive prose works well in the classroom and worked well in 1776. Others in this conversation are better equipped to give a more historiographically informed answer of the tipping point for people in the thirteen British colonies that rebelled, so my answer will look beyond those larger scale decisions to places and peoples whose kinds of tipping points were different, and in many cases more individual.

For most people who became involved in the Revolutionary War, the war came to them, generally after the more dramatic tipping points in Massachusetts and Philadelphia and Virginia that make up the causes of the Revolution.

There were certainly women involved in protests and politics in the centers of the Revolution, but for most colonial women, the war came to them. The point when everything changed was specific to their circumstances. A husband announced he was leaving with the army, and a wife had to go with him or stay at home and make her (and their) living as best she could. The enemy sailed into the harbor, and it was time to flee or settle in for a siege. In 1782, a Continental Army recruiter came through Middleborough, Massachusetts, offering bonuses, and Deborah Sampson, an underemployed former indentured servant, decided it was time to join up.

Most men joined the war in similarly individual circumstances to Sampson, whether in the British, French, Spanish, or Dutch colonies or in Europe, inspired as young men tend to be in wartime by some not fully understood or articulated combination of patriotism, lack of other opportunities, community encouragement, and being drafted. There was a point for each soldier or sailor or army laborer when these reasons tipped over into becoming part of an army, navy, or militia going to war.

For Alexander and Sophia McGillivray, the children of a Scottish former indentured servant father and a prominent Muscogee Creek mother, the tipping point came in February 1776. They were living in Savannah with their father, Lachlan McGillivray, who opposed the rebellion. The previous summer, a mob had tarred and feathered a man for supposedly drinking a toast damning the rebel cause. Neighbors arrested Alexander and Sophia's father and seized the family's property. When British ships

entered Savannah's harbor seeking rice for troops in the north, Lachlan took the chance to escape and board one of the ships along with Georgia's royal governor. Alexander and Sophia decided to head in the other direction, on a horse bound for their mother's country. There, Alexander would lead Muscogee Creek military efforts against the rebels, while Sophia applied what she had learned of trade and plantations to economic development in the Muscogee Creek Nation.

In contrast, Chickasaw leader Paya Mataha managed to avoid a tipping point into war. The major change for him and for the Chickasaws' foreign policy had come in the 1760s, in the wake of the Seven Years' War, when the withdrawal of their longtime French enemies allowed for a previously unthinkable set of peace agreements. Paya Mataha and the Chickasaws made peace with an astonishingly large number of Native nations, from the Quapaws west of the Mississippi to the Catawbas six hundred miles to the east. Paya Mataha and his people resisted the calls of their British allies to enter a war that they knew would imperil their peace agreements and do them no good.

For tens of thousands of women and men in bondage, the tipping point between figuring flight was too risky to deciding to go came when word reached them that British lines had come close enough to make an attempt, or when a loved one made the decision to go. For Petit Jean, enslaved in Mobile, the opportunity came when Spanish ships sailed into the harbor and Spanish officers needed the help of a local to undermine the colony's British officials. He put his knowledge and skills to work for the Spanish and used his time with them to achieve freedom for himself and his wife.

The series of events that pushed certain people into protest, then war, then independence created a Revolution. It's important, though, not to let this series become a teleological implication either that the road to revolution was set and inevitable or that any single change in the series would have necessarily settled people back down and averted the war and the creation of the United States. And I think it's even more important to recognize that going to war creates a whole new series of causes and effects and that most people that become involved in a war have very little to do with its making.

Harris

From the perspective of the histories of enslaved Africans and Native Americans experiencing land dispossession at the moment of the

Revolution, it's hard to imagine "no turning back" until the defeat of the British. With that defeat, the thirteen colonies could also imagine that they had the independent military might to continue their expansion against Native Americans, and to control enslaved people of African descent. Both groups of people would continue to be central to the new nation's ongoing economic and political success. I'll focus below on the history of enslaved Africans.

The Revolution would eventually lead to slavery's end in the colonies/states above Maryland and Delaware. But the colonies/states ended slavery individually and gradually, which meant that the need to control enslaved people would continue to be important to enslavers in the North during the Revolutionary era. Only two colonies provided for the end of slavery *during* the American Revolution—Vermont in 1777, and Pennsylvania in 1780—and they did so via gradual emancipation, in which the children of enslaved people would gain freedom only after serving their mothers' enslavers until the age of eighteen in Vermont and their early twenties in Pennsylvania. Most other northern colonies (with the exception of Massachusetts and New Hampshire) also provided for emancipation via gradual emancipation on terms similar to Pennsylvania. This meant that a significant number, if not the majority, of adult Black residents in these colonies in the Revolutionary era would remain enslaved for decades to come. Including the indentured children of enslaved women, bondage would remain the predominant status of people of African descent for another century.[39]

Enslavement did not only involve households who owned people. Historians of global enslavement have long argued that slavery is fundamentally and historically rooted in warfare as a path to the pursuit of wealth and political power. The form enslavement took in the Americas was no exception, as Vincent Brown has argued most recently in *Tacky's Revolt*. In the thinking of the Revolutionary era, continuing enslavement in North America would have necessitated sufficient military strength. In

39. Massachusetts ended slavery by a Supreme Court ruling in 1783 that stated that enslavement was in conflict with its 1780 constitution. But because there was no legislation ending slavery, enslaved people had to take the initiative to free themselves, up to and including going to court to claim their freedom. See Emily Blanck, "Seventeen Eighty-Three: The Turning Point in the Law of Slavery and Freedom in Massachusetts," *New England Quarterly* 75 (Mar. 2002), 24–51, https://doi.org/10.2307/1559880.

separating from Great Britain, the colonists had to be assured that they had sufficient militia and military strength to keep the upper hand in a potential or actual war with enslaved people. Victory in the Revolutionary War may have indicated that this was possible.[40]

Southerners were already aware of this reality, living as they did in plantation regions that often entailed a white minority overseeing an enslaved Black majority, whether by county or as in South Carolina, in the colony itself. In fact, enslaved people of African descent had been pivotal as destabilizing forces when British colonists in South Carolina and Georgia fought Spanish colonists in Florida and Native Americans in the Southeast region. Although Lord Dunmore's Proclamation indicated that the loyalist British were willing to invite a degree of slave rebellion in order to disrupt the patriots' activism, the tactic was part of a longer colonial history in which European colonists attempting to define who was in charge used enslaved Africans' desires for freedom strategically rather than out of an ideological commitment to individual emancipation or ending enslavement. As with any civil war, Great Britain's incitement of violence against its own subjects was viewed by the Americans as a break in the social contract. But the manipulation of enslaved people to take up a warlike stance had a long history in the colonies and was not necessarily indicative of a larger commitment to Black freedom.[41]

Dunmore's Proclamation did indicate that the colonies, individually and together, would have to figure out how to maintain their own protection against slave insurrection. Theoretically, if things had really gotten out of hand, England would have sent its armies to support the colonists against enslaved people. In fact, the degree to which the metropole saw its protection of the colonists' interests amid wars with Native peoples paralleled the questions raised by the potential for slave insurrection. The belief that England was not committed *enough* to protecting the North American colonies were part of the constellation of issues that loosened the bonds between the colonies and the metropole, even if not the foundational issue that drove them apart.

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40. Brown, *Tacky's Revolt*.

41. Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 Through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, 1974); Watson W. Jennison, *Cultivating Race: The Expansion of Slavery in Georgia, 1750–1860* (Lexington, KY, 2012) are two of many works that explore these issues.

The question of when there was "no turning back" is a counterfactual question. The more interesting counterfactual to me in terms of the history of slavery and Native dispossession in the Americas: What would have happened if the patriots had lost? Would the ideas of human freedom and equality—limited as they were—have simply died out? Or would they have smoldered and flared for years or decades to come, sparking a more inclusive path to defining human equality? Is there an alternative path in which enslaved Africans and Indigenous people would have participated in decolonization efforts in the Americas in which they were more fully brought into new nations in a fuller state of citizenship?[42]

Hattem

There was no single turning point in the imperial crisis that made independence inevitable. However, my own work and that of other historians of the period's political culture in recent years suggests that there were a series of cultural breaks, which reinforced one another in creating a sense that there was no turning back from independence. The first question one must answer in addressing the coming of the Revolution is: How did colonists get from 1763 to 1776 in only thirteen years? In other words, how did they go from being proud British subjects upon the conclusion of the Seven Years' War to being willing to fight a war for independence? I have argued in my book, *Past and Prologue*, that a series of cultural breaks helped make political independence possible so quickly.[43]

My own work on the role of changing historical memories in the coming of the Revolution argues that after 1768, colonists began to reconsider the meaning of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, seeing it more as the source of parliamentary supremacy rather than as having restored constitutional balance. With the full weight of parliamentary supremacy being wielded upon the colonies, colonists realized that 1688 meant that Parliament could act as arbitrarily and beyond redress as any Stuart monarch. My book also argues that changing notions of the "authority of the past" in colonial and British cultures played a significant role in shaping the

42. Patrick Rael, *Eighty-Eight Years: The Long Death of Slavery in the United States, 1777–1865* (Athens, GA, 2015), provides some foundational thinking on this question by comparing emancipation in the United States with other locations in the Americas.

43. Hattem, *Past and Prologue*.

discourse around the imperial crisis. Colonists inherited their sense of the authority of the past from their seventeenth-century ancestors and the culture of the common law, which they retained into the eighteenth century. But in Britain, arguments purely from precedent, custom, and tradition had lost their weight relatively speaking in the eighteenth century. This created a rhetorical dynamic in which colonists made arguments based on the past, which were not persuasive to Britons who accepted the need for unprecedented actions after suddenly finding themselves in the unprecedented situation of needing to administer the world's largest empire. These breaks between the two history cultures, in how colonists and Britons thought about the meaning of 1688 and the relationship between the past and present more generally, led to a rhetorical situation in which both sides seemed to be talking past one another throughout the crisis. But it also helped contribute to a sense of cultural distinction between colonists and Britons that was a necessary precursor for the kind of concerted action around shared interest that resulted in the Continental Congress and, ultimately, independence.

Timothy Breen's *The Marketplace of Revolution* showed how consumer culture gave colonists an opportunity not merely to protest British policies but to question their own British identities. Creating new meanings for consumer goods—like creating new meanings for the British past—proved to be politically empowering. Colonists reimagined goods that had long been highly sought after markers of social status and British subjecthood into material examples of oppression. By rejecting British goods through non-importation and non-consumption agreements, colonists turned those goods into political markers that helped them reconsider the very meaning of subjecthood.[44]

Brendan McConville's *The King's Three Faces* and Eric Nelson's *The Royalist Revolution* explored the importance of the culture of royalism in the colonies. McConville showed the role that the Hanoverian monarchs had played in colonial culture and politics in the decades preceding the 1760s. But in the 1760s and 1770s, that imagined relationship between the colonists and their monarch came under unprecedented strains. Nelson argues that in the late 1760s, as patriots began rejecting Parliament's jurisdiction over the colonies, a faction of Whig colonists developed their own "royalist" ideology as evidenced by requests that the king break with eighteenth-century precedence and use his veto over parliamentary

44. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution.*

legislation. For McConville, however, the real break in royalist culture came in the 1770s, especially following the Quebec Act and its royal sanction for the institution of Catholicism on the colony's borders. Coupled with the king's rejection of the Olive Branch Petition and his own Proclamation for Suppressing Rebellion, many colonists finally recognized that their long-held hope that the king would ultimately save them from the arbitrary rule of Parliament was not to be. These moments in 1774 and 1775 played a key role in opening the door to considering and even supporting the prospect of independence.[45]

The above is not meant to be comprehensive. Other historians have taken political cultural approaches to the coming of the Revolution, such as Nicole Eustace's book on the role of changing ideas of emotions in the Revolution. Most recently, growing interest amongst the public and scholars in the role of slavery in the coming of independence—including work on the Somerset case, fears of slave uprisings, and Dunmore's Proclamation—suggests that these developments might be seen as threats to the assumption of white supremacy that undergirded colonial culture, particularly in the South, in ways that it did not in England due to the proximity between white colonists and large numbers of enslaved persons.[46] This too can be seen as another fracture that caused colonists to rethink whether their interests were still shared with native Britons and the rest of the empire.

Political independence was an unprecedented step for colonists steeped in a culture that used the term *innovation* as an epithet. Colonists were never going to be willing to support or even entertain independence as a real option so long as they continued to think of themselves as unyieldingly British. The cultural breaks described above—fostered by parliamentary legislation, colonial protests, and British responses to those protests—each contributed in their own cumulative ways to colonists' beginning to develop a sense of distinction between themselves and their fellow subjects in Britain. They showed that they did not necessarily share all of their assumptions, values, and aspirations with Britons, who they believed were engaged in changing what it meant to be culturally British. And while this did not mean a necessarily immediate or smooth transition from feeling less British to feeling American, it nevertheless

45. McConville, *The King's Three Faces*; Eric Nelson, *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding* (Cambridge, MA, 2014).

46. Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale*.

contributed to the path along which Americans made their way to independence. Many contemporary historians see American national identity as non-existent in 1776 and its development as native to the early republic, but its seeds were rooted in these types of cultural breaks that made political independence seem a real possibility only thirteen years on from the conclusion of the Seven Years' War.

Zabin

This question made me panic. For the last few years, there has been a lot of chatter about whether the United States has already reached a tipping point. Is this the end of democracy? The beginning of a civil war? Are we the frog in the hot water who can't realize in time that the water is beginning to boil? So I have been wondering also, whether this is the experience that colonists had too—that for most of them, the tipping point was in the rearview mirror, and they missed it. Suddenly, they were in a revolution to which they never consciously committed.

But then I reread Andy and Johann's question and I took their invitation to look at events that I knew well, or that fit into my current research, as an opportunity to think more carefully and concretely about the ripple effects of events. I returned to the March 1776 evacuation of Boston, when General William Howe loaded over 11,000 soldiers and thousands more women and children (both military and civilian loyalists) onto transport ships and fled to Halifax while Washington and the Continental Army watched from the hills above the city.

It feels a little easy—too easy, maybe—to keep my focus on Massachusetts. We all know that Massachusetts tends to take the lion's share of the attention of the American Revolution, mostly because its nineteenth-century Brahmins were so good at branding it the birthplace of the Revolution. But it's also true that Boston was besieged, and blockaded, and people went hungry. And then, almost without firing a shot, the army left. I think that this evacuation might be one of the events that compelled the revolutionaries to pursue some kind of break with the British Empire.

They were compelled to do so because the evacuation showed them the limits of the British army (as well as its supply chain). The army, as I have argued earlier, was one of the more tangible ways that colonists experienced the British Empire. Uniforms, weapons, bodies: All were much more material expressions of the empire than taxes. But if the shooting of civilians in 1770 demonstrated to Bostonians the power of the empire, the

helter-skelter retreat of the army in 1776 showed its limits. And peering around the edges of those limits, I think, allowed colonists to imagine a world outside of the shelter of the empire. I'm not sure that colonists could unsee the shaky foundation of the world that they had taken for granted.

Tim Breen, in his last response, hints that disrespect is the emotion that pushes colonists to the edge. More specifically, in *The Will of the People*, he locates the Coercive Acts as the tipping point. That is the moment, I think, when he sees the might of the empire strike at the people to whom the sovereign owes protection. That's the moment when the British Empire abuses its power and the colonists say, "enough." But, maybe, just to be contrary, I would argue the inverse. The siege of Boston, and particularly its evacuation, was an even more shocking exposure of the British Empire's power, and it was a lot less impressive than they might have imagined.[47]

Colonists experienced not only their own lack of food, but even the starving of the British army. As he was loading soldiers onto transport ships, Admiral Shuldham wrote home that the Army had to evacuate because "the very distress'd Condition it is in for want of Provision makes [retreat] absolutely necessary," And their distress was obviously apparent to civilians as well. The day after they left, Abigail Adams wrote in wonder "—To what a contemptable situation are the Troops of Britain reduced!"[48]

Colonists couldn't quite believe that the British army was really retreating; everyone, from Washington on down, kept wondering if they were just regrouping. But when they actually sailed away to Halifax—not to Rhode Island, or to New York, or any of the other places that they expected—they started to believe that they really could exist without the empire, because it was not nearly as strong as they imagined. The empire itself seemed "ignominious" rather than invincible. Long ago, Charles

47. Breen, *The Will of the People*, 19–53.

48. Vice Admiral Molyneux Shuldham to Philip Stephens, Mar. 8, 1776, in *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, ed. William Bell Clark, William James Morgan, William Dudley, and Michael J. Crawford (13 vols., Washington DC, 1964–2019), 4: 230; Abigail Adams to John Adams, Mar. 16–18, 1776, *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive,* Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17760316aa&bc=%2Fdigitaladams%2Farchive%2Fbrowse%2Fletters_1774_1777.php.

Royster noted that *rage militaire* peaked in these months of the siege, in the moment when militias became the Continental Army. He was right to note that many colonists saw—or imagined—their own military strength in this moment. But there is more than self-delusion happening here. It's not just that colonists saw themselves as potential winners. It's that they saw the British army, for the first time, as losers. And so, for that matter, did the loyalists who left with them.[49]

I would just open up my Massachusetts-centric story by noting that in March of 1776, the Second Continental Congress is already meeting and prepared to amplify the story of the evacuation. Of course, people were still contemplating the idea of reconciliation, looking for "Peace Commissioners" and generally wondering how everything would end. But it seems as if the return to normalcy that many colonists embraced between 1770 and 1773 was not on the table. *Common Sense* had already been published, and it made explicit what Massachusetts colonists might only have understood dimly: that there was no point to staying in the British Empire. It no longer had anything to offer.

Here I'll plant my flag: The tipping point came when enough colonists no longer saw the advantages of sticking with the empire. Their second-class relationship to the British Empire had already been made clear to them, but it still seemed worth it to stay in its powerful orbit for a while. But if the Revolution had as its tipping point a moment that people decided that they'd rather not stay in the empire—even if they didn't know exactly what they wanted instead—then I vote for the evacuation of Boston as the event that opened their eyes.

Question 4: If we think back to your answers to Question 1, one of the major themes that emerged was that historians' perspectives on the American Revolution have expanded geographically, temporally, and in its cast of characters. As we progressed through our conversation, in various ways, these expansions led many of you to invoke questions of

49. "Ignominious" is from a letter from Thomas Cushing to Robert Treat Paine, Mar. 18, 1776, in *The Papers of Robert Treat Paine*, ed. Stephen T. Riley and Edward W. Hanson https://www.masshist.org/publications/rtpp/index.php/view/RTP3d128; Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775–1783* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1979), 25–53.

empire—the relationship between colonizer/colonized, the loss of imperial hegemony—especially in your responses to Question 3.

So here's our question: Has the expansion in the scale with which we study the Revolution led us back to an imperial understanding of the Revolution? Has new work exposed, in ways that the older imperial school did not or could not, how the empire lost control both at the local level (such as Serena Zabin's example of Boston in her response) and at a broader scale (such as that invoked in Kathleen DuVal's answer in her response)?

Breen

I spent many hours working under the stern gaze of Charles McLean Andrews. Known to students as the leading figure of the so-called Imperial School, his portrait impressed us as a person who perhaps had been a Lord-Lieutenant or colonial governor of some distant British possession during another era. Of course, we were aware that his imperial interpretation of eighteenth-century Anglo–American history was old hat. The discipline had moved on. The Revolution was now a domestic story, and the academic rewards at the time seemed tied either to the discovery of divisive class tensions or to a close analysis of revolutionary notions of liberty and rights. This bundle of ideas soon morphed into full-blown ideology. From this perspective, the British Empire—however defined—lost its historiographic significance.

What goes around, comes around. The notion that empire counted for something has recently experienced new life. That is a good thing. With respect to Andrews, however, a restoration of empire should be based on an honest assessment of his work. He was, after all, a brilliant researcher, and although the topic is currently unfashionable, his discussion of the finer points of British law remains the most reliable source for matters of *meum and tuum*.

Andrews castigated the privileged elite who ran the British Empire. In *The Colonial Background of the American Revolution*, he depicts the aristocrats who sat in Parliament as a complacent group obsessed with personal rivalries. The historian Lewis Namier mapped out these petty squabbles in elaborate detail. Of only tangential interest for the ruling class was the administration of an expanding empire; even less so, was the well-being of peoples of different races and ethnicity. Such challenges mattered—especially after 1790—but at the time not quite as much as did the round of house parties and country hunts. The lords of the manor who sat in Parliament, Andrews observed, "stood together like a wall and

resisted appeals from any quarter that threatened to undermine the privileges of their class."[50]

To be sure, thoughtful political commentators at the time—Adam Smith, Thomas Pownall, and Josiah Tucker come to mind—understood the need for imperial reform. But even they viewed the mainland and Caribbean colonies primarily as sources of consumer goods. An empire that provided so much trickle was worth the cost of defense and administration. The people who actually lived in such places were of only passing interest. However valuable the New World sugar and tobacco may have been—and that value was huge—the colonists were never quite the equals of the men and women who happened to live in England. Someone such as Benjamin Franklin was able to break into London society because he was an extraordinary genius, but most Americans who visited the center of empire discovered—like the Scots and Irish—that they were second-class subjects. The sense of marginality could be annoying. James Otis asked acerbically, "Are the inhabitants of British America all a parcel of transported thieves, robbers, and rebels, or descended from such? Are the colonists blasted lepers, whose company would infect the whole House of Commons?"[51]

Otis had a well-earned reputation for hyperbole. He was an ambitious creole like John Adams and George Washington, in other words a provincial who believed that imperial officials had ignored his talents. But ordinary Americans had a more positive view of the empire. In so much as they thought about the topic at all, they insisted that their relationship with England was altogether a good thing, a guarantor of commercial prosperity, constitutional liberty, and Protestant religion. It also defended them from other predatory empires. Brendan McConville and Linda Colley—among others—have made a good case for a deep-rooted colonial nationalism that various parliamentary taxes did not seriously erode. The colonies may have been tied more closely to Great Britain during the 1760s than at any previous time in their histories. The bonds were as much cultural and commercial in character as political. In any case, the loudest yelps of oppression came from a few New England

50. Charles McLean Andrews, *The Colonial Background of the American Revolution: Four Essays in American Colonial History* (New Haven, CT, 1924), 191; Lewis Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, 2nd ed. (1929; Newcastle, UK, 1957).

51. James Otis, Jr., *A Vindication of the British Colonies* (Boston, 1765), in *Pamphlets of the American Revolution*, ed. Bernard Bailyn (Cambridge, MA, 1965), I: 568.

commercial centers. At the time that Samuel Adams was busy promoting popular resistance in Boston, Virginia planters were falling all over themselves praising their royal governor Baron de Botetourt. As Mary Beth Norton and others have argued, the tipping point came in 1774 with the punishment of the entire city of Boston for the destruction of the tea. That was the moment when scattered protests sparked organized popular resistance to imperial power.[52]

The return of the empire raises challenging interpretive problems. The slow, often uncertain path toward independence had all the markings of a colonial rebellion. White Americans wanted Britain to restore a commercial and legal structure that had worked well enough for a very long time. Confronted by aristocrat intransigence, backed by overwhelming military power, they pursued self-rule. Before 1776, there was nothing revolutionary about their actions. We encounter no murdered priests, no radical redistribution of property, and few destroyed chateaux.

As Thomas Jefferson observed in a draft of the Declaration of Independence—a version wisely rejected by the Continental Congress—it was British military attacks that gave "the last stab to agonizing affection, and manly spirit bids us to renounce for ever these unfeeling brethren. We must endeavor to forget our former love for them." The empire still had a strong emotional hold on the very Americans who were forming a new republican government. The cultural bonds were not easily severed.[53]

To compare the run-up to independence with the events that transformed France or Russia misperceives our own history. Americans launched a colonial rebellion against an empire that failed them; what we view as revolution came later, the result of a process of learning what it meant locally and nationally to live under a government founded on the will of the people. Like so many British colonies over the centuries—India, for example—the initial goal was independence, no more, no less. Post-colonial theorists may help us to understand the painful process of cultural and political disengagement. With the empire restored, we are left with a nettlesome question: What in fact was revolutionary about the American Revolution?

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52. McConville, *The King's Three Faces*; Linda Colley, *The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen: Warfare, Constitutions, and the Making of the Modern World* (New York, 2021); Mary Beth Norton, *1774: The Long Year of Revolution* (New York, 2020).

53. Thomas Jefferson's "Original Rough Draft" of the Declaration of Independence in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton, NJ, 1950), I: 427.

DuVal

Expanding the peoples and places involved in the Revolution might still allow for a central question regarding the coming and progression of the Revolution: When did people stop thinking that the empire did more good for them than bad? Put another way, when did people begin to believe that the power of the empire posed a greater danger to themselves than to their enemies and rivals? On a larger scale, in Serena Zabin's words: "when enough colonists no longer saw the advantages of sticking with the empire." It's important, though, that we no longer even pretend to be looking for one answer to this question. The answers range over time, place, and perspective. For many people, the change came more because of what people around them did and said than any change in what the empire was doing at that moment. And for some people, that change never came.

That central question then requires other questions with multiple answers for different people and places: What did the British Empire provide to its subjects? Why did some subjects believe that the empire was supposed to serve their needs? And what do we learn differently from subjects who never had such illusions at all?

I like how this central question allows us to focus back on empire and its relations with colonists and others in North America while also applying the knowledge and methodologies developed in recent decades as we have expanded our range of peoples and places. It allows us to avoid any temptation, in the words of Timothy Breen's apt warning, to look for "a transformative moment when the course of events could not be altered." Instead, we can look for tipping points (which might be reversible) for different people and places—times when people changed their minds about the empire, the war, the way they should govern themselves, and their own safety, life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.

This kind of framing could allow us to compare a wide range of decisions in parallel. What I loved very best about Robert Gross's terrific 1976 *Minutemen and Their World* was how it took decision-making seriously and in context: "Men go to war for many reasons. Some they proudly announce to the world, some they conceal, and some they scarcely imagine." Now, I can imagine taking Gross's questions and findings to, say, Jamaica with Andrew O'Shaughnessy's and Vincent Brown's work: In the aftermath of Tacky's Rebellion, Jamaican plantation owners thought protection from the empire so important that they put a Stamp

Act on themselves. In occupied Boston, Serena Zabin shows us, people made family decisions in conjunction with decisions about empire and revolution—as of course people did everywhere.[54]

Harris

Until quite recently, the United States as a nation has viewed the "colonial era" and British imperialism as a largely benign moment in its national history. The violence of British rule, whether towards Native Americans, enslaved Africans, or non-elite indentured servants, and the role of violence and suppression in securing British colonial rule and then United States national rule and economic success, has only recently claimed its place in a less-celebratory way in academic histories. The focus on the language, intellectual history, and ideological origins of the Revolutionary era, versus understanding the interaction between ideas and lived experience dominated the academic historiography on the Revolution, even as scholars continued to work on the lived experience of a number of groups via women's history, Native American history, African American history, and histories attentive to class distinctions. In my experience (no doubt delimited by the conservatism of my own doctoral training), not until the 1990s did scholars begin bringing these two areas together, and that work continues today. Two standout histories in this regard are Jill Lepore's *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (1998); and Thelma Wills Foote's *Black and White Manhattan: The History of Racial Formation in Colonial New York City* (2004). As Foote states in her introduction, both scholars were writing at time when "the academic field of early American history . . . persistently represented its object of study in ways that perpetuate[d] the ideal of an exceptional American cultural identity and elide[d] hemispheric and global perspectives on the centrality of racial domination and other legacies of colonialism to the formation of U.S. national culture." Whereas Lepore's work focuses on the moment of war and the rewriting of history in its aftermath, Foote's work covers the ways in which violent domination was written into everyday practices of rule.

54. Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York, 1976), 105; Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia, 2000); Brown, *Tacky's Revolt*; Zabin, *The Boston Massacre*.

Taken together, both books lay a rich foundation for understanding the colonial era in a less sanguine way.[55]

The implications of these two histories and others like them continue to influence the ways in which colonial history is understood, taught, and researched among academic historians. The term *settler colonialism* also does considerable work in complicating the legacy of British colonial rule in North America. Settler colonialism is rooted in the goals of European colonists for the violent domination of Native people (including physical and cultural genocide) for the primary purpose of land dispossession. As many historians have documented, not every interaction between Native Americans and European colonists embodied these outcomes fully. But settler colonialism joins histories of enslavement of people of African descent in the continued effort to make clear that U.S. ideologies of self-determination were created within a framework that privileged the culture, wealth-production, and desires of white Europeans over all others.[56]

The inflammatory controversies around the *1619 Project* indicate just how difficult it has been to hold complicated truths about the ways that the oppression of non-white and non-elite people was foundational to the lofty ideals envisioned by the founders of the U.S. This is not news, especially for those who recognize that Edmund Morgan's 1975 work *American Slavery, American Freedom* addressed exactly these issues at the nation's Bicentennial, and despite the limits of its title, also detailed the ways in which Virginia colonists' erroneous assumptions about Native Americans contributed to ideas of American freedom. Of course, academic historians have not stood still since 1976; far from it. And as much as the *1619 Project* inspired backlash, it also inspired many to read more. In the summer of 2020, I had the privilege of teaching a National Endowment for the Humanities seminar on Slavery in the Colonial North to a group of K–12 teachers. The largest common concern was to how deal with "colonial day": the practice of re-enacting life in a colonial town

55. Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York, 1998); Thelma Wills Foote, *Black and White Manhattan: The History of Racial Formation in Colonial New York City* (New York, 2004), 9. Foote's work has not received the attention it deserves due in part to her untimely death in 2007.

56. On settler colonialism across time and space, and in conversation with histories of enslavement, see the forum, Jeffrey Ostler and Nancy Shoemaker, eds., "Settler Colonialism in Early American History," *William and Mary Quarterly* 76 (July 2019), 361–450, https://doi.org/10.5309/willmaryquar.76.3.0361.

with fourth graders, who dressed up in costumes, learned their parts as Puritan ministers, goodwives, merchants, colonial governors etc., and spent the day in a colonial village. As we might imagine, teachers were receiving pushback on these re-enactments: Were children of African descent supposed to inhabit the role of enslaved people? Was making butter just an innocent, easy activity, or was it an example of child labor? How did Puritan ministers understand slavery and Christianity? Were carpenters building ships for slave voyages? Whereas some parents remembered their own colonial days with nostalgia, others were less sanguine about what could and couldn't be depicted in such a format. But the deeper question, for them and for us: How do we effectively discuss and debate the gap between the ideal and the lived reality, historically and today, so that we can decide how to recognize our common humanity? As we approach the 250th anniversary, will "settler colonialism," "imperialism," and history from below have an impact on how this nation understands the full range of sacrifices, willing and unwilling, it took to define it? Will recognizing the full range of this history lead to a greater humility and care as we chart our future?

Hattem

The original imperial school of Charles Andrews, George Louis Beer, Lawrence Henry Gipson, et al., had a number of limitations that were a product of the nature of the young discipline of history in its early twentieth-century heyday. Their scholarship contrasts sharply with the recent work of those whom David Waldstreicher has called "neo-imperial" historians (or Atlantic historians of empire). Obviously, the difference in political and historiographical contexts between the early twentieth and twenty-first centuries has had a drastic impact on these two bodies of work. Historians like Andrews were deeply conservative Anglophiles, who in a very real sense were engaged in rescuing the reputation of the British Empire in the United States in the wake of the Great Rapprochement. More recent neo-imperial historians are working in a decidedly "anti-colonial" context, at least within the politics of academia. Recent work that draws on a contemporary historiographical context is offering new perspectives on how the empire lost control politically, culturally, geographically, and legally in ways that the original imperial school could not.[57]

57. Charles McLean Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History* (4 vols., New Haven, CT, 1934–1937); George Louis Beer, *The Old Colonial System, 1660–1754* (2 vols., New York, 1912); Lawrence Henry Gipson, *The British*

Acting in response to the hyper-nationalist historians of the nineteenth century and drawing on unprecedented access to British archives, the imperial historians focused primarily on the mechanics of British and colonial governance. Meanwhile, mid-twentieth-century scholarship on the coming of the Revolution largely drew a portrait of colonial resistance that began over issues of representation and then became about the distribution of authority within empire. But recently Jack Greene and Craig Yirush have highlighted the longer history of political conflicts between colonial governments and the metropole over that distribution of authority and the emergence of imperial and colonial constitutions of empire. Meanwhile, Steve Pincus's current work has argued for the existence of a transatlantic patriot Whig political culture while also reminding us that the nature of imperial administration took a decidedly authoritarian turn after the Seven Years' War. This is especially interesting because so much of twentieth-century historiography on the coming of the Revolution—from the imperial and progressive historians to the neo-Whigs—has to some extent been rooted in an attempt to explain patriots' seemingly exaggerated rhetoric about their treatment within the empire. Pincus's work (as well as that of several of his students and historians of the Spanish Empire) has suggested that perhaps patriot rhetoric about the threat of tyranny was not paranoid so much as it was grounded in an admittedly often vague understanding of the politics of the metropole and of imperial geopolitics as absolutism appeared to be on the march in Europe.[58]

Similarly, the new geographical perspective in early American and revolutionary scholarship has also produced analytical results that were beyond the original imperial historians. For example, a broader

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Empire before the American Revolution (15 vols., 1936; repr. New York, 1939–1970); Herbert Levi Osgood, *The American Colonies in the Seventeenth Century* (3 vols., New York, 1904–1907); David Waldstreicher, "The Revolutions of Revolution Historiography: Cold War Contradance, Neo-Imperial Waltz, or Jazz Standard?" *Reviews in American History* 42 (Mar. 2014), 22–35.

58. Jack P. Greene, *The Constitutional Origins of the American Revolution* (New York, 2011); Craig W. Yirush, *Settlers, Liberty, and Empire: The Roots of Early American Political Theory, 1675–1775* (New York, 2011); Pincus, *The Heart of the Declaration*; du Rivage, *Revolution against Empire*; James M. Vaughn, *The Politics of Empire at the Accession of George III: The East India Company and the Crisis and Transformation of Britain's Imperial State* (New Haven, CT, 2019). On colonial understandings of European politics, see D. H. Robinson, *The Idea of Europe & the Origins of the American Revolution* (New York, 2020), 174–336.

geographical scope has also informed recent perspectives on the relationship between law and empire in the colonies. This is most notable in the work of Daniel Hulsebosch, who argued for the importance of the challenge of unprecedented mobility amongst North American colonists to older notions of jurisdiction in colonial legal and political culture, and Eliga Gould's work on the importance of the law of nations in understanding the political break between the colonies and Britain. So, whereas the imperial historians were focused on British administration and the relationship between the colonies and Britain, works like these have both expanded our sense of that relationship and diminished the centrality afforded to it by the original imperial historians. This is an example of how a wide variety of subfields related to colonial and imperial history have offered new insights by broadening their geographical scope.[59]

Through the expansion of scale in the study of the Revolution in the previous two decades, we are opening new political, cultural, geographical, and legal perspectives on how the empire lost control. These perspectives go far beyond older imperial arguments about the importance of demagoguery in rhetorically shaping a distorted view of the colonies' relationship to Britain, and subsequent arguments about a debate over representation and the distribution of imperial authority. These recent threads exploring various modes of connection and relations between the empire and the colonies promise a more complex understanding of how the empire lost control of the colonies and the demise of the First British Empire than the original imperial historians' imaginations could have conjured.

Zabin

There's a lot in this question to contemplate.

I find particularly compelling Kathleen DuVal's formulation that "most people that become involved in a war have very little to do with its making." That insight explains so beautifully how historians' desire to

59. Daniel J. Hulsebosch, *Constituting Empire: New York and the Transformation of Constitutionalism in the Atlantic World, 1664–1830* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2005); Hulsebosch, "Imperia in Imperio: The Multiple Constitutions of Empire in New York, 1750–1777," *Law and History Review* 16 (Summer 1998), 319–379; Eliga H. Gould, *Among the Powers of the Earth: The American Revolution and the Making of a New World Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2012). Also, see Mary Sarah Bilder, *The Transatlantic Constitution: Colonial Legal Culture and the Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2004).

expand the cast of characters we bring to our past histories doesn't necessarily change much about the causes of the American Revolution. Those who "became involved"—as soldiers, as keepers of the homefront, as laborers, as guides, and as victims—rarely got to sit at the table where decisions were made, although they shaped the ways that those decisions played out on the ground. And I think that the ways that these people experienced the British Empire, both materially and emotionally, colored their responses to the conflicts that political elites created.

I grappled for a long time with this question of an "imperial understanding of the Revolution." There's no question that our sense of the British Empire and its relationship to the American Revolution has changed. We as historians are certainly done with the idea that the Thirteen Colonies that signed the Declaration of Independence were the only British colonies (or the only ones worth thinking about). In general, I think that a new focus on the British Empire is really part of historians' incorporation of a more interconnected ("entangled," as Eliga Gould pointed out quite a while ago) and global world into their explanations of the American Revolution. The conflict over tea, to take the most obvious example, was as much an attempt by Parliament to exploit their colonies in India by propping up the East India Company as it was to teach American consumers or merchants some kind of lesson about the power of the British Empire. In other words, the new work shows us the British Empire as more than a force exerted on North American colonies.[60]

Thinking about whether the British Empire "lost control" of the colonies highlights some disagreements between us about the intention of the British Empire. Tim Breen wrote, "in a mood that blended aggression and complaisance, British political leaders did what imperial administrators have often done when challenged by dependent subjects—they relied on state violence to obtain their own ends." I would argue, however, that British political officials were actually not very good at using state violence to achieve their ends, at least not if what they were trying to do was overawe white colonists into acquiescing to British power. As I've argued elsewhere, using the British military to act as police was almost always a mistake in the eighteenth century, and the military knew it.[61]

The British military was enormously effective, however, in keeping the "other" thirteen colonies within its empire. Nova Scotia depended

60. Eliga H. Gould, "Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds: The English-Speaking Atlantic as a Spanish Periphery," *American Historical Review* 112 (June 2007), 764–86.

61. Zabin, *The Boston Massacre*.

enormously on the economic support of the British Navy. Even more important, West Indian assemblies and planters understood clearly that they would not survive either external threats or internal ones without a large military presence. As Leslie Harris reminds us, Dunmore's proclamation exposed to white Virginians the possibility that they "would have to figure out how to maintain their own protection against slave insurrection." The military power of the state was most effective as a political tool when used to support slavery rather than to make white colonists cower.

An older imperial history was the story of an overweening British Empire trying to keep America from fulfilling its glorious destiny. These days, the British Empire in America looks more like an overwhelmed bureaucracy of a newly expanded empire that was experimenting with new forms of governance and administration. Rebellion on the part of colonial governments was a response to the British government's policies, but not because Parliament had particularly singled out Massachusetts or Virginia (at least, not at first). As ministers and mid-level administrators tried to reimagine how to coordinate and administer this empire, they stepped on plenty of toes. And here is where I would loop back to agree with Tim (with a little help from some of the other responses): The British government did make the first missteps.

Michael Hattem pointed out in an earlier response that there were "cultural shifts" in the 1760s and 1770s that made the idea of independence possible in 1776. These seem to point toward the idea of a voluntary relationship with Britain, rather than an involuntary one. Choosing their history, their consumer goods, and to some degree even their king was a new way of thinking about what it meant to be a British colonist. Perhaps this new scholarship really reveals that white colonists lost their desire to be part of the empire. In other words, the British did not lose control, accidentally breaking the iron chains that bound their colonies to the metropolis. Instead, they alienated colonial affections.

Question 5: How would you encourage Americans to commemorate the Revolution's 250th anniversary?

Breen

We should be honest about the prospects for the Revolution's 250th anniversary. The odds are great that the observance will be disappointing, even embarrassing. That may seem an overly cynical observation, but on the basis of past experience, one can anticipate a commercial flood of

Founding Father bobbleheads and patriotic coffee cups. There is also the disturbing prospect that the event will be subsumed by partisan political issues. More threatening is the possibility that few Americans will care one way or another about the country's origins. Genuine curiosity about the past is fading as students turn their attention to academic subjects that promise career rewards.

Much popular indifference results from the inability of serious research scholars to communicate effectively with the American people. The commemoration provides an opportunity to bridge the gap. It will not be easy. The challenge is how to incorporate a broader, more inclusive narrative of revolution—one that deals honestly with the experiences of African Americans, women, and Native Americans and expands the geographic perspective of the story to include areas beyond the thirteen original states—without ignoring topics that also speak to the interests of ordinary people. What must be avoided is a reflexive return to national history populated exclusively by a familiar group of leaders. It would be a mistake, of course, to dismiss celebrated figures such as Washington, Jefferson, and Adams from a larger interpretative perspective, but they should appear in a more nuanced political context.

How then could we develop an honest revolutionary story able to resonate beyond university history departments? My suggestion is that we should radically revise the entire narrative and ask new, engaging questions about political and cultural independence that have gone missing from the historical conversation. In the current roiled political climate, a fresh approach to our country's origins might speak powerfully to ordinary people uncertain about exactly what the Revolution achieved and why they should care.

A bold revision might begin by focusing on a subject that has long haunted discussions of the American Revolution. Haunted, but never adequately addressed. We are still not sure exactly in what sense the Revolution was revolutionary. Was it really comparable to the events that transformed France and Russia? Probably not. Perhaps because our revolution does not qualify for the World Series of revolutions, historians have concentrated on its many failures. The list is daunting. It did not liberate 20 percent of the population that was enslaved, and it was a disaster for Native Americans.

Still, the question remains. Do these undeniable failures mean that the Revolution was not revolutionary? We are not sure how we might measure such things. For many participants in the revolutionary movement

the major promise of independence was freeing colonists from a burdensome and increasingly objectionable aristocratic culture. Doffing the cap to leaders who claimed authority simply because of blood lines became intolerable at some moment and contempt for a society based on monarchical privilege gave way to the idea that all men are created equal. Within the context of the times that notion was radical and a reminder that a revolutionary strand—however poorly implemented over the last several centuries—might resonate with modern Americans irritated by how other Americans assume special privilege simply because of wealth and inheritance.

It is time to consider seriously a second key question that floats over the entire revolutionary debate. What, we wonder, was the character of the entire event? Into what analytic category should we place it? Was it a colonial rebellion, which properly should be compared with what occurred in other emerging colonial states such as India and Nigeria? Or, we might ask, if the American Revolution was in some manner genuinely revolutionary, when did it transition from rebellion to revolution? In other words, should we be depicting the Revolution not so much as a single event—something that occurred in 1776—or as an ongoing process in which ordinary American people discovered revolution, learned through experience what it meant not to be British? This approach would at the very least restore the people to the story of their own revolution, and it might promote greater empathy for the aspirations of groups throughout the world who are now struggling against imperial oppression in one form or another. Of course, unless one understands the shifting demands of resistance to imperial power—the experience of throwing off an aristocratic culture—one is hard put to comprehend the post-revolutionary imperatives in America that led to the ratification of a strong, centralized federal government.

A third revision of the traditional story might challenge a chronology that most Americans take for granted. The standard textbook narrative is grounded on what might be called the pressure cooker model of political resistance. It starts with the coronation of George III—great hopes but disappointing results—and then jumps nimbly to the Stamp Act Crisis. From there it is an easy step to protest against the Townshend duties. And then the Tea Act, growing concern over military occupation. The Declaration of Independence seems the logical and inevitable result to building colonial unhappiness. The problem with this familiar history—sure to be repeated endlessly in 2026—is that it ignores the power and resilience of the British Empire and fails to show how and when ordinary

people moved from mildly interested spectators to defiant rebels. The problem—then and now—is how to explain massive political mobilization. As I have argued before, the irritants of the 1760s were not harbingers for independence. These tensions were part of running a large empire. The major change occurred when ordinary people became committed revolutionaries.

It is unlikely that the 250th anniversary will change how the American people view the origins of the republic. But they may ask new questions about popular participation in a revolutionary movement. That is a welcome prospect. As the philosopher Richard Rorty counseled, perhaps the best we can do is encourage a candid conversation with ourselves about what we still value in our political society.

DuVal

For all of our rejection of a triumphalist interpretation of the American Revolution and our insistence on seeing its complexity and ambiguity as well as the ill effects it had on some people in the short and long runs, I hope that Americans will also find some inspiration and even celebration in the 250th anniversary.

In its 2023 session, the North Carolina State Legislature considered House Bill 96, which would have required all students at North Carolina public colleges to pass a three-unit course in American government, a course that by law would include reading and being tested on the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and other specific documents from U.S. and North Carolina history. The bill's title, the "Reclaiming College Education on America's Constitutional Heritage" or "NC REACH Act," reveals its authors' underlying assumption that colleges are teaching the founding wrong, and it is easy to dismiss the bill as more an attack on us historians than inspired by genuine respect for the Constitution.[62]

Yet there is a baby here that I do not want to throw out with the bathwater: Americans (and some people beyond the United States) care deeply about the Revolution and the founding. I do not think that a self-righteous and dismissive interpretation of the nation's founding as cynical and

62. Indeed, I argued as much in an opinion piece in the *Raleigh News and Observer* entitled "This Heritage Act Bill is an Insult to NC Students and Their Teachers," May 9, 2023.

sinister is any more correct than a Whiggish insistence that the Revolution only temporarily and mistakenly left out a few people from its sunny rights-expansion agenda. I think Jane Kamensky is right to worry in her 2019 "Two Cheers for the Nation: An American Revolution for the Revolting United States" that "our current scholarly synthesis renders our students—rising voters all—passive: frozen with shame rather than prostrate in awe, but docile just the same." As Kamensky notes, "shame and veneration are but opposite sides of the same coin. Neither cultivates action, which lies at the core of democratic citizenship." I am glad to report from North Carolina that the REACH Act did not pass, and the UNC System's Board of Governors instead enacted a more moderate version, without the "Reclaiming" title, which requires students to take one of many classes, including my Revolution class, that teach "Foundations of American Democracy."[63]

A multi-perspectival history of the American Revolution should not paralyze but instead should facilitate understandings that can be both complicated and inspiring. Serena Zabin explained in the *JER* in 2017 that "without mythologizing power or condescending to the losers, historians can offer multiple perspectives on an event." If we do so, different people will take different lessons from the Revolution's history, some more celebratory than others, but ideally none simplistically triumphalist and none simplistically cynical.[64]

As much it may surprise some North Carolina state legislators, in my U.S. History to 1865 course, I make a point of quoting uses of the soaring rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence across multiple lectures. The Seneca Falls convention in 1848 declared: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal" and that "the history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her." In 1865, as Tennessee was writing a new state constitution, a large number of the state's Black men wrote to the Tennessee Constitutional Convention urging its members to extend to Black men the right to vote: "We know the burdens of citizenship, and are ready to bear them," they wrote. "This is a democracy—a government of

63. Kamensky, "Two Cheers for the Nation," quotation 315.

64. Serena R. Zabin, "Conclusion: Writing To and From the Revolution," *Journal of the Early Republic* 37 (Winter 2017), 771–83, quotation 773.

the people. It should aim to make every man, without regard to the color of his skin, the amount of his wealth, or the character of his religious faith, feel personally interested in its welfare. Every man who lives under the Government should feel that it is his property, his treasure, the bulwark and defence of himself and his family, his pearl of great price, which he must preserve, protect, and defend." We do not these days often think of our government—or our Revolutionary heritage—as our "pearl of great price." But these men hoping for true citizenship, like the women and men who gathered at Seneca Falls in 1848, remind us that we do a disservice to our audiences if we leap to an easy cynicism about democratic institutions and American ideals. The United States was founded on idealism, and the historical and continuing tensions between American ideals and shortcomings seem something that the majority of the U.S. public is ready to explore with us at the nation's 250th anniversary.[65]

Harris

In the years surrounding the 1976 Bicentennial, Alex Haley's book *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and the subsequent television show (1977), as well as Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom* focused the nation's attention to the centrality of slavery, African Americans, and race to the foundational ideas, economy, politics, and experiences of the United States. These works were only the highest crest of several waves of knowledge that expanded the nation's and the historical profession's understanding of the Revolutionary era—but that also reframed the *questions* that could and should be asked. Even as Haley's work was met with charges of plagiarism, it became one of the most important cultural touchstones of public history of its era. Haley re-centered American history through the eyes of African Americans in a way that echoed and reinforced the struggles and triumphs of the 1960s, which the nation was still in the process of digesting and accepting—or rejecting. Morgan's argument that slavery enabled the development of American

65. Andrew Tait et al. to the Union Convention of Tennessee, Jan. 9, 1865 (59 signatories plus "many other colored citizens of Nashville"), printed in unidentified newspaper, clipping enclosed in Col. R. D. Mussey to Capt. C. P. Brown, Jan. 23, 1865, Letters Received, series 925, Department of the Cumberland, U.S. Army Continental Commands, Record Group 393 Pt. 1, National Archives, transcribed in *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War*, ed. Ira Berlin (New York, 1992), 499–500.

democracy by providing a base population upon which whites of all classes could build their own hopes and dreams drew from and influenced a range of scholarship, from George Fredrickson's use of Herrenvolk Democracy in 1971's *The Black Image in the White Mind* to Walter Johnson's conception of enslavers creating their dreams from the worth embodied in enslaved people sold in southern antebellum markets in *Soul by Soul*. Even as the nation approached and then moved beyond the celebrations of the Bicentennial moment, the historic redefinition of the American polity in the post-World War II era continued to reverberate in the public sphere and in academia.[66]

Nearly fifty years on, we approach another anniversary. The paths laid out by Haley, Morgan, and a host of others continue to expand and deepen the possibility for a complex exploration of the Revolutionary era. Can the 2026 commemoration contain it all? Not least, the very public controversy and discussion of the New York Times *1619 Project* (as well as the revised version that followed in the edited volume) has made clear that for many, the conversations about the role of African Americans in the history of our nation that were highlighted in 1976 have advanced among academics and the general public, but that more work needs to be done. In addition, the Supreme Court's focus on originalist interpretations of the Constitution that assume attitudes among the Founding Fathers that were impossible (such as colorblindness) continue to mislead a general public about the full range of ideologies and unresolved problems that were present and unsolvable at the founding—unsolvable because historical change takes time, even amid a revolution.

How does one celebrate complexity? The unfinished? Our ongoing responsibility? Are these things to celebrate, or to recommit to, or both? Can we honor the founding moment by also seeing how much there still is to do? Although the idea of a living Constitution is for some a chimera of its own, there is a need for us to live more fully into the best aspects of that

66. Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (New York, 1976); Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*; Arnold H. Lubasch, "'Roots' Plagiarism Suit is Settled," *New York Times*, Dec. 15, 1978, https://www.nytimes.com/1978/12/15/archives/roots-plagiarism-suit-is-settled-roots-plagiarism-suit-is-settled.html. On the cultural impact, see Erica L. Ball and Kellie Carter Jackson, eds., *Reconsidering Roots: Race, Politics and Memory* (Athens, GA, 2017). George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (New York, 1971); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).

Constitution—and to outlive or outgrow other aspects that clearly do not serve our current circumstances well. Most recently, Harvard historian Jill Lepore has begun The Amendments Project, which seeks to challenge the idea that the Constitution can't or shouldn't be amended or reinterpreted for contemporary needs. She is far from alone in her sense of the urgency of this effort. The question is, how? How do we move on from stagnant memorialization to a living interaction between the ideals of the past and their usefulness or irrelevance in the present?[67]

Commemoration implies an ending, something that is complete and unchanging: the end of a war; the end of a life. The ideas inaugurated by the Revolutionary era, not only in the United States but also in the Caribbean, Europe, and beyond, have not ended, and their meaning was not and is not complete nor unchanging. The Revolutionary era invited an ongoing engagement with our secular responsibilities to each other, as nations and as part of a global community—responsibilities to redefining our common humanity in a way that allowed for greater self-fulfillment (which is not to be confused with unlimited individualism). An honest engagement with the complex legacies of the founding era—positive and negative; still useful and no longer useful—appears to call not for a static commemoration, but a critical engagement that might enable many more of us to renew an active and activist sense of our present and future. In that spirit, commemorating the Revolution would include the following:

1. **Recognizing** that it was a Revolutionary *era*, in which numerous groups of people within and beyond North America participated in a fundamental and ongoing redefinition of humane possibilities.
2. **Reckoning** with the idea that no "revolution" is stable but continues to reverberate outward.
3. **Recommitting** to active engagement with the legacies of Revolutionary era, which would include
    a. Registering to vote—and actually voting in every election for which one is eligible;

67. Jill Lepore, "How to Stave Off Constitutional Extinction," *New York Times*, July 1, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/01/opinion/constitutional-amendments-american-history.html; and The Amendments Project, https://amendmentsproject.org.

b. Reading and supporting local journalism, by subscription or donation, as a vital source of accurate information;
c. Participation in one action at each of the local, state and federal levels, once a month: attending a city council or school board meeting; sending a letter to an elected official about an issue you care about; even learning about an issue that you're unsure you know about.

What was true of the Revolutionary era is that many different groups of people created and used that time to deepen their connection to knowledge and activism: by reading, communicating, learning, acting, voting (with their feet or their ballots, in informal and formal politics). We would all do well to deepen our connection to how to create meaningful change around some of our most pressing issues—some of which were alive at the time of the Founding, and most of which need new thinking and new solutions in today's context.

Hattem

As the 250th anniversary of independence approaches, the nation's current circumstances share a few interesting similarities with the Bicentennial of 1976. Just as the long Bicentennial era can be said to have started with the opening of *1776,* a Broadway musical, in March of 1969, the long semi-quincentennial era can also be said to have started with the opening of a Broadway musical—*Hamilton*—in January of 2015. Just as the years leading up to the Bicentennial of 1976 were marked by scandals that implicated the president of the United States in the commission of crimes, so too have been the years leading to the 250th anniversary of 2026. As in the early 1970s, Americans today have unusually high levels of distrust and lack of faith in American institutions, while the regional partisanship that was beginning to emerge in the 1970s has become more firmly entrenched. Just as the Bicentennial era was defined in part by liberal activist movements for equal rights for African Americans and women, so too have the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements helped define the contemporary political climate as the next anniversary approaches. And just as those earlier movements sparked significant counter-reactions from conservatives who responded in part by doubling down on their sense of ownership of the legacy of the American Revolution, so too have the most recent movements.

Throughout the nation's history, conflicts over the popular memory of the Revolution have tended to become more prominent and vitriolic when certain conditions have existed: high levels of political partisanship, economic downturn, active social movements attempting to redress inequality, a rise (or perceived rise) in immigration, and an approaching anniversary.

Currently, the United States is arguably experiencing all of these conditions, creating an almost perfect storm for political and cultural conflict over the memory of the Revolution. Of course, we have already seen this in recent years with the 2020 "Conference on American History" held in Washington, DC, and recent attempts by Republican state legislatures to ban the teaching of race and slavery under the guise of "critical race theory." Yet, I would argue that conflicts over the meaning and legacy of the Revolution (and American history, more broadly) are not inherently a sign of dysfunction. Rather, they have been a constant (and, one might argue, necessary) part of American political culture for nearly two hundred and fifty years. As such, these political conflicts over defining the past should be understood themselves as a form of commemoration.

Just as there are many similarities between the contexts of the Bicentennial and the present, there are also things to be both avoided and continued from the commemorations of the long Bicentennial era. Fortunately, the crass commercialism of the "buy-centennial" seems unlikely to be repeated, for a variety of reasons, as does the failed attempt by the Nixon administration to centralize a national commemoration for partisan gain. With the end of the scandal-ridden American Revolution Bicentennial Commission in 1972–73, the actual commemorations of the Bicentennial in 1976 were organized and occurred at the state and local levels. As during the Centennial of 1876, these commemorations often focused more on local history than the history of the Revolution specifically. As such, past anniversaries have provided an impetus toward commemorating American history on a more local, community level. Were this to be repeated with the 250th anniversary, it would be a welcome outcome.

The Bicentennial also provided an unprecedented platform for the growth of public history. The 1970s and 1980s marked the beginning of a new kind of public history in which credentialed historians played an increasing and decisive role. The new public history drew on the scholarly

developments of the time. It incorporated social history and its concern for the lives and experiences of ordinary individuals and drew on exciting new scholarly developments in African American history, Latino American history, and the history of women. Through the work of organizations like the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation and countless other local Black organizations and activists, public history sites dedicated to African American history— including the Boston African American National Historic Site and the African American Museum of Philadelphia—were established throughout the country under the aegises of the federal, state, and local governments as well as private and non-profit entities. In the wake of the Bicentennial, African American history began to become more visible in much older, more traditionally white public history sites. Colonial Williamsburg hired its first actors to portray enslaved people in 1979 and, in 1981, began offering a two-hour "Other Half Tour," which focused primarily on slavery. Meanwhile, at Monticello, visitors were already being exposed to information about slavery and the life of Sally Hemings well before the famous DNA study in 1998. In the 1980s and 1990s, social history and the growth of women's history led to increased visibility of women as historical subjects in many public history sites as well. Partly a product of these Bicentennial efforts, it is now largely taken for granted by those working on the ground in the field of public history that the way to attract larger audiences and commemorate the past generally—particularly as the nation has diversified demographically—is to highlight the lives and contributions of non-elites and marginalized groups.

But the history of the Revolution itself is only part of the story. For nearly 250 years, the memory of the Revolution has served as the nation's origin myth. And the history of how Americans have remembered and used the Revolution should also be commemorated. In 1776, Lemuel Haynes, a mixed-race Minuteman and later preacher was perhaps the first American to quote the Declaration's famous line: "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." "Liberty is equally as precious to a black man, as it is to a white one," he wrote, "and bondage as equally as intolerable to the one as it is to the other." In the 1830s, abolitionists took up the mantle of defining the Declaration primarily by the ideal of equality. William Lloyd Garrison's very first issue of *The Liberator* in 1831 included a mission statement in which he wrote, "Assenting to the 'self-evident truths

maintained in the American Declaration of Independence . . . I shall strenuously contend for the immediate enfranchisement of our slave population." In 1848, the Seneca Falls Convention of the woman's rights movement issued their "Declaration of Sentiments," which modified the language of the Declaration of Independence, beginning with: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal." Into the twentieth century, the suffragist movement, the civil rights movement, and the gay and lesbian rights movements all laid claim to the Revolution, particularly through the ideals of equality and liberty. The importance of the Revolution in the cause of change and progress should itself be commemorated because it offers a reminder of the potential power in remembering and laying claim to the legacy of the Revolution, which is every Americans' birthright, and the potential dangers of ceding claims to its legacy to one side of the political spectrum.[68]

Zabin

I would encourage Americans to take the Revolution's 250th anniversary as an opportunity to engage in their civic communities. I'd love to tie the 250th to an enormous voter registration drive, but even more than that, I would be thrilled to see Americans come together to clean up a park, paint a mural, or sign up for a book club at their local libraries. I know that sounds painfully earnest, and, as with all volunteer projects, there probably should be cake.

But I'm not suggesting a birthday party. In the spirit of the MLK national day of service, I would want Americans to imagine a future together with the country that we have. I think that engaging in the country as it is today, and connecting with other people as we do it, are two key themes that I'd want to see the semi-quincentennial commemorations put at their center.

We have spent a lot of this conversation thinking about the history of the United States, but the anniversary is a time to look forward as well as

68. Michael D. Hattem, *The Memory of '76: The Revolution in American History* (New Haven, CT, 2024), 3–6. "Declaration of Sentiments" quoted in Ruth Bogin, "'Liberty Further Extended': A 1776 Antislavery Manuscript by Lemuel Haynes," *William and Mary Quarterly 40* (Jan. 1983), 88–105, quotation 95. See also Holton, *Liberty*, 248–49. *The Liberator, Vol. I, no. I,* Jan. 31, 1831, in MHS Collections Online. https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=1698 .Hattem, *The Memory of '76,* 225–28, 262–63.

back. Leslie Harris points to the "range of sacrifices" made both willingly and not, that it took to create the United States. As we all know, the foundation of the United States, in other words, is much more than the soaring rhetoric that opens the Declaration of Independence. But that rhetoric is also part of the history that we could bring forward into the present. Along the lines of Danielle Allen's *Our Declaration*, the commemoration of the 250th is a civic event, not a historical one. There is a long tradition among Black historians from William Cooper Nell to Annette Gordon-Reed that those ideals of America's Founding are worth holding up as a mirror to the United States, to show the country how it can improve as well as the ways that it has failed. A labor organizer I know has always asserted that no one wants to follow a pessimist. Those yet unfulfilled claims made in the Declaration's preamble can and should be America's lodestar in a movement toward a better country in a more just world.[69]

The power of action as the core of a commemoration, I would argue, is that it requires people to use both their hands and their hearts to engage. Having a vision of what should go on that mural, or exploring another world with a book group, or putting some sweat into a common place like a park, honors many parts of ourselves and one another. Of course, we should take it as a moment to build up the practices of our democracy, including voting. But voting is an individual act for the most part, and I am, personally, hungry for community activities.

I do not think that urging people to participate in acts of civic engagement is a particularly politics-neutral activity. I too am exhausted by the impact of extremists in our country. Exhortations to find common ground with our political opponents can feel like a demand to deny the humanity and dignity of some of us. And indeed, the past is littered with moments when some groups have fought for political inclusion and lost. As Toby Ditz once noted in these pages, the prevalence of these moments "force one to marvel, and not in a good way, that it was possible from the get-go [of the new nation] to claim political personhood in the name of a common humanity recognized by both speaker and listener and yet be denied again and again." It is hard to imagine settling into a cozy conversation about a novel with someone who denies your essential self.[70]

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69. Danielle Allen, *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (New York, 2014).

70. Toby Ditz, "Masculine Republics and 'Female Politicians,'" *Journal of the Early Republic* 36 (Summer 2015), 263–69, quotation 269.

And yet, while those extremist voices are loud, they are not the only ones in our lives. For while most people are not on the far left or far right, we still live in a country with intense disagreements about how to solve some of the enormous issues that we face. This is a country that was born in conflict; I would like to find some ways to model debates over our future as well as our past.

How should we find the right balance between long-term environmental goals and short-term needs? What are the right limits to place on technology, on capitalism, or on healthcare? These are genuine questions, which of course have their own ideologies and internal debates. And, in truth, they are far more complicated, requiring more knowledge, nuance, and education, than many of the culture war battle sites. Good debate and good answers require helping people slow down, learn, and maybe even read something longer than a social media post. As historians, we celebrate contingency, context, and subtle distinctions. We need to bring these skills, as well as our knowledge, to this commemoration.

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City (2003; Chicago, 2023) and most recently *Slavery and the University: Histories and Legacies* (Athens, GA, 2019, with James T. Campbell and Alfred L. Brophy). Harris has also participated in a number of public history projects, including the award-winning Slavery in New York exhibition (2005–2007) at the New-York Historical Society; the reinterpretation of the urban slave quarters at Telfair Museum's Owens-Thomas House in Savannah, Georgia; and the interactive website "People Not Property" with Historic Hudson Valley.

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