


BOOK REVIEW

## Michael D. Hattem. *The Memory of '76: The Revolution in American History*

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While John Adams asserted that the true American Revolution “was in the hearts and minds of the people” before 1776, Michael Hattem’s *The Memory of ’76* contends that it has remained there ever since. In each era of American history, “conflicts in American politics and culture over partisanship, regionalism, race, gender, class, ethnicity, and religion have unavoidably shaped and been shaped by the ways in which Americans have remembered and fought over their Revolution” (p. 303). Hattem traces an ongoing and disputed search for the “first principles” of the founding in America’s past to conclude that the “the memory of the Revolution has often done more to divide Americans than to unite them” (pp. 6–8).

The very first political disputes in early American history included pointed disagreements over how best to memorialize the Revolution. Popular commemorations like Mason Locke “Parson” Weems’s “apocryphal anecdotes” about George Washington’s “old-fashioned virtues” were crafted in the hope that “every youth may become a Washington” (p. 28). As the Federalist faction claimed Washington’s inheritance through histories produced by loyalists like John Marshall, Republicans aimed to memorialize “the revolutionary generation” as a whole through accounts produced by Thomas Jefferson’s ally Joel Barlow (pp. 21–24, 30). While sectionalism roiled the subsequent generation of American politics, it also reflected divergent interpretations of the Revolution. Abolitionists like Frederick Douglass called for citizens to reflect upon the irony of American liberty by asking, “What to the slave is the Fourth of July?” while pro-slavery advocates published Revolutionary histories that emphasized the South’s importance to the cause (p. 70). Americans found themselves caught between invocations of the Declaration of Independence to justify ending slavery—a practice “neither warrant[ed], license[d], nor sanction[ed]” by the Constitution—and secessionists who argued that the Constitution, with its tacit approval of slavery, supported a government free from tyranny and aligned to the idea of independence (pp. 70, 90). During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln professed the Declaration and the Constitution as mutually reinforcing the eventual abolition of slavery, while Jefferson Davis and Alexander Stephens asserted that the Declaration and the Constitution legitimized their efforts to secede and their conviction that all men were not *literally* created equal (pp. 81, 93).

By 1876, many Americans looked to the centennial celebrations as opportunities to align America's Revolutionary heritage with competing visions of modernity. African Americans successfully commissioned the construction of a centennial statue of Richard Allen, a Black educator and minister from the founding era who pushed for African American inclusion in Revolutionary patriotism (p. 113). Suffragists argued publicly that "the women of this nation, in 1876, have greater cause for discontent, rebellion, and revolution than the men of 1776," pushing organizers and attendees to support voting rights for women (p. 116). Meanwhile, the Society of the Cincinnati sponsored pilgrimages to Revolutionary sites, "instructing the nation in how to properly understand its revolutionary legacy," while the Daughters of the American Revolution offered speakers, organized events, published literature, and created clubs "aimed at inculcating patriotism in children" (p. 123). Textbook publishers, state legislatures, and historical sites like Monticello and Colonial Williamsburg all worked to root out any history that, as stated in a 1923 Wisconsin law, "falsifies the facts regarding the War of Independence or ... defames our nation's founders or misrepresents the ideals and causes for which they struggled" (p. 154). Charles Beard helped support progressive reformers' claim to be the true Revolutionary inheritance by documenting an elitist turn in the founders' Constitution. However, because Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal coalition relied on the support of conservative Democrats, it retained celebrations of founding principles while justifying government intervention in the economy in the name of economic prosperity and international security—the same principles that motivated Revolutionaries to sign the Declaration of Independence. (pp. 181–83).

Cold War conservatives employed similar consensus-oriented rhetoric by aligning the Revolution to three key principles: individual liberty, limited government, and free enterprise (pp. 181–83, 193). Throughout the "long bicentennial era," the Republican Party promoted a small-government vision of the founding, while New Left academics like Jesse Lemisch pushed back against the "schlock"-ification of celebratory history (pp. 246–47). A People's Bicentennial Commission held events in libraries and churches, connecting financial reform and anti-big business rhetoric to the movement for American independence (p. 255). African American bicentennial groups used community spaces to teach "the role of black Americans in United States history," and student organizations like the Amerind Club "use[d] the Bicentennial period to recapture a people's history and to support the urgent struggles of Native Americans" (pp. 257, 260–61). Meanwhile, conservatives found an earnest stalwart in Ronald Reagan and the "nationalist gospel" of figures like Billy Graham that fused commercialism, capitalism, and Christianity in American memory (pp. 271–75). Such divides permeate contemporary politics as well: Fights over history standards, heated disputes over Thomas Jefferson's exploitation of Sally Hemings, public endorsement of and performative outcry against *The 1619 Project*, and the musical *Hamilton's* combination of "the celebratory conservative memory with the liberal multicultural memory" of the Revolution suggest that Americans continue to argue over the politics of the nation's founding (pp. 281, 291–97, 301).

*The Memory of '76* reveals that, consciously or unconsciously, disputes over the Revolution itself have dominated public discourse and steered public understanding of the past and the present alike. This discursive political curriculum has reached beyond schools and permeated Americans' learning in many everyday contexts. In the early

1800s, Americans' tendencies to name children after the key figures of the founding generation increased by 1,000 percent (p. 56). American obsession with colonial revivalism in art and architecture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflected nostalgia for an era that seemed at once essential and inaccessible to a society staring down modernization (p. 126). Even schools themselves have been caught up in the politicization of the Revolution's memory in ways that stretched beyond the textbook or the classroom setting. In 1953, elected officials implored students in Kentucky's public schools to "donate a 'penny a week'" to support the restoration of Independence Hall. "At a time when America's ideals and principles are being attacked on all sides," the *Paducah Sun-Democrat* observed, "the determination of millions of youngsters to participate in restoring Independence Hall ... is a heart-warming affair" (p. 210).

An important thread throughout the work prioritizes Hattem's conclusion that because advocates for such disparate causes have invoked the Revolution to support their divergent positions, such appeals often rendered it "devoid of any ideological meaning" (p. 93). Regrettably, Americans have come to argue over "who gets to be centered" in the founding instead of "who gets to be included" (p. 303). As a result, the book serves as a critical reminder for scholars, educators, and learners alike that the Revolution was and remains a contested part of nearly every aspect of American political life. Given the insightful discovery that a perpetually contested memory of the founding is embedded in the nation's political psyche, Hattem's work offers an important opportunity to build awareness of these contests and a more holistic understanding of what it means to debate, discuss, and understand America's history in all its complexity. If, as Thurgood Marshall remarked in a 1989 speech, "the true miracle was not the birth of the Constitution, but its life," then *The Memory of '76* is essential reading for those who wish to think more deliberately about the founding and its long life in American "hearts and minds."