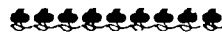




The American Revolution

The nation's bicentenary has spurred a number of leading scholars to take another look at the American Revolution. Some have uncovered new data on social and economic life in colonial America. Others have sought anew to explain the Revolution's causes and effects, its leaders' strengths and weaknesses. Here, Sociologist Robert Nisbet discusses the Revolution's social impact; in a second essay, Historian Merrill Peterson analyzes the contrasting roles of the Revolution's principal thinkers, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, two political allies who became ideological foes, and then, in old age, were reconciled.



THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE REVOLUTION

by Robert Nisbet

Was there in fact an American Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century? By this, I mean a revolution involving sudden, decisive, and irreversible changes in social institutions, groups, and traditions, in addition to the war of liberation from England that we are more likely to celebrate.

Clearly, this is a question that generates much controversy. There are scholars whose answer to the question is strongly negative. Indeed, ever since Edmund Burke's time there have been students to declare that revolution in any precise sense of the word did not take place—that in substance the American Revolution was no more than a group of Englishmen fighting on distant shores for traditionally English political

This article was adapted from: Robert Nisbet, "The Social Impact of the Revolution." In America's Continuing Revolution: An Act of Conservation (Washington: The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1975).

Robert Nisbet, 63, is Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at Columbia University. A historical sociologist, he was born in Los Angeles, did his undergraduate work and Ph.D. (1937) at Berkeley, where he taught sociology until 1953. He then shifted to the University of California's Riverside campus, becoming dean and vice chancellor before moving to the University of Arizona in 1972. He has published widely read studies of social upheaval, notably *Social Change and History, Tradition and Revolt*, and *Twilight of Authority*. He has served on a Wilson Center advisory panel on the selection of Fellows.

rights against a government that had sought to exploit and tyrannize. According to this argument, it was a war of restitution and liberation, not revolution; the outcome, one set of political governors replacing another. This view is widespread in our time and is found as often among ideological conservatives as among liberals and radicals.

At the opposite extreme is the view that a full-blown revolution did indeed take place. This is clearly what John Adams believed: "The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments, of their duties and obligations. . . . This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affectations of the people, was the real American Revolution." And Samuel Adams, more radical in ideology and hence more demanding in defining revolution, asked rhetorically, "Was there ever a revolution brought about, especially one so important as this, without great internal tumults and violent convulsions?"

If there was a genuine revolution in America, we shall find it not in the sphere of ideological tracts—which history demonstrates may or may not yield actual revolution—but rather in the social sphere.

Whether we follow Tocqueville and Taine* in seeing centralization and collectivization of political power as the principal consequence of revolution, or more radical historians in seeing individual liberty and welfare as the chief consequence, it is invariably the impact on the intermediate social sphere†—on the ties to land, kindred, class, estate, and servitude of one kind or another—that is at the heart of the matter.

Consider the French Revolution. Scholars may differ among themselves as to whether, in the final analysis, it was the *individual* with his rights and liberties or the *political state* with its

* Hippolyte Adolphe Taine (1828–93), French philosopher and historian.

† That is, intermediate between individual and state.

centralized power and national solidarity that had the greater triumph. But what is unmistakably clear is that the whole complex of social authorities, allegiances, and functions, so largely the heritage of the medieval period, was vitally changed during the French Revolution. The real essence of this revolution was not its Reign of Terror, formidable as that was, but the legislation enacted by successive French revolutionary governments—legislation that profoundly affected the nobility, the traditional family, the corporate nature of property, the laws of primogeniture and entail, the place of religion in society, the guilds, and other groups.

Such changes in intermediate society can be seen vividly in other modern revolutions—in some degree in the Puritan Revolution of seventeenth century England, in far greater degree in the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, and in our own time in some of the new nations in the non-Western world.

Now, it is worth stressing that the social sphere is commonly “feudal” in nature when we find it being assaulted by the hammer blows of revolution. Feudalism invites revolution because it virtually consecrates inequality—the prime cause of revolution everywhere. It succumbs rather easily because of its seeming inability to command wide loyalties and because it is unable, by its nature, to mobilize the necessary military power quickly and effectively. Feudalism’s characteristic diffusion and decentralization of power results in an inability to draw upon a central power in crises. Marxists have told us much about how capitalism and its associated political structures are subject to revolution. But, in truth, all the revolutions of modern history have been launched against systems more nearly *feudal* than capitalist. It may well be that the overriding effect of modernization in both its economic and political manifestations is to sterilize the revolutionary impulse.

Feudalism in America

In light of these observations, let us now consider the American Revolution. Was there in the colonies a social order that can reasonably be called feudal?

Can conflicts originating in inequality, in social class, property, and religion be discerned in America in whatever degree, analogous to the conflicts leading up to the English, French, and Russian revolutions?

Finally, can substantial changes, effected politically, within revolutionary circumstances, be found taking place in the social

structure of America during the two decades following the outbreak of war with England?

The answer to these questions is yes.

An American "feudal stage" has often been denied or effaced by historians in their stress on the homogeneous middle-class character of American colonial history. But there was indeed a solid substructure of feudalism in the American colonies.

Feudalism has less to do with knights, castles, and dukedoms than with the "ties of dependence" uniting individuals of all classes into a society. I am inclined to think that a feudal system necessarily emerges whenever a relatively small number of persons seek to live in a new territory with great expanses of land to be had by the well-off or energetic, where ties with a central authority are weak or absent, where localism is enforced by topography as well as custom, and where landed property tends to create the fundamental rights and privileges in society. Certainly by the mid-1700s the American colonies met these feudal criteria, no matter how loath we may be to apply them to the Pilgrims and others of established historical fancy, who we are prone to believe left all European history behind when they came to the New World.

A Land-based Class System

In the colonies, land counted for a very great deal. And where a social system is rooted in the land, land-hunger is the common and abiding accompaniment—a hunger that directs itself particularly to large manorial estates.

Nearly three million acres in New York alone were occupied by large, essentially manorial, estates. The Van Rensselaer manor on the Hudson measured some 24 by 20 miles. The Fairfax estate in Virginia had, at the height of its prosperity, some six million acres. There were very large estates in the Carolinas, and in most of the other colonies as well—New England alone forming the exception. How could there not have been a substantial admixture of feudalism where such land holdings existed, assuming, as we have every right to assume, the survival of customs, conventions, and authorities brought to the New World from the Old?

From these great manorial holdings in America sprang a class system that was a vivid, if today often minimized, feature of colonial life. Feudal in essence, it had the large landowners at the top. As Richard Morris has pointed out, families such as

the Livingstons, De Lanceys, and Schuylers had a place in the social hierarchy and in politics not a bit different from that enjoyed in England at the time by such members of the nobility as the Duke of Bedford, the Marquess of Rockingham, and Lord Shelburne. Below the landed class fell tenant farmers, artisans, mechanics, small freeholders, laborers, indentured servants, and the very large class of Negro slaves.

There was little rhetoric in colonial times about homogeneity and equality when it came to classes as distinct in their powers and privileges as some of these were. Indeed, Jackson Turner Main has concluded, in his *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America*, that the long-term tendency was "toward greater inequality, with marked class distinctions." Class lines were discernible in the cities as well. A great deal of the inbreeding and the close social and political solidarity found in eighteenth century England existed, and was surely increasing in intensity, in pre-revolutionary America.

An established religion—a "state church"—is another aspect of life that is feudal in root and connotation. In most of the colonies, religious establishment existed in one degree or other. Congregationalism reigned in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut, and the Church of England in a number of other colonies. Yet in none, so far as I can ascertain, did a majority of the people actually profess the established faith.

Is it difficult to suppose widespread resentment on the part of the majority at the thought of paying taxes to support a church to which they did not belong and may even have detested? Even where taxes were light and only randomly collected, the symbolic aspect was important. Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists, and Methodists in Virginia were bound to have resented paying taxes in support of the Church of England and a clergy notoriously given to sloth and drink.

Laws of Inheritance

Where feudalism exists in any degree, so do the customs of *primogeniture* and *entail*, the first granting the inheritance of fixed property only to the oldest son, the second fixing land firmly to family line. These customs existed throughout Europe and were also familiar to the colonists. When the Revolution broke out, only two colonies had abolished primogeniture, only one had abolished entail.

Some historians of the American Revolution belittle the effect in the colonies of the laws of primogeniture and entail

and of religious establishment because contemporary research into the records of that time finds evidence of only infrequent legal recourse or attempted recourse. But the comparative study of social movements makes plain enough that there is little correlation between the *symbolic* importance attached to issues and their measurable incidence. Think only of abortion and busing in our own day!

The same can be said of the significance attributed to the economic prosperity experienced in the colonies for decades before the war with England. Given this prosperity, it is sometimes argued, social tensions could not have been severe. Again, however, we learn from the study of revolutions that there is nothing so calculated to focus attention upon social resentments and raise popular expectations and demands as a period of relative economic prosperity.

An Inevitable Revolution?

Would there have been a social revolution in America—bringing changes to such institutions as property, family, religion, and social class—if the war with England had not broken out? Would internal social tensions themselves have led to revolution?

My own guess, and it can only be that, is that no such revolution would have occurred without a precipitating war in which ideological values were strong.

Quite probably the social changes we see in the American Revolution would have occurred, albeit more slowly, under the spur of rising pressures during the next century. In fact, this did happen in Canada. But who can be sure in these matters?

If war was the necessary precipitating factor in the American social revolution, let it be remembered that war has accompanied each of the other major Western revolutions of modern times. The link between war and revolution is both existentially and historically close, especially when war is either intense or prolonged. Both destroy traditional authorities, classes, and types of wealth; both create new kinds of power, rank, and wealth. With much reason, conservatives have been as suspicious of war as of revolution. It was, after all, in the wake of war that revolutionary changes occurred in ancient Athens at the end of the fifth century B.C., and in the Rome of Augustus. Almost all the intensity of the French Revolution burst upon the French people in war and under the justification of war emergency.

Now let us consider the changes which took place so suddenly in traditional American social institutions and values—changes fully meriting the label “revolutionary.”

First, there is the relation between land and the family. Although discontent with the laws of primogeniture and entail had certainly existed for a long time, only Pennsylvania and Maryland had abolished the former and only South Carolina the latter, prior to the outbreak of the revolutionary war. Yet within a single decade of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, all but two states abolished entail, and in these two, entail had become relatively insignificant in any case. Within another five years, primogeniture had become illegal in every state and all had established some form of partible inheritance. Only two states, North Carolina and New Jersey, failed to include daughters as well as sons in the new laws of inheritance. Elsewhere full equality became the rule.

We may not be inclined *today* to regard the abolition of primogeniture and entail as a revolutionary change in social structure. But looking back a half-century into American history, Tocqueville spoke of society being “shaken to its center” by the adoption of that legislation.

Tocqueville was already steeped in the comparative aspects of the study of revolution, if only by virtue of the obsessive influence of the French Revolution; he knew very well indeed that strong family systems everywhere are rooted in the continuity of family property. He also knew that the best possible prescription for the individualization and, in time, the economic rootlessness of a population is the separation of kinship from this foundation. Not only does the law of partible inheritance make it difficult for families to preserve their ancestral domains, Tocqueville pointed out, but it soon deprives them of the desire to attempt the preservation. Historians of our own day echo Tocqueville’s view (although with far greater documentation). One need reflect but a moment on the incentives—to land speculators, not to mention to the heirs—that would have stemmed from this abolition.

How simple it was for France to effect similar changes two decades later! Only a single act by a single body of lawmakers was required, such was the centralization that had been wrought by French monarchs and then confirmed by the revolutionary assembly. The same can be said of analogous Russian changes following the Bolshevik triumph. How remarkable, then, that in America one of the most telling acts of equaliza-

tion known in social history was effected virtually in unison by 13 different legislatures. To say, as many American students of the Revolution have said, that laws of primogeniture and entail mattered little, that they were at best hardly more than vestigial memories, scarcely fits the swift and uniform eradication of these laws by the state legislatures.

Nor should we overlook the revolutionary impact of the confiscations of large Tory-owned estates, with shares of these holdings going to American patriots. The exact number of acres involved is less significant than the *fact* of confiscation and distribution. For an appropriate parallel in our own day we should have to imagine state confiscation of a substantial number of large "disloyal" business corporations, with ownership of shares turned over to loyal citizens. The sense of revolutionary acquisition among the citizens in that day of overwhelmingly landed wealth must have been substantial.

Religious Freedom

It was inevitable that the shocks of the war with England would produce revolutionary consequences in the religious realm as well. Agitation for release from the exactions of religious establishment could hardly help but become part of the act of war against England in those colonies where the Church of England was established. And this agitation was bound to have reverberations even in colonies where the Congregational church was established.

True, the laws pertaining to religion were not everywhere overthrown in a single spasm. In parts of New England, disestablishment did not occur until the nineteenth century. Nor was there by any means firm agreement among the leaders of the revolutionary war as to its desirability. John Adams and others had serious misgivings on the matter, and the Baptists and Quakers who had begun to work for religious freedom before the Revolution found considerable opposition to their labors. The historical fact is, however, that religious liberty did become a matter of burning concern to a great many Americans during the Revolution. Its importance is evidenced by responses to the Constitution when this document was given to the states for ratification.

The lack of any safeguards for liberty of faith at once struck critics in all sections. The Virginia Convention proposed an amendment guaranteeing freedom of

conscience. North Carolina's Convention seconded the proposal, adopting the same language. . . . In the first Congress attention was directed to the oversight by James Madison, and the required guarantee was made the first constitutional amendment proposed to the nation.*

Of all the consequences of the American Revolution, undoubtedly the most heralded in other parts of the world was the firm establishment of religious freedom. Tocqueville was but one of many who thought this creation the most remarkable of American achievements.

The Great Contradiction

There remains the deeply troubling question posed by the presence of Negro slaves in America. At the time of the Revolution, there were about a half-million slaves in the 13 colonies—most of them in the South, but a fair number, perhaps 55,000, in the North. It would be splendid indeed if we could say that under the principles of liberty and equality proclaimed by the American founders these slaves were given their freedom. Obviously, we cannot. But it by no means follows that the position of the Negro in America was insulated from revolutionary thought and action.

In 1774, the Continental Congress decreed an "American Association" (that is, a nonimportation agreement) pertaining to slavery, and the prohibition on slave-trading seems to have held up throughout the war. In July 1774, Rhode Island enacted a law that thenceforth all slaves brought into the colony should be freed. The law's preamble, which begins as follows, is instructive:

Whereas the inhabitants of America are generally engaged in the preservation of their own rights and liberties, among which that of personal freedom must be considered as the greatest, and as those who are desirous of enjoying all the advantages of liberty themselves should be willing to extend personal liberty to others . . .

Delaware prohibited importation in 1776, Virginia in 1778, and Maryland in 1783 (for a term of years), with North Carolina imposing a higher tax on each Negro imported. States where

* Allan Nevins. *The American States During and After the Revolution, 1775-1798* (Clifton, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelley, 1924), p. 440.

there were few slaves proceeded under the stimulus of the Revolution to effect the immediate or gradual abolition of slavery itself. In short, the planting of the seeds of abolitionism was one of the major acts of the American Revolution.

Freedom and Slavery

True, a case can be made that war with England only hardened the determination of many southerners to maintain the institution of slavery. There can be no doubt that the eagerness with which a good many southern plantation owners entered the war sprang from the fear that an English victory would bring emancipation of the slaves. And a great many blacks saw, and had every reason to see, more hope of freedom with the British than with American plantation owners.

Yet even so, we cannot miss the strong tide of abolitionism that rose during this period. The minds of the men who led the Revolution and its war were sensitive and humane. The contrast between the principles of freedom and equality on the one hand and the presence of a half-million black slaves on the other no more escaped men like Jefferson and Adams than it did Edmund Burke and other Whigs in England. It is precisely the awareness of this contrast that marks the real beginning of the long and tragic story of black liberation in America, a story that would have its next great episode in the Civil War and that would still be unfolding during the 1960s.

The American Revolution failed the Negro. Nevertheless, as Bernard Bailyn has written, "as long as the institution of slavery lasted, the burden of proof would lie with its advocates to show why the statement that 'all men are created equal' did not mean precisely what it said: all men, 'white or black.'" And Benjamin Quarles, whose study of the Negro in the American Revolution is the most detailed investigation of the subject yet made, has written:

The American Revolution touched all classes in society, even Negroes. On the eve of the conflict, the same religious and political idealism that stirred the resistance to Britain deepened the sentiment against slavery. . . . Ultimately the colored people of America benefited from the irreversible commitment of the new nation to the principles of liberty and equality.

Now I want to turn to a very different aspect of the subject: the justly celebrated moderateness of spirit of the American

Revolution. A revolution did indeed occur in America, one involving social structures and values. Why, then, did no Terror, no Thermidor, no military dictatorship make its appearance, as has been the case in European revolutions?

We cannot doubt that the idea of equality was buoyant in America; we need look only at the many pamphlets written and circulated before and during the revolutionary war. Nor can we doubt that significant sections of the American people were bound to have felt the impact of laws directed at slavery, established religion, traditional inheritance of property, and, to a lesser extent, the expropriation of estates. These are explosive issues, and they ordinarily arouse the deepest passions. How do we account, then, for the widespread spirit of acceptance of the Revolution in America, a spirit shared by conservatives, liberals, and radicals, a spirit characterized by consensus and continuity?

Dispersion and Division

Some historians speak of a "spirit" of moderation and pragmatism in America that contrasts with the ideological passions of Europe. This does not, however, carry us very far. Looking at the subsequent history of America, from the War of 1812 through the Civil War to World Wars I and II, and bearing in mind the fierce ideological passions that have flared often enough in our history, it would be risky to appeal to any such embedded spirit.

Other historians properly refer to the temper of the leadership that America was fortunate to have during the Revolution. We cannot fail to see the restraint, responsibility, and wisdom of such men as John Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Dickinson, Franklin, Hamilton, and others, and I would not for a moment dismiss their importance. But how did such a restrained and moderate leadership survive throughout the Revolution? After all, the English and French revolutions began in moderation, and something of the same can be said of the Russian if we consider the Kerensky government the first phase of that revolution, yet they eventually succumbed to ever more radical and zealous leaders.

Any answer to so complex a question must be offered in the spirit of hypothesis. And it is in that spirit that I present the following possible explanations:

First, the American Revolution was, by virtue of the nature of colonial America, a *dispersed* revolution. There was nothing

in America comparable to a London, Paris, or Moscow, no large city steeped in historical traditions of turbulence and occasional revolt. Tensions rooted in social and economic conditions certainly existed in New York and Boston, and possibly in our other cities; but there was not, and there could not have been, the cumulative disorder or the air of incipient revolt known to have existed in the great European cities.

Nor was there in America, either before or after the Revolution, the centralization of political power that England, France, and Russia knew so well. The French and Russian revolutions, especially, must be seen against a background of long-developing governmental centralization. Each of the European revolutions was a *focused* revolution, which made it easy for the sudden passions of the ideologues or the crowd to be translated into acts that could affect the entire country.

In America, we must look to the 13 separate colonies or states to find the vital elements of the social revolution. Certainly, there was communication among the colonies and states; but it was communication among separate, independent, and proud political societies. It was this dispersion and decentralization of power that moderated passion and inclination so far as the nation as a whole was concerned. The vital principle of countervailing power—of intermediate authority, of division of rule—operated to reduce, at least for a long time, the national impact of intellectual and social movements arising in any one part of the nation.

Second, religion remained a strong force in American society. Plural in manifestation and closely connected with locality and region, it did not easily mix with political passions. Admittedly, religion as a cultural force seems to have declined somewhat during the eighteenth century; but once the symbols of establishment were removed, evangelical religions began to transform the religious landscape. We could not explain the immense burst of religiosity in the 1820s and later—carrying with it the birth of many new faiths and lasting through the century—if the seeds of it had not been present earlier.

In America, religious values and aspirations consumed psychic energy that might otherwise have gone into political ideology. In France, as students of the French Revolution from Edmund Burke to Hannah Arendt have observed, it was with religious passion translated into political action that the Jacobins dealt with government and society. In the English Revolution, by the time it was under way, the line between re-

ligion and political evangelism was very thin indeed. In the twentieth century, Marxism has become the substitute for established religion in Russia and wherever it prevails.

How very different was the American experience: In America, as was not the case in France or Russia, revolution never had a chance to become God.

A Nation of Joiners

Third, and closely related to the first two factors, is the idea of voluntary association. Our reputation for being a nation of joiners was made early; and neither the fact nor the reputation could have been possible had it not been for an American attitude toward association vitally different from any attitude easily discernible in most European countries at the time. The hatred of internal associations by the French revolutionaries—a hatred manifest not only in the destruction of the guilds, monasteries, and other bodies deriving from the past, but also in the explicit prohibition of almost all new associations—never existed in the United States. No specific constitutional provision guaranteed freedom of association; but, given the guarantees of freedom of assembly and petition, and the strong social and cultural roots of the phenomenon, voluntary associations thrived.

This suggests again that a great deal of passion that would surely have gone into *political* movements was directed elsewhere—that is, into the innumerable intermediate associations which, along with local, regional, and religious loyalties, made the American social landscape very different from the French in the nineteenth century.

Fourth, post-revolutionary America had few if any of the *politically* important class divisions found in Europe. True, the colonies did have very distinct social classes, and these were almost certainly becoming more distinct before the Revolution. It was the war with England that significantly changed the pattern of social class in America.

Although most wealthy, educated, and socially influential Americans sided with Britain in one degree or another, and most members of the lower classes chose the side of the Continental Congress, there were altogether too many exceptions in each instance to give a distinct character of *class conflict* to the war.

All serious students of social class, including Karl Marx, have noted the vital importance of conflict—conflict that is

political in character and ideological in thrust—in shaping and hardening classes. Had the upper class in America solidly opposed the war instead of supplying most of its leaders, and had the lower class alone supported the war, the outcome (assuming war would have taken place at all) would almost certainly have been a class structure like that of Western Europe, with ideological conflict to match. That this did not occur in America—much to the dismay of Marxists later—is, it would seem, a result of the “accident” of the war against England. For, with tenant farmers, indentured servants, and even Negroes frequently to be found on the rebel side, and with the rebel leaders coming from the upper classes of New England and the South, only the slightest “class-angling” of the revolutionary war was possible.

The American Brand of Intellectuals

Fifth, I would adduce the absence of an intellectual class in America at the time of the Revolution as one of the prime reasons for the lack of political ferocity both during and after the Revolution.

I am referring, of course, to the class of political intellectuals of which the Philosophes in France—who had much to do not only with setting the intellectual background of the revolution in France but also with giving that revolution the special ideological ferocity it came to have by 1791—were such iridescent examples. This class may be said to have begun with the politically minded humanists of the Italian Renaissance. It grew steadily in size during the succeeding centuries. We properly include in it not only the humanists and their successors, the Philosophes, but also, later, the revolutionists of 1848 (to be found in just about all coffee houses on the continent), Saint-Simonians, Fourierists, positivists, and, eventually, anarchists, socialists, and communists. Its dominant characteristics are, and have been, social rootlessness, an adversary position toward polity, and a fascination with power and its uses. The capacity of this class for ideological fanaticism, for the sacrifice of life and institution alike in the name of principle, and even for outright blood-lust and terror is well known.

This kind of class was lacking in America before and during the Revolution. There were indeed men and women of extraordinary intellect and learning; but for a Jefferson or an Adams or a Dickinson, learning—even great learning in phi-

osophy and the arts—could be compatible with a strong sense of *membership in society*. It did not invite alienation or revolt.

The intellectual leaders of the American Revolution were generally businessmen or landowners; they had a stake in society. It is inconceivable that either a Jefferson or a Hamilton could have renounced what Burke called the “wisdom of expediency” in the interest of pursuing an abstract principle. No American leader could have contemplated mass executions or imprisonments with delight, as did the millennialist intellectuals of 1649, 1793, and 1917. At no point in the American Revolution, or in its aftermath, do we find any Committee of Public Safety after the French fashion, any Council of the People’s Commissars, any Lilburnes, Robespierres, or Lenins. Nothing so completely gave the American Revolution its distinctive character as the absence of the European species of political intellectual. It is only in the present century that we have seen this species coming into prominence in America.

In conclusion, I would argue, then, that there was indeed an American Revolution in the full sense of the word—a social, moral, and institutional revolution that affected major changes in the character of American society—as well as a war of liberation from England that was political in nature.

The line from the social revolution of the 1770s to the civil rights revolution of the 1960s is a direct one. It is a line that passes through the Civil War—itself certainly not without revolutionary implication—and through a host of changes in the status of Americans of all races, beliefs, and classes. The United States has indeed undergone a process of almost permanent revolution. I can think of no greater injustice to ourselves, as well as to the makers of revolution in Philadelphia, than to deny that fact and to allow the honored word *revolution* to be preëmpted today by spokesmen for societies which, through their congealed despotisms, have made real revolution all but impossible.



ADAMS AND JEFFERSON: A REVOLUTIONARY DIALOGUE

by Merrill D. Peterson

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson first met in June 1775 at the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia. The war had begun. Incipient revolutionary governments were in being in both Massachusetts and Virginia. But whether American independence would be declared or won, whether the continent would be united, and what the ultimate course of this revolution would be no one could tell. Adams and Jefferson, finding that they thought alike on the great questions before Congress, quickly became friends and coadjutors.

Whatever their later differences, neither ever doubted "the perfect coincidence" of their principles and politics in 1775-76. Both had risen to positions of revolutionary leadership in their respective provinces. Adams was the veteran of the two. Jefferson was still a young law student in Virginia when Adams, in 1765, made his political debut with the celebrated Instructions of the Town of Braintree, declaring Parliament's Stamp Act unconstitutional. Born in 1735, eight years before Jefferson, he had been longer engaged in the colonial resistance to Great Britain, had served conspicuously in the First Continental Congress, and was widely recognized, along with his cousin Samuel Adams and Patrick Henry and Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, as one of the foremost leaders of the American cause. Thus in the early relationship of the two men Adams was clearly the senior partner. Jefferson deferred to him and would continue to do so for many years.

The Virginian's reputation had gone before him to Congress. Since his entrance into the House of Burgesses in 1769 as a 26-year-old delegate from western Albemarle County, Jefferson had sided with the party of Henry and Lee and made something of a name for himself as a draftsman of legislative papers championing American rights. His writings were known and admired, Adams later said, for "their peculiar felicity of

Adapted from Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue by Merrill D. Peterson. Copyright © 1976 by The University of Georgia Press.

expression." After a few weeks' acquaintance, he noted with approval the judgment of a fellow delegate that Jefferson was "the greatest rubber off of dust" to be met with in Congress—a man of learning and science as well as a forthright politician.

In debate on the floor of the House, where Adams excelled, Jefferson seldom uttered a word. The legend grew up, even before they were in their graves, that Jefferson had been "the pen" and Adams "the tongue" (Washington, of course, "the sword") of American independence. "Though a silent member of Congress," Adams recalled, "[Jefferson] was so prompt, frank, explicit, and decisive upon committees and in conversation . . . that he soon seized upon my heart." They saw a good deal of each other on committees, and Adams said that Jefferson agreed with him in everything. It is not surprising, then, that he came to regard Jefferson in the light of a political protégé, and such was the Virginian's cordiality and esteem that he returned the favor with every appearance of discipleship.

The course of experience that brought these two men to Philadelphia in 1775 was in some respects similar. Both were first sons in the succession of several generations of hardy independent farmers—Adams at Braintree in the shadow of Boston, Jefferson in the Virginia up-country where his father had been among the earliest settlers. However far they strayed, they always returned to their birthplace as the best place of all, finally dying there, and for all the honors heaped upon them, claimed to cherish the title of "farmer" above any other. Both attended the provincial college—Harvard in Massachusetts, William and Mary in Virginia—and then prepared for the bar. Beginning with the *Institutes* of Lord Coke, the Whig champion against the Stuart kings, they mastered the entire history of English law, which provided the foundation of their political opinions. Both men made their provincial reputations at the bar; they were practicing lawyers before they were politicians, but as the Revolution came on they were forced to abandon their profession and neither ever really returned to it.

Adams and Jefferson were preëminently students, not only of law but of history and philosophy and literature, both ancient and modern. They were avid readers—and readers with a purpose. Fragmentary notes on what they read appear in their surviving "commonplace books." While their personal tastes varied, many of the same names—Cicero, Sidney, Locke, Bolingbroke, Montesquieu, Hume—turn up in the early reports of their reading. If Jefferson was more consciously a student of the Enlightenment, exalting nature and reason against mystery

Merrill Daniel Peterson, 55, is Thomas Jefferson Foundation Professor at the University of Virginia, where he has been a member of the history department since 1962. Born in Manhattan, Kansas, he received his A.B. at the University of Kansas (1943), then served three years with the Navy before going on to Harvard (Ph.D., 1950). Prior to his arrival in Charlottesville, Peterson taught at Harvard, Princeton, and Brandeis. Among his books are: *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (winner of the Bancroft Prize in 1960); *James Madison: A Biography in His Own Words* (1974); and *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation* (1970).

and authority, Adams also felt its liberating influence.

Being studious men in love with their books, their families, and their firesides, both were rather reluctant politicians. For several years after the Stamp Act controversy, Adams wavered between Boston and Braintree, repeatedly forswore the noisy political world of Sam Adams for the quiet, along with the fortune, of his profession, and only finally surrendered himself to the revolutionary movement in 1773. Jefferson, although he grew up in a society where government was the responsibility of the class to which he belonged, experienced the same ambivalence and, unlike Adams, never overcame it.

These similarities of background and interest were undoubtedly important in laying the basis of friendship; more important in the longer run of history, however, were differences of temperament, of intellectual style and outlook, of social and political experience, which were less apparent in 1775 than they would be 15 or 20 years later.

Adams the Calvinist

Adams was a latter-day son of New England Puritanism. Although he shook off the theological inheritance from the fathers, he cherished the Puritan past and rather than replace the original model of a Christian commonwealth—John Winthrop's "city upon a hill"—he sought to transform it into a model of virtuous republicanism. The Puritans had come to Massachusetts Bay to worship as *they* pleased, and however noble their ideal it was not an ideal of religious or political freedom. Yet in his first published essay, *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, 1765, Adams reconstructed the Puritan past into a legend of republican beginnings, thereby conscripting it in the cause of revolution. "It was not religion alone, as is commonly supposed, but it was a love of universal liberty . . .," he wrote, "that projected, conducted, and accomplished

the settlement of America." The fundamental institutions established by the Puritans—congregations, schools, militia, and town meetings—must remain the pillars of the community, and no government, republican or whatever, could survive unless it was ordered on "the perfect plan of divine and moral government."

The strain of Calvinism, which thus entered into Adams's republican vision, colored his theory of human nature. "Sin," although wrenched from its old theological associations, remained a prominent word in his political vocabulary, roughly translated as human weakness and selfishness. Reading Montesquieu through Calvinist lenses, Adams deemed austerity of morals and manners indispensable to republican government. "But," he said in 1776, "there is so much rascality, so much venality and corruption, so much avarice and ambition . . . among all ranks and degrees of men even in America, that I sometimes doubt whether there is public virtue enough to support a republic." He was a doubting republican at the starting gate, one for whom the American Revolution carried the heavy burden, added to everything else, of moral regeneration after the old Puritan vision.

Jefferson the Humanist

Now to all this, Jefferson, virtually untouched by the Puritan dispensation, presents a sharp contrast. Virginia had no legend of pure and noble beginnings, nothing peculiarly edifying in its past, no glorious heritage to preserve. And to be a revolutionary there was to be an enemy, if not of religion, then of the established Anglican church which dominated the landscape. Unlike Adams, for whom the New England church was an ally, Jefferson came to the Revolution as a man alienated from the traditional religious culture of his community. Taking his moral and political directives from the modern philosophy of the Enlightenment, Jefferson felt no need to maintain the centrality of religion in human affairs. Indeed it was one of the missions of the Enlightenment to retire God to the wings and place man at the center of the stage. Destiny was no longer controlled by Providence but by Nature. Man was inherently good, seeking his own happiness through the happiness of others, and with the progress of knowledge Nature would answer all his purposes. Civil education was required, but not churchly discipline. Religious restraints, even the hope of Heaven and the fear of hell, were unnecessary; in so far as they were supported by

civil government they were unjust. Just as morality had no certain dependence on religion, religion was of no concern to the state. As Jefferson would write in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, "our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, more than our opinions in physics or geometry."

With this view Adams could not agree. For him the American Revolution was a continuation under new auspices of an old quest for a pure and righteous commonwealth, while for Jefferson it looked to the liberation of the individual from all conceptions of higher moral authority embodied in church or state.

The Rough and the Smooth

The friendship between Adams and Jefferson was a triumph of will over seeming incompatibilities of personal temperament and intellectual style. Neither man, one short and stout, the other tall and lean, could have seen himself reflected in the other. Adams was warm and contentious, Jefferson cool and agreeable. Adams was impulsive and careless, Jefferson deliberate and precise. Adams was a gyroscope of shifting moods; his nerves, as Mercy Warren once told him, were "not always wound up by the same key." Jefferson's nerves, together with the compass of his mind, were amazingly steady. Adams always wore his heart on his sleeve and perceived the world about him as a drama in which he was the central character.

Jefferson, while not an insensitive man, approached the world through his reason and concealed his inner feelings behind an almost impenetrable wall of reserve. Adams, by his own confession, was "a morose and surly politician." Jefferson, if seldom a happy politician, proved amiable and sanguine. He was more impressed by the scope than by the limits of human possibilities. "My temperament is sanguine," he would later tell Adams. "I steer my bark with Hope in the head, leaving Fear astern."

Adams, finding himself awkward and churlish in social intercourse, supposed the fault lay in the New England character, which he contrasted with "the art and address" of the southern gentlemen he met in Congress. Jefferson, of course, while not at all typical of the southern breed, possessed "art and address" in abundance, including those qualities of subtlety, grace, and refinement so conspicuously lacking in Adams. A friend of his youth remarked that he had "a little capillary vein of satire"

meandering about in his soul which was as powerful as it was sudden. The Swiftian rapier did not suit Jefferson. He disapproved of satire and hid what little humor he had under "the pale cast of thought." What was ludicrous in life was cause for regret rather than amusement. Expecting so much of men, and nations too, he could not laugh at their follies, least of all at his own. To Jefferson's lofty idealism his friend opposed an obsessive realism, alternately stern or satiric as befit his mood. While there was something endearing in Adams's robust honesty—and Jefferson found it—it inevitably offended men with feelings scarcely less tender than his own and contributed to that unpopularity of which he would constantly complain.

The New Englander was, basically, an insecure person. His yearnings for fame, his notorious vanity and airs of conceit, grew from massive layers of self-doubt. In early manhood (occasionally afterwards) he kept a diary—another mark of his Puritan heritage—which was filled with upbraidings, self-catechizing questions, and self-improving resolutions. As late as his 37th year, he could admonish himself: "Beware of idleness, luxury, and all vanity, folly, and vice!" Half his life had run out, and what a poor, insignificant atom he was! "Reputation," he often told himself, "ought to be the perpetual subject of my thoughts, and aim of my behavior."

At last, with the onrush of revolution, he resolved to pursue reputation by power rather than by fortune. He found, as did Jefferson, new scope for his abilities. But even at the height of political achievement, he was plagued by anxieties. "I begin to suspect that I have not much of the grand in my composition," he confided to his ever-understanding wife Abigail in 1777. Then and later he felt that his services and sacrifices were unappreciated. "I have a very tender, feeling heart," he wrote. "The country knows not, and never can know, the torments I have endured for its sake." In time, he became morbid on the subject.

Jefferson was rarely afflicted in this way. He was an Epicurean, though of sober mien, to whom emotional torment and self-flagellation were alien. Never in his life did he keep a personal diary. He kept records of everything—gardens, the weather, Indian languages—except the state of his soul. His self-possession, his easy, almost bland, sense of personal security left little room for inner questioning. Unlike the Yankee commoner, he did not have to scratch or fight his way to power. The road had been blazed for him by his father; in a sense, it went with his social position. He could therefore feel relaxed

about it. Although endowed with a normal amount of ambition, it never became an obsession. Political power in itself held no charms for him. He often said that nature had destined him for the tranquil pursuits of the arts and sciences. None of the heroes of his early life—certainly not the Enlightenment trinity of Bacon, Newton, and Locke—was associated with political power. If such power were taken away from him, it would have caused Jefferson no regrets; in fact, it would have afforded a welcome release to his talents in other and, he thought, better directions. Adams, who committed himself fully to the career and the fame of a founding father, had no such reserves to fall back on.

Two Paths to Revolution

The fact that one man came to the Revolution through Massachusetts politics, the other in Virginia, also made a difference. For Adams the torch had been ignited by James Otis's constitutional argument against the writs of assistance in 1761; for Jefferson it was Patrick Henry's celebrated speech against the Stamp Act.

The true cause of the Revolution in Massachusetts, Adams believed, was "the conspiracy against liberty" hatched at the conclusion of the Great War by the local "court party" of Governor Francis Bernard, Thomas Hutchinson, and the brothers Andrew and Peter Oliver. It was this junto of high officials, not king and Parliament, that first plotted to tax Massachusetts with the base aim of increasing their own fortunes, securing their independence of the legislature, and establishing a local oligarchy. The enemy, then, was less the British government abroad than it was a corrupt Tory party at home.

This vivid sense of an internal struggle between "court" and "country" parties—one that threw Adams back into the political world of Walpole and Bolingbroke—was lacking in Virginia. There no Tory party threatened; notwithstanding factional quarrels at Williamsburg, the gentry stuck together, as they always had, and ruled without challenge except from the mother country. In Jefferson's mind, Britain was the culprit and no residue of affection, such as Adams would continue to feel, remained in him after 1776. Moreover, the popular agitation which radical Whigs used to stoke the revolutionary furnace in Massachusetts raised in Adams fears of upheaval from below.

Jefferson expressed no such fears. On the contrary, he

thought Virginia could use a little of the "leveling spirit." And the southern aristocrat went on to become the legendary apostle of democracy, while the northern bourgeois acquired the reputation of an apologist for order and hierarchy. Finally, because the war began in Massachusetts and the resources of the continent were wanted for her defense, Adams sought a strong confederation melting the states "like separate parcels of metal, into one common mass," while Jefferson, with other Virginians and the great majority of Congress, saw neither the urgency nor the wisdom of this. As the war progressed, Adams changed his mind, only to return to his earlier opinion a decade later.

Whatever may have been the cause of the American Revolution, the major issue in debate was the constitutional authority of Great Britain over the colonies. As Whigs of a more or less radical stamp, Adams and Jefferson tended to think alike on the issue and, barring small details, reached the same conclusions. What they sought in 1775 and earlier was not independence but reconciliation on the terms of the British constitution; yet as their theory of the constitution was in direct conflict with the regnant theory in Britain, the arguments they advanced unraveled the imperial relationship, forcing the ultimate choice of submission or independence. Jefferson addressed the issue in *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, published in 1774, while Adams's most labored constitutional argument appeared in the *Novanglus* essays of 1774-75.

The polemics offered two versions of the same theory of the empire and of American rights within it. From the beginning of the contest with the mother country, the Americans had attempted to find some halfway house between total submission to the authority of Parliament, which British opinion demanded, and its total rejection. Generally, the line had been drawn between *external* and *internal* legislation, Parliament having authority in one sphere, as in the regulation of trade, but not in the other. Any line offered difficulties in theory as well as in practice, however. Since they were not represented in Parliament, the colonists claimed that it could not legislate for them, and the tradition of the English constitution lent support to the claim. But the new Whig theory of parliamentary supremacy, stemming from the Revolution of 1688, buttressed by the conventional political wisdom that rejected any idea of two sovereign authorities in the same state—the specter of *imperium in imperio*—proved trouble-

some for the Americans.

Jefferson and Adams, therefore, repudiated the authority of Parliament altogether and set forth a new theory of the empire as a commonwealth of equal self-governing states owing allegiance to a common king.

Jefferson reached this position by way of the argument that the Americans were the sons of expatriated men who had possessed the *natural* right "of going in quest of new habitations, and of there establishing new societies, under such laws and regulations as to them shall seem most likely to promote public happiness." This right being natural, the colonists were as free as if they had returned to a state of nature; but, said Jefferson, they voluntarily chose to submit themselves to the British monarch, "who was thereby made the central link connecting the several parts of the empire thus newly multiplied."

Adams's reasoning was similar. America was a discovered, not a conquered, country; the first settlers had a natural right, which they exercised, to set up their own governments and enact their own laws consistent with their obligations to the king. These obligations, in the Massachusetts case, were contained in a royal charter, a *compact* with the king. Partly because of the crucial role of this compact in the history of Massachusetts, for which there was no equivalent in Virginia, Adams's argument was more historical and legalistic than Jefferson's. But both appealed to the past in the defense of rights that were basically moral and, in the final analysis, must be justified on the law of nature.

It is difficult to say just when Adams and Jefferson gave up the hope of reconciliation and became advocates of independence. For several months after the fighting began, both supported armed resistance as a means of bringing Britain to her senses and winning a settlement on American terms. But Britain proved incorrigible.

Adams later claimed that he was the constant advocate of independence from the reassembling of Congress after the August recess of 1775. Yet in January of the new year he said that independence was "utterly against my inclinations" and a few weeks later stated his position as "reconciliation if practicable and peace if attainable," quickly adding that he thought both impossible. Jefferson's posture was much the same. Reconciliation was his desire, but rather than submit to British pretensions to legislate for America he would "sink the whole island in the ocean."

Neither man, it seems fair to say, rushed into independence, but both were willing to risk it and, further, to demand it if resistance within the empire failed of solution. There were sound political reasons for soft-pedaling independence in the winter of 1775–76. The delegates of the middle colonies, in particular, were firmly opposed to the ultimate step. Independence could not be declared until a public opinion had been created for it up and down the continent. This was the work of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* early in the new year. With a popular political rhetoric neither Adams nor Jefferson commanded, Paine transformed independence from a frightful bugaboo to a captivating vision.

"Every post and every day rolls in upon us," Adams rejoiced in May. "Independence like a torrent." His principal concern at this time was for the establishment of new constitutional governments in all the colonies, which would make independence a *fait accompli* and also ensure the maintenance of civil order. Congress finally passed his and Lee's resolution for this purpose—"a machine to fabricate independence"—on May 15. Three weeks later it debated the Virginia resolution calling upon Congress to declare the 13 colonies free and independent states.

Drafting a Declaration

Although the vote was postponed, a five-man committee was appointed to prepare a declaration of independence. Rather surprisingly, Jefferson found himself named at the head of the committee whose leading members were Benjamin Franklin and Adams. Jefferson's later testimony was that the committee asked him to draft the proposed paper. Adams, on the other hand, remembered a conversation in which Jefferson tried to persuade him to do it. He demurred for three reasons: "Reason first—You are a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason second—I am obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular. You are very much otherwise. Reason third—You can write ten times better than I can." If the conversation actually occurred, Adams later found reason to regret his decision. In time the authorship of the Declaration of Independence gave Jefferson an *éclat* with the public that all of Adams's revolutionary services could not match, and he resented it.

Jefferson showed both Adams and Franklin a rough draft of the Declaration, and neither had much to suggest in the

way of changes. From the committee the final draft went to Congress on June 28. There, after voting the Virginia resolution for independence on July 2, the delegates debated Jefferson's handiwork for two and one-half days. Many changes were made, nearly all of them for the worse, in his opinion. He was especially incensed by the elimination of the angry paragraph indicting the king for waging "cruel war against human nature itself" by forcing on the colonies the traffic in African slaves.

Adams doubtless supported his friend on this question, as on every other. He was "the colossus" in the debate, Jefferson later said—the Declaration's "pillar of support on the floor of Congress, its ablest advocate and defender against the multifarious assaults it encountered." And even after some of Adams's aspersions on the document came to public notice decades later, Jefferson generously praised "the zeal and ability" with which he had fought for "every word" of it in Congress.

July 2, Adams's "Fourth"

Oddly enough, neither man sent up any huzzahs upon the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. Adams thought the landmark decision had been taken earlier, on July 2. That was the crucial action; Jefferson's paper only declared it. He wrote to Abigail: "The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epocha in the history of America. I am apt to believe it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade . . . from one end of the continent to the other, from this time forward, forevermore." He prophesied the celebrity of American independence with future generations but was off the mark as to the anniversary date. Obviously, neither he nor Jefferson fully appreciated in 1776 the power of words, great words, to symbolize action and to become its monument.

For several months the two congressmen had been turning their thoughts to the creation of new governments in the colony-states. It was, Adams declared, "a time when the greatest lawgivers of antiquity would have wished to live. How few of the human race have ever enjoyed an opportunity of making an election of government—more than of air, soil, or climate—for themselves or their children!" Jefferson also felt the chal-

lenge. The creation of new government, he said, "is the whole object of the present controversy." But no one responded more eagerly or more soberly to the challenge than Adams. Months before independence was declared he had been calling for the formation of new governments. All the books he had read on the theory and practice of government now found immediate application, and he went back to reread them. There was no more agreeable employment than researches "after the best form of government," he said. Politics was "the divine science"—"the first in importance"—and, while centuries behind most other sciences, he hoped that in this ripening "age of political experiments" it would overtake the rest.

The *Thoughts* of John Adams

When several southern delegates came to Adams in the early months of 1776 seeking advice on the planning of new state governments, he wrote out his ideas in a brief epistolary essay which was so much admired that he consented to its publication, anonymously, under the title *Thoughts on Government, in a Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend*. Adams later said that the letter was written to counteract the "too democratic" plan of government loosely advanced by that "disastrous meteor," Thomas Paine, in *Common Sense*.

Adams began by insisting on the importance of the *form* of government, then went on to show that the *republican* form is the best. Borrowing from Montesquieu's theory on the unique spirit appropriate to the different forms of government, agreeing that the spirit of republics is *virtue*, Adams reasoned that since the practice of virtue produces the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people, a republic is the best form of government. A virtuous people makes a republic possible; its survival makes the cultivation of virtue necessary.

But what is a republic? Adams always had trouble defining it. It is "an empire of laws, and not of men," he said. But this described the principle of constitutionalism, not the form of government, and implied that a government of unjust laws, laws against natural right, might be republican. At other times Adams said a republic is a government in which the people have "an essential share" in the sovereign power.

Nearly all the American Whigs in 1776 favored republican government. The issue was how popular, how democratic, these new republics should be. And here Adams, as compared to Paine, or even Jefferson, took a moderate position. In his view,

and by either of his definitions, the British government was a type of republic, one in which the three pure forms—monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy—were ingeniously balanced in king, lords, and commons. Unlike Jefferson and so many others whose admiration for the British constitution sank in the decade before the Revolution, Adams venerated it to the end of his days as “a masterpiece.” Unfortunately, it was not made for the government of colonies; independence came about because the Americans were denied the most valuable part of the constitution, democratic representation.

Holding these views, Adams experienced some difficulty formulating a conception of American republicanism detached from the British model. He was not alone in this; certain categories and dogmas of the British constitution survived in Jefferson’s mind too. But for Adams the problem increased rather than lessened after 1776, and compared to his mature political theory, *Thoughts on Government* was a democratic document. It followed from the definition of a republic that the constitution should be so contrived as to secure an impartial “government of laws.”

The representative assembly should be an exact portrait in miniature of the interests among the people at large. Because of the wide distribution of property in America, at least in New England, this would ensure substantial democracy. But no government in a single assembly could long preserve the freedom and happiness of the people. Absolute power, from whatever source derived, must inevitably grow corrupt and tyrannical. And so Adams called for an upper house to check the lower and a first magistrate with an unqualified negative on the legislature. He also called for an independent judiciary, rotation in office, annual elections, and so on, which were the clichés of old Whig political science.

Jefferson could cheerfully endorse most of what Adams recommended. The differences between them at this time did not fundamentally concern the form or structure of government but the extent of the government’s commitment to the ideals of freedom and equality declared in the country’s birthright.

On balance, Adams was more interested in restoring order than in promoting reform. Even as he advocated republican government, he was beset by fears for its success from the want of virtue in the people. There was so much littleness and selfishness, so much disrespect for rank and status, so much luxury and avarice and talent for political corruption, even in

New England, that wise and honest men might soon look to the security of a monarch.

Jefferson had a more consoling philosophy for a republican, one which assumed the virtue of the people from an innate moral sense in every man and diminished the role of the state in the regulation of human affairs. With his image of a naturally beneficent and harmonious society—an image derived from philosophy rather than experience—government simply did not have for him the preëminent importance Adams assigned to it.

The Jeffersonian View

Its primary purpose was to secure individuals in their natural rights and thereby to liberate them for action in society. In Jefferson's view, government should be absorbed into society, becoming truly self-government; Adams believed that society must be absorbed into government, reproduced in it, and regulated by it.

Theories of human nature help to explain the difference. Adams, although he thought Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Mandeville had painted human nature too black, without any color of benevolence, nevertheless felt that "self-love" was the dominant passion in men and that government must deal with it. Jefferson, in opposition to these philosophers, believed that the moral sense, in which all men were equal, naturally led them to seek the good of others and to live justly in society. He regarded man primarily as a social animal, naturally made for society; Adams regarded man as a political animal, constantly competing for power.

Both men drafted constitutions for their native states. When he was in Congress in the spring of 1776, Jefferson sent his for Virginia to the revolutionary convention meeting in Williamsburg. It arrived too late for serious consideration, however; and had it arrived earlier, Jefferson's plan might not have received that consideration, for it was widely at variance with the conservative constitution adopted for Virginia. Except that it stripped away all semblance of monarchical power, the new government was like the old. It did not in any way alter the distribution of power in Virginia society. It continued the freehold suffrage qualification under which one-third or more of the adult white males were disenfranchised; the unequal system of representation which favored the East over the West—"old" Virginia over "new" Virginia; and it consolidated the

oligarchical power of the local authorities, the county courts.

Jefferson's plan also contained conservative features. He was as eager as Adams, for instance, to divide the legislative power and to secure through an upper house, or senate, a kind of aristocratic check on the annually elected popular assembly. But he had difficulty finding a logical basis for differentiating the two houses of a consistently republican legislature. He had at first thought of life appointment of senators, then quickly rejected it, as he also rejected the solution that would be adopted in several of the new state constitutions of founding the lower house on numbers (population) and the upper on property. Finally, he decided on election of the senators by the popular body for staggered terms of nine years, yet was unhappy with this solution.

Jefferson's draft constitution also embodied a number of far-reaching institutional reforms: absolute religious freedom, the replacement of Virginia's bloody criminal code with one framed on humane and enlightened standards, the abolition of laws of entail and primogeniture (together with other measures intended to diffuse landed property among the mass of people), and the mitigation of slavery. The Virginia Constitution of 1776 neither embodied these reforms nor envisioned them. It contained no article for future amendment or revision.

Jefferson became a declared enemy of the Virginia Constitution. Repeatedly, over many years, he tried to replace it with a more democratic instrument, but failed. Partly because of his concern over the course of the Revolution in Virginia, he retired from Congress in September 1776, returned home, and immediately entered the General Assembly in Williamsburg. For several years, he worked to secure fundamental reforms.

He was not a flaming radical at this time, or at any time. He was a committed revolutionist, rather far to the left on the political spectrum in America. But he would not go to radical lengths to secure his objectives—his personal temperament precluded that—and he was still struggling to escape the chrysalis of the English Whig tradition, as his dilemma about the senate makes clear. What is remarkable about Jefferson, however, in contradistinction to Adams, was his capacity for political growth and adaptation. His vision was forward, and he grew in democratic directions with his age and country. He came to realize that even his own ideas for Virginia's government in 1776 fell short of the principles of the Revolution. "In truth," he reflected, "the abuses of monarchy had so much filled the space

of political contemplation, that we imagined everything republican which was not monarchy. We had not yet penetrated to the mother principle that 'governments are republican only in proportion as they embody the will of the people, and execute it.'"

If Jefferson failed to become the republican solon of Virginia, Adams was largely successful in Massachusetts. In the fall of 1779, during an interlude between diplomatic missions abroad, he was elected by his Braintree constituents to represent them in a constitutional convention. The citizens of Massachusetts had previously rejected a constitution offered by the legislature; and part of the significance of the convention was that it would be elected by the people for the specific purpose of framing a fundamental law, which would then be referred to them for approval or disapproval. The Massachusetts constitutional convention of 1779-80 thus gave finished form to the process by which a people may establish a government with their own consent.

"Equally Free and Independent"

In the convention, Adams was given the responsibility of submitting a working draft; and since few changes were made in it, either in committee or on the floor, the honor of the Massachusetts Constitution belonged to him. Although it seemed designed to make as little change as possible in the customary frame of government, it was a more elaborate document than any of the constitutions Jefferson drafted for Virginia. There was more than literary significance in Adams's phrasing of certain principles generally shared with Jefferson. Thus he wrote "all men are born equally free and independent," which, as Adams knew, was not the same as saying "all men are created (or born) equal." The convention substituted Jefferson's more egalitarian accent.

With regard to the frame of government, Adams followed the main outlines of his *Thoughts on Government*. The legislature would be in three parts, the house, the senate, and the governor, as Adams conceived the British one to be. The governor would be popularly elected, which he had not proposed in 1776, and vested with large powers including an absolute negative on the laws. The convention gave him only a qualified negative, or suspensive veto; but in the creation of a strong executive, overriding the antimonarchical sentiments of the Revolution, the Massachusetts Constitution was unique in its

time. Increasingly, Adams viewed the executive power as the mainstay of a balanced constitution, and he thought the trimming of the governor's negative the only serious error of the convention.

He solved the problem of the senate by proportioning its membership to the amount of taxes paid in the several electoral districts, that is to say, basing it on property. The wealthier the district, the more power it would have in the senate. In addition to its relevance for the Whig theory of balance, the solution conformed to the favorite axiom of James Harrington, "power always follows property," which Adams said was "as infallible a maxim in politics as that action and reaction are equal in mechanics."

Adams was in France, on a second diplomatic mission, when the Massachusetts Constitution was ratified. Henceforth his career in the American Revolution was on the European stage, where he worked in the shadow of the eminent Dr. Franklin to secure the money, arms, and friends necessary to win the war and establish American independence.

Jefferson, meanwhile, served as Governor of Virginia during two difficult years, 1779 and 1781, which ended in the humiliation of the government and the virtual prostration of the state by British troops. He retired to Monticello under a cloud and, stung by criticism of his leadership, resolved never to return to public life. He and Adams occasionally exchanged letters about the affairs of war and the seemingly desperate cause of confederation, letters that are proof of political friendship, though not of personal intimacy. Had Jefferson kept his resolution, the friendship would have expired with the war; but he did not, in part because of the tragedy of his wife's death, and in 1784 he and Adams were back in harness together.

A 50-Year Friendship

The Revolution did not end in 1776 or 1783; it was given a new turn by the French Revolution, and the Jeffersonian "Revolution of 1800" settled its destiny in the American polity. Adams and Jefferson were participants, indeed the chief ideological standard-bearers—at first as political allies, later as political foes—in this entire sweep of democratic revolution. The revolution that had been the basis of the friendship gradually tore it apart, leaving it in tatters in 1800.

Yet the friendship was restored in 1812, as partisan and ideological passions receded, mainly through the friendly med-

iation of Dr. Benjamin Rush. Himself a signer of the Declaration of Independence, Rush seemed to think the reconciliation of these American patriarchs a national responsibility. "I consider you and [Mr. Jefferson] as the North and South Poles of the American Revolution," he told Adams. "Some talked, some wrote, and some fought to promote and establish it, but you and Mr. Jefferson *thought* for us all."

The story of their friendship has an appealing human interest, of course, and the later correspondence between them, when they were both retired from the public stage, stands as a literary monument of the age. More important than the story or the correspondence, however, was the dialogue of ideas through which these two philosopher-statesmen carried forward the ongoing search for the meaning and purpose of the American Revolution.

Adams and Jefferson died within hours of each other on the 50th anniversary of American independence, July 4, 1826. The full significance of what they had thought, of what they had contributed to the founding of the nation, and, above all, of their reconciliation was thus dramatically enforced on the public mind.

Eulogizing the deceased patriots in Boston's Faneuil Hall, Daniel Webster declared: "No two men now live, fellow-citizens, perhaps it may be doubted whether any two men have ever lived, in one age, who, more than those we commemorate, have impressed their own sentiments, in regard to politics and government, on mankind, infused their own opinions more deeply into the opinions of others, or given a more lasting direction to the current of human thought."

With the passing of Adams and Jefferson, the curtain fell on the nation's revolutionary age. But, as Webster said, their work and their wisdom had not perished with them. The revolutionary dialogue of 50 years between Adams and Jefferson was an enduring legacy to American liberty.



BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Time remains to wind up the Bicentennial year with a good look at the American Revolution. What to choose to read is, however, a question of some difficulty.

Over the years, American and British historians writing on aspects of the Revolution have created a body of work overwhelming in its variety and scope. No entirely satisfactory single study exists, whether it be George Bancroft's pioneering 10-volume **A HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES, from the Discovery of the American Continent** (Little, Brown, 1834-75; abridged edition edited by Russel B. Nye, Univ. of Chicago, 1966, cloth & paper) or the latest, two-volume exercise, **A NEW AGE NOW BEGINS: A People's History of the American Revolution** by Page Smith (McGraw-Hill, 1976).

These sweeping narratives are surprisingly alike in some ways. But where Bancroft, the founding father of American history, writes stirringly of battles in "drum and bugle" style, Smith, equally fascinated by war, is down-to-earth modern. Example: "The most pressing issue before the [second Continental] Congress was the appointment of a commander in chief for the army at Boston. Artemas Ward was too fat, Israel Putnam too old, William Heath too inexperienced."

A determined reader can probably do best by going first to primary sources and following up with several books that examine segments of the story or concentrate on particular interpretations of events in America and Britain.

Contemporary diaries and letters from ordinary citizens and soldiers of the revolutionary era can be sampled in

the nearly 200 volumes of **EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION** and **THE FIRST AMERICAN FRONTIER** (Arno, 1968-71). Other books offer telling selections of such correspondence along with the major public documents from the pens of the eighteenth century Americans who wrote—and wrote well—even as they charted a course for their new country.

COLONIES TO NATION 1763-1789: A Documentary History of the American Revolution edited by Jack P. Greene (Norton, 1975, cloth & paper) reflects changes in historical research and analysis missing from Henry Steele Commager's **DOCUMENTS OF AMERICAN HISTORY** (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 9th ed., 1974, cloth & paper). But to own either is to have a rich private archive.

As a setting for the contemporary papers, no better brief chronological introduction to the period can be found than Edmund S. Morgan's **THE BIRTH OF THE REPUBLIC: 1763-1789** (Univ. of Chicago, 1956, cloth & paper). More detailed but not unwieldy are John Richard Alden's narrative, **A HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION** (Knopf, 1969, cloth & paper), and his **THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION, 1775-1783** (Harper & Row, 1954, cloth & paper); the latter, limited specifically to the war years, follows the ebb and flow of the military campaigns of Washington and his foes.

The conflicting currents of political belief in colonial America are described in several books. One, Hannah Arendt's rigorous **ON REVOLUTION** (Viking, 1963, cloth & paper), considers the character of the American Revolution as

part of the larger phenomenon of revolution in modern history and stresses its continuing relevance to the world.

THE COLONIAL BACKGROUND OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: Four Essays in American Colonial History by Charles McLean Andrews (Yale, 1924, cloth & paper), a short volume by the father of modern scholarship on early America, portrays the changing, increasingly awkward relationships between Britain and the colonists during the century and a half before the rebellion. **THE IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION** by Bernard Bailyn (Harvard, 1967, cloth & paper) tells how expectations brought from Britain by the colonists shaped their responses to such measures as the Stamp Act and were in turn altered by subsequent events.

Works that stress the world political climate before and during the American Revolution are **THE STRUCTURE OF POLITICS AT THE ACCESSION OF GEORGE III** by Sir Lewis Namier (London: Macmillan, 1960, cloth; St. Martin's, 1961, paper), in two volumes for the reader with ample time and strong interest, and **THE AGE OF DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800** edited by R. R. Palmer (Princeton, 1959), also in two volumes. Vol. I seeks to place the American Revolution in the context of contemporary reformist impulses in Europe.

BRITISH POLITICS AND THE STAMP ACT CRISIS: The First Phase of the American Revolution, 1763-1767 by P. D. G. Thomas (London: Clarendon Press, 1975) is an English author's exhaustive chronicle of British behavior during the early years of strain. **THE STAMP ACT CRISIS: Prologue to Revolution** by Edmund S. and Helen M. Morgan (Univ. of N. C., 1953, cloth; Macmillan, 1963, rev. ed., paper) briskly

analyzes from the American point of view the setting, antecedents, and repercussions of this first serious rupture in Anglo-American relations.

Another book that, like the Morgans', treats the background of the Revolution more broadly than its title suggests is **THE BOSTON TEA PARTY** by Benjamin Woods Labaree (Oxford, 1964, cloth & paper). It provides a full account of the tea trade and American resistance to imposition of the Townshend Acts, as well as those "three short hours on a cold December night in 1773" when a small band of men in Boston Harbor "precipitated a reaction that led with little pause to the Declaration of Independence."

How that great document was drafted is described in Carl Lotus Becker's book, first published in 1922, **THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE: A Study in the History of Political Ideas** (Knopf, 1942, cloth; Random House/Vintage, 1958, paper). It discusses the Declaration's antecedents in the eighteenth century's prevailing philosophy of "natural rights" and provides close textual analysis of the Declaration itself. Becker's critique of the document's literary qualities—he speaks of "the high seriousness, a kind of lofty pathos" of Jefferson's sentences—has yet to be matched.

The reader who wants to know more about American society at the time the nation was evolving would do well to begin with Jackson Turner Main's **THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA, 1760-1781** (Princeton, 1965, cloth & paper). Main uses tax rolls and other data to show sharp economic differences among the colonists and describes early American class distinctions and styles of living. A next step might be the bulky **AMERICAN EDUCATION: The Colonial Experience** by Lawrence A. Cremin (Harper & Row, 1970, cloth & paper). It encompasses

the era's entire cultural and social development—in households, churches, business, politics, but most of all in schools and colleges, from 1607 to 1783.

THE LOYALISTS IN REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA, 1760-1781 by Robert McCluer Calhoun (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973) is useful for understanding the war's backyard opponents. **THE PROBLEM OF SLAVERY IN THE AGE OF REVOLUTION, 1770-1823** by David Brion Davis (Cornell, 1975, cloth & paper) deals with the apathy or antipathy encountered by abolitionists of the time.

Merrill Jensen's **THE ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION: An Interpretation of the Social-Constitutional History of the American Revolution, 1774-1781** (Univ. of Wis., 1940) is fairly difficult reading for the nonspecialist. It is, however, the definitive work on the establishment of the United States' first, shaky national government. Easier to read is the follow-up narrative of the postwar Confederation period by Andrew C. McLaughlin, **THE CONFEDERATION AND THE CONSTITUTION, 1783-1789** (Harper, 1905, cloth; Macmillan, 1962, paper).

The economic forces at play throughout the revolutionary era figure to some degree in the work of most historians; the first to focus mainly on those forces was the controversial Charles A. Beard. In **AN ECONOMIC INTERPRETATION OF THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES** (Macmillan, 1935, cloth; Free Press, 1965, paper), he argues that the Constitution was the product of conservative interests, "principally . . . four groups of personalty interests which had been adversely affected under

the Articles of Confederation: money, public securities, manufacturers, and trade and shipping." His interpretation is today considered at best oversimplified. A revisionist view—rather hard reading—can be had in Forrest McDonald's **WE THE PEOPLE: The Economic Origins of the Constitution** (Univ. of Chicago, 1958, cloth & paper), a close examination of the complexity of economic interests at work in the hammering out of the nation's enduring charter.

Finally, there is **ESSAYS ON THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION**, a collection of original articles edited by Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson (Univ. of N.C., 1973, cloth; Norton, 1973, paper). Bernard Bailyn, Rowland Berthoff, Richard Maxwell Brown, H. James Henderson, Jack P. Greene, William G. McLoughlin, Edmund S. Morgan, John Murrin, and John Shy were asked to summarize "for educated readers the results of their studies in aspects of the Revolution best understood by them and for which they have gained the respect of their professional colleagues."

Taking up such themes as violence in the 1760s and '70s, the effects of the war on the civilian population, voting blocs in the Continental Congress, and the role of religion, they fulfill the hope expressed in the opening chapter that "when all the [Bicentennial] medallions have been struck, the pageantry performed, the commercial gimmicks exploited, and the market-tested hackwork published," these essays might help to explain "what, in the context of the knowledge now available, the American Revolution was all about and what bearing it should have on our lives."

EDITOR'S NOTE. *Jack P. Greene, professor of history at the Johns Hopkins University and a 1974-75 Fellow, and Forrest C. Pogue, director of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Institute for Historical Research of the Smithsonian Institution, gave advice on this bibliography.*

MEN OF THE REVOLUTION

Their Lives:

GEORGE WASHINGTON: A BIOGRAPHY. Douglas Southall Freeman. 7 vols. (Scribners, 1948-57; Kelley, 1975). **GEORGE WASHINGTON.** James T. Flexner, 4 vols. (Little, Brown, 1965-72)

JEFFERSON AND HIS TIME. Dumas Malone. 5 vols. (Little, Brown, 1948, 1970, cloth & paper)

JOHN ADAMS AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION. Catherine Drinker Bowen. (Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1950, cloth; Grosset & Dunlap, 1957, paper)

SAMUEL ADAMS, PROMOTER OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: A Study in Psychology and Politics. Ralph V. Harlow. (Holt, 1923; Octagon, 1972)

JOHN PAUL JONES, A SAILOR'S BIOGRAPHY. Samuel Eliot Morison. (Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1959, cloth & paper)

ROCHAMBEAU: America's Neglected Founding Father. Arnold Whitridge. (Macmillan, 1965, cloth, 1974, paper)

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN. This work, translated from the French in which diplomat Franklin wrote it, was first published in London in 1793. The Library of Congress now has 135 cards in its catalog for editions published since—including one edited by Leonard W. Labaree (Yale, 1964).

Their Letters:

THE ADAMS-JEFFERSON LETTERS: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams. Edited by Lester J. Cappon. 2 vols. (Univ. of N. C., 1950)

THE BOOK OF ABIGAIL AND JOHN: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-1784. Edited by L. H. Butterfield, Marc Friedlander, & Mary-Jo Kline. (Harvard, 1975)

THE DIARIES OF GEORGE WASHINGTON, 1748-1799. Edited by J. C. Fitzpatrick. 4 vols. (Houghton, Mifflin, 1925)

THE PAPERS OF JOHN MARSHALL, Vol. I: Correspondence and Papers, November 10, 1775-June 23, 1788: Account Book, September 1783-June 1788. Edited by Herbert A. Johnson, Charles T. Cullen, & Nancy G. Harris. (Univ. of N. C., 1974)

THE PAPERS OF JAMES MADISON. 9 vols. Vols. 1-7 edited by William T. Hutchinson & William M. E. Rachal, Vols. 8-9 by Robert A. Rutland, et al. (Univ. of Chicago, 1962-75)*

THE PAPERS OF ALEXANDER HAMILTON. Edited by Harold C. Syrett & Jacob E. Cooke. 22 vols. to date. (Columbia, 1961-76)*

THE PAPERS OF THOMAS JEFFERSON. Edited by Julian P. Boyd. 19 vols. to date. (Princeton, 1950)*

* These and a number of other collections of writings by famous and lesser-known revolutionary figures are being edited and published under the sponsorship of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission.