

The American Revolution: Evaluating its Influence

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The importance of the Revolutionary War is undeniable. Without it, the thirteen colonies would have taken much longer to gain independence from England if ever at all.

Neoprogessives like Gordon S. Wood argue that the conflict was quite radical because of the drastic change in how the colonists related to each other. However, despite the conflict's name, neoconservative historians like Carl N. Degler question how "revolutionary" the war really was. Degler argues that because the social structures of the colonies remained unchanged after the war, the Revolutionary War was a conservative event. The truth, as it often does, lies somewhere between neoprogessive and neoconservative ideas. Though the American Revolution did change the mindset of the colonists in ways that would affect the future, its immediate and visible impact on social and economic life was quite conservative.

The fact that the social classes before and after the revolution were generally identical indicates that the immediate effects of the revolution were conservative. Though all king appointed officials and many loyalists left America after the war, the overarching social order in the colonies remained the same. Most of the architects of the revolution were by no means poor and unknown figures. Rather, they were all quite wealthy and powerful. For instance, George Washington was one of the richest men in Virginia (Trees). Benjamin Franklin, another patriot, was well known and respected in both the United States and France ("Benjamin Franklin"). Instead of lowering the rank of these individuals, the war increased their status. In this regard the Revolution was very conservative.

Not only did the pre-revolutionary elite retain their place in society, no new social classes rose to power after the war. While statistics do show an overall increase in the numbers of state delegates of more moderate wealth, there was no major shift in political control. In fact, 69 percent of those who signed the Declaration of Independence had already served in office before

the war began (Zinn 75). In the state of Maryland, property requirements still kept about 90 percent of the population from voting (Zinn 81). Thus while there was a shift in state authority away from the elite, there was certainly no radical change of control from the rich to the poor.

Additionally, people at social and political disadvantage in the colonies – such as women and slaves – gained little in social rank after the war had passed. Despite the colonists’ belief in freedom and “natural rights,” both women and slaves were still excluded from the liberties held by white male property owners. Even women who owned property and ran businesses were still not allowed to vote (“Voters and Voting”). Ironically, despite the American call for equality, most slaves had better chances attaining liberty by fighting for the British. After the War, the few slaves in the North were gradually freed, but conditions for slaves in the South did not improve at all. Even so, it is still important to remember that the ideas presented by the founding fathers, most notably the idea that all people have “natural rights,” were still key in movements for abolition and women’s rights. The ideas that came out of the Revolution were the basis on which the advocates for these movements argued (“Suffrage, Women’S”). Unfortunately, neither of these issues were a part of the immediate change brought about by the American Revolution, and it took many years before women and African Americans had the same rights as white males (“Civil Rights Movement”).

The fact that the immediate effects of the Revolution were conservative is also proven by the lack of land redistribution after the war and by the continuation of property qualifications for voting. It is important to understand what land meant to people of this time period. In a letter written to John Sullivan, John Adams wrote “... We may ... affirm that the Ballance of Power in a Society, accompanies the Ballance of Property in Land” (Adams 77). To Adams and the rest of the colonists, property such as land was not just a means to make money, but also a symbol of

independence. It was only with property or a trade (a skill such as blacksmithing) that a colonist could earn enough money to provide for themselves and their family. Those who had no property were powerless and were forced to be dependent on another landowner for survival. Thus, in the American mind for all to be free meant that all people would have a trade or own land. This belief went mostly unchallenged even after the Revolution. Before the Revolution, rules were set in place that mandated citizens must hold a certain amount of property to be allowed suffrage. It was thought that without owning land, a person could not be free and therefore would only have the same ideas as the man whose property he worked. Adams believed that the landless would not have the judgment to make political decisions that were not directed by the employer who provided them with life's necessities (Adams 77). Little changed to the rules that prohibited the poor from voting after the Revolution. According to its constitution written in 1762, Virginia residents were not allowed to vote unless they had 25 acres of land in use or 50 acres of unsettled land (Cornell 84). This law went unchanged after its new constitution in 1776. Other states, such as Pennsylvania, offered increased voting rights to the poor in its 1776 constitution, but in other states, suffrage laws were hardly affected (Cornell 84).

America in the 18th century was very prosperous. Colonists had a lot better chance of owning land and rising up through the social classes than if they were back in England. Charles Pickney, South Carolina's federal delegate in 1787, said that "There is more equality of rank and fortune in America than any other country under the sun" (qtd. In Degler 124). However, socioeconomic mobility was not changed much by the Revolution. America was unique in that it had an abundance of land. Unlike Europe, where land was at a high premium, the colonists saw plenty of opportunity to expand west (albeit at the expense of the Native Americans already living there). Thus land was already much more affordable for the common folk than in Europe.

Moreover, the land that had been owned by loyalists did not necessarily find its way down to the lower classes. Some of this land was redistributed to the poor, but most of it was bought by speculators and large landowners (Degler 126-7). The overall availability of land to the lower classes did not greatly change from before the Revolution. Thus the number of people who were considered “independent” remained about the same as it was before the Revolution.

The final reason the short-term effects of the revolution were conservative is that the colonists were happy and proud British subjects up until around the French-Indian war. As previously stated, the colonies were very prosperous and offered opportunity not found back in Europe. For the most part, white, male colonists were content with the government and social structure of the English colonies (“The Shot Heard”). It was only after Parliament began enforcing taxes without colonial consent that cracks began to appear in their relationship. The colonists were angered at having to pay more for indispensable goods – such as tea and paper products – without having any direct representation in Parliament to defend them (Levy, “Taxation Without Representation.”). Even after that, it took the Battle of Lexington and Concord to convince the Continental Congress to formally and completely declare independence (Ammerman). The colonists did not fight for the sake of a radical new republic as much as they fought to preserve their lifestyle and the relationship they had with the Crown prior to the French Indian War.

The positive relationship that England had with the colonies is further seen in revolutionary slogans like “no taxation without representation” and also in the Declaration of Independence. Many of the ideals behind the American Revolution were not radical and new. Instead, they were inherited from the British. For example, the principle of not taxing citizens without representation that the colonists rallied behind was actually a doctrine of the English Bill

of Rights (Levy, “Bill of Rights”). The colonists’ contentment with the social structure under British rule led to few radical changes after the Revolutionary War.

While the immediate effects of the American Revolution were conservative, the American Revolution did ultimately enshrine into American thought some radical ideas about how individuals should be treated. After the Revolution, the words “all men are created equal” became rooted in the hearts of Americans as part of their national identity. Jacques-Pierre Brissot, a visitor from France, observed in 1788 that “the Americans more than any other people are convinced that all men are born free and equal” (qtd. In Degler 124). This egalitarian idea wasn’t entirely new to the colonies; in the words of Degler it was the “distillation of a cherished sentiment into a ringing phrase, allegiance to which stemmed from its prior acceptance rather than from its eloquence” (Degler 124). But admittedly it was the Revolution that truly ingrained it into American culture. The belief in freedom and equality laid the groundwork for change in the future by allowing people to question inequality in the United States for the first time. For example, it was in 1775 (during the war) that the first abolitionist club in America was created (Newcomer).

Colonists also exercised their new freedom in the disestablishment of state churches. Virginia was the first state to disestablish the Anglican church in an attempt to cut ties with England. Other states followed suit, and by 1833, the last of the state churches was abolished (Allitt). This was later affirmed by the first amendment to the Constitution. America broke the pattern that the church and state in the West had followed for centuries. Though America was still very influenced by Christianity, the separation of church and state was a radical effect of the Revolution.

The overthrow of monarchy and the establishment of a republic that occurred after the Revolution was radical in some ways. Rather than viewing themselves through the lenses of hierarchy, Americans rejected the system that allowed power to be passed down through select nobles. Thomas Paine expressed this new American sentiment, saying that “virtue is not hereditary” (Wood 137). Post-revolutionary Americans believed that men of any background could possess the qualities that were required to lead a state or a nation. The destruction of the aristocracy in the United States led to the creation of a republic, which although it was modeled after Parliament and preexisting state governments, still made the federal government more accessible to the common folk than ever before. The new republic was intended so that any citizen that rose up in social rank could contribute to the political process, not just nobles who were born into power.

While the ideas of human equality were certainly revolutionary, they were only applied to white, property owning males (Norton 188-91). The radical ideal of equality may have taken root in the minds of Americans, but it clearly did not translate immediately into revolutionary actions. If these ideas had been taken more literally, then perhaps African Americans and women may have gained legal rights earlier in the new Constitution. The notion of giving citizens freedom wasn't unique the United States either. Even Great Britain, whose aristocracy the colonists sought to distance themselves, outlawed slavery before the United States finally did.

Aspects of both the neoconservative and neoprogressive views are correct. The American Revolution was not so radical that the influence of British ideas was entirely removed. Indeed, to this day, the United States and England have similar governments and are close allies. It is also correct that the Revolution had large effects on the social and political mindset of the United States. The ideas of “natural rights” and equality have greatly shaped the way that America is

today and will hopefully continue to do so in the future. However, it did not so radically change America at the time as to convince it to apply these ideas to its entire population.

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