ISSUE 6

Was the American Revolution Primarily a Struggle for Power?

YES: Theodore Draper, from *A Struggle for Power: The American Revolution* (Times Books, 1996)

NO: Bernard Bailyn, from *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Belknap Press, 1967)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Journalist Theodore Draper argues that the American Revolution was primarily a struggle for power between Great Britain and its American colonists.

NO: Historian Bernard Bailyn asserts that the American Revolution was an ideological struggle against Great Britain, which conspired to take away the colonists' political liberties.

Was the American Revolution a true revolution? The answer may depend on how the term *revolution* is defined. *Strict constructionists*, for example, perceive revolution as producing significant and deep societal change, while *loose constructionists* define the term as "any resort to violence within a political order to change its constitution, rulers, or policies." Historians agree that American Revolutionaries fulfilled the second definition because they successfully fought a war that resulted in the overthrow of their British rulers and established a government run by themselves. Historians disagree, however, on the extent of social and economic change that took place in America.

Early historians did not concern themselves with the social and economic aspects of the American Revolution. Instead, they argued over its causes and refought the political arguments advanced by the rebelling colonists and the British government. George Bancroft was the first historian to advance the *Whig*, or *pro-American*, interpretation of the war. America won, he said, because God was on our side. Much of Bancroft's 10-volume *History of the United States* (1834–1874) was written during the period of Jacksonian democracy, when the belief that it was the Manifest Destiny of the United States to spread the ideas of freedom, progress, and democracy across the North American continent was highest.

Bancroft's view remained unchallenged until the beginning of the twentieth century, when a group of imperialist historians analyzed the Revolution from the perspective of the British Empire. These historians tended to be

sympathetic to the economic and political difficulties that Great Britain faced in running an empire in the late eighteenth century.

Both the Whig and the imperialist historians assumed that the Revolution was an *external* event whose primary cause was the political differences between the colonists and their British rulers. In 1909, however, historian Carl Becker paved the way for a different interpretation of the Revolution when he concluded in his study of colonial New York that an *internal* revolution had taken place. The American Revolution, said Becker, created a struggle not only for home rule but also one for who should rule at home. This *progressive*, or *conflict*, interpretation dominated most of the writings on the American Revolution from 1910 through 1945. During this time progressive historians searched for the social and economic conflicts among groups struggling for political power.

During the cold war years of the 1950s and 1960s, American historians rejected what they considered to be an oversimplified conflict interpretation of the Revolution by the previous generation of progressive historians. These *neoconservative* historians distinguished the moderate American Revolution from the more extreme revolutions that had taken place in Russia in 1917 and in China and the other Third World nations after World War II. Carl N. Degler argued that upper-middle-class colonists led a pragmatic conservative revolution against Great Britain, which left untouched the prewar economic and social class structure of an upwardly mobile group of colonists. Robert E. Brown, in his studies on colonial Massachusetts and Virginia, argued that America had become a middle-class democracy even before the American Revolution had taken place.

Not all colonial historians accept the neoconservative interpretation. By the 1970s a group loosely termed *neoleft* who had been influenced by the tumultuous events of the 1960s began to write about the impact of the Revolution on the tenant farmers, the urban poor, the slaves, women, and the Indians. These historians, led by Gary B. Nash and Alfred F. Young, rejected the male-dominated and Eurocentric framework of previous historians. They view the development of the American colonies from a triracial perspective that included not only Europeans but also Indians and Africans of both sexes.

The following selections look at the roles played by ideology and power in bringing about the American Revolution. Were these two forces opposite, or did they complement one another in bringing about a revolution? In the first selection, Theodore Draper plays down the importance of ideas and argues that the American Revolution was primarily a struggle for power between Great Britain and its American colonists. In the second selection, Bernard Bailyn maintains that the American Revolution was an ideological struggle against Great Britain, who in the 1760s had conspired to take away the colonists' political rights and liberties as members of the British Empire.

YES

Theodore Draper

A DEGREE OF IMPORTANCE

As one looks back at the prerevolutionary period, some things stand out.

The end of the Seven Years' War in 1763 opened the revolutionary road by giving the British a rationale to tax the Americans and by relieving the American colonists of the French threat. Whether the Revolution might have broken out even if the French were still in Canada is something we will never know. But there is good reason to believe that it would at least have come much later in time and in different circumstances.

Long after 1763, the Americans claimed that all they had ever wanted was a return to the status quo ante. In effect, they were satisfied with their status in 1763, because they effectively managed their own lives and dominated the governors sent to rule over them. They were growing spectacularly in population and commerce, whatever the obstacles put in their path. They were protected by the British navy in a still dangerous and treacherous world. They enjoyed thinking of themselves as part of the British empire, and their elite imitated the ways of their counterparts in England. There is no reason to doubt that the Americans really wanted to preserve the status quo before 1763, because it worked largely in their favor.

But the new British legislation of 1764–65, culminating in the Stamp Act, brought about a sudden, unexpected, explosive change in the American ethos. It is hard to believe that the cost of the stamps could have made so great a difference that a revolutionary trend was set in motion by it. The Stamp Act represented something much larger and more threatening than a tax. What that was is the secret of the American Revolution.

In large part, the ensuing struggle was one between British sovereignty and American autonomy. British sovereignty was the guiding British principle from the beginning to the end of the struggle. But once the Americans discovered how to fight against parliamentary taxation, they had a fatal stranglehold on that sovereignty. Again and again they invoked the old Lockean doctrine that they must give consent before parting with their money. The colonists presented the British with a paradox—consent meant that they had to be represented in Parliament, yet the colonies said that they could not be meaningfully represented there. The British could not hold on to their

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sovereignty if they gave up their right to taxation, and the Americans could not hold on to the right to tax themselves without fatally impairing British sovereignty over them.

For ten years, the argument went round and round, always ending in the same place. But why did it take ten years to settle the matter? For one thing, the British long did not have the force in the colonies to compel obedience. For another, the British were filled with illusions about the colonies—that they were too different from one another to unite against British rule, that the Americans needed British protection against other predatory powers, that there were enough British well-wishers in the colonies to prevent a total British collapse. These misconceptions had just enough truth in them to be misleading. If we can believe John Adams, at least one-third of the colonial population opposed the Revolution. A later estimate has put the figure at about one-fifth. In any case, the pro-British opposition was large enough to give the British reason to expect substantial aid from inside the colonies.

As for the Americans, they had been part of the British empire for so long—a century and a half for the oldest colonies—that breaking away seemed to go against their very nature. They needed time and goading to develop an ideology and a leadership that brought them to the full realization that they were aiming at independence. In fact, they engaged in some extraordinary intellectual gymnastics to hold on to some shred of attachment to the British empire. First they objected to taxation, not trade; then they held on almost to the very end to a loyalty to the king, not Parliament. When the Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1776, declared, "The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States," and went on to state at length all of his alleged "Oppressions," with barely a mention of Parliament, it forgot all that had been said in previous years about obeying the king and blaming Parliament.

The final stage of the revolutionary struggle against the tea tax was brought about by a relatively minuscule issue. As late as December 1774, the precocious Alexander Hamilton noted that it was ridiculous "to affirm, that we are quarrelling for the trifling sum of three pence a pound on tea; when it is evidently the principle against which we contend." George Grenville had said essentially the same thing: "The question is not about paying of this sum, or that sum of money, but to establish your jurisdiction, and power of every kind within the words of the Act of Parliament over the colonies." They agreed that the specific issue could not have had revolutionary implications if it had not embodied principle, jurisdiction, and power.

The entire colonial case against British rule had been largely negative—against taxation, against a "standing army," against the importation of tea, against the Coercive Acts. In all the mountain of words against the British from 1765 to 1775, few—if any—have anything to do with changing the political and certainly not the social structure as it had developed under British rule. The Revolution was not fought to bring about democracy or any kind of egalitarianism. Before 1776, very few—if any—Americans expected to bring about a republic. The British gave the colonists a revolution-

ary program long before the Americans were willing to admit that this was their goal. "It is something of a paradox of the American Revolution," J. R. Pole, a British historian, has observed, "that its leaders knew what they were against before they were absolutely sure about what they were for."

Once the war broke out, it was obvious that the new American states could not reorganize themselves in a monarchical fashion or substitute an American monarchy for a British monarchy. The result was the creation of a republic, with all the political changes that implied. But the term itself was not an issue in the prewar period; it was realized only as a result of the war. In 1775, for example, that inveterate ideologist John Adams, as *Novanglus*, had only gone so far as wanting an American state united with a British state "under one king." It was not until 1776 that Adams turned his mind to what the next stage would be and decided that "all good government is republican." In fact, Adams was astounded that the change in attitude had come so suddenly. "Idolatry to Monarchs, and servility to Aristocratical Pride," he wrote to his wife, Abigail, in July 1776, "was never so totally eradicated from so many Minds in so short a Time."

In October 1774, the First Continental Congress still gave assurances that "our connexion with Great Britain we shall always carefully and zealously endeavour to support and maintain." The following year, even after Lexington and Concord and the appointment of George Washington as commander in chief, the Second Continental Congress declared that "we mean not to dissolve that union which has so long and so happily subsisted between us" and "we have not raised armies with ambitious designs of separating from Great-Britain and establishing independent states." The popular turn to independence came after the publication of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* in January 1776. Independence meant that the Americans wanted to have the power to determine their own fate, but just what that fate was going to be was still an open question.

Were the Americans sincere in their long denials of the goal of independence, or did they play a double game of seeming to reject it publicly while wanting it privately? It is difficult to be sure of the answer, because none of the American Founders ever discussed it publicly and historians have not been much more helpful. The connection with Great Britain was so deeply ingrained in the American consciousness that it was broken only with the greatest difficulty. American extremists came close to advocating a semblance of independence in 1774–75, but only in the form of equality within the empire. On this score, too, the British were the first to recognize what they were fighting against. They had been prepared to expect an American breakaway for decades before it became a practical issue. In any case, it appears that the Americans made the Revolution only as a last resort and by telling themselves that they were aiming at something else—not an unusual occurrence in great historic events.

Another tantalizing question is what might have happened if the British had not deceived themselves that the Americans were too weak and divided to fight. When it was too late, at least two British ministers admitted that they had been "misled and deceived." Lord North himself confessed that "he had been deceived in events" and had not imagined that "all America would have armed in the cause." In fact, the British government blundered into a war which it did not think it would have to fight. Yet it is hard to believe that it would have capitulated to the Americans without a struggle, even if it had been more foreknowing. After all, it would have had to agree to a cringing dissolution of the empire and the expected ruination of Great Britain itself. More likely, a less deluded British government might have taken more resolute military measures earlier to head off the coming challenge. In this case, the question is whether the Americans would have been so headstrong if Gage had had 24,000 troops instead of about 4,000.

Yet to overemphasize the grievances and self-deceptions that ostensibly brought about the Revolution is to lose sight of the underlying changes in the relationship between the colonies and the mother country. In the "pamphlet of war" of 1759–1761, the premonitions of colonial independence had had nothing to do with those grievances and illusions, all of which came later. The British pamphleteers based themselves on objective factors that arose out of the growth and development of the colonies. They saw that Great Britain, 3,000 miles away, could not by itself hold the Americans back from wanting to determine their own fate. Only an external threat from the French in Canada could restrain the Americans from striking out on their own.

One of the peculiar aspects of the Revolutionary War was its outbreak. It began at Lexington and Concord at a time when the colonial militia was fired up with an inordinate sense of its advantage over the British regulars. This sense was fed by the disparity in casualties at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, the capture of Ticonderoga in May of that year, and the disparity of casualties at Bunker Hill in June. Gage's force was cooped up in Boston and did not dare offer opposition to a superior colonial force. The colonial advantage, however, began to evaporate in 1776. One wonders whether the militia would have been so headstrong and confident if the early disparities had not existed. These had resulted wholly from the sluggishness with which the British side had prepared for a war. The British did not begin to take the war seriously until 1776, by which time it was too late. In fact, the war broke out even before the entire American side fully believed that independence was what it was fighting for. There is no telling what would have happened if the British had manifested more force earlier, but it is safe to say that British military policy in 1774–75 was partially responsible for setting off the war.

To some later British historians, British colonial policy made no sense. One attributed it to "a stupid generation of English politicians." Another pointed out that the Stamp Act was never expected to bring in more than £100,000, the tax on tea never more than £30,000, and the war cost the British Treasury £128,000,000 and thousands of British lives. In the light of these figures, "one would think there was no man in Great Britain but would have run out into the streets crying for instant reconciliation with the Colonies." But it was not merely "a stupid generation of English politicians" that wanted the war; the bulk of British people of that generation supported the war. The forces that led to the American Revolution were too large and too deep to be attributed to stupid British politicians.

* * *

In the end, the Revolution was a struggle for power—between the power the British wished to exercise over the Americans and the power the Americans wished to exercise over themselves. The Declaration of Independence put it bluntly—the Americans in 1776 wanted nothing more than to assume a "separate and equal station" among "the Powers of the earth."

This struggle for power was masked for sometime—by the issues of taxation, the authority of Parliament, the Coercive Acts. But all the while, the real question was which side would dictate to the other side. The British generation of the revolutionary period believed that Great Britain was faced with ruin and degradation if the American colonies were lost. It was willing to fight a war not merely to keep the American colonies but to prevent Great Britain from sinking into an economic and diplomatic morass. This outlook turned out to be wrong, and a new British empire, much stronger than the first, was created in the nineteenth century. But the future was a dark secret to the British people and politicians of 1774–75.

James Otis had stated the essential issue as early as 1762 in the preface to his first pamphlet: "*The world ever has been and will be pretty equally divided, between those two great parties, vulgarly called the* winners, *and the* loosers; *or to speak more precisely, between those who are discontented that they have no Power, and those who never think they can have enough.*"

Otis and other Americans were soon busy arguing about the various differences that arose between Great Britain and the colonies. But increasingly, Americans saw that the British were responding to a rising American power. In 1768, a Philadelphia essayist, William Hicks, asked: "Shall we be reduced to the most abject state of dependence, because we may possibly become formidable rivals to our jealous British brethren?" In 1774, Richard Wells wrote a pamphlet in which he exulted: "We look to manhood—our muscles swell out with youthful vigor; our sinews spring with elastic force; and we feel the *marrow of Englishmen in our bones*. The day of independent manhood is at hand—we feel our strength; and with a filial grateful sense of *proper* obedience, would wish to be esteemed the *friend* as well as the *child* of Britain." In 1774, Thomas Jefferson explained the Boston Tea Party in terms of a new power relationship: "An exasperated people, who feel that they possess power, are not easily restrained within limits strictly regular."

To get over the objection that British rule meant rule by Parliament, the revolutionary colonists long tried to substitute the king for Parliament. This strategy never impressed the British public or the king, because at least in this instance they knew their history better than Benjamin Franklin or the Massachusetts legislature did. According to the settlement of 1688–89, the king swore to rule by the laws of Parliament. For British Whigs, this compact was sacrosanct. In 1773, George III had Dartmouth tell Franklin that laws had to be made by Parliament in all cases whatsoever and that it was his duty to preserve this right "entire and inviolate." One wonders whether the delegates in 1776 blamed the king for all their troubles because they had previously exempted him from them.

Both sides were victims of their own contradictions. The British maintained that Parliament had the right to legislate and tax the Americans because the Americans were British subjects. But the British also held that the colonies were and must remain "dependent" on Great Britain and, therefore, different from it. The Americans wanted to be British subjects but not for the purpose of being taxed or subject to parliamentary legislation. The two were incompatible.

One American contradiction concerned slavery. The Americans assailed a tax on stamps or on tea as the equivalent of nothing short of slavery, even absolute slavery. Yet they paid little attention to the real slavery of blacks that was all around them, mainly in the south but also in the north. There was some sentiment for abolition in the north before the American Revolution, but it never amounted to much, and some of the most eminent revolutionaries were slave owners. This discrepancy did not escape the notice of Dr. Johnson, who asked, "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?"

The question arises how important the "constitutional" or "political" arguments between the British and Americans were. These arguments can be followed in the speeches, pamphlets, and resolutions that traditionally make up a good part of the American road to revolution. They are important because they tell of the intellectual struggle that preceded the outbreak of hostilities. In this struggle, however, the American political positions changed repeatedly over the critical ten years. They went from objecting to taxation only, to rejecting the legislation of Parliament in all cases, to accepting the weak link with the king, to declaring absolute independence. Something of longer range and deeper significance was driving the Americans to an ever more extreme resolution of the conflict.

It could well be found in the insight which James Harrington had expressed in *The Common-wealth of Oceana*, published in 1656—that colonies were "as yet babes that cannot live without suckling the breasts of their mother-Cities," but that "I mistake, if when they come of age they do not wean themselves." Or, a century later, Francis Hutcheson's thought: "Large numbers of men cannot be bound to sacrifice their own and their posterity's liberty and happiness, to the ambitious views of their mother-country, while it can enjoy all rational happiness without subjection to it." Or the conviction that the British could not keep the Americans in subjection without a French Canada to frighten them, a proposition that was at the very heart of the Canada versus Guadeloupe debate a half decade before the Stamp Act. These views point to a "real cause" that, as Thucydides put it, "made war inevitable"—the growth of the power of the Americans, and the alarm this inspired in Great Britain. There was something in this conflict in the nature of a struggle between a British immovable body and an American irresistible force. Such an impasse could not persist indefinitely; one or the other force had to give way.

In 1776, one of the most acute British observers of the time, Adam Smith, cut through the old disputes to what he thought was the real American motivation. The American leaders, he wrote, "feel in themselves at this moment a degree of importance which, perhaps the greatest subjects in Europe scarce feel. From shopkeepers, tradesmen, and attornies, they are become statesmen and legislators, and are employed in contriving a new form of government for an extensive empire, which, they flatter themselves, will become, and which, indeed,

seems very likely to become, one of the greatest and most formidable that ever was in the world." He continued: "Such has hitherto been the rapid progress of that country in wealth, population and improvement, that in the course of little more than a century, perhaps, the produce of America might exceed that of British taxation. The seat of the empire would then naturally remove itself to that part of the empire which contributed most to the general defence and support of the whole." Smith wrote before the full impact of the Revolution was clear, but he clearly saw it in terms of "wealth, population and improvement" that promised to make the Americans more important than the British even if they stayed in the empire.

In 1777, Thomas Paine wrote: "America, by her own internal industry, and unknown to all the powers of Europe, was, at the beginning of the dispute, arrived at a pitch of greatness, trade and population, beyond which it was the interest of Britain not to suffer her to pass, lest she should grow too powerful to be kept subordinate."

As the war dragged on, even Lord North frequently remarked that "the advantages of this contest could never repay the expence." This sign of weakness did not sit well with George III, who sent North a note to stiffen him and to explain what the stakes for Great Britain were. The king's view may seem overwrought in retrospect, but at the time it was shared by others and helps to explain why the British fought so long to prevent what much later came to be known as "falling dominoes":

> The present Contest with America I cannot help seeing as the most serious in which any Country was ever engaged[;] it contains such a train of consequences that they must be examined to feel its true weight; whether the laying a Tax was deserving all the Evils that have arisen from it, I should suppose no man could alledge that without being thought more fit for Bedlam than a Seat in the Senate; but step by step the demands of America have risen—independence is their object, that certainly is one which every man not willing to sacrifice every object to a *momentary and* inglorious Peace must concurr with me in thinking that this Country can never submit to; should America succeed in that, the West Indies must follow them, not independence, but must for its own interest be dependent on North America; Ireland would soon follow the same plan and be a separate State, then this Island would be reduced to itself, and soon would be a poor Island indeed, for reduced in Her Trade Merchants would retire their Wealth to Climates more to their Advantage, and Shoals of Manufacturers would leave this Country for the New Empire.

From this point of view, the British stakes could not have been higher. If Great Britain lost the war, it was allegedly condemned to change from being the greatest power in the world to being but a "poor Island," from which her merchants and manufacturers would flee. This forecast proved to be overly pessimistic, but no one could have known it at the time. In effect, Great Britain was thought to be fighting for keeping its status as a great power or for retaining almost any power at all. By the same reasoning, the Americans were fighting to become the "New Empire."

If, as seems clear from the evidence, the Americans in 1774–75 were fighting against the king, the majority in Parliament, and most of the politically minded British public, no one of these three can

be blamed for the War of Independence. When the Americans first put the responsibility for their plight on Parliament and then on the king, they were looking for a convenient scapegoat. In fact, the war was a struggle between the main bodies of leaders and people on both sides. The one wanted to keep what seemed to be essential to its welfare, and the other wanted to break away to release itself from external restraints and prohibitions.

Paradoxically, the Americans were lucky to have been *British* colonies. In no other empire of the time could the colonies have had the advantages that the Americans had under the British empire. Only the British could have permitted a colonial press to go so far in challenging and defying the mother country. Only the British could have allowed a substantial and vigorous part of their own upper class to sympathize with and support the American rebels. Only the British could have provided much of the theoretical underpinning of colonial ideology. There was no Locke or "Cato" in France or Spain to inspire its colonists and arm them with convenient arguments against its own rule. Almost to the end of the colonial period, the colonists pleaded for their rights as *British* subjects, not as Americans. The Americans may have deceived the British or themselves in their allegiance to what they considered to be the true British tradition, even if it was a dissident side of that tradition. Nevertheless, the Americans could not have obtained such political and psychological sustenance from anywhere else in the world at that time.

Who made the American Revolution? The best-known revolutionaries belonged to a relatively small American elite. Sometimes backing it and sometimes going its own way was a larger, anonymous mass of the poor to the middle stratum, sometimes called the "populace," the "rabble," or the "mob." From time to time, the latter's violence and lack of control frightened the revolutionary elite as well as British officialdom. In the end, the elite managed to hold on to its leadership and to direct the Revolution where it wanted it to go. The supreme political advantage of the elite was that it had a unifying program that was simple and manageable. It wanted freedom from British subjection without social turmoil and transformation. The mass support had no such large program and generally expressed itself in destructive local violence, which suddenly flared up and just as suddenly subsided. The most probable answer to the question is that the American Revolution was made by both strata but that the elite gave it its leadership, program, and continuity.

We may usefully go back to the pamphlet war of 1759–1761, with which we began. The main issue in those pamphlets was how the American colonies influenced the interests of Great Britain. The pro-Guadeloupe side held that it was better to leave Canada to the French, because "in process of Time" the American colonies would "care little about the Mother Country," since the colonies were sure to "increase infinitely from all Causes." As a British pamphlet of 1761 put it: "As America increases in people, so she must increase in arts and sciences, in manufactures and trade, while she has the same laws, liberties, and genius we have at home; the more she increases in these, the less she must want from Britain; the more she rises above a certain pitch, her utility and advantage to Britain must proportionately decline."

At that time nothing had yet happened to come between Great Britain and the American colonies. All this theorizing was based on long-held ideas about empires and colonies. The British government had ignored the warnings against taking Canada instead of Guadeloupe. Nevertheless, the long procession of British thinkers who had contributed such warnings had not labored in vain; they had produced a climate of opinion that had increasingly hardened the British resolve to make the showdown with the Americans hinge on the issue of sovereignty and power. There is no telling what the Americans would have done if the British had left well enough alone after 1763 or even 1766, but it is almost certain that the Revolution would not have come when and how it did. The struggle for power might have been delayed, but it could not have been indefinitely postponed.

* * *

The struggle for American independence was a struggle for power because—most simply—the essential issue was this: Who would make the ultimate decisions? This question came to a head in the 1760s, but it had long haunted both the colonies and the mother country.

The decision-making power had worried the British as early as the seventeenth century. It had been at the bottom of all the British predictions and speculations about the tenuous hold the mother country had over the colonies. It had expressed itself in the unwavering insistence of the colonies that their charters gave them full control of their monies and expenditures. Money-power had prevailed in the incessant struggles between governors and assemblies. Only the laissez-faire British colonial policy in the first half of the eighteenth century and the daunting French threat from Canada had made it unnecessary or inopportune for the colonies to attempt to make any important change in the nominal relationship with Great Britain before the 1760s.

That the struggle was over the power of decision was shown in its most naked and unmistakable form in the first case... against Governor Bernard of Massachusetts, led by James Otis in 1762. Otis did not challenge the facts about Bernard's response to the demand of merchants and fishermen in Salem and Marblehead to protect them against an alleged threat from a French privateer. He based his entire case on Bernard's expenditure of funds to send out a colonial sloop. The issue was clear-cut for Otis—only the assembly had the power to authorize the expenditure. Nothing but the power of decision was at stake.

This precedent held for the rest of the colonial period. The stamp tax was fought so vehemently because it was imposed by Parliament and not the assemblies. For the first time, it violated the assemblies' monopoly of power over money. Once the assemblies were deprived of this preeminent power, they saw themselves as virtually powerless. They were mollified for a time by the repeal of the Stamp Act, and they tolerated the Declaratory Act as a face-saving gesture on the part of the British government. But the Declaratory Act was the true casus belli of the American Revolution. When it stated in unmistakable terms that Parliament had full power to make laws binding on the colonies "*in all cases whatsoever*," it challenged the colonies to—as George III put it—"submit or triumph."

In these tumultuous years between 1765–66 and the outbreak of the war in 1775, the struggle for power was marked by various ideological, constitutional, and political issues. But these controversies invariably turned on who had the power of decision to settle them. They were not intellectual exercises between rival groups of ideologues. In the end, the issue was dependence versus independence—colonial dependence on Great Britain, meaning that Parliament would make the ultimate decisions, or American independence, meaning that the assemblies would make the ultimate decisions. A fundamental change in the American form of government had to wait for the end of the war and the new federal Constitution, drawn up in 1787.

In the end, the colonies had to wrest the power of decision from Great Britain before they could face the question of what to do with it. The struggle for power came first.

NO

Bernard Bailyn

THE IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

The American Revolution was above all else an ideological, constitutional, political struggle and not primarily a controversy between social groups undertaken to force changes in the organization of the society or the economy.... Intellectual developments in the decade before Independence led to a radical idealization and conceptualization of the previous century and a half of American experience, and... it was this intimate relationship between Revolutionary thought and the circumstances of life in eighteenth-century America that endowed the Revolution with its peculiar force and made it so profoundly a transforming event.... Most commonly the thought of the Revolution has been seen simply as an expression of the natural rights philosophy: the ideas of the social contract, inalienable rights, natural law, and the contractual basis of government. But some have denounced this interpretation as "obtuse secularism," and, reading the sermons of the time with acute sensitivity, argue that it was only a respect for world opinion that led the Founders to put their case "in the restricted language of the rational century," and that the success of the Revolutionary movement is comprehensible only in terms of the continuing belief in original sin and the need for grace. Yet others have described the sermons of the time as a form of deliberate propaganda by which revolutionary ideas were fobbed off on an unsuspecting populace by a "black regiment" of clergy committed, for reasons unexplained, to the idea of rebellion. And still others deny the influence of both Enlightenment theory and theology, and view the Revolution as no revolution at all, but rather as a conservative movement wrought by practitioners of the common law and devoted to preserving it, and the ancient liberties embedded in it, intact.

The pamphlets (of the American Revolution) do reveal the influence of Enlightenment thought, and they do show the effective force of certain religious ideas, of the common law, and also of classical literature; but they reveal most significantly the close integration of these elements in a pattern of, to me at least, surprising design—surprising because of the prominence in it of still another tradition, interwoven with, yet still distinct from, these more

From Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Belknap Press, 1967). Copyright © 1967 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Reprinted by permission. Notes omitted.

familiar strands of thought. This distinctive influence had been transmitted most directly to the colonists by a group of early eighteenth-century radical publicists and opposition politicians in England who carried forward into the eighteenth century and applied to the politics of the age of Walpole the peculiar strain of anti-authoritarianism bred in the upheaval of the English Civil War....

Phrases that I, like most historians, had readily dismissed as mere rhetoric and propaganda: "slavery," "corruption," "conspiracy,"... were used so forcefully by writers of so great a variety of social statuses, political positions, and religious persuasions, they fitted so logically into the pattern of radical and opposition thought; and they reflected so clearly the realities of life in an age in which monarchical autocracy flourished, in which the stability and freedom of England's "mixed" constitution was a recent and remarkable achievement, and in which the fear of conspiracy against constituted authority was built into the very structure of politics, that I began to suspect that they meant something very real to both the writers and their readers: that there were real fears, real anxieties, a sense of real danger behind these phrases, and not merely the desire to influence by rhetoric and propaganda the inert minds of an otherwise passive populace. The more I read, the less useful, it seemed to me, was the whole idea of propaganda in its modern meaning when applied to the writings of the American Revolution.... In the end I was convinced that the fear of a comprehensive conspiracy against liberty throughout the English-speaking world—a conspiracy believed to have been nourished in corruption, and of which, it was felt, oppression in America was only the most immediately visible part—lay at the heart of the Revolutionary movement....

* * *

The colonists believed they saw emerging from the welter of events during the decade after the Stamp Act a pattern whose meaning was unmistakable. They saw in the measures taken by the British government and in the actions of officials in the colonies something for which their peculiar inheritance of thought had prepared them only too well, something they had long conceived to be a possibility in view of the known tendencies of history and of the present state of affairs in England. They saw about them, with increasing clarity, not merely mistaken, or even evil, policies violating the principles upon which freedom rested, but what appeared to be evidence of nothing less than a deliberate assault launched surreptitiously by plotters against liberty both in England and in America. The danger to America, it was believed, was in fact only the small, immediately visible part of the greater whole whose ultimate manifestation would be the destruction of the English constitution, with all the rights and privileges embedded in it.

This belief transformed the meaning of the colonists' struggle, and it added an inner accelerator to the movement of opposition. For, once assumed, it could not be easily dispelled: denial only confirmed it, since what conspirators profess is not what they believe; the ostensible is not the real; and the real is deliberately malign.

It was this—the overwhelming evidence, as they saw it, that they were faced with conspirators against liberty determined at all costs to gain ends which their words dissembled—that was signaled to

the colonists after 1763, and it was this above all else that in the end propelled them into Revolution.

Suspicion that the ever-present, latent danger of an active conspiracy of power against liberty was becoming manifest within the British Empire, assuming specific form and developing in coordinated phases, rose in the consciousness of a large segment of the American population before any of the famous political events of the struggle with England took place. No adherent of a nonconformist church or sect in the eighteenth century was free from suspicion that the Church of England, an arm of the English state, was working to bring all subjects of the crown into the community of the Church; and since toleration was official and nonconformist influence in English politics formidable, it was doing so by stealth, disguising its efforts, turning to improper uses devices that had been created for benign purposes. In particular, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, an arm of the Church created in 1701 to aid in bringing the Gospel to the pagan Indians, was said by 1763 to have "long had a formal design to root out Presbyterianism, etc., and to establish both episcopacy and bishops." ...

Fear of an ecclesiastical conspiracy against American liberties, latent among nonconformists through all of colonial history, thus erupted into public controversy at the very same time that the first impact of new British policies in civil affairs was being felt. And though it was, in an obvious sense, a limited fear (for large parts of the population identified themselves with the Anglican Church and were not easily convinced that liberty was being threatened by a plot of Churchmen) it nevertheless had a profound indirect effect everywhere, for it drew into public discussion—evoked in specific form—the general conviction of eighteenth-century Englishmen that the conjoining of "temporal and spiritual tyranny" was, in John Adams' words, an event totally "calamitous to human liberty" yet an event that in the mere nature of things perpetually threatened. For, as David Hume had explained,

> in all ages of the world priests have been enemies to liberty.... Liberty of thinking and of expressing our thoughts is always fatal to priestly power... and, by an infallible connection which prevails among all kinds of liberty, this privilege can never be enjoyed... but in a free government. Hence... all princes that have aimed at despotic power have known of what importance it was to gain the established clergy; as the clergy, on their part, have shown a great facility in entering into the views of such princes.

Fear of the imposition of an Anglican episcopate thus brought into focus a cluster of ideas, attitudes, and responses alive with century-old Popish-Stuart-Jacobite associations that would enter directly into the Revolutionary controversy in such writings as John Adams' *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law* (1765) and Samuel Adams' "A Puritan" pieces published in the *Boston Gazette* in 1768. And more than that, it stimulated among highly articulate leaders of public opinion, who would soon be called upon to interpret the tendency of civil affairs, a general sense that they lived in a conspiratorial world in which what the highest officials professed was not what they in fact intended, and that their words masked a malevolent design.

Reinforcement for this belief came quickly. Even for those who had in no way been concerned with the threat of an episcopal establishment, the passage

of the Stamp Act was not merely an impolitic and unjust law that threatened the priceless right of the individual to retain possession of his property until he or his chosen representative voluntarily gave it up to another; it was to many, also, a danger signal indicating that a more general threat existed. For though it could be argued, and in a sense proved by the swift repeal of the act, that nothing more was involved than ignorance or confusion on the part of people in power who really knew better and who, once warned by the reaction of the colonists, would not repeat the mistake—though this could be, and by many was, concluded, there nevertheless appeared to be good reason to suspect that more was involved. For from whom had the false information and evil advice come that had so misled the English government? From officials in the colonies, said John Adams, said Oxenbridge Thacher, James Otis, and Stephen Hopkins—from officials bent on overthrowing the constituted forms of government in order to satisfy their own lust for power, and not likely to relent in their passion. Some of these local plotters were easily identified. To John Adams, Josiah Quincy, and others the key figure in Massachusetts from the beginning to the end was Thomas Hutchinson who by "serpentine wiles" was befuddling and victimizing the weak, the avaricious, and the incautious in order to increase his notorious engrossment of public office. In Rhode Island it was, to James Otis, that "little, dirty, drinking, drabbing, contaminated knot of thieves, beggars, and transports... made up of Turks, Jews, and other infidels, with a few renegado Christians and Catholics"—the Newport junto, led by Martin Howard, Jr., which had already been accused by Stephen Hopkins and others in Providence of "conspiring against the liberties of the colony."

But even if local leaders associated with power elements in England had not been so suspect, there were grounds for seeing more behind the Stamp Act than its ostensible purpose. The official aim of the act was, of course, to bring in revenue to the English treasury. But the sums involved were in fact quite small, and "some persons... may be inclined to acquiesce under it." But that would be to fall directly into the trap, for the smaller the taxes, John Dickinson wrote in the most influential pamphlet published in America before 1776, the more dangerous they were, since they would the more easily be found acceptable by the incautious, with the result that a precedent would be established for making still greater inroads on liberty and property.

> Nothing is wanted at home but a PRECEDENT, the force of which shall be established by the tacit submission of the colonies.... If the Parliament succeeds in this attempt, other statutes will impose other duties... and thus the Parliament will levy upon us such sums of money as they choose to take, *without any other* LIMITATION *than their* PLEASURE.

... During the same years the independence of the judiciary, so crucial a part of the constitution, was suddenly seen to be under heavy attack, and by the mid-1760's to have succumbed in many places.

This too was not a new problem. The status of the colonial judiciary had been a controversial question throughout the century. The Parliamentary statute of 1701 which guaranteed judges in England life tenure in their posts had

been denied to the colonies, in part because properly trained lawyers were scarce in the colonies, especially in the early years, and appointments for life would prevent the replacement of ill-qualified judges by their betters, when they appeared; and in part because, judicial salaries being provided for by temporary legislative appropriations, the removal of all executive control from the judiciary, it was feared, would result in the hopeless subordination of the courts to popular influences. The status of the judiciary in the eighteenth century was therefore left open to political maneuvering in which, more often than not, the home government managed to carry its point and to make the tenure of judges as temporary as their salaries. Then suddenly, in the early 1760's, the whole issue exploded. In 1759 the Pennsylvania Assembly declared that the judges of that province would thereafter hold their offices by the same permanence of tenure that had been guaranteed English judges after the Glorious Revolution. But the law was disallowed forthwith by the crown. Opposition newspapers boiled with resentment; angry speeches were made in the Assembly; and a pamphlet appeared explaining in the fullest detail the bearing of judicial independence on constitutional freedom.

... "More and more," as the people contemplated the significance of crown salaries for a judiciary that served "at pleasure," was it clear that "the designs of administration [were] totally to subvert the constitution." Any judge, the House in Massachusetts ultimately stated, who accepted such salaries would thereby declare "that he has not a due sense of the importance of an impartial administration of justice, that he is an enemy to the constitution, and has it in his heart to promote the establishment of an arbitrary government in the province."

Long before this, however, another aspect of the judicial system was believed also to have come under deliberate attack. The jury system, it was said, in New York particularly but elsewhere as well, was being systematically undermined. In New York the same executive who had fought the permanent tenure of judges insisted on the legality of allowing jury decisions, on matters of fact as well as of law, to be appealed to the governor and Council. This effort, though defeated within a year by action of the Board of Trade in England, had a lasting impact on the political consciousness of New Yorkers. It was publicly assailed, in the year of the Stamp Act, as "arbitrary" and "scandalous" in its deliberate subversion of the British constitution.

Associated with this but more important because more widespread in its effect was the extension and enforcement of the jurisdiction of the vice-admiralty courts—"prerogative" courts composed not of juries but of single judges whose posts were "political offices in the hands of the royal governors, to be bestowed upon deserving friends and supporters." Since these courts had jurisdiction over the enforcement of all laws of trade and navigation as well as over ordinary marine matters, they had always been potentially threatening to the interests of the colonists. But in the past, by one means or another, they had been curtailed in their effect, and much of their business had been shunted off to common law courts dominated by juries. Suddenly in the 1760's they acquired a great new importance, for it was into their hands that the burden of judicial enforcement of the new Parliamentary legislation fell. It was

upon them, consequently, and upon the whole principle of "prerogative" courts that abuse was hurled as the effect of their enhanced power was felt. "What has America done," victims of the decisions of these courts asked, "to be thus particularized, to be disfranchised and stripped of so invaluable a privilege as the trial by jury?" The operations of the vice-admiralty courts, it was felt, especially after their administrative reorganization in 1767, denied Americans a crucial measure of the protection of the British constitution. "However respectable the judge may be, it is however an hardship and severity which distinguishes [defendants before this court] from the rest of Englishmen." The evils of such prerogative invasion of the judiciary could hardly be exaggerated: their "enormous created powers... threatens future generations in America with a curse tenfold worse than the Stamp Act."

The more one looked the more one found evidences of deliberate malevolence. In Massachusetts, Thomas Hutchinson's elaborate patronage machine, long in existence but fully organized only after the arrival of Governor Francis Bernard in 1760, appeared to suspicious tribunes like Oxenbridge Thacher and John Adams to constitute a serious threat to liberty. The Hutchinsons and the Olivers and their ambitious allies, it was said (and the view was widely circulated through the colonies), had managed, by accumulating a massive plurality of offices, to engross the power of all branches of the Massachusetts government thereby building a "foundation sufficient on which to erect a tyranny."

> Bernard had all the executive, and a negative of the legislative; Hutchinson and Oliver, by their popular arts and secret intrigues, had elevated to the [Council] such a collection of crown officers and their own relations as to have too much influence there; and they had three of a family on the superior bench.... This junto, therefore, had the legislative and executive in their control, and more natural influence over the judicial than is ever to be trusted to any set of men in the world.

With encouragement, no doubt, from England, they were stretching their power beyond all proper bounds, becoming "conspirators against the public liberty."

The same evil of plural officeholding, tending to destroy the protective mechanism of the separation of powers, was observed to be at work in South Carolina. In both cases the filiation between the engrossing of offices in England and in America could be said to be direct. The self-seeking monopolists of office in the colonies, advancing themselves and their faithful adherents "to the exclusion of much better men," Adams wrote somewhat plaintively, were as cravenly obedient to their masters in power in England as their own despicable "creatures" were to them. How deep this issue ran, how powerful its threat, could be seen best when one noted the degree to which it paralleled cognate developments in England....

Meanwhile an event even more sinister in its implications had taken place in the colonies themselves. On October 1, 1768, two regiments of regular infantry, with artillery, disembarked in Boston. For many months the harassed Governor Bernard had sought some legal means or excuse for summoning military help in his vain efforts to maintain if not an effective administration then at least order in the face of Stamp Act riots, circular let-

ters, tumultuous town meetings, and assaults on customs officials. But the arrival of troops in Boston increased rather than decreased his troubles. For to a populace steeped in the literature of eighteenth-century English politics the presence of troops in a peaceful town had such portentous meaning that resistance instantly stiffened. It was not so much the physical threat of the troops that affected the attitudes of the Bostonians; it was the bearing their arrival had on the likely tendency of events. Viewed in the perspective of Trenchard's famous tracts on standing armies and of the vast derivative literature on the subject that flowed from the English debates of the 1690's, these were not simply soldiers assembled for police duties; they were precisely what history had proved over and over again to be prime movers of the process by which unwary nations lose "that precious jewel *liberty*." The mere rumor of possible troop arrivals had evoked the age-old apprehensions. "The raising or keeping a standing army within the kingdom in time of peace, unless it be with consent of Parliament, is against the law," the alarmed Boston Town Meeting had resolved....

And then... came the Boston Massacre. Doubts that the troops in Boston constituted a standing army and that it was the purpose of standing armies to terrify a populace into compliance with tyrannical wills were silenced by that event, which, [Andrew] Eliot assured [Thomas] Hollis, had obviously been coming. It "serves to show the impossibility of our living in peace with a standing army. A free people will sometimes carry things too far, but this remedy will always be found worse than the disease. Trenchard's *History of Standing Armies*, with which you formerly obliged me, is excellent... Unless there is some great alteration in the state of things the era of the independence of the colonies is much nearer than I once thought it, or now wish it." The same response was generally broadcast in the narrative of the Massacre, written by James Bowdoin and others for the Boston Town Meeting, which was distributed everywhere in the English-speaking world. This famous pamphlet stressed the deliberateness of the shooting and the clarity of the design that lay behind the lurid event; nor was the parallel to the St. George's Fields murders neglected. The acquittal of the indicted soldiers did not alter the conviction that the Massacre was the logical work of a standing army, for it accentuated the parallel with the English case which also had concluded with acquittal; and in Boston too there was suspicion of judicial irregularities. How the murderers managed to escape was known to some, it was said, but was "too dark to explain."...

The turning point was the passage of the Tea Act and the resulting Tea Party in Boston in December 1773. Faced with this defiant resistance to intimidation, the powers at work in England, it was believed, gave up all pretense of legality—"threw off the mask," John Adams said in a phrase that for a century had been used to describe just such climactic disclosures—and moved swiftly to complete their design. In a period of two months in the spring of 1774 Parliament took its revenge in a series of coercive actions no liberty-loving people could tolerate: the Boston Port Act, intended, it was believed, to snuff out the economic life of the Massachusetts metropolis; the Administration of Justice Act, aimed at crippling judicial processes once and for all by permitting trials to be held in England for offenses committed in Massachusetts; the Massachusetts Government Act, which stripped from the people of Massachusetts the protection of the British constitution by giving over all the "democratic" elements of the province's government—even popularly elected juries and town meetings—into the hands of the executive power; the Quebec Act, which, while not devised as a part of the coercive program, fitted it nicely, in the eyes of the colonists, by extending the boundaries of a "papist" province, and one governed wholly by prerogative, south into territory claimed by Virginia, Connecticut, and Massachusetts; finally, the Quartering Act, which permitted the seizure of unoccupied buildings for the use of troops on orders of the governors alone even in situations, such as Boston's, where barracks were available in the vicinity.

Once these coercive acts were passed there could be little doubt that "the system of slavery fabricated against America... is the offspring of mature deliberation." To the leaders of the Revolutionary movement there was, beyond question, "a settled, fixed plan for *enslaving* the colonies, or bringing them under arbitrary government, and indeed the nation too." By 1774 the idea "that the British government—the *King, Lords,* and *Commons*—have laid a regular plan to enslave America, and that they are now deliberately putting it in execution" had been asserted, Samuel Seabury wrote wearily but accurately, "over, and over, and over again." The less inhibited of the colonial orators were quick to point out that "the MONSTER of a standing ARMY" had sprung directly from "a PLAN... *systematically* laid, and pursued by the British *ministry*, near twelve years, for enslaving America"; the Boston Massacre, it was claimed, had been "planned by Hillsborough and a knot of treacherous knaves in Boston." Careful analysts like Jefferson agreed on the major point; in one of the most closely reasoned of the pamphlets of 1774 the Virginian stated unambiguously that though "single acts of tyranny may be ascribed to the accidental opinion of a day... a series of oppressions, begun at a distinguished period and pursued unalterably through every change of ministers, too plainly prove a deliberate and systematical plan of reducing us to slavery."...

The fact that the ministerial conspiracy against liberty had risen from corruption was of the utmost importance to the colonists. It gave a radical new meaning to their claims: it transformed them from constitutional arguments to expressions of a world regenerative creed. For they had long known—it had been known everywhere in the English-speaking world in the eighteenth century—that England was one of the last refuges of the ancient gothic constitution that had once flourished everywhere in the civilized world....

And if now, in this deepening gloom, the light of liberty went out in Britain too—in Britain, where next to "self-preservation, political liberty is the main aim and end of her constitution"—if, as events clearly portended and as "senators and historians are repeatedly predicting... continued corruption and standing armies will prove mortal distempers in her constitution"—what then? What refuge will liberty find?

"To our own country," it was answered,

> must we look for the biggest part of that liberty and freedom that yet remains, or is to be expected, among mankind.... For while the greatest part

> of the nations of the earth are held together under the yoke of universal slavery, the North American provinces yet remain *the country of free men:* the *asylum,* and the last, to which such may yet flee from the common deluge....

Now, in 1774, that "future occasion" was believed to be at hand. After the passage of the Coercive Acts it could be said that "all the spirit of patriotism or of liberty now left in England" was no more than "the last snuff of an expiring lamp," while "the same sacred flame... which once showed forth such wonders in Greece and in Rome... burns brightly and strongly in America." Who ought then to suppress as "whimsical and enthusiastical" the belief that the colonies were to become "the foundation of a great and mighty empire, the largest the world ever saw to be founded on such principles of liberty and freedom, both civil and religious... [and] which shall be the principal seat of that glorious kingdom which Christ shall erect upon earth in the latter days?" America "ere long will build an empire upon the ruins of Great Britain; will adopt its constitution purged of its impurities, and from an experience of its defects will guard against those evils which have wasted its vigor and brought it to an untimely end." The hand of God was "in America now giving a new epocha to the history of the world."

POSTSCRIPT

Was the American Revolution Primarily a Struggle for Power?

In Draper's view the main issue behind the American Revolution was the struggle for power by a group of North American colonists whose wealth, power, and sheer size were about to dwarf the mother country in the last half of the eighteenth century. During his discussion, Draper alludes to some interesting counterfactual history. What if the colonists were under the rule of the Spaniards? Could they have expressed their grievances as freely as they had under British rule? What if the British had taken the colonists' threats to rebel more seriously in 1775 and had not waited a year before engaging in full-scale military operations? Would the colonial militia have been so willing to engage a well-organized British army at Lexington and Concord?

Draper has been criticized by a number of historians for his failure to take the colonists' ideas about liberties and rights as motivational forces that underlay the struggle for power. See the chapter entitled "The Stamp Act Crisis," in Edmund S. Morgan, *The Challenge of the American Revolution* (W. W. Norton, 1976.)

Bailyn stresses the importance of ideas as a primary motivating force in bringing about the American Revolution. First published as a lengthy essay and extended into a book in the late 1960s, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* has become a classic work. A number of scholars, however, have criticized Bailyn's ideological approach to the American Revolution. Although Draper does not dismiss ideology as propaganda, he also does not connect the ideas of the Revolutionaries with the actions that they took.

Gordon Wood, one of Bailyn's students at Harvard University, accepts Bailyn's ideological construct of the American Revolution but argues that after 1776, the Revolution "broadened into a struggle among Americans themselves for the fruits of independence." In two influential books—*The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (University of North Carolina Press, 1969) and *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1991)—Wood extends his analysis beyond 1776 into the 1820s. Another group of historians, loosely categorized as "New Left" or radical historians, have updated J. Franklin Jameson's classic *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (1926; reprint, Princeton University Press, 1967) to include urban workers, merchant seamen, slaves, Indians, and women.

On the Internet, a good starting point for further researching the War of Independence can be found at `http://grid.let.rug.nl/~welling/usa/chap2.html`.