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WE COULD HAVE BEEN CANADA

Was the American Revolution such a good idea?

By Adam Gopnik May 8, 2017

The Revolution is the last bulwark of national myth, but in sanctifying it we forget that it was more horrific than heroic.

Illustration by Brian Stauffer

And what if it was a mistake from the start? The Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution, the creation of the United States of America—what if all this was a terrible idea, and what if the injustices and madness of American life since then have occurred not in spite of the virtues of the Founding Fathers but because of them? The Revolution, this argument might run, was a needless and brutal bit of slaveholders' panic mixed with Enlightenment argle-bargle, producing a country that was always marked for violence and disruption and demagogy. Look north to Canada, or south to Australia, and you will see different possibilities of peaceful evolution away

from Britain, toward sane and whole, more equitable and less sanguinary countries. No revolution, and slavery might have ended, as it did elsewhere in the British Empire, more peacefully and sooner. No "peculiar institution," no hideous Civil War and appalling aftermath. Instead, an orderly development of the interior—less violent, and less inclined to celebrate the desperado over the peaceful peasant. We could have ended with a social-democratic commonwealth that stretched from north to south, a near-continent-wide Canada.

The thought is taboo, the Revolution being still sacred in its self-directed propaganda. One can grasp the scale and strangeness of this sanctity only by leaving America for a country with a different attitude toward its past and its founding. As it happened, my own childhood was neatly divided between what I learned to call "the States" and Canada. In my Philadelphia grade school, we paraded with flags, singing "The Marines' Hymn" and "Here Comes the Flag!" ("Fathers shall bless it / Children caress it / All shall maintain it / No one shall stain it.") We were taught that the brave Americans hid behind trees to fight the redcoats—though why this made them brave was left unexplained. In Canada, ninth grade disclosed a history of uneasy compromise duality, and the constant search for temporary nonviolent solutions to intractable divides. The world wars, in which Canadians had played a large part, passed by mostly in solemn sadness. (That the Canadians had marched beyond their beach on D Day with aplomb while the Americans struggled on Omaha was never boasted about.) Patriotic pageantry arose only from actual accomplishments: when Team Canada won its eight-game series against the Russians, in 1972, the entire nation sang "O Canada"—but they sang it as a hockey anthem as much as a nationalist hymn.

Over the years, we have seen how hard it is to detach Americans from even the obviously fallacious parts of that elementary-school saga—the absurd rendering of Reconstruction, with its Northern carpetbaggers and local scalawags descending on a defenseless South, was still taught in the sixties. It was only in recent decades that schools cautiously began to relay the truth of the eighteen-seventies—of gradual and shameful Northern acquiescence in the terrorist imposition of apartheid on a post-slavery population.

The Revolution remains the last bulwark of national myth. Academics write on the growth of the Founding Father biographical genre in our time; the rule for any new

writer should be that if you want a Pulitzer and a best-seller you must find a Founding Father and fetishize him. While no longer reverential, these accounts are always heroic in the core sense of showing us men, and now, occasionally, women, who transcend their flaws with spirit (though these flaws may include little things like holding other human beings as property, dividing their families, and selling off their children). The phenomenon of "Hamilton," the hip-hop musical that is, contrary to one's expectations, wholly faithful to a heroic view of American independence, reinforces the sanctity of the American Revolution in American life.

Academic histories of the Revolution, though, have been peeping over the parapets, joining scholarly scruples to contemporary polemic. One new take insists that we misunderstand the Revolution if we make what was an intramural and fratricidal battle of ideas in the English-speaking Empire look like a modern colonial rebellion. Another insists that the Revolution was a piece of great-power politics, fought in unimaginably brutal terms, and no more connected to ideas or principles than any other piece of great-power politics: America was essentially a Third World country that became the battlefield for two First World powers. Stirred into the larger pot of recent revisionism, these arguments leave us with a big question: was it really worth it, and are we better off for its having happened? In plain American, is Donald Trump a bug or a feature of the American heritage?

Justin du Rivage's "Revolution Against Empire" (Yale) re-situates the Revolution not as a colonial rebellion against the mother country but as one episode in a much larger political quarrel that swept the British Empire in the second half of the eighteenth century. Basically, du Rivage thinks that the American Revolution wasn't American. The quarrels that took place in New York and Philadelphia went on with equal ferocity, and on much the same terms, in India and England, and though they got settled by force of arms and minds differently in each place, it was the same struggle everywhere. "Radicalism flourished in Boston, Bristol, and Bengal, while fears of disorder and licentiousness provoked rural elites in both the Hudson Valley and the English shires," du Rivage writes. "As radical Whigs gained strength in North America, the political culture of the British Empire became increasingly Janus-faced."

On one side were what he calls "authoritarian reformers"; on the other, those radical Whigs. (Both were seeking to sway or supplant the "establishment Whigs.") This isn't

the familiarly rendered divide between Tories and Whigs; the authoritarian reformers were less fusty country squires attached to old English institutions than an élite executive class of intellectuals and aristocrats committed to the Empire and to the reform of institutions that were seen as preventing the Empire from being maximally efficient. It was a group of men who, in spirit and psychology, were not entirely unlike the "reformers" in Communist China, open to change for the purpose of reinforcing their own power in an intact hierarchy. The authoritarian reformers were "not a political party per se," du Rivage writes. "They were, rather, an ideological vanguard, a loosely organized group of politicians, publicists, and theorists." (Significantly, no famous names cling to the group; career politicians and businessmen like William Murray, Matthew Decker, and Viscount Bolingbroke were their mostly interchangeable leaders.) They wanted a strong monarch surrounded by a circle of aristocratic advisers; very limited democracy; reform in the Army and Navy; and a tax-heavy system of mercantile trade—all of it intended to make the Empire as profitable as it needed to be.

Extended taxation within the Empire was central to their agenda. They sincerely believed in "taxation without representation," because they saw citizenship not in terms of sovereignty and equality but in terms of tribute received and protection offered. Pay up, and the British Navy will keep the Frenchmen, pirates, and aboriginals away. Samuel Johnson, who was hired by the authoritarian reformers to write the 1775 pamphlet "Taxation No Tyranny," captured the argument best: the men who settled America had chosen to leave a place where they had the vote but little property in order to live in a place where they had no vote but much property. With lucid authoritarian logic, Johnson explained that even though the American citizen might not have a vote on how he was taxed, "he still is governed by his own consent; because he has consented to throw his atom of interest into the general mass of the community."

The radical Whigs, though they, too, were implanted within establishment circles—grouped around William Pitt and the pro-American Marquess of Rockingham, with the devilish John Wilkes representing their most radical popular presence—were sympathetic to Enlightenment ideas, out of both principle and self-protection, as analgesics to mollify "the mob." They represented, albeit episodically, the first stirrings of a party of the merchant class. They thought that colonists should be seen as potential consumers. Alexander Hamilton, back in New York, was a model radical Whig—trusting in bank credit and national debt as a prod toward prosperity, while the authoritarian reformers were convinced, as their successors are to this day, that debt was toxic (in part because they feared that it created chaos; in part because easy credit undermined hierarchy).

The radical Whigs were for democratization, the authoritarian reformers firmly against it. The radical Whigs were for responsible authority, the authoritarian reformers for firm authority. And so on. This quarrel, du Rivage argues, swept across the Empire and, as much as it divided colony from home country, it united proponents of either view transnationally. Those we think of as "loyalists" in the American context were simply

authoritarian reformers who lost their war; those we think of as "patriots" were simply radical Whigs who won.

Some of the force of du Rivage's account of the Revolution lies in his dogged insistence that the great political quarrel of the time really was a quarrel of principles. His book, he tells us in the introduction, is ultimately about "how ideas and politics shape social and economic experience." This is a more radically Whiggish proposition than it sounds. For a long time, under the influence of the formidable Lewis Namier, the historian of Britain's eighteenth-century Parliament, the pervasive ideas in the political life of the period were held to depend on clans and clan relations, not systems of thought. Even Edmund Burke, we were told, was no more drawn to Rockingham by ideology than Tom Hagen was drawn to the Corleone family because he shared Vito's views on urban governance.

Though there is obviously truth in this approach, then and now, du Rivage deprecates it as much as it has ever been deprecated. (His evidence for the power and specificity of this battle of ideas includes a number of political cartoons, drawn by the participants: it is astonishing how often the political figures of the time, from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Revere, communicated in comic images.) Throughout, he makes a convincing case for the view that people quarrelled not about clans but about concepts. In fact, participants in the quarrels could cross clan lines: the radical Pitt's brother-in-law, George Grenville, himself a Prime Minister, was the leader of the authoritarian reformers in Parliament.

This account cuts against the American specificity of the Revolution—the sense that it was a rebellion against a king and a distant country. No one at the time, du Rivage suggests, saw what was happening as pitting a distinct "American" nation against an alien British one. Participants largely saw the conflict in terms of two parties fighting for dominance in the English-speaking world. The scandalous high-water mark of du Rivage's iconography occurs in January of 1775, when Pitt (now ennobled as the Earl of Chatham) brought Franklin, then living in London, into the House of Lords to witness his speech on behalf of the American radicals, in effect sealing the unity of the single party across the ocean. This scene—though nowhere captured in the familiar imagery of Franklin flying his kite and inventing bifocals—was, in its day, as significant as that of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

The transnational nature of the Revolution, du Rivage shows, has been blanked out. The promise of transatlantic unity in a move toward modernity was very real. Had the radical Whigs secured their power in Britain, our Revolution might well have taken on a look and feel far more like those of the later Canadian and Australian dissolutions from the Brits: a political break toward "home rule" but without any of the elaborate paraphernalia of patriotism attached to it. We would probably still have had some piece of the British flag upon our own, and Betsy Ross would have sewn in vain.

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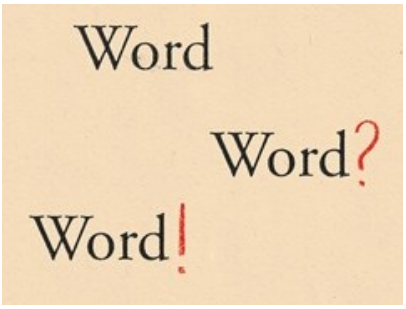

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Du Rivage's book began as a Yale Ph.D. thesis, and has not lost all traces of its origins. He has the passion for his labels that any inventor has for his own mousetraps: scarcely a page in his book goes by without at least one of the terms "radical Whigs" and "authoritarian reformers" appearing on it. He is so taken with his explanatory scheme that he asserts it even when the lines between the camps were a little blurrier than the neat Ping-Pong division suggests. Although his sympathies are with the radical Whigs, he sees that many of the authoritarians' claims were not false. As Alan Taylor made clear last year in his mind-opening "American Revolutions" (Norton), the victory of the rebels immediately led to the loss of the protection of the British Navy, leaving

American merchant ships defenseless against the pirates of the Barbary Coast, a situation that produced a lot of imprisoned American sailors and, eventually, the Marines hitting the shores of Tripoli, inspiring the song we sang in that second-grade class in Philadelphia. The imperial protection racket really did protect; its withdrawal meant that we had to put together an enforcement squad of our own, which we did, and are still paying for.

Holger Hoock, in his new book, "Scars of Independence" (Crown), has a somewhat simpler point to make. The Revolution, he shows, was far more brutal than our usual memory of it allows. (Mel Gibson's Revolutionary War movie, "The Patriot," made this point, as his "The Passion of the Christ" did of Roman crucifixion; say what you will about his politics, Gibson is good at reminding us of the core violence in our favorite myths. Crosses and muskets really *are* lethal weapons.) Page after page, the reader blanches while reading of massacres and counter-massacres, of floggings and rapes, of socket bayonets plunged into pitiful patriots and of competitive hangings and murders. The effect is made all the more hallucinatory by the fact that these horrors took place not in Poland or Algeria but in what are now, in effect, rest stops along I-95, in Connecticut and New Jersey, in a time we still think of as all three-cornered hats and the clip-clop of Hollywood equipages on cobblestoned streets.

Hoock is almost too delighted with his discoveries; like the fat boy in "Pickwick," he wants to make your flesh creep. Certainly, no reader will ever be able to imagine the Revolution again as the pop-gun pageantry that those Philadelphia school talks instilled in us kids. He details tortures inflicted on both sides—the phrase "tarred and feathered" persists as something vaguely folkloric but is revealed as unimaginably cruel. The prison ships in which captured soldiers were placed were themselves sites of horror: thousands of American captives were left to languish, starve, and often die, in British sloops kept just offshore. The reader grimaces at Hoock's description of a British bayonet massacre, a kind of mini My Lai, of helpless patriots in rural New Jersey:

> The British started to bayonet
> their defenseless victims, crushing
> bones and leaving gashing wounds
> in the men's stomachs, chests,
> backs, and limbs. Withdrawing the

blade, as much as plunging it in,
tore muscles, arteries, and organs.
When the British moved out,
Julian King had sixteen wounds,
including eleven in his breast, side,
and belly; George Willis had
sustained between nine and twelve
wounds, some in his back. At first,
it seemed that Thomas Talley
would escape this wave of the
bloody assault; he was taken
prisoner. British soldiers had
moved him outside and stripped
him of his breeches, when his
captors received orders to kill him,
too. They took Talley inside the
barn and lethally jabbed him half a
dozen times.

A seventeen-year-old British soldier, arriving on the scene, recalled that "the shrieks and screams of the hapless victims whom our savage fellow soldiers were butchering, were sufficient to have melted into compassion the heart of a Turk or a Tartar"—as pointed a comparison in lethal indifference to human suffering as an eighteenth-century British mind could make.

The narrow lesson here is that war is war, and that the moment the dogs of war are unleashed—anywhere, for any purpose—atrocity follows. In an epilogue, Hoock makes the wise point that, given what wars of national liberation are actually like, Americans should perhaps be disabused of our enthusiasm for nation-building and democracy exportation. Yet what specific point about our political legacy does Hoock want to make? Even just wars are appalling; knowing how high the casualty rate was on Omaha Beach and in the Normandy campaign after D Day does not reduce our sense that the Second World War was a necessary conflict. The horrors of the Civil War were still more horrific than those of the Revolution, and yet few are sorry that it was fought; in any case, that war has never been subject to the same amnesia, in part

because, given the presence of photography and wire-service telegraphy, it was hard to hide those horrors in neat packets of patriotism.

Hoock's book does raise another, unexpected question: why is it that, until now, the Civil War cast such a long, bitter shadow, while the Revolution was mostly reimagined as a tale of glory? One reason, too easily overlooked, is that, while many of those who made the Civil War were killed during it, including the Union Commander-in-Chief, *none* of the makers of the Revolution died fighting in it. The Founding Fathers had rolled the dice and put their heads on the line, but theirs was the experience of eluding the bullet, and, as Churchill said, there is nothing so exhilarating as being shot at without result. Of how many revolutions can it be said that nearly all its makers died in their beds? In the American Revolution, the people who suffered most were not the people who benefitted most, and the lucky ones wrote most of the story. Like everything in history, amnesia has its own causality.

Du Rivage's and Hoock's accounts are mostly about white guys quarrelling with other white guys, and then about white guys being unimaginably cruel to one another, stopping only to rape their enemy's wives and daughters. What of the rest? Here again, both new histories illuminate the role of the African-American slave population, and of the fight of the indigenous population to find room for its own existence. As Taylor showed, what we called the "Indian" population—in Canada, the preferred name now is First Nations—struggled to find space, and land, between the Americans and the Canadians, and mostly lost (though they lost on the British side of the border with less violence than on this side, the British being less hungrily murderous than the Americans).

The experience of the African abductees in the war was more tragic. Thousands of slaves ran to the British lines, with the encouragement of the British Army, and though the Brits mainly valued the slaves as an irritant to their masters, they did give them shelter and, sometimes, arms. At Yorktown, thousands of escaped slaves recruited as soldiers fought within the British lines; when the Americans compelled the British to surrender, many of the slaves were returned to their miserable bondage—including slaves owned by Washington and Jefferson. "Jefferson retrieved five or six of his slaves; Washington recovered two young black women but not a dozen other slaves who managed to slip away," Hoock recounts.

Had the British won, we might now be taught about a fight between brave British emancipators and indigenous slaveholders, with the black slaves who defected to the British-loyalist side seen as self-emancipators, as the blacks who defected to the Union Army are now, and with Washington's and Jefferson's rhetoric of liberty shown the same disdain we have for the not-very-different libertarian and individualist rhetoric of their heirs in the Confederacy. We would perhaps wonder, far more than we are now allowed to, how radical Whigs like Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Paine ever allowed themselves to betray their own Enlightenment principles by making the tragic error of entering into a compact with slaveholders.

That historical account would be as self-serving and tendentious, in its own way, as our current glorious one. Against the skeptical view of the achievement of the American Revolution, one can easily posit a view more radical than even the ideology of radical Whigs quite suggests. Three decades ago, Gordon Wood, in "The Radicalism of the American Revolution," asked us to see the Revolution in the broadest historical scale, and to realize that, whatever its failings and brutalities and hypocrisies, it represented a decisive break with doctrines of inherited power and monarchical rule, and a move toward democracy that had scarcely been so dramatically accomplished since very ancient times. Jonathan Israel's forthcoming book "The Expanding Blaze" promises to make a similar case: that the revolution was the great radical act of its day, responsible, directly and indirectly, for the onset of the modern age. Abolitionism rose from the promise of the Revolution more than the Revolution sustained slavery.

Indeed, that abolitionism burned brighter in Britain than in the independent States, as historians have argued, had at least something to do with America's triumph: Britain could demonstrate that it was better, more honorable, than its former colonies at a time when such a demonstration was urgently sought. Then, too, the separation of the Southern plantation owners from the West Indian ones weakened a formidable lobbying force within the Empire. Still, if history is not always written by the winners, it shapes itself to the slope of events: had the episode arrived at a different outcome, as it easily might have, the American rebellion could well have come to be seen as the French Revolution often is, if on a far smaller scale—a folly of Enlightenment utopianism unleashing senseless violence.

In confrontations between empire and rebels, though, our hearts are always with the rebels. We take it for granted that rebels are good and empires bad; our favorite mass entertainment depends entirely on the felt familiarity of this simple division. But there is a case to be made that empires can be something other than evil. People mocked the beginning of the "Star Wars" cycle, turning as it did on a trade dispute, but trade disputes are real, and begin wars, and whom would you really rather have running the government when a trade treaty has to be negotiated on a galactic scale: Senator Palpatine or Han Solo?

The authoritarian reformers—the empire, in other words—have something to be said for them; and what is to be said for them is, well, Canada. Our northern neighbor's relative lack of violence, its peaceful continuity, its ability to allow double and triple identities and to build a country successfully out of two languages and radically different national pasts: all these Canadian virtues are, counterintuitively, far more the legacy of those eighteenth-century authoritarian reformers than of the radical Whigs. This is literally the case; the United Empire Loyalists, as they were called, the "Tories" who fled from the States, did much to make Canada. More than that, Canada is the model liberal country because it did not have an American-style revolution, accepting instead the reformers' values of a strong centralized, if symbolic, monarchy (the Queen is still there, aging, on the Canadian twenty-dollar bill); a largely faceless political class; a cautiously parliamentary tradition; a professionalized and noncharismatic military; a governing élite—an establishment.

The Canadian experience was not free of sin—as the indefensible treatment of the First Nations demonstrates—and was, as well, not free of the "colonial cringe" that bedevils so many countries overattached to the motherland. (London and Paris, in this view, meant too much for too long to too many ambitious Canadians.) Still, there is something to be said, however small, for government by an efficient elected élite devoted to compromise. The logic of Whig radicalism, in whatever form it takes, always allows charismatic figures undue play; there's a reason that the big Whigs remain known today while the authoritarian reformers mostly sink into specialists' memories of committees and cabinets.

The first modern charismatic politician, John Wilkes, was among the greatest Whig heroes of the American radicals. Nor is it entirely accidental that he would give his

name to the charismatic actor who killed Lincoln. The red thread of theatrical violence, violence as show and spectacle and self-definition, links the violence of our revolution with the violence implicit in all cults of great men. Those who say "Thus always to tyrants!" can say it only when they shoot somebody. A government based on enthusiasm, rather than on executive expertise, needs many things to be enthusiastic about. Whig radicalism produces charismatic politics—popular politics in a positive sense, and then in a negative one, too. This is the Achilles' heel of radical Whiggism, and we know that it is its Achilles' heel because one day it produces an Achilles, and the next a heel.

If there's a brighter light unifying Britain and America at the time of the Revolution, perhaps it lies neither with the frightened authoritarians nor with the too easily inflamed radicals but with the new doctrines of compassion that could run between them. Hoock tells the story of Captain Asgill, who, as late as 1782, was sentenced by Washington to be hanged in retaliation for an unpunished loyalist atrocity. (A group of British prisoners were forced to draw lots—or, rather, had lots drawn for them by a small American boy—and poor Asgill was the loser.)

His mother, back home in London, wrote to the Count of Vergennes, the foreign minister of France, America's ally and Britain's adversary: "My son (an only Son) and dear as he is brave, amiable as deserving to be so . . . is now confined in America, an object of retaliation! Shall an innocent suffer for the guilty? Represent to yourself, Sir, the situation of a family under these circumstances; surrounded as I am by Objects of distress; distracted with fear & grief; no words can express my feelings or paint the scene." Hoock sneers a little at the letter (as "drenched in the language of sentimentalism"). But it worked. Vergennes forwarded it to Washington, and it became a cause célèbre in the new nation, exactly because of its call to a reciprocal humanity of suffering. "What must be the feelings of the many hundreds of . . . tender American mothers"—reading that letter—"whose sons in the early bloom of youth have perished in that sink of misery, the prison ship at New York?" one gazette writer wondered. Eventually, the affair produced a five-act play by Jean-Louis Le Barbier, dramatizing Washington torn between mercy and justice, and Hoock tells us that, although Washington couldn't read French, "the retired general and lifelong theater enthusiast thanked the author personally for his dramatic efforts." Nations could escape the mutual cycle of massacre and reprisal through the new "sentimental" cult of sympathy.

This third late-eighteenth-century ideology, still with us sporadically, seems saner than either authoritarian beliefs (however reforming) or Whiggish ones (however radical). "The Patriot" is an instructive movie; "Saving Captain Asgill" might be an inspiring one. ♦

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Adam Gopnik, a staff writer, has been contributing to The New Yorker since 1986. He is the author of, most recently, "A Thousand Small Sanities: The Moral Adventure of Liberalism." *Read more »*