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NONFICTION; White Man's War

By GORDON S. WOOD

AMERICAN REVOLUTIONS

A Continental History, 1750-1804

By Alan Taylor

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In 2001 Alan Taylor, one of America's most distinguished historians and a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, published a well-received book entitled "American Colonies," which he regarded as "a half step toward a more global (and less national) sensibility for our place in time." That book challenged the traditional focus on the English and British contributions to American colonial history by including the other cultures — Native American, African, Spanish, French, Dutch and even Russian — that were involved in the settlements that eventually became the United States. Taylor says "American Revolutions" is "a sequel" to that earlier work. Most books on the Revolution, he writes, "focus on the national story of the United States. . . . That approach demotes neighboring empires and native peoples to bit players and minor obstacles to inevitable American expansion."

In this volume, Taylor seeks to set the American Revolution in the broadest possible context — not only involving it in all the struggles of the rival European empires in the New World, but making the native peoples and the African slaves more important, indeed, even central, to it. It was not just the Eastern Seaboard's protesting taxes that explains the Revolution. Conflicts in the trans-Appalachian west, Taylor contends, need to be linked "with resistance to parliamentary taxes as equal halves of a constitutional crisis that disrupted the British Empire in North America." The several small uprisings that took place in the Spanish Empire in the early 1780s may not have greatly affected the course of the American Revolution, but the slave rebellion on the French island of Saint-Domingue in the 1790s certainly did; indeed, Taylor seems to have selected the end date, 1804, in his subtitle in order to include the creation of the second republic in the Americas, Haiti.

Still, the American upheaval was so gory, so violent and above all so consequential for the world that it necessarily overwhelms all these other revolutions. Taylor really wants to show that the Revolution was anything but the "good, orderly, restrained and successful" event usually depicted "in popular history books and films." By broadening the context, he aims to desacralize the Revolution, to explode popular myths about it and to rip aside the mantle of nobility, dignity and heroism that he believes has too long covered up its sordid and bloody reality.

It certainly was bloody. Twenty-five thousand Americans in the military died in the war, 1 percent of the population, more deaths proportionally than in any other war in our history except for the Civil War. The

war went on for eight years, the longest in our history until Vietnam, and it touched all parts of the country, including its western regions.

It was also a civil war, “rife with divisions, violence and destruction.” About 20 percent of the population remained loyal to the British Empire. These half-million Loyalists suffered greatly for their devotion to the king. The Patriots, the term Taylor prefers to use for the supporters of the Revolution, intimidated them, tarred and feathered them and confiscated their property. “In the name of liberty,” Taylor writes, “Patriots suppressed free speech, broke into private mail and terrorized their critics. . . . Patriots believed only in the liberty of their press.” In the end, at least 60,000 Loyalists fled the nation for other parts of the British Empire.

In a prodigious display of historical research, Taylor has drawn on nearly a thousand books and articles, listed in his 55-page bibliography. Because he has expanded the chronology of the Revolution into the 19th century and has included so much beyond the well-known headline events, he has some difficulty fitting everything in. He often packs so many incidents into each paragraph, with actions succeeding and crowding in upon one another, that there is no space to expand and develop any one of them. Consequently, they tend to get bunched up and leveled, and the narrative often comes to seem unusually compressed and flattened.

Insofar as anything is highlighted in Taylor’s narrative, it is the many Patriot hypocrisies and contradictions. Southerners, Taylor suggests, engaged in the Revolution principally to protect their property in enslaved Africans, but “implausibly blamed the persistence of slavery on the British.” The Patriots’ talk of liberty was very limited. They “defended freedom for white men while asserting their domination over enslaved blacks.” Occasionally the Patriots were not very patriotic. Following the surrender of the American forces trying to take Quebec in 1775, “a quarter of the captured Patriots switched sides to enlist with the British.”

Sometimes Taylor’s emphasis on irony and contradiction slips into anachronism. Because the colonial legislatures denied women, free blacks and propertyless white males the vote, he concludes that “colonial America was a poor place to look for democracy.” But where in the 18th century was there a better place to look for democracy? Despite restrictions on the suffrage, the colonies still possessed the most democratic governments in the world at that time.

In his account Taylor tends to stress the bad behavior of ordinary white men, especially in their dealings with people of other races. Ignoring government officials and their own genteel leaders, they pursued their selfish interests without any scruples whatsoever. In the west, where fighting between settlers and Indians was especially bloody and vicious, whites tended to run amok and slaughter Indians freely in pursuit of their “genocidal goals.” They wanted land and respected governmental authority only when they needed its protection from the Indians. “Only fear could trump greed on the frontier.” In the end Jefferson’s “Empire of Liberty” inevitably “favored white men at the expense of Indians and blacks.”

In Taylor’s Revolution there aren’t many heroes. Washington was one at Trenton, but even he, in secretly buying land in violation of the law, shaded the truth in pursuit of his self-interest. When the British invaded Virginia in 1781, Virginians rioted to resist Patriot drafts of militiamen. Depending on who was winning, many people flipped from one side to another and sometimes back again. With so much corruption, disaffection and selfishness among the Patriots, it is amazing that the Revolution was finally

successful. Taylor himself admits that “the accomplishments of independence, union and republican government seem all the more remarkable given the grim civil war at the heart of the Revolution.”

A major legacy of the Revolution, he concludes, was the emergence of a society dominated by ordinary middle-class white men, the very people he has most criticized as patriarchal, racist and genocidal. In Taylor’s mind their victory seems to have come at the expense of others. By focusing on common white men, he maintains, the Revolution worked against blacks, Indians and women. The question raised by Taylor’s book is this: Can a revolution conceived mainly as sordid, racist and divisive be the inspiration for a nation?

PHOTO: In the name of liberty: George Washington with slaves on his Mount Vernon estate.
(PHOTOGRAPH FROM MPI/GETTY IMAGES)