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# evolutionary Heritage



National Park Service  
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**Our Revolutionary  
Heritage**

Some Thoughts  
on the Meaning  
of the  
American Revolution  
by  
Henry Steele Commager

The generation that won independence and launched the new United States had a special conception of history, and of America's place in history. They were familiar enough with the past, and with the "lessons" of history that came out of the past. But they did not believe that America was bound by that past or subject to those lessons. It was, they thought, the special glory of America that it should launch a new era in history, that it should embark upon a series of experiments which had no precedent in the past, but which would provide models for the future. Here in this New World—which was in a sense a new Eden—man was to have a second chance. Here it would be possible to discover whether man was capable of governing himself, whether he could achieve equality, emancipate himself from tyranny and superstition, and create a civilization not only materially rich but morally and intellectually rich. For here, in the most favorable environment ever vouchsafed mankind, men could work out their destinies free from those ancient tyrannies that had plagued them from the beginning of recorded history: the tyranny of the Des-

pot, the Priest, the Soldier, the tyranny of ignorance and poverty and war. Here, for the first time, it might be possible to show what man was really capable of.

Washington and Franklin, Jefferson and Tom Paine, and their co-revolutionaries believed that the American people had a Heaven-sent opportunity to triumph over the past and to mold the future. That was what Washington meant when he wrote that "the Foundation of our Empire was not laid in the gloomy age of Ignorance and Superstition, but at an Epoque when the Rights of Mankind were better understood and more clearly defined than at any former period." That is what Jefferson meant when he wrote of America that "this whole chapter in the history of man is new. The great extent of our territory is new. The mighty wave of public opinion which has rolled over it is new." That is what the French philosopher-statesman Turgot meant when he wrote of the Americans that "this people is the hope of the human race." Perhaps Tom Paine put it better than any one else: the American, he said, "is a new Adam in a new Paradise."

All the auspices were favorable—all but the hateful institution of Negro slavery, and most of the Founding Fathers were confident that it was on the way out. There was land enough, as Jefferson said, "for our descendants to the thousandth and thousandth generation," and there was a benign government which—it is Jefferson again—"did not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned." Americans enjoyed immunity from the sanguinary wars of the Old World and could look forward—so they thought—to centuries of peace. They enjoyed religious freedom, and freedom from those reli-

gious antipathies that had made a shambles of so many Old World societies. They were an enlightened people, with the highest standards of literacy anywhere on the globe; they cherished science and education, and made the benefits of both available to the whole of society. Thanks to a century and a half of self-government in town meetings and county courts, they were more mature politically than any other people, and more creative too.

It is that creativity, particularly in the political arena, that is most impressive. It is no exaggeration to say that the generation of the Founding Fathers was politically the most creative of any in modern history. For the Americans proved themselves able to do what the statesmen or philosophers of the Old World would not do: translate principles into institutions.

Consider the principles set forth so eloquently in the Declaration of Independence: That all men are created equal; That they are endowed with "unalienable rights;" That these rights embrace life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; That it is to secure these rights that governments are instituted among men; That governments so instituted derive their just powers from the consent of the governed; That when government becomes destructive of these ends, men may "alter or abolish it"; That men have the right to institute new governments designed to "effect their safety and happiness."

The Founding Fathers did not invent these principles; they did something more important, they put them into practice, and institu-



Thomas Paine

tionalized them. John Adams put it most succinctly: “they realized the theories of the wisest writers.”

The first task was to create a Nation, for without that nothing else could be achieved. We take nationalism for granted, but should not. Americans, after all, were the first people in history deliberately to “bring forth” a new Nation: all others had been the products of centuries of history. And Americans made a Nation out of the most disparate elements—13 States, each asserting its sovereignty, and a people widely scattered over an immense territory, without the common denominators of a monarch, a ruling class, or an Established Church. As John Adams put it, the Founding Fathers “made thirteen clocks to strike as one—a perfection of mechanism which no artist had ever before effected.” They also provided for a method by which the Nation could grow territorially without reproducing the Empires of the Old World. The new Nation inherited—or wrested from Britain—the vast territory west to the Mississippi. In the eyes of history these lands constituted colonies. But Americans would have nothing to do with colonies or colonialism. By a stroke of genius they solved that ancient problem of colonialism—a problem which continued to harass the Old World nations down to our own time—by the simple device of transforming those “colonies” into States equal in every respect to the original 13 States. Thus the United States was able to grow from 13 to 50 States with less trouble than Britain had with Ireland alone.

The United States was born the largest nation in the Western world: how organize a territory so vast? This problem was solved not by creating a powerful centralized state

—which would have been wholly unacceptable in that generation—but by creating a federal union. Men had been talking about federalism for over 2,000 years, but they had never succeeded in creating a state truly federalized. The Founding Fathers solved the problem of federalism by what now seems like a very simple device: recognizing the *people* as sovereign and providing a mechanism whereby they could allocate the exercise of their sovereign powers among governments, assigning those of a general nature to the national government and those of a local nature to the State governments. This division broke down in 1861, but was reestablished—with important modifications—after the Civil War, and is still with us. The United States remains the oldest Federal Union in the world, and its version of federalism has spread widely throughout the world.

Even while the Revolutionary generation was establishing the firm foundations of nationalism and federalism it was turning the great principles of the Declaration of Independence into practices and institutions. Consider the principle that governments “derive” their powers from the consent of the governed. All very well in theory, but how translate that theory into practice? No people had ever done so before. The Founding Fathers solved this problem with one of the great inventions in the history of politics: the constitutional convention, the most fundamental of all democratic institutions. The constitutional convention *is* the sovereign people, organized for political action. It alone has the right to alter or abolish government and to institute new governments. State constitutional conventions have been doing this with some regularity for two centuries. There has never been a second



Federal constitutional convention, but the Framers provided for the continuous modernization of the Constitution through the process of constitutional amendments: even now, 187 years after the original convention, the people, through their State legislatures, are voting on an amendment that provides equal rights for women.

Turn to the second great principle: that all government is limited. It is a principle implicit in the whole of the Declaration: that there were limits to the power of government, and that what George III and Parliament were doing was contrary to fundamental law. The principle was an ancient one, but so far no people had ever been able to impose limits on their kings or their governments. The history of government—as Americans read it (and not incorrectly)—had been an unbroken record of tyranny, and as they looked across the Atlantic at France and Prussia and Russia and even Britain they could see that tyranny still flourished everywhere in the western world.

This problem, too, the Founding Fathers solved, first in the States and then in the Federal Government. What a plethora of devices for limiting government!: first the written constitution itself, then separation of powers, annual or frequent elections, the distribution of powers among State and Federal governments, and on top of all this, elaborate Bills of Rights setting forth the boundaries of constitutional governments. Within a few years there was added to this network of limitations one that was distinctively American: the practice of judicial review.

We take for granted limitations imposed by people upon their rulers, and so, too, limita-

tions imposed by majorities upon dissident or recalcitrant minorities. What was—and is—remarkable is the spectacle of a people imposing limitations upon themselves, even of majorities imposing limitations upon themselves. That requires a degree of moral and political sophistication rare in human experience. Yet that is precisely what Americans of the Revolutionary era contrived and—perhaps even more surprising—what Americans of subsequent generations have accepted. The United States is one of the few democracies in the world that voluntarily imposes limits upon the exercise of democracy. Elsewhere in the western world the majority will is conclusive; in the United States it is subject to fundamental principles of constitutionalism and law, principles that are assumed to embody natural rights or—to revert to the phrase of the Declaration—the laws of Nature and Nature’s God.

It was more difficult to give life and body to the abstract principles of the Declaration than to contrive the constitutional mechanisms, and we must confess that the fulfillment of this achievement still eludes us. What shall we say of the assertion that “all men are created equal?” That was one principle that was not translated into reality at the time, and that has not yet been fully realized. But it was, after all, the Enlightenment that laid down the principle in all sincerity. When Jefferson wrote that “all men are created equal,” he meant it in a quite literal sense. He meant that in the eyes of Nature all men are *born* equal. The inequalities of color, race, sex, class, wealth, even of talents, do not derive from birth or from Nature, but from society. Jefferson, and many of the signers of the Declaration, were lifelong opponents of slavery, and Jefferson himself contributed more to its eradication



John to Abigail  
July 3, 1776

"You will think  
enthusiasm, Be  
aware of the  
that it will be  
Declaration, a  
States. Yet  
See the Ray



ms,

Reported with  
am not. I am well  
and Blood, and Treasure  
to maintain this  
support and defend these  
th all the gloom, I can  
Radiating light and glory."

than any other man of his time. And, as with so much of the Declaration, the words "created equal" came to have a life of their own. They became, in the end, not so much descriptive as prophetic. For, as Lincoln said in 1857, the Fathers "meant to set us a standard for a free society which should be familiar to all and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere." The long delay in giving even an approximation of equality to Negroes and minority groups was—and is—the great American tragedy.

"Pursuit of happiness" is a more elusive phrase. The idea that God and Nature intended that men should be happy was a commonplace of 18th-century thought. In the Old World, however, happiness tended to be an elitist concept, something that the upper classes might enjoy through the cultivation of art and music and learning and the social graces. But as America had no upper classes, happiness here was supposed to be available to all who were free, and it consisted not in the enjoyment of the arts or philosophy, but in material well-being: milk and meat on the table and bread baking in the oven, a well-built house and a well-filled barn, schooling for children, freedom from the tyranny of the State or the Church or the military, freedom to move to any State, to work at any job, to marry any man or woman, to worship in any church. After almost two centuries most Americans still think of happiness in these terms.

Philosophically and practically, the new principles, practices, and institutions ap-

peared to work. The principle that men make government and can unmake it encouraged not ceaseless political upheavals but, on the whole, order and tranquility in political life; there have been many revisions of State constitutions but the changes are insignificant; there has been no fundamental change in the national constitution, only amendment. The principle that government is limited did not make for political impotence: on the contrary, the political machinery has functioned well most of the time—which is as much as can be said of the political machinery of most nations. The principle of the separation of Church and State did not lead to a decline in religion or a breakdown in morals; the churches flourished, and moral standards were about the same as in countries with established churches. The principle of the supremacy of the civil to the military, and so too of openness in government, was faithfully observed (up to our own time, anyway) without any danger to the safety of the Republic. The greatest mixture of peoples and languages in modern national history went into the melting pot. That melting pot did not melt everyone down to a uniform product by any means, but the American people—the white people anyway—achieved about as much unity as did the peoples of most Old World nations. The break-up of the Union in 1861 did not come as a result of ethnic differences in the white population, and it is relevant to note that in the end it was the Union—which had the greatest ethnic heterogeneity—that triumphed and not the Confederacy, which boasted ethnic homogeneity.

The Revolution itself contributed richly to the nourishment of that sense of unity. It proved, indeed, a veritable cornucopia of

heroic deeds, noble characters, and eloquent rhetoric; it provided a kind of instant historical past. There was Captain Parker at Lexington Common: "if they mean to have a war let it begin here," and the Minute Men at Concord Bridge firing the shot heard 'round the world. There was Prescott at Bunker Hill (really Breed's): "don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes." There was Ethan Allen before Ticonderoga, invoking the aid of the Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress. There was Nathan Hale at the foot of the gallows regretting that he had but one life to lose for his country. There was the flamboyant John Paul Jones, closing with the *Serapis*: "I have not yet begun to fight." There was Tom Paine writing the *Crisis* papers on a drum head by the flickering light of camp fires: "These are the times that try men's souls." There was Mad Anthony Wayne storming Stony Point, and George Rogers Clark wading through the swollen waters of the Wabash to capture Vincennes and Daniel Morgan smashing Tarleton at Cowpens. Above all there was Washington—Washington taking command under the famous elm in Cambridge, Washington driving the British from Boston, Washington crossing the Delaware on Christmas night and turning the fortunes of the war, Washington surviving the terrible winter at Valley Forge, Washington leading the remarkable forced march from New York to Yorktown and triumphing there as the British played "The World Turn'd Upside Down;" Washington at Newburgh, as he fumbled for his glasses: "I have grown gray in your service and now find myself growing blind;" Washington taking the oath of office as first President of the Nation he had helped to bring into being; Washington even in Heaven, his triumphal entrance fully authenticated by the authoritative Parson Weems.

Washington looms like some God over that whole galaxy of Plutarchian heroes: when was any other Nation so fortunate in its heroes? There was John Adams, the "Atlas of Independence," and Thomas Jefferson writing the Declaration in that little room in Philadelphia he had rented from the bricklayer Graff, and going on from there to immortality. There was Tom Paine furiously dashing off *Common Sense*, which did so much to win over public opinion to the necessity of independence, and the venerable Benjamin Franklin winning all hearts over in Paris, and winning French aid, too, and coming back at the age of 81 to add his prudence and his wisdom to the deliberations at the Constitutional Convention. For the pen was as mighty as the sword: the youthful Hamilton drafting so many of Washington's papers and then drafting a good part of the *Federalist Papers*; James Madison pushing through the immortal Statute of Religious Freedom for Virginia and joining in with Hamilton to write the *Federalist Papers*; George Mason with his great Bill of Rights for Virginia, which became the model for the bills of rights of other States and of the United States, too. Nor must we forget the gentle Philip Freneau with his stirring poems, and Joel Barlow with his gargantuan *Vision of Columbus*, or the "American Farmer," Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur, with those famous *Letters*, or Noah Webster already busy making an American language.

How explain this outpouring of political genius—and political leadership—in the America of the Revolutionary generation? We have seen nothing like it since, nor for that matter has any nation. The practical explanation is that in the simple, rural America of that day there were few other



outlets for genius than those offered by public service: after all, there was no court, no church, no aristocracy, no army or navy, no great universities or learned academies, no banks or commercial companies like the East India or the Hudson's Bay. Talent went, almost by default, into public life. A second practical explanation is that though the total adult white male population of America was very small—certainly well under one million—Americans, unlike the peoples of the Old World, used what they had. In France, Spain, the Italian and the German states, only nobles and aristocrats could expect to participate in public affairs on any high level, and in these countries there was no such thing as voting or participating in legislative assemblies. In Britain perhaps as many as 200,000 men had the vote—though not nearly that number exercised it—and access to public life was limited strictly to members of the upper classes. There is, too, a third reason that might be denominated practical, and that is the reason of necessity. Has any generation in our history been called upon to do more than this generation was required to do: win independence, set up State governments, write a constitution, create a Federal system, win the trans-Allegheny West and set up territorial governments there, create a nation, and fabricate all those institutions that go to making the Nation strong and progressive? There is nothing like war for bringing out courage; there is nothing like emergency for bringing out ingenuity; there is nothing like challenge for bringing out character.

But there was more to it than these practical considerations, important as they were. There was a common training in the classics—those of Greece and Rome and those of 17th-century England. All of the Fathers

knew Thucydides and Plutarch with their celebration of civic virtue and of public service. All of them might have said, with the Rev. Jonathan Mayhew, "having been initiated in youth with the doctrines of civil liberty, as they are taught in such men as Plato, Demosthenes, Cicero, and other persons among the ancients, and such as Sidney and Milton, Locke and Hoadley among the moderns, I liked them; they seemed rational." There was the deep sense of obligation to posterity, a note that runs through the whole of the public and private literature of the day.

Let three examples suffice. Listen to Washington's appeal at Newburgh: "You will, by the dignity of your conduct, afford occasion for posterity to say, when speaking of the glorious example you have exhibited to Mankind, 'had this day been wanting, the world had never seen the last stage of perfection to which human nature is capable of attaining.'" Recall Tom Paine's plea for independence: "'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are involved in the contest and will be more or less affected to the end of time." Ponder John Adams' touching letter to his wife when he had signed the great Declaration: "Through all the gloom I can see the rays of ravishing light and glory. Posterity will triumph in that day's transaction, even although we should rue it, which I trust in God we shall not."

As the 18th century identified God and Nature, so the Founding Fathers tended to identify Man and Mankind, and the present and Posterity. Their service was not to wealth but to the commonwealth; their obligation not merely to their own day or their own society but to Posterity.

### **Parks and the Bicentennial**

Throughout the National Park System the Bicentennial will be a time of commemoration and celebration. More than 20 sites—historic places like Minute Man, Independence Hall, Adams Mansion, Cowpens, and Yorktown—are directly related to the story of the American Revolution. In these parks special programs, exhibits, living history performances, and demonstrations of antique skills and crafts will interpret for visitors the life and times of the Revolutionary generation. In all national park areas, programs appropriate to the Bicentennial will be presented, placing new emphasis on local history and traditions and on the contributions a diverse people made to the American Nation. For Americans, and their guests from abroad, the Bicentennial will be an occasion to visit the places of scenic grandeur and historic significance that make up the American inheritance and to discover for themselves what is enduring—and relevant for today—in the American Revolution.

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