The Not-so Revolutionary Revolution

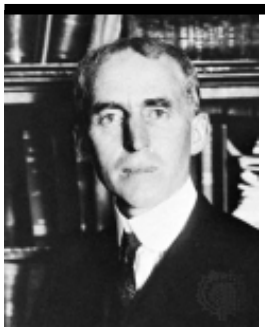
a study of the motives and trends that influenced the founding fathers

unedited, by ***Scott Plencner***

Many untrained nineteenth century historians bogged down by their own highly Romantic and nationalistic notions would argue that the founding fathers were inspired almost divinely. These historians might also argue that the accomplishments and reforms of the founding fathers were so revolutionary that they were born in a vacuum and unleashed on a world drastically alien to them and unready for them. This is where the idea of a far-reaching, world altering "revolution" came from. When one considers the economic world that surrounded the founding fathers throughout their lives and the surge of neo-Classicalism and religious revival of the mid to late eighteenth century, one can easily say that the American Revolution, while a reform of some measure and unknown (up to this point) in the world, was not so revolutionary. The Revolution was not born in a vacuum or all at one by divine inspiration. Economic prosperity accompanied it, decades of trends preceded it, and centuries of thought influenced it.

In many ways, it was Columbia political scientist and historian Charles Austin Beard who began tearing down the Romantic, nationalistic interpretations of the Revolution that dominated most of the nineteenth century. In his 1913 book *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, Beard stated that there was not some clean, unworldly motivation behind the Constitution, but that there were personal economic considerations by the respective delegates to the convention, perhaps at some times some of these motives were stained with the mark of self-preservation. Beard argued that the ideas recorded and put to life by the Constitution were much more products of the political times and the economic situations of late eighteenth century America than anything else.

Beard claimed the founding fathers were less sages than they were capitalist opportunists. "The whole theory [the economic interpretation] rests upon the concept that social progress in general is the result of contending interests in society— some favorable, others opposed to change," Beard wrote. According to Beard, it is important to find out which socioeconomic groups might have benefited by such a drastic change in the old system as the Revolution and the Constitution proved to be. Beard goes on and on in his work pointing out the types of people who would be open to "revolution." These groups were well represented at the conventions that governed the Revolution and included mortgaged farmers, landed debtors, and Western speculators and operators.



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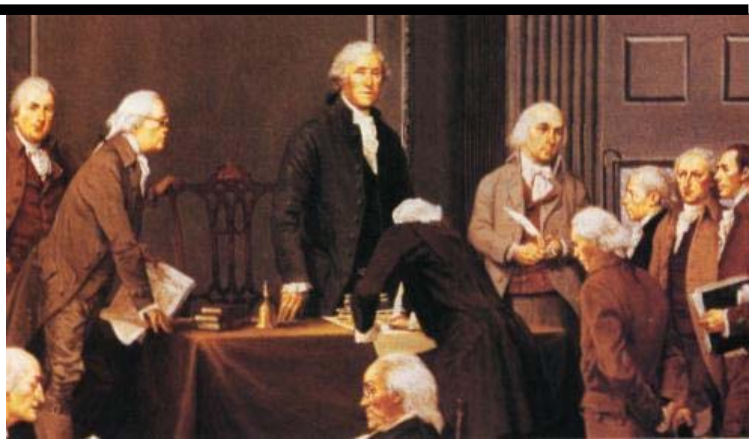
This last group of "opportunists" included such delegates as Hugh Williamson of North Carolina and George Washington of Virginia, both Easterners interested in the cheap but much-demanded land west of the Alleghenies. Eastern investment in the West was crucial to the power-players of the revolutionary era. Thomas Pickering of Pennsylvania wrote, "All I am now worth was gained by speculations in land." The land in the West was economically important enough to the Americans that it helped erode the bonds with Britain. Americans saw the Proclamation of 1763, which prohibited governors from granting Western lands, as a hindrance to their economic progress and prosperity. By the end of the confederalist era (1787), without British restrictions, settlers poured into the West and land-owners in the East gained titles at cheap prices, hoping to gain great profit as the area filled with the likes of Daniel Boone and hoards of renters and buyers. The weak national government and army of the Articles of Confederation provided little in the way of defense for these early frontiersmen who were constantly being attacked by natives and under the watchful eyes of entrenched and fortified redcoats (who remained after the war ended in 1781.)

A strong national government, whatever its exact construction, might provide for a stronger effort to subjugate natives, thus speeding up the extraordinary return on the investments the speculators were



Delegates to the convention were sure to design a strong central government since it protected interests in the West.

so depending on to pay their own bills. Because of this it is no surprise that reading lists of delegates and state ratification committeemen is like reading a list of Western speculators. Almost every man across the political spectrum from Washington to Franklin had an economic stake in the West, a personal stake so important that it created an atmosphere ripe for a change in the system, a "revolution."

To say that revolution only happened because it was profitable for Americans is something Alexander Hamilton would very definitely had understood. Beard states that Hamilton recognized that "governments were not made out of thin air and abstract principles." Hamilton's Constitution had economic objectives that he rarely concealed with rhetoric or airy speeches on principle or morals as many politicos of his era did. The co-author of the Federalist Papers, Hamilton in them very clearly identifies the new federal government as one which will more effectively protect interests of property owners, the only people allowed by the original document to vote. "The protection of these faculties [to acquire property] is the first object of government," his co-author James Madison wrote in Federalist #10 to the citizens of New York.

As the delegates sat down at the Constitutional Convention to write their own job descriptions, it is not too entirely unfounded to say that many felt through this action they would gain great personal power and wealth. Writing the Constitution was not so much a mission from God and for common sense as it was a mission from the self and for individual investment portfolios. Hamilton's anti-federalist enemies (Western debtors to Eastern landlords) were quick to accuse him of reaping benefits from his job as treasurer, an accusation he always denied. Such accusations were not rare, and the fact that they were floating around indicate that there may not have been very holy motives behind the Constitution, or at least that many Americans might have had reason to be wary of the political action of the conservative politicians and landlords that made up the federalist ranks.

Much of the reason the convention was called was in reaction to Shay's Rebellion and the growing conflict between debtors and creditors. Throughout the period that the Articles were effective, economic anarchy ran rampant, much to the dealt of debtors who benefited from the inflation caused by state-issued "rag money." whenever Eastern politicians tried to correct the economic errors through taxation or limits on currency production, Western debtors, renters, and farmers (many who and fought in the revolution) threatened uprisings. From the debtor's point of view, he was simply trading in a British tyrant for one closer to home.

One such conflict resulted in great bloodshed as a mob of rioters led by Revolutionary war veteran Daniel Shays ravaged Massachusetts, demanding lighter taxes and inflation. The reaction to Shay's Rebellion was drastic. Many feared the nation would be led by a "mobocracy." This fear of the "ignorant" masses is reflected quite visibly in the Constitution's indirect election of the president through the electoral college and the way suffrage was limited to land holders. Conservatives (many of whom were creditors) eager to protect their own assets and interests called the Constitutional Convention. Beard writes that "war had given [the mob] a taste for strong measures" and that they "were consolidated by the popular hostility to them [conservatives] on account of their 'secret' and 'aristocratic' character."

Federalists lamented the fact that Congress had little authority over the money supply. Throughout the 1780's several attempts were made by conservative Gouverneur Morris, then assistant financier of the Confederation, to impose a national coinage ratio and a uniform national currency. This move was finally approved, but it met opposition from then liberal Congressman Thomas Jefferson, who called the ratio 'too complicated.' By the time the confederate Congress had approved a national coinage, it was dead and replaced by the Constitution. The Convention proved to carry the interests of creditors as the new Congress was given sole authority over the money supply.

Fear of the mob was as much a motivation as anything else, and is something we would not expect from the democratic-minded "demi-gods" of Nineteenth century history. It was the reaction of these very mobs that initiated the bloodshed that led to the demise of the British supremacy over America. It was only later that the landed signed onto the revolutionary cause. In a 1774 letter to Thomas Cushing, a colonial Massachusetts politician, Benjamin Franklin laments the destructive action of the mobs as they urged for independence. The next year Franklin's attitude shifted completely. In letters to English clergyman Jonathan Shipley, Franklin justifies the very bloodshed and violence he had so recently denounced. It seems, according to the revolutionary leaders, the violence of the mob was only justified when aimed against the enemies of the elite.

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With economics at the root of their motivations, the revolutionary politicians built the rhetoric they needed to stir the masses, the very rhetoric that changed the world with its democratic undertones. As stated earlier, American democracy did not emerge from a vacuum. It was the result of decades of colonial rule by a distant government, which for most of the seventeenth century left the colonies to fend for themselves in the wild of America. As a result, these colonies created semi-democratic

legislatures like the House of Burgesses in Virginia which governed everyday life and in which the power of the American aristocracy was entrenched.

Why, though, did these colonies choose democratic forms of government? Democracy, a somewhat dangerous experiment for land owners and aristocrats, may have developed not only from necessity, but also as a result of the kinds of Protestant religious organization that was outlawed in seventeenth century Britain. Democracy was not invented by the founding fathers. It is all they knew.

The original English families in New England were religiously disenfranchised in Anglican Britain. These settlers were members of John Knox's Calvinist Reformed churches. These churches deny the authority of the temporal pope or king and instead are organized independently in what is called a "presbyteral" form of government. Ordained elders (ministers) preach the sermons and administer the sacraments. In each church the minister, along with elders are elected to the "consistory." Local "consistors" make up "presbyteries," which aid in cooperation between churches. Throughout the period before the Revolution, most immigrants to the American colonies were members of Reformed churches.

Most original settlers were very religious people and attempted to duplicate this democratic Church government in their temporal governments. After all, to many America was a place to start over and build a new Zion, a new "city on a hill." These early churches quickly embraced independent Congregationalist governments. The Massachusetts Bay colonists wanted nothing to do with bishops or elders and insisted that the "people" were the church.

The first governments mirrored the Church. Suffrage was at then-high levels of 40%. Elected officials, however, felt responsible not of the people, but only to God. Winthrop in 1638 warned against the temptation of pure democracy.

Virginia's Anglican roots caused the shift to democracy to be much slower. A series of events led to the establishment of the House of Burgesses in 1619, but the colony passed through the hands of benevolent strongmen like Smith, Rolfe, and Sandys. Catholic Maryland was slowest of all to change. When Baltimore set up the colony he had planned a feudal economy that simply never took hold as Protestant inhabitants refused to play their assigned social roles. When pushed for a democratic assembly, Baltimore allowed it, only if he prepared the topics of discussion. As Maryland filled with Protestants Baltimore's antiquated, Catholic governments proved a failure.

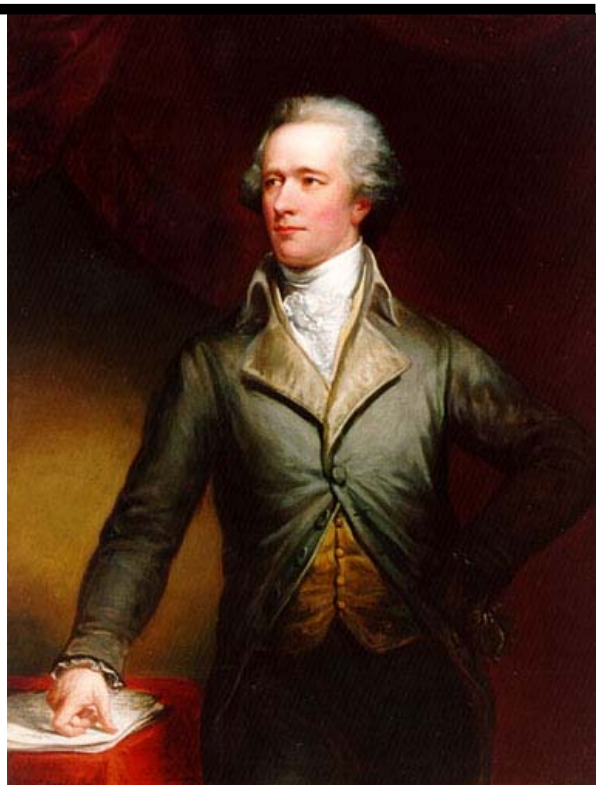
Catholics would be belittled in American politics for centuries to come due to their sect's inability to compromise hierarchical authority for more democratic, Protestant forms of government. "Americanism and Catholicism are as far apart as democracy and autocracy," said a friend of James Hyland, a Catholic priest who wrote on the Catholic question centuries after Baltimore. "The Roman Catholic Church is founded on the principles of pagan superstition, which you yourself will admit are in open conflict with the Christian and Protestant principles of the Constitution of the United States."

This conflict proves that the Protestant distrust of centralized authority made a real difference in the setting up of the original American governments, which while not openly embracing human-centered democracy, contained essential aspects of democracy.

The beginning of the eighteenth century was marked by religious revival throughout the American colonies. Churches spring up across the colonies. By the 1730's and '40's, fiery orator Jonathan Edwards reminded colonists of humanity's lowly place in the grand scheme of things. Factions and arguments erupted at the conservatism of the revivalist ministers. At the same time, the Enlightenment was battling the Great Awakening. It's effects are evident in the founding fathers, all of whom were young men when it was at its peak in popularity. The grip to which they held onto these neo-Classical ideas (which included democracy) might have been a reaction to the evangelism of their parent's generation.

The Enlightenment came about following the philosophies of Descartes, who proposed a new epistemology in the scientific method. Soon science was being used to understand the world more

Alexander Hamilton's contributions to the Federalist Papers build the case for capitalism and federalism.



and more, and religion less and less. The natural order of things was being sought by intellectuals through observation of nature, rather than authoritative sources such as the Bible or the papacy. Most Enlightenment thinkers, including many of the leading politicians of the Revolution who considered themselves intellectuals, preferred a kind of Deism to traditional Christianity. These Deists, unlike their Christian counter-parts, urged to focus on this life instead of the promise of another one. Deists searched to improve life in the here and now through education, observation, and science.

These Deist beliefs permeate the Declaration of Independence, which uses phrases such as "Laws of Nature" and "Nature's God". The revolution is justified as a logical, scientific, and natural flow of political events using the social contract theory of John Locke. Another example of such scientific flow is evidenced by Thomas Paine's "Common Sense."

It is important to note that the founding fathers steered clear of comparing what they setting up to the ancient governments of the Classical world, although republicans liked to compare themselves with Cincinatus, Cato, and Cicero. George Washington wrote, "The foundation of our Empire was not laid in the gloomy age of Ignorance and Superstition; but at an apoch when the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined, than at any other period."

While Adams suggested more Romanesque forms of government, Jefferson and the liberals looked to the democratic tradition of the Anglos rather than the Romans. While Adams was wrote that "the Roman constitution formed the noblest people, and the greatest power that has ever existed," Jefferson was warning against the potential for future Caesar's.

This new discussion of Deism, the Classics, science, and religion shaped the environment inside the minds of the politicians involved in the Revolution, just as much as the will and desire for greater wealth and power. These are some of the factors that helped direct the actions and shape the rhetoric of the founding fathers.

In his *Outline of History*, H.G. Wells, most eloquently described the founding fathers as "limited men, fallible men.... limited in knowledge and outlook; they were limited by the limitations of time. They were, like all of us, men f mixed motives; good impulses arose in their minds, great ideas swept thorough them, and also they could be jealous, lazy, obstinate, greedy, vicious." This image is far from the saintly images we receive from American historians of Wells' time. The Revolution was born of economic and political opportunity and of an intellectual environment ripe for change. The Revolution did not appear out of "thin air", as Beard insisted.

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