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EDITED BY

ELIZABETH COBBS HOFFMAN

SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

JON GJERDE

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

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our distresses, to solicit, by your ambassadors at the courts of foreign sovereigns, the aid of such powerful and good allies, as to your majesty and parliament, in your great wisdom and discretion, may seem meet. Or if such a measure should in any manner be thought incompatible with the dignity and interest of our sovereign and the nation, we most humbly and ardently supplicate and entreat, that, by deputies or ambassadors, nominated and appointed by your majesty's suffering American loyalists, they may be permitted to solicit and obtain from other nations that interference, aid and alliance, which, by the blessing of Almighty God, may, in the last fatal and ultimate extreme, save and deliver us, his majesty's American loyalists, who, we maintain, in every one of the colonies, compose a great majority of the inhabitants, and those too the first in point of opulence and consequence, from the ruinous system of congressional independence and republican tyranny, detesting rebellion as we do, and preferring a subjection to any power in Europe, to the mortifying debasement of a state of slavery, and a life of insult, under the tyranny of congressional usurpation.

## ESSAYS

Historians have for decades debated the meaning of the Revolution for American society. They have argued as to whether it was a war to determine "home rule" (whether the colonies should be independent of Britain) or a war to determine "who should rule at home" (who the rulers in the new country would be). And they have disputed the degree to which the Revolution was a radical departure on the part of Americans or a conservative attempt to reassert control over their political world. These two essays address the last of these questions. Gordon S. Wood, professor at Brown University, emphasizes the radicalism of the American Revolution. American patriots, he contends, assaulted the bonds of a traditional monarchical society. As a result, the Revolution set in motion processes of change that would transform the arrangements of state and society and would propel the new country in radical new directions. Woody Holton, a historian at the University of Richmond, agrees that the independence movement was revolutionary. Yet he focuses more on the divisions of social class and the role of the small holders in realizing the possibilities of independence in Virginia. Free of British control, their colony's government would be republican in structure, a prospect that frightened many among the Virginia gentry.

### Radical Possibilities of the American Revolution

GORDON S. WOOD

By the late 1760s and early 1770s a potentially revolutionary situation existed in many of the colonies. There was little evidence of those social conditions we often associate with revolution (and some historians have desperately sought to find): no mass poverty; no seething social discontent, no grinding oppression. For most white Americans there was greater prosperity than anywhere else in the world; in fact, the

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experience of that growing prosperity contributed to the unprecedented eighteenth-century sense that people here and now were capable of ordering their own reality. Consequently, there was a great deal of jealousy and touchiness everywhere, for what could be made could be unmade; the people were acutely nervous about their prosperity and the liberty that seemed to make it possible. With the erosion of much of what remained of traditional social relationships, more and more individuals had broken away from their families, communities, and patrons and were experiencing the anxiety of freedom and independence. Social changes, particularly since the 1740s, multiplied rapidly, and many Americans struggled to make sense of what was happening. These social changes were complicated, and they are easily misinterpreted. Luxury and conspicuous consumption by very ordinary people were increasing. So, too, was religious dissent of all sorts. The rich became richer, and aristocratic gentry everywhere became more conspicuous and self-conscious; and the numbers of poor in some cities and the numbers of landless in some areas increased. But social classes based on occupation or wealth did not set themselves against one another, for no classes in this modern sense yet existed. The society was becoming more unequal, but its inequalities were not the source of the instability and anxiety. Indeed, it was the pervasive equality of American society that was causing the problems. . . .

. . . [B]ecause such equality and prosperity were so unusual in the Western world, they could not be taken for granted. The idea of labor, of hard work, leading to increased productivity was so novel, so radical, in the overall span of Western history that most ordinary people, most of those who labored, could scarcely believe what was happening to them. Labor had been so long thought to be the natural and inevitable consequence of necessity and poverty that most people still associated it with slavery and servitude. Therefore any possibility of oppression, any threat to the colonists' hard-earned prosperity, any hint of reducing them to the poverty of other nations, was especially frightening; for it seemed likely to slide them back into the traditional status of servants or slaves, into the older world where labor was merely a painful necessity and not a source of prosperity. "The very apprehension thereof, cannot but cause extreme uneasiness." "No wonder," said Gadsden, "that throughout *America*, we find these men extremely anxious and attentive, to the cause of liberty." These hardworking farmers and mechanics were extraordinarily free and well off and had much to lose, and "this, therefore, naturally accounts for these people, in particular, being so united and steady, everywhere," in support of their liberties against British oppression. . . .

America was no doubt "the best poor Man's Country in the World." But the general well-being and equality of the society set against the gross inequality and flagrant harshness of both white servitude and especially black slavery made many people unusually sensitive to all the various dependencies and subordinations that still lurked everywhere in their lives. Thus in 1765 at the outset of the imperial crisis John Adams's fearful and seemingly anachronistic invocation of an older feudal world of "servants and vassals" holding "their lands, by a variety of duties and services . . . in a state of servile dependence on their lords," could at once arouse the colonists' anxieties over the potentialities, however inchoate and remote, of a dependent world in their own midst. They repeatedly put into words their widespread sense that very little stood between their prosperous freedom and out-and-out oppression. Indeed, they told themselves over and over that if ever they should

agree to a parliamentary tax or allow their colonial assemblies to be silenced, "nothing will remain to us but a dreadful expectation of certain slavery." The tenants of one of the New York landlords may have seemed to the landlord's agent to be "silly people" by their resisting a simple extension of the services required of them out of "fear [of] drawing their Posterity into Bondage," but they knew the reality of the eighteenth-century world. They knew the lot of ordinary people elsewhere, and they knew especially the lot of white and black dependents in their own society, and thus they could readily respond to images of being driven "like draft oxen," of being "made to serve as bond servants," or of foolishly sitting "quietly in expectation of a m[aste]r's promise for the recovery of [their] liberty." The immense changes occurring everywhere in their personal and social relationships—the loosening and severing of the hierarchical ties of kinship and patronage that were carrying them into modernity—only increased their suspicions and apprehensions. For they could not know then what direction the future was taking.

By the middle of the century these social changes were being expressed in politics. Americans everywhere complained of "a Scramble for Wealth and Power" by men of "worldly Spirits." Indeed, there were by the early 1760s "so many jarring and opposite Interests and Systems" that no one in authority could relax, no magistrate, no ruler, could long remain unchallenged. More and more ordinary people were participating in electoral politics, and in many of the colonies the number of contested elections for assembly seats markedly increased. This expansion of popular politics originated not because the mass of people pressed upward from below with new demands but because competing gentry, for their own parochial and tactical purposes, courted the people and bid for their support by invoking popular whig rhetoric. Opposition factions in the colonial assemblies made repeated appeals to the people as counterweights to the use of royal authority by the governors, especially as the older personal avenues of appeal over the heads of the governors to interests in England became clogged and unusable. But popular principles and popular participation in politics, once aroused, could not be easily put down; and by the eve of the Revolution, without anyone's intending or even being clearly aware of what was happening, traditional monarchical ways of governing through kin and patronage were transformed under the impact of the imperial crisis. "Family-Interests," like the Livingstons and De Lanceys in New York, or the Pinckneys and Leighs of South Carolina, observed one prescient British official in 1776, "have been long in a gradual Decay; and perhaps a new arrangement of political affairs may leave them wholly extinct." Those who were used to seeing politics as essentially a squabble among gentlemen were bewildered by the "strange metamorphosis or other" that was taking place.

With the weakening of family connections and the further fragmentation of colonial interests, crown officials and other conservatives made strenuous efforts to lessen popular participation in politics and to control the "democratic" part of the colonists' mixed constitutions. Some royal governors attempted to restrict the expansion of popular representation in the assemblies, to limit the meetings of the assemblies, and to veto the laws passed by the assemblies. Other officials toyed with plans for remodeling the colonial governments, for making the salaries of royal officials independent of the colonial legislatures, and for strengthening the royal councils or upper houses in the legislatures. Some even suggested introducing a titled

nobility into America in order to stabilize colonial society. But most royal officials relied on whatever traditional monarchical instruments of political patronage and influence they had available to them to curb popular disorder and popular pressure—using intricate maneuvering and personal manipulation of important men in place of whig and republican appeals to the people.

After 1763 all these efforts became hopelessly entangled in the British government's attempts to reform its awkwardly structured empire and to extract revenue from the colonists. All parts of British policy came together to threaten each colonist's expanding republican expectations of liberty and independence. In the emotionally charged atmosphere of the 1760s and 1770s, all the imperial efforts at reform seemed to be an evil extension of what was destroying liberty in England itself. Through the manipulation of puppets or placemen in the House of Commons, the crown—since 1760 in the hands of a new young king, George III—was sapping the strength of popular representation in Parliament and unbalancing the English constitution. Events seemed to show that the crown, with the aid of a pliant Parliament, was trying to reach across the Atlantic to corrupt Americans in the same way.

Americans steeped in the radical whig and republican ideology of opposition to the court regarded these monarchical techniques of personal influence and patronage as "corruption," as attempts by great men and their power-hungry minions to promote their private interests at the expense of the public good and to destroy the colonists' balanced constitutions and their popular liberty. . . .

By adopting the language of the radical whig opposition and by attacking the monarchical abuse of family influence and patronage, however, the American revolutionaries were not simply expressing their resentment of corrupt political practices that had denied some of them the highest offices of colonial government. They actually were tearing at the bonds holding the traditional monarchical society together. Their assault necessarily was as much social as it was political.

But this social assault was not the sort we are used to today in describing revolutions. The great social antagonists of the American Revolution were not poor vs. rich, workers vs. employers, or even democrats vs. aristocrats. They were patriots vs. courtiers—categories appropriate to the monarchical world in which the colonists had been reared. Courtiers were persons whose position or rank came artificially from above—from hereditary or personal connections that ultimately flowed from the crown or court. Courtiers, said John Adams, were those who applied themselves "to the Passions and Prejudices, the Follies and Vices of Great Men in order to obtain their Smiles, Esteem, and Patronage and consequently their favors and Preferments." Patriots, on the other hand, were those who not only loved their country but were free of dependent connections and influence; their position or rank came naturally from their talent and from below, from recognition by the people. "A real patriot," declared one American in 1776, was "the most illustrious character in human life. Is not the interest and happiness of his fellow creatures his care?"

Only by understanding the hierarchical structure of monarchical society and taking the patriots' assault on courtiers seriously can we begin to appreciate the significance of the displacement of the loyalists—that is, of those who maintained their allegiance to the British crown. The loyalists may have numbered close to half a million, or 20 percent of white Americans. As many as 80,000 of them are estimated to have left the thirteen colonies during the American Revolution, over six times as

many émigrés per 1,000 of population as fled France during the French Revolution. Although many of these American émigrés, unlike the French émigrés, did not have to abandon their nation and could remain as much British subjects in Canada or the West Indies or Britain itself as they had been in one of the thirteen colonies, nevertheless, the emigration of the loyalists had significant effects on American society.

It was not how many loyalists who were displaced that was important; it was who they were. A disproportionate number of them were well-to-do gentry operating at the pinnacles of power and patronage—royal or proprietary officeholders, big overseas dry-goods merchants, and rich landowners. Because they commanded important chains of influence, their removal disrupted colonial society to a degree far in excess of their numbers. . . .

To eliminate those clusters of personal and familial influence and transform the society became the idealistic goal of the revolutionaries. Any position that came from any source but talent and the will of the people now seemed undeserved and dependent. Patrimonialism, plural officeholding, and patronage of all sorts—practices that had usually been taken for granted in a monarchical society—came under attack. . . .

It is in this context that we can best understand the revolutionaries' appeal to independence, not just the independence of the country from Great Britain, but, more important, the independence of individuals from personal influence and "warm and private friendship." The purpose of the Virginia constitution of 1776, one Virginian recalled, was "to prevent the undue and overwhelming influence of great landholders in elections." This was to be done by disfranchising the landless "tenants and retainers" who depended "on the breath and varying will" of these great men and by ensuring that only men who owned their own land could vote.

A republic presumed, as the Virginia declaration of rights put it, that men in the new republic would be "equally free and independent," and property would make them so. Property in a republic was still conceived of traditionally—in proprietary terms—not as a means of personal profit or aggrandizement but rather as a source of personal authority or independence. It was regarded not merely as a material possession but also as an attribute of a man's personality that defined him and protected him from outside pressure. A carpenter's skill, for example, was his property. Jefferson feared the rabble of the cities precisely because they were without property and were thus dependent.

All dependents without property, such as women and young men, could be denied the vote because, as a convention of Essex County, Massachusetts, declared in 1778, they were "so situated as to have no wills of their own." Jefferson was so keen on this equation of property with citizenship that he proposed in 1776 that the new state of Virginia grant fifty acres of land to every man that did not have that many. Without having property and a will of his own—without having independence—a man could have no public spirit; and there could be no republic. For, as Jefferson put it, "dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition."

In a monarchical world of numerous patron-client relations and multiple degrees of dependency, nothing could be more radical than this attempt to make every man independent. What was an ideal in the English-speaking world now became for Americans an ideological imperative. Suddenly, in the eyes of the revolutionaries, all the fine calibrations of rank and degrees of unfreedom of the traditional monarchical

society became absurd and degrading. The Revolution became a full-scale assault on dependency. . . .

Of course, the revolutionary leaders did not expect poor, humble men—farmers, artisans, or tradesmen—themselves to gain high political office. Rather, they expected that the sons of such humble or ungentle men, if they had abilities, would, as they had, acquire liberal and genteel republican attributes, perhaps by attending Harvard or the College of New Jersey at Princeton, and would thereby rise into the ranks of gentlemen and become eligible for high political office. The sparks of genius that they hoped republicanism would fan and kindle into flame belonged to men like themselves—men “drawn from obscurity” by the new opportunities of republican competition and emulation into becoming “illustrious characters, which will dazzle the world with the splendor of their names.” Honor, interest, and patriotism together called them to qualify themselves and posterity “for the bench, the army, the navy, the learned professions, and all the departments of civil government.” They would become what Jefferson called the “natural aristocracy”—liberally educated, enlightened gentlemen of character. For many of the revolutionary leaders this was the emotional significance of republicanism—a vindication of frustrated talent at the expense of birth and blood. For too long, they felt, merit had been denied. In a monarchical world only the arts and sciences had recognized talent as the sole criterion of leadership. Which is why even the eighteenth-century *ancien régime* called the world of the arts and sciences “the republic of letters.” Who, it was asked, remembered the fathers or sons of Homer and Euclid? Such a question was a republican dagger driven into the heart of the old hereditary order. “Virtue,” said Thomas Paine simply, “is not hereditary.”

Because the revolutionaries are so different from us, so seemingly aristocratic themselves, it is hard for us today to appreciate the anger and resentment they felt toward hereditary aristocracy. We tend to ignore or forget the degree to which family and monarchical values dominated colonial America. But the revolutionaries knew only too well what kin and patrimonial officeholding had meant in their lives. Up and down the continent colonial gentry like Charles Carroll of Maryland had voiced their fears that “all power might center in *one family*” and that offices of government “like a precious jewel will be handed down from *father to son*.” Everywhere men expressed their anger over the exclusive and unresponsive governments that had distributed offices, land, and privileges to favorites. . . .

The Revolution’s assault on patriarchy inevitably affected relationships within the family, as decisions concerning women’s and daughters’ rights were made that conservatives later regarded as “tending to loosen the bands of society.” Changes in the family begun earlier found new republican justifications and were accelerated—showing up even in paintings. In earlier-eighteenth-century family portraits fathers had stood dominantly above their wives and children; now they were portrayed on the same plane with them—a symbolic leveling. With the Revolution men lost some of their earlier patriarchal control over their wives and property. Although wives continued to remain dependent on their husbands, they did gain greater autonomy and some legal recognition of their rights to hold property separately, to divorce, and to make contracts and do business in the absence of their husbands. In the colonial period only New Englanders had recognized the absolute right to divorce, but after the Revolution all the states except South Carolina developed new liberal laws on divorce.

Women and children no doubt remained largely dependent on their husbands and fathers, but the revolutionary attack on patriarchal monarchy made all other dependencies in the society suspect. Indeed, once the revolutionaries collapsed all the different distinctions and dependencies of a monarchical society into either freemen or slaves, white males found it increasingly impossible to accept any dependent status whatsoever. Servitude of any sort suddenly became anomalous and anachronistic. In 1784 in New York, a group believing that indentured servitude was “contrary to . . . the idea of liberty this country has so happily established” released a shipload of immigrant servants and arranged for public subscriptions to pay for their passage. As early as 1775 in Philadelphia the proportion of the work force that was unfree—composed of servants and slaves—had already declined to 13 percent from the 40 to 50 percent that it had been at mid-century. By 1800 less than 2 percent of the city’s labor force remained unfree. Before long indentured servitude virtually disappeared.

With the post-revolutionary republican culture talking of nothing but liberty, equality, and independence, even hired servants eventually became hard to come by or to control. White servants refused to call their employers “master” or “mistress”; for many the term “boss,” derived from the Dutch word for master, became a euphemistic substitute. The servants themselves would not be called anything but “help,” or “waiter,” which was the term the character Jonathan, in Royall Tyler’s 1787 play *The Contrast*, preferred in place of “servant.” . . .

By the early nineteenth century what remained of patriarchy was in disarray. No longer were apprentices dependents within a family; they became trainees within a business that was more and more conducted outside the household. Artisans did less “bespoke” or “order” work for patrons; instead they increasingly produced for impersonal markets. This in turn meant that the master craftsmen had to hire labor and organize the sale of the products of their shops. Masters became less patriarchs and more employers, retail merchants, or businessmen. Cash payments of wages increasingly replaced the older paternalistic relationship between masters and journeymen. These free wage earners now came and went with astonishing frequency, moving not only from job to job but from city to city. This “fluctuating” mobility of workers bewildered some employers: “while you were taking an inventory of their property,” sighed one Rhode Islander, “they would sling their packs and be off.”

Although both masters and journeymen often tried to maintain the traditional fiction that they were bound together for the “good of the trade,” increasingly they saw themselves as employers and employees with different interests. Although observers applauded the fact that apprentices, journeymen, and masters of each craft marched together in the federal procession in Philadelphia on July 4, 1788, the tensions and divergence of interests were already visible. Before long journeymen in various crafts organized themselves against their masters’ organizations, banned their employers from their meetings, and declared that “the interests of the journeymen are separate and in some respects opposite of those of their employers.” Between 1786 and 1816 at least twelve major strikes by various journeymen craftsmen occurred—the first major strikes by employees against employers in American history.

One obvious dependency the revolutionaries did not completely abolish was that of nearly a half million Afro-American slaves, and their failure to do so, amidst all their high-blown talk of liberty, makes them seem inconsistent and hypocritical in our eyes. Yet it is important to realize that the Revolution suddenly and effectively ended the cultural climate that had allowed black slavery, as well as other forms of

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bondage and unfreedom, to exist throughout the colonial period without serious challenge. With the revolutionary movement, black slavery became excruciatingly conspicuous in a way that it had not been in the older monarchical society with its many calibrations and degrees of unfreedom; and Americans in 1775–76 began attacking it with a vehemence that was inconceivable earlier.

For a century or more the colonists had taken slavery more or less for granted as the most base and dependent status in a hierarchy of dependencies and a world of laborers. Rarely had they felt the need either to criticize black slavery or to defend it. Now, however, the republican attack on dependency compelled Americans to see the deviant character of slavery and to confront the institution as they never had to before. It was no accident that Americans in Philadelphia in 1775 formed the first anti-slavery society in the world. As long as most people had to work merely out of poverty and the need to provide for a living, slavery and other forms of enforced labor did not seem all that different from free labor. But the growing recognition that labor was not simply a common necessity of the poor but was in fact a source of increased wealth and prosperity for ordinary workers made slavery seem more and more anomalous. Americans now recognized that slavery in a republic of workers was an aberration, “a peculiar institution,” and that if any Americans were to retain it, as southern Americans eventually did, they would have to explain and justify it in new racial and anthropological ways that their former monarchical society had never needed. The Revolution in effect set in motion ideological and social forces that doomed the institution of slavery in the North and led inexorably to the Civil War.

With all men now considered to be equally free citizens, the way was prepared as well for a radical change in the conception of state power. Almost at a stroke the Revolution destroyed all the earlier talk of paternal or maternal government, filial allegiance, and mutual contractual obligations between rulers and ruled. The familial image of government now lost all its previous relevance, and the state in America emerged as something very different from what it had been.

## Elite Concerns About the American Revolution

WOODY HOLTON

### I

One reason that many smallholders and poor whites sought an independent government was that they expected it to be much more amenable to their influence. This expectation took a while to develop, for the first pro-Independence essays to appear in Virginia made no suggestions about what form an independent government should take. Clearly, the authors favored Independence because of British provocation (military attacks, Dunmore’s emancipation proclamation, and so on) and as a matter of practical necessity. For them, the attraction of Independence was not that it would allow free Virginians to redesign their internal government. But by late 1775, as formal separation from Britain became a realistic option, more and more colonists began to imagine what a new Virginia government might look like. They

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quickly grasped that Virginia could not simply secede from the empire while maintaining the same government institutions that had developed during the colonial era. When Virginians discovered the internal implications of Independence, some drew back in horror. Others had just the opposite reaction.

Britain's government balanced three distinct forms: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. The crown represented kingship, the House of Lords embodied the aristocracy, and the House of Commons represented the common people. This structure could not be replicated in America. Because of the widespread "tenure of landed property, and the absence of *hereditary distinctions of rank*" in America, a *Virginia Gazette* writer explained, there was nothing like the British aristocracy. America also lacked a royal family from which to draw a hereditary king. These obvious differences were pointed out to the readers of the *Virginia Gazette* by an opponent of Independence that called himself "Hampden." He imagined independent American states trying to set up a new form of government. "Is it probable that they will establish a form on the same salutary principles as the old one; or is it practicable? If they should incline to do so, who among us has pretensions to the *throne*?"

The only answer to Hampden's question was that there would *be* no throne, and no House of Lords either. The lower house of the legislature would reign supreme. Even if the government were balanced among three branches, as Britain's was, the personnel of each branch would have to be selected—directly or indirectly—by the freeholders. And Virginia, like the other American colonies, had an electorate that was much broader than Britain's; in fact, the majority of free white men could vote.

The prospect of abandoning the monarchical and aristocratic elements in the British constitution worried many Virginia gentlemen. To be sure, these conservatives would have been even more opposed to giving up the democratic part of the British government—the lower house of the legislature. As much as gentlemen cherished the dominant role of the House of Commons, however, they also celebrated the fact that it was kept in check by the House of Lords and the crown. George Washington recognized that the gentry conservatives' discomfort with the idea of an unrestrained legislature was the last strand that bound them to the mother country. "My Countrymen I know, from their form of Government, and steady Attachment heretofore to Royalty, will come reluctantly into the Idea of Independancy," he told a Pennsylvanian in April 1776.

Gentlemen used two terms to describe the type of government in which the lower house of the legislature acts without the restraining influence of a House of Lords or monarch: "simple democracy" and "republic." What made this constitutional form so unacceptable, many gentlemen argued, was that it was too responsive to the will of the majority of voters. One result was that democratic and republican governments often did not have the stomach to suppress "internal . . . commotions," Landon Carter said. Another Virginian that opposed Independence recoiled at the thought of the colonial governments' being replaced by "those *wild and turbulent republics*, which hold out dissensions, civil war, massacre, and bloodshed, in perpetual prospect." Carter Braxton fretted that the draft constitutions that had been "recommended to the Colonies, seem to accord with the temper of the times, and are fraught with all the tumult and riot incident to simple democracy." He argued that mixed governments like Britain's were much more effective than democracies at preserving "tranquility and security." One reason that republics and democracies seemed to

conservatives to be beset by disorder was that they generally lacked fixed hierarchies in which everyone knew his or her place and was stuck there. Thus they fomented social mobility and competition. "I dread whether our own internal Contentions, will not again grow from this republican form we all seem to be hurrying into," [Landon] Carter wrote in April 1776. In a republic, he said, "everybody wants to be ahead and aims at it Neck or nothing as it is commonly said."

Another reason conservative gentlemen objected to the notion of a legislature responsible only to the people was their fear that, if ordinary farmers obtained political authority, they would use it to seize the property of the rich. Such a move would be prompted not only by greed but by the widespread concern that large concentrations of wealth are hazardous to republics, since great wealth can easily purchase an inordinate amount of political power. Landon Carter knew that many republicans believed "large Possessions" exert "influence against a Commonwealth." Carter Braxton's antirepublican diatribe, written in April 1776, claimed that pure republics demanded an "equal division of property."

What conservatives most disliked about legislative supremacy was the faith upon which it was founded: that common people possessed sufficient virtue to govern themselves. A conservative that criticized the constitution proposed by Richard Henry Lee in 1776 noted that what distinguished Lee's proposal from Virginia's colonial government was its placement of "the choice" of leaders "in the people." Although the critic acknowledged that popular sovereignty "seems the basis of freedom," he had little faith in the wisdom of the masses. "Nothing is so easily corrupted as an ignorant Man, as soon as he gets an Idia, that he is the cornerstone in Public Happiness," he wrote. In choosing legislators, the poor man, "activated by his circumstances," was likely to vote for any candidate that would promise to "give his poverty a good relish. And with that any lie will go down, to direct his choice," he claimed. Carter Braxton agreed. "*Public* virtue," he declared in a published address to the spring 1776 Virginia convention, "never characterised the mass of the people in any state."

The underlying assumption of the antirepublican authors that opposed Independence from Britain was that, if Virginia were to leave the British Empire, the only form of government available to it would be one in which the lower house of the legislature would not be restrained by anything resembling the British monarch and House of Lords. As the link between Independence and republicanism solidified in the minds of most Virginians, some conservatives carried it one step further. They claimed that many colonists favored Independence precisely because they knew it would allow them (as Carter Braxton asserted) to establish "their darling Democracy." Landon Carter did not believe the "Congress Republicans" when they claimed that necessity drove them to Independence. He thought they actually desired Independence so that they could establish republics in the newly independent states and then take advantage of the states' weakness to seize power for themselves. Although gentlemen that favored Independence of course denied the conservatives' claim that their secret motive was to establish republics in America, they often conceded one essential point: If the thirteen colonies did declare Independence, their new governments would inevitably have to be republics. "E. F.," an anonymous Independence advocate, had watched "the monarchy-men display their talents in pathetick descriptions of the tumults and distractions of republicks." Another Independence advocate

acknowledged that some gentlemen believed a shift to republican government in America would lead to a "dreadful train of domestick convulsions in each republick." He quoted John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which ridiculed the notion that, in republics, "nature breeds All monstrous, all prodigious things, / Abominable, unutterable, and worse / That fables yet have feign'd, or fear conceiv'd."

To Virginia smallholders, what the antirepublican theorists argued was less important than what they assumed—that, if Virginia declared Independence, it would have to adopt a more popular form of government. As smallholders studied the gentry conservatives' arguments, they began to support Independence for the same reason that some gentlemen opposed it—because an independent Virginia would inevitably be a republic.

Smallholders learned even more about the probable internal consequences of Independence from the pamphlet *Common Sense*, which appeared in January 1776. In it, the anonymous author, Thomas Paine, criticized the same British constitution that Virginia conservatives so ardently admired. Although Paine had nothing but praise for the House of Commons, he described the other two branches of the British government as "First—The remains of monarchical tyranny in the person of the king" and "Secondly—The remains of aristocratical tyranny in the persons of the peers." Paine challenged free Americans to establish the supremacy of their legislatures by declaring Independence. *Common Sense* did more than any other document to equate Independence and republicanism in the minds of the American people. This was as clear to Paine's detractors as to his supporters. Landon Carter claimed that *Common Sense* was the work of "men of Republican turns." Carter denounced the pamphlet a dozen times in his diary during the six months after it appeared.

The central thesis of *Common Sense*, hinted at in its title, was that the common people possessed enough sense to govern themselves. One conservative patriot that read the pamphlet, Edmund Randolph, observed many years later that it was "pregnant with . . . proud republican theories, which flattered human nature." *Common Sense* showed Americans that republicanism would follow as an inevitable consequence of Independence. Thus it led thousands of farmers to venture upon Independence as a bridge to a greater say in the internal government of Virginia.

The tremendous push that *Common Sense* gave to the smallholders' and poor whites' support for Independence was everywhere celebrated by its supporters and acknowledged by its detractors. "The opinion for independency seems to be gaining ground," Fielding Lewis wrote George Washington in March 1776. "Indeed most of those who have read the Pamphlet Common Sense say it's unanswerable." Washington relayed this news to Joseph Reed of Pennsylvania. "By private Letters which I have lately received from Virginia, I find common sense is working a powerful change there in the Minds of many Men," Washington said. "There is abundance talked about independency," Landon Carter stated in March 1776; "it is all from Mr. Common sense." Before January 1776, Nicholas Cresswell, an Englishman traveling in Virginia, never stated that any of the Virginians he met favored Independence. Then *Common Sense* appeared, making a "great noise" and tending "to subvert all Kingly Governments and erect an Independent Republic," Cresswell said. After that, Cresswell's journal is filled with comments such as "Nothing but Independence talked of" and "Nothing but Independence will go down."

As more and more smallholders and poor whites became convinced that they would soon be living in an "Independent Republic," some of them began to make

specific demands about what that republic should look like. "We ask for a full representation, free and frequent elections, and that no standing armies whatever should be kept up in times of peace," the freeholders of Buckingham County told their delegates to the spring 1776 convention.

## II

Smallholders predominated in another group that also had a special reason to favor Independence. These were the dissenters from the Established Church, whom Jefferson reckoned at two-thirds of white Virginians at the time of the Revolution. By the end of 1775, it was obvious to evangelical Christians and others dissenters that, if Virginia declared Independence, the new government would accord them more freedom than they had ever enjoyed as colonists. An independent state might even disestablish the Anglican Church.

Dissenters had several reasons to think an independent government would expand their freedom. They could see that many of the leaders of the Independence movement—the people that were likely to hold power in a new regime—were also leaders in the movement for religious toleration. Patrick Henry had attacked Anglican parsons and defended imprisoned evangelicals. Thomas Jefferson had also shown an interest in toleration. And *Common Sense* called for an American Magna Carta that would safeguard "above all things the free exercise of religion." "As to religion," Pain stated later in the pamphlet, "I hold it to be the indispensable duty of all government, to protect all conscientious professors thereof, and I know of no other business which government hath to do therewith." Since everyone acknowledged that a newly independent Virginia would have to be a republic, dissenters looked to the existing republics for clues about the possible religious policies of a republican Virginia. What they found encouraged them, for both the Swiss cantons and the Dutch states were conspicuously tolerant of dissenting sects.

As encouraging as these signs were, dissenters worked right up until the moment of Independence to ensure that the new regime would grant them more religious freedom. On April 26, 1776, a letter in Purdie's *Virginia Gazette* argued that, for unity's sake, Virginia should stop forcing dissenters to pay the established clergymen's salaries. Nor should dissenters have to hire Anglican parsons to perform their wedding ceremonies. The letter was signed, "A Dissenter from the Church of England." That same week, the Charlotte County freeholders urged their convention delegates to establish a government that would "secure to us the enjoyment of our civil and religious rights and privileges." One Baptist Church in Prince William County seemed to offer patriots a deal: if they would disestablish the Anglican Church, the Prince William Baptists would "gladly unite with our Brethren of other denominations, and to the utmost of our ability promote the common cause of *Freedom*."

Thus free farmers in Virginia discovered that Independence promised them both a greater role in government and broader religious toleration. All that remained was for farmers to express their support for Independence to the gentry. They did that with a vengeance in the spring of 1776.

Thomas Jefferson spent the winter of 1776 at Monticello and returned to Philadelphia the following spring convinced that 90 percent of the freeholders in the upper counties of Virginia wanted to separate from Britain. Charles Lee traveled to

Virginia in April 1776 and came away convinced that almost all white Virginians supported a declaration of Independence. The "spirit of the people . . . cr[ies] out for this Declaration," Lee told Patrick Henry early in May. The "military in particular," he said, "are outrageous on the subject." Lee knew that Henry hung back from the final step toward Independence, so he wrote him, saying, "A man of your excellent discernment need not be told, how dangerous it would be in present circumstances to dally with the spirit, or disappoint the expectations of the bulk of the People." Lee's letter to Henry concluded by appealing to the gentry's fear of anarchy. If the smallholders' demand for Independence was not met, he warned, "May not despair, anarchy, and finally submission be the bitter fruits?"

Small farmers clearly expressed their desire for Independence when they gathered at the county courthouses in April 1776 to elect delegates to what would turn out to be colonial Virginia's last convention. In the past, Virginia freeholders had hardly ever told their representatives how to vote on legislation. But smallholders apparently were emboldened by their success at forcing the winter 1775–1776 convention essentially to abolish the minute service and by other, smaller victories. Now many counties instructed their delegates to the spring 1776 convention to vote for Independence. "Papers it seems are every where circulating about for poor ignorant Creatures to sign, as directions to their delegate[s] to endeavour at an independency," Landon Carter told George Washington as the convention delegates gathered in Williamsburg. Even in James City County, where Robert Carter Nicholas, an opponent of Independence, was elected to the convention, a majority of the voters gathered at a tavern on April 24 to sign instructions to Nicholas and his fellow delegate William Norvell to vote for Independence. The instructions constituted a remarkable document; rarely had a majority of the voters of a Virginia county signed *anything*. By the time the great assembly convened, delegate Edmund Randolph later recalled, "the disposition of the people . . . could not be mistaken." The "now apparent spirit of the people" decisively favored Independence. The spirit seemed to be universal and enthusiastic. Several counties that had not bothered to send delegates to previous conventions now did so.

If any of the delegates in Williamsburg still harbored doubts about whether the pro-Independence freeholders meant business, they could just look around them. Many of the delegates to earlier conventions were no longer present, for they had been defeated at the polls. "The election of delegates for the Convention," Edmund Randolph recalled many years later "was now depended in very many, if not in a majority, of the counties upon their candidates pledging themselves . . . to sever . . . the colonies from Great Britain." Many incumbents, that refused to endorse Independence were turned out. The most stunning electoral upset was in Richmond County, where the two incumbent delegates, both of whom had won the previous seven elections, were voted out of office. The two were replaced, as one of them noted, with "determined men." One of the defeated incumbents, Robert Wormeley Carter, opposed Independence. He received only forty-five votes. The freeholders also turned out Francis Lightfoot Lee, a member of Congress that actually favored Independence. He had, in the contemptuous language of Robert Carter's father Landon, "merely kissed the arses of the people and very servilely accommodated himself to others." Apparently, one reason Lee was nonetheless defeated was that he was off in Philadelphia attending Congress and could not participate in the convention. It seems

that Richmond County freeholders, recognizing that this convention would be a major event in Virginia history, wanted to make sure that they were fully represented in it. The April 1 election in Richmond County was viewed by Landon Carter (who could not resist calling it "a kind of April fool") as a blow to the old deferential relationship between the gentry and the common people. He noted that "even relations as well as tenants all Voted against" the two incumbents.

A month after the election, Landon Carter sat down to analyze the results. "The old deligates were left out . . . and these new ones chose for this Very Purpose of an intire independence," Carter wrote in his diary. He said the reason the freeholders wanted to separate from Britain was that they desired an "independence in which no Gentleman should have the least share." Carter elaborated on this point a week later in a letter to George Washington. "I need only tell you of one definition that I heard of Independency," he wrote. "It was expected to be a form of Government, that by being independt of the rich men, eve[r]y man would then be able to do as he pleasd. And it was with this expectation they sent the men they did, in hope they would plan such a form." Indeed, it is possible that Francis Lightfoot Lee lost because the delegate replacing him advocated that the government follow the dictates of public opinion. "One of the delegates I heard exclaim agst the Patrolling law, because a poor man was made to pay for keeping a rich mans Slaves in order," Landon Carter reported. The candidate's rhetoric was effective, Carter said; he "got elected by it." Carter reported that another candidate (not necessarily in Richmond County) won by criticizing "in a most seditious manner . . . the draughting the Militia by lot."

The election analysis in Carter's diary entry and letter to Washington was prompted by the late-April incident (narrated above) in which the smallholder he identified as G. R. said he relished the thought of the British burning gentry mansions. Carter believed that the sentiments G. R. expressed were only an extreme version of the attitude that other Richmond County smallholders had exhibited at the election earlier in the month. In his diary, Carter combined his report on G. R. with his analysis of the election and concluded the whole with a sarcastic cheer. "Hurrray for Independancy, Sedition, and Confusion," he wrote. . . .

As gentlemen pieced together the news from the various county elections, the picture that emerged was ominous. "For many counties there have been warm contests for seats in our approaching convention," Robert Brent told Richard Henry Lee at the end of April. "Many new ones are got in." Landon Carter regretted that "inexperienced creatures" had been elected "all over the Colony." "Our Freeholders [are] all Mad, determind to have a New house altogether," Josiah Parker told Carter; "I hope for the best, tho I *fear* the Consequence." In all, nearly one-third of the incumbents that stood for reelection in April 1776 were defeated.

Two days after the King William County election he nearly lost, William Aylett demonstrated that he had got the voters' message. In a letter to Richard Henry Lee, Aylett described the defeat of his former colleague Carter Braxton and then declared, "These people of this County almost unanimously cry aloud for independance." Other convention delegates got the message as well. Indeed, by early May 1776, when the delegates gathered in Williamsburg, even the most conservative gentlemen had seen their fears of a popular government eclipsed by two greater fears: they dreaded the prospect of allowing Virginia to slip into anarchy, and they feared the farmers' wrath if they continued to thwart the popular demand for an independent

republic. Both of those fears pointed them toward final separation from Britain. On May 15, 1776, the Virginia convention instructed Virginia's delegates in Congress to propose that the thirteen colonies declare Independence. The next day, the Union Jack that had flown over the Capitol in Williamsburg was hauled down and replaced with a Continental flag. On June 29, 1776, the convention adopted the new constitution and chose Patrick Henry as the first governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia. Accepting, Henry highlighted an important reason for the move to Independence that has since been virtually forgotten. "Government hath been necessarily assumed," he told the convention, "in Order to preserve this Commonwealth from Anarchy and its attendant Ruin." Thus Virginia farmers had, both by committing "disorders" that frightened the gentry and by demanding a larger role in government, powerfully influenced the transformation of Virginia into an independent state.

### FURTHER READING

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