

# THE COLONISTS' AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Preserving English Liberty,  
1607-1783

Guy Chet



WILEY Blackwell



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*Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations [...] evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.*

*American Declaration of Independence, 1776.*





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## Preface

As an immigrant to the United States, I know firsthand that American values are simultaneously familiar and exotic to foreigners. On the one hand, America seems recognizable to outsiders because they are often well acquainted with American culture and institutions, and even American history. They might even see American culture, beliefs, and values as similar to their own. On the other hand, immigrants and foreign observers are often perplexed by various American peculiarities – from the natives' attachment to cars, firearms, and work, to their religiosity, their fear of governmental power, and their veneration of a Constitution written over two hundred years ago. This sense of bewilderment or frustration revolves most persistently around issues relating to liberty versus security. Whereas most Americans assume that the tension between the two is visible and visceral to all, many newcomers truly do not understand why Americans see tension between the two. My intent is to clarify to those – foreign and domestic – who are mystified by the origins and nature of Americans' conception of liberty.

Americans who revere the United States Constitution, admire the Founders, and share their ideological belief system easily identify the differences between the country they live in today and the United States of the late-eighteenth century. Those who disapprove of the Revolution and the Constitution similarly recognize these differences. Specifically, Americans of all stripes are struck by how the country, its culture, and its Constitution have been fundamentally transformed since the late-nineteenth century. The United States in the twenty-first century is a managerial nation-state. Moreover, it has been so for more than a century; longer than it had been the decentralized federal republic as which it was founded. What explain this shift are changes that occurred long ago in the circumstances, demography, economy, and culture of the country. American Constitutional law has reflected these changes in the culture, as a century of court rulings has gradually transformed Madison's Constitution from a tool to constrain the national government and insulate local governments from it, to a tool that empowers the national government to supervise, guide, correct, punish, and restrict local governments. Successive generations

of Americans have thus been born into a managerial state, and into a culture that understands liberty and equality differently than did Americans of the founding era. This transformation is dismaying for some and comforting for others, but it should allow American readers, students, and scholars to approach eighteenth-century America with detachment, as a distant and bygone historical civilization, albeit one that is still culturally relevant, meaningful, and instructive to them, such as ancient Rome or Biblical Judea.

What I propose in this book is that the American Revolution is best understood as a British event, one designed to safeguard traditional English liberties and preserve the existing status quo. I examine the Revolution through a British lens because I follow the lead of the colonists themselves, as the book's title indicates. On this method there is genuine disagreement among historians. Some historians believe their mission is to identify the hidden forces that moved people and events in the past; forces of which contemporaries were not aware, but were shaping their ideas and actions nonetheless. Other historians try instead to look at events through the eyes of people in the past, and to understand events as they themselves did; to record how contemporaries understood what they were doing, and why they were doing it. To my way of thinking, when we try to understand people and events in the past, we benefit more from channeling *their* understanding of their actions and beliefs, rather than identifying motivating forces that were hidden from them at the time, but which we can see (or think we see) from our own modern vantage point. These two competing approaches lead some historians to see the American Revolution as a story of change, and others (like myself) to see it as a story of continuity, in which the Revolutionists saw themselves as preserving the status quo, not challenging it.

An example of how one's historical method shapes one's understanding of the Revolution is the concept of class. A running theme in this book is "aristocratic resistance," a concept that describes the efforts of local governments – noble families in Europe, and elite-dominated colonial assemblies in America – to resist the concentration of power in central governments. In this framework, the American Revolution was an elite-led movement to resist change and preserve the decentralized structure of the British Empire. This characterization is a loaded one for modern readers, given how thoroughly we have internalized Marxian (or Marxist) assumptions regarding class and class conflict. Karl Marx's influence on the study of history, sociology, and economics has led most Westerners to conceive of elites and "common people" as groups with different and opposing circumstances, interests, sentiments, and allegiances. This is why modern observers routinely label elite-led conflicts like the American Revolution or the U.S. Civil War as "a rich man's war, but a poor man's fight." Even if this adversarial analysis of historical societies is accurate, it is important to remember that the concepts of class and class conflict are modern; they were foreign, as a general rule, to the minds of premodern people.

Certainly colonial Americans did not view their society in such adversarial terms. Elite families in early-modern England and America enjoyed support, deference, allegiance, and trust from below. Common folk in local communities saw the elite status of their social superiors as legitimate, and these elite families for the most part reflected the interests, fears, concerns, and values of their localities. This is why historians who use the modern concept of class to analyze colonial America clarify to their readers that contemporaries were unaware of the class dynamics that were shaping their ideas and actions; these dynamics are visible to the scholar in hindsight, but were hidden from contemporaries. By contrast, studying colonial America with *premodern* sensibilities regarding class allows one to understand this elite-led event as contemporaries themselves understood it – a communal resistance movement, rather than an elitist one.



## Acknowledgments

This book reflects knowledge and sensibilities absorbed from other scholars over three decades of studying early-American history. I am grateful to the historians who had taught me, to those for whom I had worked as a teaching assistant, and to the many others on whose work I relied when conducting research and constructing my courses, lesson plans, and lectures. The material presented here reflects the findings, analysis, and insights of numerous teachers and scholars whose work has shaped my understanding of American history. At this point, I can no longer cite the sources of my convictions regarding colonial culture and society; I have absorbed so much from so many for so long, that I cannot tell where their thoughts and beliefs end, and where mine begin. I have listed their publications in the bibliography as a form of attribution, with apologies for failing to acknowledge specifically the ideas, findings, and interpretations which they will likely identify as their own in these pages.<sup>1</sup>

I thank my editors at Wiley Blackwell – Jennifer Manias, Niranjana Vallavan, Aneetta Antony, and Ajith Kumar – for their wise counsel on bringing this book to press, Katherine Carr for her sharp copy-editing, and Erica Charters, Tal Chet, Travis Bagley, Sophie Burton, Mike Campbell, Ralph Mitchell, David Smith, and Stuart Zenner for reading early drafts of the manuscript, in parts or in whole, and offering scholarly and editorial advice. I also thank my undergraduate students, who read the manuscript and provided insights and suggestions from a student's perspective; their critique was helpful in shaping the final product. Last, I am indebted to Chris Morris and Ben Wright for their sensible advice to drop academic jargon as much as possible (specifically with regard to Americanization and Anglicization).

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1 Some sections dealing with colonial military history are based on or are drawn from my own publications on this topic. The sections dealing with the effects of Patriot manpower on American and British campaigning draw in part on David R. Smith's doctoral research on the "myth of the valiant few."

I am thankful to Yale University for admitting me into its graduate program many years ago and thus making possible my life in America and career in academia; I owe a special debt of gratitude to Associate Dean Ingrid Walsoe Engel, who went beyond the call of duty there on my behalf. Mostly, I am grateful to and for this country, which has welcomed me and has done so much for me.



## About the Companion Website

This book is accompanied by a companion website:



**[www.wiley.com/go/Chet/ColonistsAmericanRevolution](http://www.wiley.com/go/Chet/ColonistsAmericanRevolution)**

The website includes the following supplementary material for instructors:

- About the Book
- The Value of History for Civics and Critical Thinking
- Experiences From the Classroom



## Introduction

### A Status Quo Revolution

*The historian's understanding of past situations benefits greatly from the fact that he, unlike any contemporary observer, knows a good deal about the subsequent development. It is only in retrospect [...] that germinal forces, unnoticed or underestimated at the time, can be seen in their true significance. However, hindsight also has its dangers. Reading history backwards we are easily misled into postulating specific "antecedents" and "early phases" of phenomena which seem to require a long period of gestation; and we are almost inclined to distrust our records if they fail to confirm our expectations.<sup>1</sup>*

—Karl Helleiner

Perhaps the most prominent theme in scholarship on early-American history is the formation of American identity – how (and therefore when) did American society become distinctively American, featuring uniquely American manners, sociology, sports, literature, religiosity, philosophical sensibilities, and politics. Most historians hold that life in colonial America gradually reshaped English settlers' habits, mores, values, and beliefs. What produced this cultural transformation, according to this view, were realities of life that were unique to America – slavery, racial diversity, ethnic diversity, the absence of a formal aristocracy, small governmental bureaucracies, and frontier conditions, such as cheap land, high wages, robust demographic growth, and class mobility. That is, the physical and social environment in America gradually reshaped the settlers' cultural traits, and the colonies thus drifted steadily away from their English cultural roots. Eventually, this process of Americanization produced the American Revolution.

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1 Helleiner, K. (1957). The vital revolution reconsidered, *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 23 (1): 1.

Other scholars – mostly specialists on colonial America – see the settlers as conventional Englishmen. These historians are generally skeptical regarding Americanization and the alleged cultural divide between colonists and Britons. They challenge the narrative of the colonies' centrifugal trajectory away from England's sphere of influence by tracing forces of Anglicization in America. Indeed, these scholars present the Revolution as a product of the colonists' *English* culture, and argue that the formation of a uniquely American identity took place not in the colonial era, but mostly after independence, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To them, the American Revolution took place because of a sudden change in British imperial policy, not gradual changes in the identity and culture of American settlers.

U.S. History textbooks invariably deploy the first narrative – the narrative of Americanization – to explain the formation of American identity and the coming of the Revolution. Because they tell the story of the United States of America up to the present day, they trace the story of Americans' collective identity backward, to identify its earliest formation in the colonial era. With the benefit of hindsight, this framework identifies for students colonial antecedents of the Revolution – Mayflower Compact, Puritanism, Bacon's Rebellion, frontier culture, the Dominion of New England, Navigation Acts, rise of the assemblies, Zenger trial, Great Awakening, Albany Plan, Braddock's Defeat, Revenue Acts, and so on. By looking back to the Revolution from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these textbooks produce a storyline of English settlers becoming more Americanized by their physical and social environment; a story of growing distance and differentiation between settlers and mother country.<sup>2</sup>

What is obscured in this conventional account – and what is presented in this book – is the colonists' own understanding of the origins, causes, and ends of their Revolution.

## What Was the American Revolution?

Colonial history is an awkward field of study because its focal point is not the colonial period itself, but the end point of that period – the Revolution. The Revolution is the black hole toward which all colonial-era developments

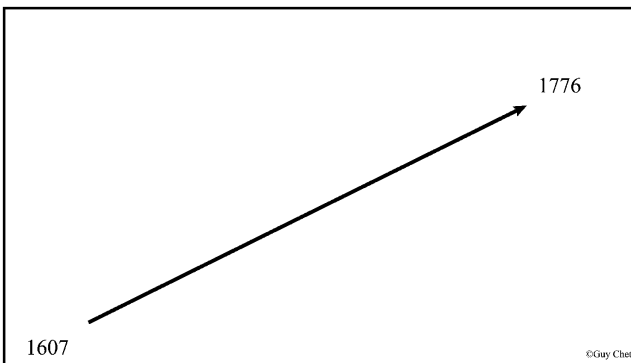
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2 A famous contemporary example of this understanding of environment and culture is Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). Written by a French settler in America, *Letters from an American Farmer* set out to explain to Europeans what is an American. The answer provided is that an American is a European who has been transformed by the American environment: "Europeans submit insensibly to these great powers [of environment], and become, in the course of a few generations, not only Americans in general, but either Pennsylvanians, Virginians, or provincials under some other name. [...] The inhabitants of Canada, Massachusetts, the middle provinces, [and] the southern ones will be as different as their climates."

gravitate. One of the first to formulate such a historical narrative for colonial America was Thomas Paine, the radical pamphleteer who worked tirelessly to win American hearts, minds, and military volunteers for the Revolution in its earliest stages. Paine's *Common Sense* (1776) told American readers the history of colonial America in order to explain to them why it was both warranted and natural for the colonies to become independent. Offering natural-law justifications for rebellion and independence, as well as economic justifications, Paine conceptualized the relationship between Britain and its colonies as a mother-child relationship. Since the natural and desired end of such a relationship is maturity and independence, Paine contended that colonial status has a shelf life beyond which it becomes unnatural, abusive, and parasitic.

Following Paine's lead, historians (and U.S. History textbooks) have habitually presented the Revolution as a natural culmination of the colonial period. The idea conveyed in this narrative of colonial and Revolutionary history is that colonial rule was increasingly onerous and frustrating to settlers, and that this structural problem was resolved by independence. Students and readers thus absorb the understanding that by planting colonies across the ocean in 1607, the English government had set in motion the forces that inexorably led to independence nearly two centuries later; and that the impulse to separate was already there in embryonic form in 1607, consistently growing during the colonial era, as Americans pursued their own interests and formed their own identity. In the 1770s, that separatist impulse finally reached fruition when Americans' political self-determination and economic self-interest (a desire to lower tax and regulatory burdens, to print paper money, and to invigorate international trade and domestic manufacturing) brought this inherent tension between colonies and mother country to a point of rupture.

American separatism and rebellion seem like natural outcomes of colonialism in retrospect, but they surprised and perplexed contemporaries at the



**Figure 1** American independence as a gradual transformative process. © Guy Chet.