

Was America Born in a Revolution or a War for Independence?

by Charles G. Mills

GLEN COVE, NY – In the century from 1607 to 1707, English colonies were established in America. Over time, some merged and some split. Some, such as Plymouth, Saybrook, and New Haven, permanently lost their identity. Most colonization was over by 1707; only Georgia was colonized after that. Most people who settled in the original colonies were English, Scots, or Welsh. A smaller number were Irish, German, or Dutch. The colonies had a variety of local elected legislative bodies as well as non-elected institutions. These elected and non-elected institutions generally survived in some form long after American Independence, and in many cases still exist.

In 1688, the English gave the name “revolution” to their violent and illegal overthrow of their Catholic King and establishment of a new Constitutional requirement that the King of England be Protestant. In 1707, England and Scotland were united into a single country, and Englishmen, Scots, and Welshmen became “British.” The English and Scots Parliaments were merged into a British Parliament. Simultaneously, the people in the colonies were gradually thinking of themselves less and less as Englishmen, Scots, and Welshmen, and more and more as Americans, as well as Virginians, Pennsylvanians, and others. Few thought of themselves as “British,” and their dislike of the British mercenary and impressed army is well known.

From 1775 to 1783, most Americans fought a war to gain the independence of their colonies from Britain. This was more a war between the colonial governments and Britain than a revolution. The history, however, is not completely one sided.

The Declaration of Independence was not a Declaration of Revolution. Although some of its general language can be read as revolutionary, many of the particular parts describing the tyrannical acts of Britain are a vindication of the traditional rights of the long-established colonial legislative bodies. Revolutions are the violent seizure of power by one group together with the killing, exiling, or otherwise mistreating of the losers. There was a little bit of this in Massachusetts and some British officials were sent home, but by and large the institutions of the colonial governments made peaceful transitions to new state governments.

America was soon divided into those who wanted a strong national government and those who did not. The resulting compromise was our Constitution and the two-party system. During the Napoleonic Wars, the conservative Americans in the Federalist Party sought an alliance with Britain, and the apologists for the radical French revolutionaries in the Republican Party sought an alliance with France. Although the Republicans won this specific argument, after the War of 1812 they gave it the conservative name “The Second War of Independence.” They opposed the nationalism of the Federalists, but ironically their war against Britain created greater nationalism. This established a battle that continues today as to whether we are a revolutionary country or one that respects its 400-year old political roots.

Between 1820 and 1860, the great American controversy became one between conservative states with political institutions based on honor, loyalty, justice, fear of God, agriculture, established freedoms, and status and between revolutionary states whose culture was one of commerce, greed,

and equality. The states with large slave populations fell into the first group, and their enemies made slavery an obsessive national issue.

The revolutionaries won a major victory in the 1840s when they gained the upper hand in New York long enough to abolish the feudal agricultural lease system in the Hudson Valley.

By 1865, the victorious North had completely rejected the idea that our political institutions dating from the early 1600s -- the major reason we fought for independence -- had to be respected, and instead it adopted a completely revolutionary interpretation of America. Such radical attitudes open the door to tyranny because they allow everything to be overthrown. The refusal of George III and Lord North to respect the prerogatives of the Virginia House of Burgesses is no less a threat to liberty than the refusal of the federal government and the Northern army to respect such prerogatives.

It would be easy to say that the Northern victory established in practice that America was born in a Revolution, not a War of Independence. In 1876, 1920, and 1980, however, presidents were elected who took a step back from radicalism.

The issue is simple. If America had been born in a "Revolution," then overthrowing governments would be a legitimate part of the political process. If, however, America had been born in a "War of Independence," then governments like those of Virginia and Massachusetts could fight back if a central government violated the rights established in the early 1600s. The first theory justifies the killing of millions of innocent people by the French Revolutionaries, Soviets, and Chinese Communists. The second theory justifies the states fighting for their rights against the central government as they did in the War Between the States.

It was unjust for George III and Lord North to impose taxes without the consent of the colonial legislatures, to quarter soldiers in civilian houses, to close the port of Boston, and to move colonial criminal trials to London. It is equally unjust for Congress to impose arbitrarily different percentages of Medicaid costs on different states, and indeed state attorneys general are investigating what can be done to stop this. Just as the colonial legislatures were the champions of freedom once, the state governments that continue their function may turn out to be today's champions of liberty. The battle against revolution continues.