

The American Revolution and the Minority Myth

By William F. Marina | Posted: Wed. January 1, 1975

“The revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people and in the union of the colonies, both of which were accomplished before hostilities began.”

—John Adams[1]

THE AMERICAN PEOPLE are now in the midst of a great celebration of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution. It is tragic that this celebration is giving added emphasis in the mind of the general public to at least one myth which a few historians have tried without apparently great success to lay to rest. That failure says much about the present state of the academy in this country and the virtual breakdown of communications within and between important segments of the society.

The widespread, persistent, and dangerous myth to which I should like to call attention here is the notion that the American Revolution was carried out by only a minority of the people. The supposed source for such an estimate is John Adams. Among the many who have cited this view is Daniel Ellsberg, who called attention to “John Adams’ [sic] well-known estimate that one third of the population in America supported the rebels, one third the British . . . and one third were [sic] neutral.” The history of this citation goes back to 1902, to George Sydney Fisher’s, *The True History of the American Revolution*. It has been repeated countless times since then, in books, articles, and other media. Without attempting to give a comprehensive listing of citations since 1902, let me give just a few recent sources making this point, which will serve to demonstrate the persistence of the idea.

In 1971 it was mentioned by the colonial historian Darrett B. Rutman, the next year by Ellsberg, and, at a conference which I attended, by the conservative social critic Irving Kristol, as well as by Alistair Cooke in his “America” series on television, and the book of the same name, though Cooke changed the neutral third to one that did not “give a damn.” In 1974 it was cited by Thomas H. Greene in his book on comparative social revolutions where he was in turn quoting Karl Deutsch; the next year several times by the columnist Sydney B. Harris, and, in the Bicentennial year in the excellent new study of the Revolution by Page Smith, which otherwise is a magnificent source to show the Revolution was a majority movement (he reconciles this by saying Adams was referring to the beginning of the Revolution).[2] The above examples ought to be sufficient to make the point that this view is widespread and has considerable appeal to many intellectuals.

When any citation is offered for this “well known” estimate, it is to a letter which Adams wrote to James Lloyd, dated January, 1813.[3] A close examination of that letter should convince an intelligent reader that John Adams never said any such thing! It is clear that Adams, in point of fact, was writing about American opinion of the French Revolution and the subsequent struggle between England and France which had a considerable impact on the United States in the 1790’s during the period of his presidency from 1797 to 1801. Without taking the space to quote the entire letter, which runs over two printed pages, or discussing all of the specific points of evidence to sustain that view, the data to destroy the misreading can be provided simply by

examining a part of one sentence. After mentioning a third “averse” to the Revolution, and a third “enthusiastic,” Adams observed: “The middle third, composed principally of the yeomanry, the soundest part of the nation, and always averse to war, were rather lukewarm both to England and France....” If it was the American Revolution toward which this “lukewarm” group was neutral, does it make any sense at all that a staunch patriot such as Adams would have praised it as “the soundest part of the nation”? Of course not! He did so because that group shared his own view toward the struggle between France and England.

None of us, of course, is free from error, and even a mistake of this magnitude, repeated over seventy-four years, is certainly conceivable, even if based upon a questionable methodology common sense suggests is rather weak. What is truly shocking, and depressing, however, is that beginning back twenty-two years ago, at least three historians, one of them a Marxist, the other two solid, establishment scholars by any measure, exposed the myth, certainly in terms of the misreading of the letter of Adams.[4] In those circumstances, how is it possible that popular writers, and also scholars, could continue to perpetuate the myth of Adams’ estimate in the face of evidence to the contrary?

Given at this point the history of the problem and the sociology of the myth, there are at least three distinct questions involved, which though interrelated, must be examined separately. The first of these relates to the American Revolution. Was it a minority or a majority movement? That question is significant even if John Adams had never existed. A second problem concerns the methodology of using a single assessment from John Adams, even if it had been correct, as the sole basis for answering the first question. The final one has to do with what might be called the “sociology of the myth”: what is happening within the “academy,” and to the transmission belt whereby ideas are more widely popularized among the public, that a myth such as this should linger on, over two decades after its exposure? Is there something about the nature of the myth that explains its apparent allure for so many scholars and writers?

An adequate answer to the first question would be impossible within the pages of this essay. I have sought to discuss it in detail in a forthcoming volume, *The American Revolution as a People’s War*, which will be published later this year. Only the contours of that study can be given here, but earlier I referred to the minority idea as a very “dangerous” one, and the reader is entitled to some explanation of why that is so.

The Founding Fathers of the Republic constantly talked and wrote about the importance of representative government. “The will of the people,” and by that they generally meant more than a simple majority, was of deep significance in their thinking, second only to the idea of a higher law. Thomas Jefferson put it quite succinctly, when he observed, “the will of the majority, to be rightful, must be reasonable.”[5] If, then, the Founding Fathers were knowingly in a minority, and they must have had some sense about whether their views were representative of a large mass of the people, there is no escaping the conclusion that they were a pretty slippery and hypocritical bunch. That, however, was not the case, for they thought they were in a majority, and the evidence suggests they were not mistaken in that assumption.

What cannot fail to strike the reader if he chooses to examine some of the misreadings of the

Adams' quote in their larger contexts—by Daniel Ellsberg, Alistair Cooke, or Sydney Harris, for example—is the obvious delight that these writers take, which is, indeed, a major reason they cite it, in the notion that it is a minority that often knows best. We shall examine that hubris of the intellectuals shortly, as well as their minority theory of social change, for I think it is dangerous, for exactly the same reasons as did the Founding Fathers, whose belief in majoritarianism was based upon that concept as a means and not an end.

The unstated assumption of all those who mistakenly cited Adams is the notion that one of the participants could provide an adequate breakdown of the size of the contending sides. But who shall we ask, and at what point in time in the shifting debates and actions that constitute the Revolution? Will it be the Tory Anglican minister Jonathan Boucher, who left his parish in Maryland rather early in the debate and estimated that nine-tenths of the people were sympathetic to that view, but also tells us that in his last year in America he preached with loaded pistols beside him in the pulpit? How about Joseph Galloway of Pennsylvania, who joined in the initial protests but, unable to accept the logic of independence, ended up a Loyalist, claiming that view constituted four-fifths to nine-tenths of the people? Or our friend John Adams, trying to get a loan from the Dutch, who said a mere twentieth were Tories? Finally, there is General George Washington, who in 1781 told of the “calamitous distress” of the army and “the inquietudes prevailing among the people” but, nonetheless, observed that “A large majority are still firmly attached to the independence States, [and] abhor a reunion with Great Britain.”[6] No, merely compiling a vast number of such estimates, even if we know the bias of the person and the circumstances under which the assessment was made, can tell us little unless we knew the nature of the data, if any, upon which he relied as a basis for the estimate.

What must be done is to examine the shifting arguments and events themselves in terms of what we know of the dynamics of social change, the sociology of revolution, and what David Ramsay, the American patriot and also historian of the Revolution, called “people’s war.” In doing so we can appreciate the number of people who participated in those actions and the fact that the nature of the war they fought would have been impossible, as the Americans clearly understood, without the support of the overwhelming mass of the people.

No historian denies the massive support that came together against the Stamp Act in 1765. Though England backed down, some of the more conservative American leaders were concerned about the riots and about the kinds of people who had participated in those protests. The enforcement of the nonimportation agreements involved an increasing rise to prominence of popular leaders of the “mechanics” in the larger cities such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston, where communication was easiest. They were even more determined than the wealthier merchants who had initiated such a method of protest against the Townshend Acts, but another British capitulation relaxed the crisis by 1770.

Beneath the complaints on the specific issues and the shifting arguments lay a fundamental debate about the nature of the British system. It usually takes some time for the clarity of such questions of legitimacy to emerge, and this was no exception. It was revived and brought to a head by the Tea Act of 1773, the Boston Tea Party, and the subsequent British decision in 1774 to respond with force in what became known as the Intolerable Acts. In 1765 the Americans had

responded by creating an extralegal institution, the Stamp Act Congress. The failure to purchase stamps and the boycott of British goods were both indications of the widespread support for the protests. The Continental Congress was also such an extralegal institution, but it went further in instituting a continuing Association and formalizing the numerous committees that had for years been in contact up and down the colonies.

Even as Congress took steps for Americans to arm to protect themselves, in Boston, General Thomas Gage's reports are one of the best sources of evidence, for he grew increasingly aware that he was surrounded in his "enclave" by a New England countryside in arms. In September, 1774, the mere rumor of British troop movements found the roads into Boston clogged with militia men, estimated at more than twenty thousand men, who returned home on the news the report was false. The irony was that urban firebrands such as Samuel Adams found the farmers even more willing, as they became increasingly drawn into the protest, to create a confrontation with the British.

By the time the fighting erupted at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, the local and state committees of the Association had so far taken over all the functions of government that not only had the legitimacy of British rule disappeared, but also many of the formal institutions. That change was indicated by the decision of the British governor in Virginia simply to leave the state. Given the natural tendency of human beings to cling to tradition under most circumstances, none of the above would have been remotely possible unless a massive number of the population had ceased to recognize British rule as a factor in their lives. It was to be over another year, with much fighting in between, before the Americans would formalize that withdrawal of legitimacy by a Declaration of Independence. There is evidence a large part of the population supported independence before the reluctant leaders in the Congress would vote upon or commit that sentiment to paper.[7]

The best evidence, however, is found in the nature of the war itself. Many years later General Robert E. Lee correctly pointed out that the American Revolution had been a true civil war, for the population in virtually every area reflected a division of opinion, whereas the Civil War was much more of a sectional conflict. Recent historians of the Loyalists,[8] such as William Nelson, have estimated them at no more than a sixth of the population.[9] If that estimate is correct, the only alternative to a massive American majority is a very large neutral group. But if that were so, how can the collapse of the legitimacy of British institutions even before the outbreak of fighting, which will always tend to polarize the neutrals, be explained? Further, the patriots managed not only to subdue the internal Loyalist opposition, which had the support of the British army, Hessian mercenaries, and Indian allies, but also to mount an assault on Canada.

The British strategy to "win" the war was a complete failure. It is impossible to restore a sense of legitimacy by force of arms, and from 1774 to 1778, the British never seriously considered any other alternative.[10] By that time, however, the Americans were no longer interested in trying to restore the past paradigm and were deeply engaged in the building of a new paradigm and a new legitimacy.[11]

Only in the light of the growing discussion of revolutionary warfare since World War Two have

historians begun to appreciate the extent to which David Ramsay was correct in his characterization of the Revolution as a “people’s war.” The British were never able to hold on to their “enclaves” in the four major colonial cities for the duration of the war and were under continual harassment by the militia. Thus, it took over 3,000 soldiers to guard the fifteen-mile route for supplies to move from Chester to Philadelphia, and even then, many wagons did not get through. As one European soldier observed, “The Americans lose 600 men in a day, and eight days later 1200 others rejoin the army; whereas to replace ten men in the English army is quite an undertaking.”[12]

While some generals such as Washington complained about the militia’s lack of discipline and longed to be able to fight a war along European lines, as the military historian John Shy notes, “From the British viewpoint, the militia was the virtually inexhaustible reservoir of rebel military manpower, and it was also the sand in the gears of the pacification program.”[13]

The Americans seemed almost instinctively to understand what the British did not, that the political base is more important than anything else. Given the circumstances of a poor and newly organized government, the primary task of the committees was to expand legitimacy in their locality, and of the militia,” whatever the cost to . . . itself,” to control the area and harass the enemy. Is it any wonder, given that task, that the regular army forces were usually short on troops and undersupplied? Yet, as Shy acknowledges, “The militia never failed in a real emergency to provide reinforcements and even reluctant draftees for the state and Continental regular forces.”[14]

As the British historian Eric Robson admitted, “Restricted to little more than the ground they stood on, the British increasingly found subsistence a matter of considerable difficulty.” As early as February, 1777, Captain James Murray, a young British officer, described “a pretty amusement known by the name of foraging or fighting for our daily bread. As the rascals are sulking about the whole country, it is impossible to move with any degree of safety without a pretty large escort, and even then you are exposed to a dirty kind of [harassment].”[15]

It is impossible to read through the reports and statements of the British without recognizing what today would be termed a ‘a credibility gap’ between the glowing hopes of some politicians and political generals on the one hand, and some more perceptive officers, especially those who actually had to face the ill-equipped American yeoman, clad in his hunting shirt uniform, in the field. The first group was constantly talking about how quickly they would smash the American scum, who seldom would come out from behind a tree but fired and fled, and soon be back in London. The other group recognized they faced an entire people numerous and armed who would never surrender, but as the American General Nathaniel Greene put it, “fight, get beat, rise, and fight again.”[16] Thus it was acknowledged that the British did not go out at night in less than battalion strength because the Americans usually controlled the countryside. These men saw that with a vast wilderness into which the Americans could retreat, “victory” would be denied them, and the longer the war, the better the chance they would never make it back home again.[17]

Nothing, of course, helped the American cause more than the fact that the British, unable to raise sufficient forces in Great Britain, were forced to employ foreign mercenaries to fight the war.

After trying the carrot of pacification without much success, the British later in the war began to discuss terror tactics which some officers argued would soon bring the Americans to their knees. But others, such as Colonel Charles Stuart, who had served in America for several years, doubted the capacity of the British forces to wage “a war of ravage and destruction,” as there was no basis to believe that “acts of severity will cause these people to submit,” for in the past “every species of barbarity has been executed,” without any beneficial result, and to continue it would create “an irrecoverable hatred” among the American people.[18]

It is doubtful that Mao Tse Tung ever put the principles of “people’s war” any better than a young aide of General Washington’s, Alexander Hamilton:

It may be asked, if, to avoid a general engagement, we give up objects of the first importance, what is to hinder the enemy from carrying every important point, and ruining us? My answer is, that our hopes are not placed in any particular city, or spot of ground, but in preserving a good army, furnished with proper necessities, to take advantage of favorable opportunities, and to waste and defeat the enemy by piecemeal.[19]

General Charles Lee wrote several perceptive notes on the tactics of partisan warfare. In the final analysis the war was to a great extent won in the South by officers who began to employ these radical tactics against the British.[20]

It was not only in the South, late in the war, that British forces out in the countryside found themselves under constant harassment by guerrillas and partisan forces. After listening to the optimistic reports of Loyalists, Hessian forces ventured out of New York; to link up with these supposedly large Loyalist forces. Instead, they found themselves in New Jersey under attack by American militia in what amounted to a constant skirmish. The Hessians decided to retreat to their New York enclave. British General John Burgoyne’s army had come under the same sort of harassment, culminating in his surrender at Saratoga.

In short, a British army had difficulty sustaining itself in the countryside for any length of time. The British never dared, after Lexington and Concord, to go into the New England countryside and, after the evacuation of Boston, tried mainly terrorist raids on various port towns. But that harassment was also found in the South and the middle states, where supposedly Loyalist strength was greater.

As the war progressed many Americans, in the face of terrorist raids by Hessian and British forces, turned more adamantly against them. The American leader Andrew Pickens, for example, had originally signed an oath of allegiance to the king, but turned in anger after British troops destroyed his property.

What strikes one in this war of terror was the relatively selective use of that tactic by the Americans, and its indiscriminate use by British, especially Loyalist, forces. Secondly, there is the youth of the American forces, of which young men such as Andrew Jackson, age fourteen, were not untypical. It is important to recall that the average age of the male population was only about sixteen, so that many had no memories of a time when Americans had not been opposing

British policy or when British troops had not been stationed among the people. For that generation, many of them moving west, the idea of a British “tradition” had little or no meaning. The first atrocity of the war was probably committed by a twelve year old who killed an already wounded British soldier on the way back from Concord Bridge.

Francis Marion’s guerrilla group was an especially young one. Some American military leaders had initial doubts whether that rag-tag group of youngsters could do the job, but such doubts soon vanished. It is worth asking, had the British tried to prolong this terror tactic of punishing the American population along with a long war, what kind of psychological brutalization might have been inflicted on that generation of young American fighting men? Especially after the terror tactics of the British leader Banastre Tarleton, American guerrilla units on the move found it expedient to take fewer and fewer prisoners.

Finally, it is clear that the British policymakers simply had no clear notion of what victory might consist of, other than a complete American capitulation. They had no conception about how to go about winning a war against a population in arms and opposed to them. The British with some difficulties could hold an enclave or two; they could not destroy the American forces.

Modern counter-insurgency theory teaches that one first reduces the enemy’s regular forces to partisan units, these are then forced to become guerrilla groups, these are then broken up, and the insurgency dries up as order is restored. If that is the scheme, then the British managed to achieve very little. They failed militarily, but the political effort to undermine American legitimacy was virtually nonexistent. Some American committees held meetings under the very noses of the enemy, and could almost always rely on the people to tell them of the troop movements. The British never came close to destroying the complex structure of governing committees at the local, county, state, and continental levels through which the Americans conducted the war, and which represented the real legitimacy of the American Revolution. The British never accomplished the military task, but even if they had done so, it would have been meaningless unless the political structure, and the legitimacy which it held for the Americans, could also have been smashed. They failed in both!

A measure of the Americans’ confidence that they represented the majority of the people is found in the way in which the committees operated at the local level. Disliking the use of outright force or terror against those who harbored Loyalist leanings, and because they represented a majority, the committees preferred to practice techniques which students of Chinese Communist “brainwashing” would recognize as “coercive persuasion.”[21] Thus, when a certain R. H. in Delaware wrote a letter to the local paper questioning the patriots’ support, he found himself summoned by the committee, whereupon began a series of consultations and letters back and forth until he “confessed” his error to the satisfaction of the group. The key word for such committees of “safety” as they were often called, and which operated across all the colonies, was “recantation,” which they strove to extract from all those who did not show the proper attitude.[22]

The committees and the militia were often confident of their ability to handle situations without resort to force. This was true even in New York where the Loyalists were relatively strong and

the resort to force, therefore, was seemingly of greater appeal as a means to subdue them.[23] It seems evident in the protest leading up to the war, and in the nature of the conduct of the war itself, leading to the victory, that every event was conditioned by, and can only be fully understood as a result of the fact that an overwhelming number of the population supported the American cause.

To that number could be added the friends in England and in Europe, some of whom saw the Revolution as a great struggle for liberty and crossed the ocean to serve in it. The alliance with France shortened the war. Without it, one can speculate a long, bloody drawn-out war before the British packed up and went home. R. R. Palmer is correct to suggest that such a war of attrition would have greatly changed the internal structure, socially, economically, and politically, of the American society that would have emerged from such a war.[24] Later generations of Americans can only but be thankful that the British did not become so ideologically involved in some kind of “domino” theory about the possible fall of other of their colonies to this republican heresy as to opt for a policy of terror and subjugation desired by some more “hawkish” officers, but opposed by those such as Charles Stuart.

Related to this point, we can conclude this discussion of the actual events of the Revolution itself, as opposed to the sociology of the minority myth, with a few comments on a problem which appears to have caused considerable consternation among some historians in the last several decades: whether the American Revolution was a “true” social revolution, or simply a “colonial” rebellion?[25]

While not a pseudo-problem, this question has suffered from lack of clarity due to a failure to define the terms or the precise issue. Probably no one would argue that at one extreme is the rebellion, or revolt, in which nothing much changes except the faces of the rulers and the palace guard. A number of different social phenomena can be strung out along a spectrum from that pole, in which debate has raged about such factors as the degree of violence, the numbers who left and the composition of the new elite, as well as the extent of social, economic, and political change instituted by the new regime. But the greatest failure is the lack of a definition at the other pole, that is, what characterizes a true social revolution in its “purest” form? I would suggest that the most significant characteristic of that phenomenon is a shift in the world view of the society from one value base to another, with respect to legitimacy.

By that definition the American Revolution was quite revolutionary, as natural law superceded the idea of the divine right of kings, or as Thomas Paine put it in *Common Sense*:

A French bastard landing with an armed Banditti and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original. It certainly hath no divinity in it.[26]

At the first Continental Congress, it was Richard Henry Lee of Virginia who suggested that the Americans “lay our rights upon the broadest bottom, the ground of nature,”[27] and, of course, the Declaration of Independence is based upon that idea. Contrast that with the Russian Revolution, where after over half a century, the idea of a new legitimacy, as two recent writers

have pointed out,[28] is still very precarious. In fact, its leaders see detente as having a twofold purpose, quite apart from lulling the Western suspicion of Communist subversion; one is outside recognition of their legitimacy, and the other is to use imported technology to bypass the liberalization which must accompany any attempt to fully utilize their own human resources. And the Chinese have openly identified, in terms of a basis for their legitimacy, the continuity with legalism and the mandate of heaven in controlling the rivers more effectively than any previous dynasty.

Even along that spectrum of other factors the American Revolution emerges as more “revolutionary” than some other revolutions. R. R. Palmer noted that the percentage of the population that left America was higher than in revolutions such as the French and the Russian.[29] Further, a number of Frenchmen later returned to positions of authority, whereas in the American case, none of the some 15,000 who eventually returned ever held any post of significance. How revolutionary was the Russian Revolution if ten years afterwards old czarist bureaucrats staffed over half the government posts, a process Lenin was complaining of as early as 1921. [30] In contrast, as a recent study shows, the turnover of officeholders to a new elite averaged seventy-seven percent in the American Revolution.[31]

Despite some recent new work, what the above points suggest is that our study of the comparative sociology of revolution is in an extremely primitive and confused state, though not without some hope. A measure of the confusion, in my view, is the continued emphasis on minorities in revolutions. Thus a recent study tries to make that point as a part of a larger theory by citing the Adams letter which, as we have already seen, is erroneously interpreted. If that is all that can be offered to sustain the notion of minority revolutions, then there is scant evidence indeed![32]

What I am suggesting is that the question of legitimacy is really at the heart of the whole process of revolution. A revolution is impossible unless a majority withdraws its allegiance from the old regime and begins to place it elsewhere. Often that process is masked to the point that when the old regime collapses, the fall appears more “sudden” than was actually the case. A good example is what occurred in Massachusetts in late 1774 and early 1775. General Gage’s reports were at first optimistic, based to a considerable extent on the fact that the Americans did not really seem to be actively opposing the carrying out of the Intolerable Acts, but he later began to recognize the whole countryside was ranged against the British. What he failed to understand was that the Americans were not opposing that policy because they had already begun to withdraw any sense of legitimacy to British rule, and they were busy setting up their own organizations to carry out such important tasks as bringing in supplies to feed the people since the port had been closed.[33]

It is also important to understand the role of leadership and of intellectuals in such shifts of legitimacy by the society which underlie the process of revolution, as was recognized by John Adams in his observation, cited earlier, that the real American Revolution was in the change in the hearts and minds of the people which occurred before the fighting began. Leadership, by definition, is a minority. It would be impossible, for example, to say that ninety percent of a movement was comprised of its leaders. Effective leadership stays in communication with the

people which it represents. Certainly this was true in the American case, and in which popular pressure often pushed the leaders along. When the British backed off as in the late 1760's and early 1770's, some "leaders" such as Samuel Adams found themselves out in front but all alone, and had to accept that fact.

It is necessary to call attention to these relationships because there is a school of thought that sees leadership rather easily manipulating the larger population.[34] Propaganda must also, if it is to be effective, bear some relationship to what a large part of the people are experiencing, and offer an explanation that makes sense to it. Finally, there is the role of the intellectual, going back to that phase in the revolutionary process called by Crane Brinton in his classic, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, "the desertion of the intellectuals." The intellectuals not only call into question the legitimacy of the old regime, they build the basis of a new one, and both of these ideas must be communicated to the mass of the people.

There is a sense in which the leadership can, as in some revolutions such as the Russian, manipulate the larger mass of the people, but the price of that action is, in the not too long run, to cut the heart out of the revolution. The legitimacy of the authoritarian czarist regime was questioned long before it revealed its utter incompetency in World War One. In the Russian Revolutions of 1917, Lenin understood the importance of "peace" among the mass of the people, in the slogan "peace, land, and bread," far better than did his opponents in the revolutionary coalition. The idea of legitimacy is by its very nature abstract and philosophical, and therefore offers some opportunity for a well-organized minority within the revolutionary coalition to pursue specific alternatives on given issues that may be at variance with larger segments of the coalition, but still within the parameters of the new legitimacy. A foreign intervention in behalf of the legitimacy of the old regime will often cause the people to support that minority, and mask the extent to which the direction of things has already moved outside the parameters of the revolutionary coalition and the new basis for legitimacy. As the Bolsheviks followed that course, as noted earlier, Lenin himself was aware of his dilemma and the contradiction of utilizing much of the old bureaucracy to support that thrust. As today's dissidents in Russia have sought to point out, the contours of Stalinism were already obvious under Lenin, and as the messianism falls away even more, one can see how much all of it is in the tradition of an older Russia.[35] Amaury de Riencourt some years ago called attention to much of the same with respect to China.[36]

The contrast with the American Revolution ought to help us to better understand our own revolutionary experience. The relative lack of violence in our own revolution is fundamentally explained by the majority against the Loyalists, in which "coercive persuasion" was the preferred alternative, and in which there was no falling out (but there were disagreements to be sure) within the revolutionary coalition in which a minority sought to push the revolution in a direction contrary to the wishes of the majority.

There certainly was a sense in which the American Revolution was prescriptive, in the Burkean meaning of that term. Richard Henry Lee declared that American rights were "built on a four-fold foundation—on nature, on the British constitution, on charters, and on immemorial usage." [37] The last three were indicative of the desire to conserve the past, but the first, "nature," opened up

a host of new questions, and, as noted earlier, he laid that down as the “broadest bottom” on which to build.

Central to understanding the whole American experience as Tocqueville observed a half century later, and the American Revolution was no exception, was the idea of equality. Elsewhere I have written about that process, and distinguished between equality, of opportunity, that a society be without castes, and before the law, and a leveling egalitarianism which is the very antithesis of the former.[38] The turnover of the elite was one measure of the extensive change, and it was recognized at the time as the popular American leaders were called representatives of the “mobility,” more often than “levelers,” and also referred to as “new” men.[39]

British policy managed to alienate numerous groups as each new measure undercut the mobility of another segment of the population. The brilliant essay of Rowland Berthoff and John M. Murrin, “Feudalism, Communalism, and the Yeoman Free holder: The American Revolution Considered as a Social Accident,” has demonstrated the revival of the worst aspects of a feudalism that threatened to turn back the mobility which the Americans had long enjoyed. The legislation enacted by the state governments in the midst of the Revolution was intended not only to reverse that trend, but to expand mobility and opportunity.[40]

Finally, the Americans were the advocates of a Whig tradition whose philosophy had never fully been implemented in England. Whether one believes that the Americans ought to have revised the Articles of Confederation instead of creating a national government through the Constitution, all three branches in the new system ultimately derived from the sovereign people, thus breaking with the traditions of political theory of which they were heirs, and they were aware of this radical departure.[41]

From this sketch of the events of the Revolution and analysis of it in terms of the comparative sociology of revolutions, let us return to the minority myth; to the methodological assumptions underlying the citing of the Adams letter, and its repetition. A major clue to the error ought to have been evident in that it was in conflict with other statements of Adams. Adams did not, of course, have sophisticated techniques with which to gauge American opinion, and these have also failed some of our modern pollsters at times, but what is fascinating after examining the question of support of the Revolution from a number of angles, and with the advantage of considerable hindsight and a multitude of theories and historical studies, is how nearly John Adams’ views coincide with my own findings and those of several other historians, save that he was generous in the number of Loyalists.

Writing in the last years of his life, he estimated them at no more than a third, and, making no mention of neutrals, saw the rest as pro-patriot. Further, his was a dynamic estimate changing with time that noted the massive protest against the Stamp Act and the later British efforts to win over a segment of the Americans. He finally concluded that New England, centering around Massachusetts, was solidly pro-revolution, the South, focusing around a firmly proAmerican Virginia, perhaps less so, and the middle states more evenly divided.[42] Which brings us to the final question: How could this assessment be ignored, and even the repeated exposure of the misreading of the letter to Lloyd, while maintaining the minority myth?

American academia has become so fragmented that a specialist apparently does not now read much of what is written even in areas relatively near his own. That perhaps explains why more intellectuals have not come across the exposure of the misreading of the Adams letter. But it does not explain the obvious relish with which intellectuals have repeated the minority myth. The answer to that problem, I suspect, lies in the elitist assumptions that intellectuals have about social change. They rather like the notion that small minorities, like themselves, are the prime movers in history.

There is a certain irony in the difference between their attitude, and the central meaning of the American Revolution. Robert Nisbet noted that a basic distinction between the American Revolution and other revolutions was that it lacked a conscious intellectual class (but certainly not intellect!).^[43] The basic thrust of the American Revolution was to open up equality of opportunity and before the law, which forms the basis of the free market system, while most other revolutions have had a strong egalitarian bent.^[44] Many intellectuals, as Ludwig von Mises and F. A. von Hayek, among others, have shown,^[45] manifest an anti-capitalist, socialist mentality which is linked to their egalitarian preference. As I have suggested elsewhere, the egalitarian rhetoric of some intellectuals tends to mask the desire which they have to be a part of a ruling bureaucracy which will administer the leveling program.^[46]

In the final analysis, the perpetuation of the minority myth based on a misreading of the Adams letter is an excellent indicator of how far American society has moved from the original meaning of that great Revolution. Perhaps the greatest tribute we can pay to the men who made that Revolution, on its two-hundredth anniversary, is to renew our faith in that original purpose, and redouble our efforts to achieve that goal of equality of opportunity and before the law for which they strove.

Notes:

[1] Quoted in Merrill Jensen, *The Founding of a Nation* (N.Y.: 1969), pp. xii.

[2] Daniel Ellsberg, *Papers on the War* (N.Y.: 1972), p. 141; Darrett B. Rutman, *The Morning of America* (N.Y.: 1971), p. 178; Alistair Cooke, *America* (N.Y.: 1972), p. 109; Thomas H. Greene, *Comparative Revolutionary Movements* (Englewood Cliffs: 1974), p. 47; Sydney B. Harris, *Cincinnati Enquirer*, July 5, 1975 and *Miami Herald*, August 4, 1975, and Page Smith, *A New Age Now Begins* (N.Y.: 1976), I, 656.

[3] In C. F. Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams* (Boston: 1850-6), X, 108-11.

[4] John R. Alden, *The American Revolution* (N.Y.: 1954), p. 87; R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* (Princeton: 1959), I, 200; and Herbert Aptheker, *The American Revolution* (N.Y.: 1960), pp. 54-5.

[5] Quoted in A. P. Grimes, *American Political Thought* (N.Y.: 1955), p. 157.

[6] Quoted in Aptheker, *Revolution*, pp. 54-5.

[7] John M. Head, *A Time to Rend, An Essay on the Decision for American Independence* (Madison: 1968), especially chapter eight.

[8] There is a difficulty in using the words “Tory” and “Loyalist.” Most who opposed the protests up to the decision for independence were Tories, and so labeled by many of the Whiggish American dissidents. Some Whigs, however, could not go along with the idea of independence, and so, perhaps Loyalist is best employed to describe that last phase of the debate.

[9] William H. Nelson, *The American Tory* (London: 1961), and Wallace Brown, *The Good Americans: The loyalists in the American Revolution* (N.Y.: 1969), pp. 226-38.

[10] Especially John Shy, “The American Revolution: The Military Conflict Considered as a Revolutionary War,” in S. G. Kurtz and J. H. Hutson, eds., *Essays on the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: 1973), pp. 130-9.

[11] The idea of legitimacy and paradigms with respect to revolutionary shifts, though restricted to science, is discussed in Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: 1970).

[12] Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 148.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] Quoted in Eric Robson, *The American Revolution; In its Political and Military Aspects, 1763-1783* (Hamden: 1965), p. 162.

[16] See Theodore Thayer, “Nathaniel Greene,” in George A. Billias, ed., *George Washington’s Generals* (N.Y.: 1964), pp. 109-36.

[17] See Robson, *Revolution*, passim, for numerous quotations from the letters and reports of British officers discussing the “morale” problem.

[18] Quoted in Shy, “Military Conflict,” p. 146.

[19] Quoted in Robson, *Revolution*, p. 161.

[20] See, for example, Don Higgenbotham, “Daniel Morgan: Guerrilla Fighter,” in Billias, *Generals*, pp. 291-316.

[21] For a discussion of various aspects of “coercive persuasion” in history see William Marina and Thomas A. Breslin, “‘Brainwashing’ and Managed Group Experiences: Converging ‘New’ Techniques?” in *Reason Papers: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Normative Studies*, II (Fall, 1975), 97-116.

- [22] See the discussion in Aptheker, *Revolution*, pp. 78-84.
- [23] See A. C. Flick, *The American Revolution in New York* (Albany: 1926), pp. 206-7.
- [24] Palmer, *Age*, p. 188, and the comment in Pies Mackesy, *The War for America, 1775-1783* (Cambridge: 1965), p. 511.
- [25] See, for example, Daniel Boastin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: 1955).
- [26] Quoted in Grimes, *Thought*, p. 87.
- [27] Quoted in Jensen, *Founding* p. 493.
- [28] Hedrick Smith and Robert Kaiser.
- [29] Palmer *Age*, p. 221.
- [30] Henry Jacoby, *The Bureaucratization of the World* (Berkeley: 1973), chapter eight.
- [31] See James K. Martin, *Men in Rebellion: Higher Government Leaders and the Coming of the American Revolution* (New Brunswick: 1973).
- [32] Greene, *Movements*, p. 47.
- [33] A good description is in Bernhard Knollenberg, *Growth of the American Revolution* (N.Y. 1975), pp. 153-5.
- [34] See, for example, Philip Davidson, *Propaganda and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: 1941), introduction, but which contains much data to support a majoritarian interpretation. The notion of a small group of American leaders somehow manipulating a larger population goes back at least to the nineteenth-century historian W. E. H. Lecky, if not to the Loyalists themselves. It is found in Robson's study, and was especially dominant several decades ago as a reflection of the propaganda theories of Harold Lasswell, then much in vogue.
- [35] Robert G. Wesson, *The Russian Dilemma* (New Brunswick: 1974).
- [36] Amaury de Riencourt, *The Soul of China* (N.Y.: 1962).
- [37] Quoted in Jensen, *Founding*, p. 494.
- [38] William Marina, *Egalitarianism and Empire* (Menlo Park: 1975).
- [39] See the numerous quotes from Americans of the revolutionary period in Merrill Jensen, *The American Revolution Within America* (N.Y. 1974), and Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (Chapel Hill: 1969).

[40] In Kurtz and Hutson, *Essays*, pp. 256-88.

[41] Wood, *Creation*, is excellent in expanding in detail upon this point.

[42] See Adams, *Works*, X, 63, 192.

[43] Robert A. Nisbet, *The Social Impact of the Revolution* (Washington. 1974), pp. 21-2.

[44] This interpretation is developed in detail in William Marina, *The American Revolution as a People's War* forthcoming in 1976.

[45] L. von Mises, *The AntiCapitalist Mentality* (N.Y.: 1956); F. A. Hayek ed., *Capitalism and the Historians* (Chicago 1954), and Hayek, *The Intellectuals and Socialism* (Menlo Park: 1971).

[46] Marina, *Egalitarianism*.

After all, the American Revolution and the war that accompanied it not only determined the nation we would become but also continue to define who we are. The Declaration of Independence, the Midnight Ride, Valley Forge—the whole glorious chronicle of the colonists’ rebellion against tyranny is in the American DNA. Often it is the Revolution that is a child’s first encounter with history. Related Content. In the course of England’s long and unsuccessful attempt to crush the American Revolution, the myth arose that its government, under Prime Minister Frederick, Lord North, had acted in haste. Accusations circulating at the time—later to become conventional wisdom—held that the nation’s political leaders had failed to comprehend the gravity of the challenge.