

Narrating Nationhood

13

DAVID RAMSAY

The History of the American Revolution 1789

David Ramsay (1749–1815), a physician, legislator, and historian, graduated from the College of New Jersey and studied medicine at the College of Philadelphia with Benjamin Rush. He accepted a position and settled permanently in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1774. His History of the American Revolution was published in Philadelphia in 1789 and serialized in the Columbian Magazine. Six American editions of the book were published between 1789 and 1865, as well as German, Dutch, Irish, and two English and French editions.

APPENDIX: NO. IV

The State of parties: the advantages and disadvantages of the Revolution: its influence on the minds and morals of the Citizens.

Previous to the American revolution, the inhabitants of the British Colonies were universally loyal. That three millions of such subjects should break through all former attachments, and unanimously adopt new ones, could not reasonably be expected. The revolution had its enemies, as well as its friends, in every period of the war. Country,

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religion, local policy, as well as private views, operated in disposing the inhabitants to take different sides. The New-England provinces being mostly settled by one sort of people, were nearly of one sentiment. The influence of placemen¹ in Boston, together with the connections which they had formed by marriages, had attached sundry influential characters in that capital to the British interest, but these were but as the dust in the balance, when compared with the numerous independent Whig yeomanry of the country. The same and other causes produced a large number in New-York, who were attached to royal government. That city had long been head quarters of the British army in America, and many intermarriages, and other connections, had been made between British officers, and some of their first families. The practice of entailing estates had prevailed in New-York to a much greater extent, than in any of the other provinces. The governors thereof had long been in the habit of indulging their favourites with extravagant grants of land. This had introduced the distinction of landlord and tenant. There was therefore in New-York an aristocratic party, respectable for numbers, wealth, and influence, which had much to fear from independence. The city was also divided into parties by the influence of two ancient and numerous families, the Livingstones and Delanceys. These having been long accustomed to oppose each other at elections, could rarely be brought to unite in any political measures. In this controversy, one almost universally took part with America, the other with Great Britain.

The Irish in America, with a few exceptions, were attached to independence. They had fled from oppression in their native country, and could not brook the idea that it should follow them. Their national prepossessions in favour of liberty were strengthened by their religious opinions. They were Presbyterians, and people of that denomination, for reasons hereafter to be explained, were mostly Whigs. The Scotch on the other hand, though they had formerly sacrificed much to liberty in their own country, were generally disposed to support the claims of Great Britain. Their nation for some years past had experienced a large proportion of royal favour. A very absurd association was made by many, between the cause of John Wilkes and the cause of America. The former had rendered himself so universally odious to the Scotch, that many of them were prejudiced against a cause, which was so ridiculously, but generally associated, with that of a man who had grossly insulted their whole nation. The illiberal reflections cast

¹*placemen*: political appointees to public office

by some Americans on the whole body of the Scotch, as favourers of arbitrary power, restrained high-spirited individuals of that nation from joining a people who suspected their love of liberty. Such of them as adhered to the cause of independence, were steady in their attachment. The army and the Congress ranked among their best officers, and most valuable members, some individuals of that nation.

Such of the Germans in America as possessed the means of information, were generally determined Whigs; but many of them were too little informed to be able to chuse their side on proper ground. They, especially such of them as resided in the interior country, were, from their not understanding the English language, far behind most of the other inhabitants in a knowledge of the merits of the dispute. Their disaffection was rather passive than active: a considerable part of it arose from principles of religion, for some of their sects deny the lawfulness of war. No people have prospered more in America than the Germans. None have surpassed, and but few have equalled them in industry and other republican virtues.

The great body of Tories in the southern States was among the settlers on their western frontier: many of these were disorderly persons, who had fled from the old settlements to avoid the restraints of civil government. Their numbers were increased by a set of men called regulators. The expence and difficulty of obtaining the decision of courts against horse-thieves and other criminals, had induced sundry persons, about the year 1770, to take the execution of the laws into their own hands, in some of the remote settlements, both of North and South-Carolina. In punishing crimes, forms as well as substance must be regarded. From not attending to the former, some of these regulators, though perhaps aiming at nothing but what they thought right, committed many offences both against law and justice. By their violent proceedings regular government was prostrated: they drew on them the vengeance of royal governors: the regulators having suffered from their hands, were slow to oppose an established government, whose power to punish they had recently experienced. Apprehending that the measures of Congress were like their own regulating schemes, and fearing that they would terminate in the same disagreeable consequences, they and their adherents were generally opposed to the revolution.

Religion also divided the inhabitants of America: the Presbyterians and Independents were almost universally attached to the measures of Congress. Their religious societies are governed on the republican plan.

From independence they had much to hope, but from Great Britain, if finally successful, they had reason to fear the establishment of a church hierarchy. Most of the episcopal ministers of the northern provinces were pensioners on the bounty of the British government. The greatest part of their clergy, and many of their laity in these provinces, were therefore disposed to support a connection with Great Britain. The episcopal clergy in the southern provinces being under no such bias, were often among the warmest Whigs. Some of them foreseeing the downfall of religious establishments from the success of the Americans, were less active: but in general, where their church was able to support itself, their clergy and laity zealously espoused the cause of independence. Great pains were taken to persuade them, that those who had been called dissenters, were aiming to abolish the episcopal establishment to make way for their own exaltation; but the good sense of the people restrained them from giving any credit to the unfounded suggestion. Religious controversy was happily kept out of view: the well-informed of all denominations were convinced, that the contest was for their civil rights, and therefore did not suffer any other considerations to interfere, or disturb their union.

The Quakers, with a few exceptions, were averse to independence. In Pennsylvania they were numerous, and had power in their hands. Revolutions in government are rarely patronised by any body of men, who foresee that a diminution of their own importance is likely to result from the change. Quakers from religious principles were averse to war, and therefore could not be friendly to a revolution, which could only be effected by the sword. Several individuals separated from them on account of their principles, and following the impulse of their inclinations, joined their countrymen in arms. The services America received from two of their society, Gen. Greene and Mifflin, made some amends for the embarrassments which the disaffection of the great body of their people occasioned to the exertions of the active friends of independence.

The age and temperament of individuals had often an influence in fixing their political character. Old men were seldom warm Whigs: they could not relish the great changes which were daily taking place; attached to ancient forms and habits, they could not readily accommodate themselves to new systems. Few of the very rich were active in forwarding the revolution. This was remarkably the case in the eastern and middle States; but the reverse took place in the southern extreme of the confederacy. There were in no part of America more determined Whigs than the opulent slaveholders in Virginia, the Car-

olinas, and Georgia. The active and spirited part of the community, who felt themselves possessed of talents that would raise them to eminence in a free government, longed for the establishment of independent constitutions: but those who were in possession or expectation of royal favour, or of promotion from Great Britain, wished that the connection between the Parent State and the Colonies might be preserved. The young, the ardent, the ambitious, and the enterprising, were mostly Whigs; but the phlegmatic, the timid, the interested, and those who wanted decision were, in general, favourers of Great Britain, or at least only the lukewarm, inactive friends of independence. The Whigs received a great re-inforcement from the operation of continental money. In the year 1775, 1776, and in the first months of 1777, while the bills of Congress were in good credit, the effects of them were the same, as if a foreign power had made the United States a present of twenty million of silver dollars. The circulation of so large a sum of money, and the employment given to great numbers in providing for the American army, increased the numbers and invigorated the zeal of the friends of the revolution; on the same principles, the American war was patronised in England, by the many contractors and agents for transporting and supplying the British army. In both cases the inconveniencies of interrupted commerce were lessened by the employment which war and a domestic circulation of money submitted in its room. The convulsions of war afforded excellent shelter for desperate debtors. The spirit of the times revolted against dragging to jails for debt, men who were active and zealous in defending their country, and on the other hand, those who owed more than they were worth, by going within the British lines, and giving themselves the merit of suffering on the score of loyalty, not only put their creditors to defiance, but sometimes obtained promotion, or other special marks of royal favour.

The American revolution, on the one hand, brought forth great vices; but on the other hand, it called forth many virtues, and gave occasion for the display of abilities which, but for that event, would have been lost to the world. When the war began, the Americans were a mass of husbandmen, merchants, mechanics, and fishermen; but the necessities of the country gave a spring to the active powers of the inhabitants, and set them on thinking, speaking, and acting, in a line far beyond that to which they had been accustomed. The difference between nations is not so much owing to nature, as to education and circumstances. While the Americans were guided by the leading strings of the Mother Country, they had no scope nor encouragement

for exertion. All the departments of government were established and executed for them, but not by them. In the years 1775 and 1776, the country, being suddenly thrown into a situation that needed the abilities of all its sons, these generally took their places, each according to the bent of his inclination. As they severally pursued their objects with ardour, a vast expansion of the human mind speedily followed. This displayed itself in a variety of ways. It was found that the talents for great stations did not differ in kind, but only in degree, from those which were necessary for the proper discharge of the ordinary business of civil society. In the bustle that was occasioned by the war, few instances could be produced of any persons who made a figure, or who rendered essential services, but from among those who had given specimens of similar talents in their respective professions. Those who, from indolence or dissipation, had been of little service to the community in time of peace, were found equally unserviceable in war. A few young men were exceptions to this general rule. Some of these, who had indulged in youthful follies, broke off from their vicious courses, and on the pressing call of their country became useful servants of the public: but the great bulk of those, who were the active instruments of carrying on the revolution, were self-made, industrious men. These who by their own exertions had established or laid a foundation for establishing personal independence, were most generally trusted, and most successfully employed in establishing that of their country. In these times of action, classical education was found of less service than good natural parts, guided by common sense and sound judgement.

Several names could be mentioned of individuals who, without the knowledge of any other language than their mother tongue, wrote not only accurately, but elegantly on public business. It seemed as if the war not only required, but created talents. Men whose minds were warmed with the love of liberty, and whose abilities were improved by daily exercise, and sharpened with a laudable ambition to serve their distressed country, spoke, wrote, and acted, with an energy far surpassing all expectations which could be reasonably founded on their previous acquirements.

The Americans knew but little of one another, previous to the revolution. Trade and business had brought the inhabitants of their sea-ports acquainted with each other, but the bulk of the people in the interior country were unacquainted with their fellow-citizens. A continental army, and a Congress composed of men from all the States, by freely mixing together, were assimilated into the mass. Individuals of

both, mingling with the citizens, disseminated principles of union among them. Local prejudices abated. By frequent collision asperities were worn off, and a foundation was laid for the establishment of a nation out of discordant materials. Intermarriages between men and women of different States were much more common than before the war, and became an additional cement to the union. Unreasonable jealousies had existed between the inhabitants of the eastern and of the southern States; but on becoming better acquainted with each other, these in a great measure subsided. A wiser policy prevailed. Men of liberal minds led the way in discouraging local distinctions, and the great body of the people, as soon as reason got the better of prejudice, found that their best interests would be most effectually promoted by such practices and sentiments as were favourable to union. . . .

Such have been some of the beneficial effects which have resulted from that expansion of the human mind, which has been produced by the revolution; but these have not been without alloy.

To overset an established government, unhinges many of those principles which bind individuals to each other. A long time, and much prudence, will be necessary to re-produce a spirit of union and that reverence for government, without which society is a rope of sand. The right of people to resist their rulers, when invading their liberties, forms the corner stone of the American republics. This principle, though just in itself, is not favourable to the tranquillity of present establishments. The maxims and measures, which in the years 1774 and 1775 were successfully inculcated and adopted by American patriots, for oversetting the established government, will answer a similar purpose, when recurrence is had to them by factious demagogues for disturbing the freest government that were ever devised.

War never fails to injure the morals of the people engaged in it. The American war, in particular, had an unhappy influence of this kind. Being begun without funds or regular establishments, it could not be carried on without violating private rights; and in its progress, it involved a necessity for breaking solemn promises, and plighted public faith. The failure of national justice, which was in some degree unavoidable, increased the difficulties of performing private engagements, and weakened that sensibility to the obligations of public and private honour, which is a security for the punctual performance of contracts. . . .

On the whole, the literary, political, and military talents of the citizens of the United States have been improved by the revolution, but

their moral character is inferior to what it formerly was. So great is the change for the worse, that the friends of public order were loudly called upon to exert their utmost abilities in extirpating the vicious principles and habits which have taken deep root during the late convulsions.