**“The War for Independence was no Revolution” By: Howard Zinn**

Around 1776, certain important people in the English colonies made a discovery that would prove enormously useful for the next two hundred years. They found that by creating a nation, a symbol, a legal unity called the United States, they could take over land, profits, and political power from favorites of the British Empire. In the process, they could hold back a number of potential rebellions in America and create a consensus of popular colonial support for the rule of a new, privileged leadership.

When we look at the American Revolution this way, it was a work of genius, and the Founding Fathers deserve the awed tribute they have received over the centuries. They created the most effective system of national control devised in modern times, and showed future generations of leaders the advantages of combining paternalism with command.

**Many Rebellions**

Starting with Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia, by 1760, there had been eighteen class or race uprisings aimed at overthrowing colonial governments. There had also been six black rebellions, from South Carolina to New York, and forty riots of various origins. This worried the colonial political elites. And so by the 1760s, these colonial leaders saw the possibility of directing much of the rebellious energy away from themselves and against England and her local officials.

After 1763, with England victorious over France in the Seven Years' War, expelling them from North America, ambitious colonial leaders were no longer threatened by the French. They now had only two rivals left: the English and the Indians. The British, wooing the Indians, had declared Indian lands beyond the Appalachians out of bounds to whites. Perhaps once the British were out of the way, the Indians could be dealt with.

With the French defeated, the British government turned its attention to tightening control over the colonies. It needed revenues to pay for the war, and looked to the colonies for that. Also, the colonial trade had become more and more important to the British economy, and more profitable: it had amounted to about 500,000 pounds in 1700 but by 1770 was worth 2,800,000 pounds. So, the American leadership was less in need of English rule, the English more in need of the colonists' wealth. The elements were there for conflict and it was not long in coming.

The war had brought glory for the generals, death to the privates, wealth for the merchants, unemployment for the poor. There were 25,000 people living in New York (there had been 7,000 in 1720) when the French and Indian War ended. A newspaper editor wrote about the growing "Number of Beggers and wandering Poor" in the streets of the city. Letters in the papers questioned the distribution of wealth: "How often have our Streets been covered with Thousands of Barrels of Flour for trade, while our near Neighbors can hardly procure enough to make a Dumplin to satisfy hunger?"

Historian Gary Nash's study of city tax lists shows that by the early 1770s, the top 5 percent of Boston's taxpayers controlled 49 percent of the city's taxable assets. In Philadelphia and New York too, wealth was more and more concentrated. Court-recorded wills showed that by 1750 the wealthiest people in the cities were leaving 20,000 pounds or the equivalent to about $2.5 million today.

In Boston, the lower classes began to use the town meeting to vent their grievances. The governor of Massachusetts had written that in these town meetings "the meanest Inhabitants ... by their constant Attendance there generally are the majority and outvote the Gentlemen, Merchants, Substantial Traders and all the better part of the Inhabitants."

What seems to have happened in Boston is that certain lawyers, editors, and merchants of the upper classes, but excluded from the ruling circles close to England-men like James Otis and Samuel Adams-organized a "Boston Caucus" and through their oratory and their writing "molded laboring-class opinion, called the 'mob' into action, and shaped its behavior." Otis and Adams were keenly aware of the declining fortunes and the resentment of ordinary townspeople, and they began molding popular opinion.

**Using the Lower Classes**

We have here a forecast of the long history of American politics, the mobilization of lower-class energy by upper-class politicians, for their own purposes. This was not purely deception; it involved, in part, a genuine recognition of lower-class grievances, which helps to account for its effectiveness as a tactic over the centuries. James Otis, Samuel Adams, Royal Tyler, Oxenbridge Thacher, and a host of other Bostonians, linked to the artisans and laborers through a network of neighborhood taverns, fire companies, and the Caucus, espoused a vision of politics that gave credence to laboring-class views and regarded as entirely legitimate the participation of artisans and even laborers in the political process.

This grievance against the rich in Boston may account for the explosiveness of mob action after the Stamp Act of 1765. That summer, a shoemaker named Ebenezer MacIntosh led a mob in destroying the house of a rich Boston merchant named Andrew Oliver. Two weeks later, the crowd turned to the home of Thomas Hutchinson, symbol of the rich elite who ruled the colonies in the name of England. They smashed up his house with axes, drank the wine in his wine cellar, and looted the house of its furniture and other objects. A report by colony officials to England said that this was part of a larger scheme in which the houses of fifteen rich people were to be destroyed, as part of "a War of Plunder, of general leveling and taking away the Distinction of rich and poor."

It was one of those moments in which fury against the rich went further than leaders like Otis wanted. Could class hatred be focused against the pro-British elite, and deflected from the nationalist colonial elite? The leaders of the Revolution began to worry about keeping “common mob” sentiments under their control. They worried that the mob would turn its attention at some point against them too. So, now the job was to keep the lower classes angry at British “atrocities” but not at the greed of the colonial elite.

In the countryside, where most people lived, there was a clear conflict of poor against rich, one which political leaders would use to mobilize the population against England, granting some benefits for the rebellious poor, and many more for themselves in the process. For example, in North Carolina, a powerful movement of white farmers was organized against wealthy and corrupt officials in the period from 1766 to 1771. Called the Regulator movement, it consisted of "class-conscious white farmers in the west who wanted an end to elite rule and more democracy in the local government in their respective counties." The Regulators referred to themselves as "poor Industrious peasants," as 1abourers," "the wretched poor," "oppressed" by "rich and powerful ... designing Monsters."

A contemporary account of the Regulator movement in Orange County describes the situation: Thus were the people of Orange insulted by the sheriff, robbed and plundered ... neglected and condemned by the local elite Representatives and abused by the Magistracy; obliged to pay Fees regulated only by the Avarice of the officer; obliged to pay a Tax which they believed went to enrich and aggrandize a few, who lorded it over them continually; and from all these Evils they saw no way to escape; for the Men in Power, and Legislation, were the Men whose interest it was to oppress, and make gain of the Laborer.

In that county in the 1760s, the Regulators organized to prevent the collection of taxes, or the confiscation of the property of tax delinquents. Officials said "an absolute Insurrection of a dangerous tendency has broke out in Orange County," and made military plans to suppress it. At one point seven hundred armed farmers forced the release of two arrested Regulator leaders. The Regulators petitioned the government on their grievances in 1768, citing "the unequal chances the poor and the weak have in contentions with the rich and powerful."

The result of all this was that the assembly passed some mild reform legislation, but also an act "to prevent riots and tumults," and the governor prepared to crush them militarily. In May of 1771 there was a decisive battle in which several thousand Regulators were defeated by a disciplined army using cannon. Six Regulators were hanged. Kay says that in the three western counties of Orange, Anson, and Rowan, where the Regulator movement was concentrated, it had the support of six thousand to seven thousand men out of a total white taxable population of about eight thousand.

One consequence of this bitter conflict is that only a minority of the people in the Regulator counties seem to have participated as patriots in the Revolutionary War. Most of them probably remained neutral. As a result, in Virginia, the educated gentry recognized quickly that something needed to be done to persuade the lower orders to join the revolutionary cause. By turning the poor against the British, the colonial elite reasoned that they could deflect this class anger away from themselves onto England. One Virginian wrote in his diary in the spring of 1774: "The lower Class of People here are in tumult on account of Reports from Boston, many of them expect to be press'd & compell'd to go and fight the Britains!" Around the time of the Stamp Act, a Virginia orator addressed the poor: "Are not the gentlemen made of the same materials as the lowest and poorest among you? Listen to no doctrines which may tend to divide us, but let us go hand in hand, as brothers .

It was a problem for which the rhetorical talents of Patrick Henry were superbly fitted. He was, as Rhys Isaac puts it, "firmly attached to the world of the gentry," but he spoke in words that the poorer whites of Virginia could understand. Henry's oratory in Virginia pointed a way to relieve class tension between upper and lower classes and form a bond against the British. This was to find language inspiring to all classes, and stirring enough to build patriotic feeling for the resistance movement. It was political manipulation at its best.

**Common Sense**

Tom Paine's Common Sense, which appeared in early 1776 became the most popular pamphlet in the American colonies. It made the first bold argument for independence, in words that any fairly literate person could understand.

Paine's pamphlet appealed to a wide range of colonial opinion angered by England. But it caused some tremors in aristocrats like John Adams, who were with the patriot cause but wanted to make sure it didn't go too far in the direction of inciting democratic feelings among the lower order. Paine had denounced the so-called balanced government of England, and called for single-chamber representative bodies where the people could be represented. Adams denounced Paine's plan as "to democratical. Popular assemblies needed to be checked, Adams thought, because they were "productive of hasty results and absurd democracy."

**Social Control**

How did the colonial elite manage to control the poor which convincing them to fight against the aristocratic English? They did it by guile, bribery, intimidation, and the use of laws. In Maryland, for instance, by the new constitution of 1776, to run for governor one had to own 5,000 pounds of property; to run for state senator, 1,000 pounds. Thus, 90 percent of the population were excluded from holding office. And so small land holders, tenants, renters and casual day laborers posed a serious problem of social control for the elite.

In fact, Maryland elites worried about rioting against leading families, who were suspected of hoarding needed commodities for themselves while the poor suffered. This class hatred was expressed by one man who said "it was better for the people to lay down their arms and pay the duties and taxes laid upon them by King and Parliament than to be brought into slavery and to be commanded and ordered about as they were."

Despite this, Maryland authorities retained control. They made concessions, taxing land and slaves more heavily, letting debtors pay in paper money. It was a sacrifice by the upper class to maintain power, and it worked.

It worked because the wealthy bribed and bought off the poor with meager gifts and trinkets, much as the Dutch bought New Amsterdam in 1640. Look, for example, at what happened to land confiscated from fleeing Loyalists. It was distributed in such a way as to give a double opportunity to the Revolutionary leaders: to enrich themselves and their friends, and to parcel out some land as bribes to small farmers to create a broad base of support for the new government. Indeed, this became characteristic of the new nation: finding itself possessed of enormous wealth, it could create the richest ruling class in history, and still have enough for the middle classes to act as a buffer between the rich and the dispossessed.

So, it is clear that no new social class came to power through the door of the American revolution. The men who engineered the revolt were largely members of the colonial ruling class. George Washington was the richest man in America. John Hancock was a prosperous Boston merchant. Benjamin Franklin was a wealthy printer. And so on. On the other hand, town mechanics, laborers, and seamen, as well as small farmers, were swept into "the people" by the rhetoric of the Revolution, by the camaraderie of military service, by the distribution of some land. Thus was created a substantial body of support, a national consensus, something that, even with the exclusion of ignored and oppressed people, could be called "America. It seems that the rebellion against British rule allowed a certain group of the colonial elite to replace those loyal to England, give some benefits to small landholders, and leave poor white working people and tenant farmers in very much their old situation.

**The War Was a Social Revolution By: Gordon S. Wood**

We Americans like to think of our revolution as not being radical; indeed, most of the time we consider it downright conservative. It certainly does not appear to resemble the revolutions of other nations in which people were killed, property was destroyed, and everything was turned upside down. The American revolutionary leaders do not fit our conventional image of revolutionaries-angry, passionate, reckless, maybe even bloodthirsty. We can think of Robespierre, Lenin, and Mao as revolutionaries, but not George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams. They seem too stuffy, too solemn, too cautious, too much the gentlemen. We cannot quite conceive of revolutionaries in powdered hair and knee breeches. The American revolutionaries seem to belong in drawing rooms or legislative halls, not in cellars or in the streets. They made speeches, not bombs; they wrote learned pamphlets, not manifestos. They were not abstract theorists and they were not social levelers. There was no reign of terror in the American Revolution and no resultant dictator-no Cromwell, no Bonaparte. The American Revolution does not seem to have the same kinds of causes-the social wrongs, the class conflict, the impoverishment, the grossly inequitable distributions of wealth-that presumably lie behind other revolutions.

Of course, there have been many historians-Progressive or neo-Progressive historians who sought to interpret the American Revolution in the light of the French Revolution, and to look for the same kinds of internal violence, class conflict, and social deprivation that presumably lay behind the French Revolution and other modern revolutions. Since the beginning of the twentieth century these Progressive historians have formulated various social interpretations of the American Revolution essentially designed to show that the Revolution was not only about "home rule" but also about---who was to rule at home." They have tried to describe the Revolution essentially as a social struggle by deprived and underprivileged groups against entrenched elites.

But this idea by Progressive scholars is wrong. The Progressive historians failed because the social conditions that are supposed to lie behind all revolutions-poverty and economic deprivation-were not present in colonial America. There should no longer be any doubt about it: the white American colonists were not an oppressed people; they had no crushing imperial chains to throw off. In fact, the colonists knew they were freer, more equal, more prosperous, and less burdened with cumbersome feudal and monarchical restraints than any other part of mankind in the eighteenth century. Such a situation, however, does not mean that colonial society was not susceptible to revolution.

Following the Progressive historians, Neo-conservative authors tended to think of the American Revolution as having nothing to do with the society. It has therefore often been considered to be a rebellion undertaken not to change the existing structure of society but to preserve it. For these Neo-conservative historians the Revolution seems to be little more than a colonial rebellion or a war for independence. Consequently, we have generally described the Revolution as an unusually conservative affair, concerned almost exclusively with politics and constitutional rights, and, in comparison with the social radicalism of the French and Russians, hardly a revolution at all.

**A Radical Revolution?**

If we measure the radicalism of revolutions by the degree of social misery or economic deprivation suffered, or by the number of people killed or manor houses' burned then this conventional emphasis on the conservatism of the American Revolution becomes true enough. But if we measure the radicalism by the amount of social change that actually took place-by transformations in the relationships that bound people to each other-then the American Revolution was not conservative at all; on the contrary: it was as radical and as revolutionary as any in history. Of course, the American Revolution was very different from other revolutions. But it was no less radical. In fact, it was one of the greatest revolutions the world has known, a momentous upheaval that not only fundamentally altered the character of American society but decisively affected the course of subsequent history.

It was as radical and social as any revolution in history, but it was radical and social in a very special sense. By destroying the English monarchy and establishing their own American republics, they were changing their society as well as their governments, and they knew it. Only they did not know how much of their society they would change.

By the time the Revolution had run its course in the early nineteenth century, American society had been radically and thoroughly transformed. One class did not overthrow another as in France or Russia; the poor did not supplant the rich. But social relationships were changed, and decisively so. By the early years of the nineteenth century the Revolution had created a society fundamentally different from the colonial society of the eighteenth century. It was in fact a new society unlike any that had ever existed anywhere in the world.

That revolution did more than legally create the United States; it transformed American society. In 1760 America was only a collection of disparate colonies huddled along a narrow strip of the Atlantic coast-economically underdeveloped outposts existing on the very edges of the civilized world. The less than two million monarchical subjects who lived in these colonies still took for granted that society was and ought to be a hierarchy of ranks and degrees of dependency and that most people were bound together by personal ties of one sort or another. Yet scarcely fifty years later these insignificant borderland provinces had become a giant, almost continent-wide republic of nearly ten million egalitarian-minded bustling citizens who not only had thrust themselves into the vanguard of history but had fundamentally altered their society and their social relationships. Far from remaining monarchical, hierarchy-ridden subjects on the margin of civilization, Americans had become, almost overnight, the most liberal, the most democratic, the most commercially minded, and the most modern people in the world. It was the Revolution that was crucial to this transformation. It was the Revolution, more than any other single event, that made America into the most liberal, democratic, and modern nation in the world.

Significantly, these changes were radical, and they were extensive. To focus, as we are today on what the Revolution did not accomplish-highlighting and lamenting its failure to abolish slavery and change fundamentally the lot of women-is to miss the great significance of what it did accomplish; indeed, the Revolution made possible the anti-slavery and women's rights movements of the nineteenth century and in fact all our current egalitarian thinking. The Revolution not only radically changed the personal and social relationships of people, including the position of women, but also destroyed aristocracy as it had been understood in the Western world for at least two millennia. The Revolution brought respectability and even dominance to ordinary people long held in contempt and gave dignity to their menial labor in a manner unprecedented in history. Most important, the Revolution made the interests and prosperity of ordinary people-their pursuits of happiness-the goal of society and government. In short, the Revolution was the most radical and most far-reaching event in American history...

**Conditions for Revolution**

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 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 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. 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 wealth did not set themselves against one another. The society was becoming more unequal in terms of wealth. Progressive historians are wrong when they say that this inequality was a source of instability and anxiety. Indeed, it was the pervasive equality of American society that was causing the problems. In fact, it was becoming acceptable to believe that anyone could make money in America. Families "in less than ten years have risen from the lowest rank, have acquired upward of £100,000 and have, moreover, gained this wealth in a simple and easy manner." Men who had quickly risen to the top were confident and aggressive but also vulnerable to challenge, especially sensitive over their liberty and independence, and unwilling to brook any interference with their status or their prospects.

For other, more ordinary colonists the promises of American life were equally strong. Take, for example, the lifelong struggle of farmer and sawmill owner Moses Cooper of Glocester, Rhode Island, to rise from virtual insignificance to become the richest man in the town. In 1767-68, at the age of sixty, Cooper was finally able to hire sufficient slaves and workers to do all his manual labor; he became a gentleman and justice of the peace and appended "Esq." to his name. Certainly by this date he could respond to the rhetoric of his fellow Rhode Islanders talking about their colony as "the promised land ... a land of milk and honey and wherein we eat bread to the full ... a land whose stones are iron ... and ... other choice mines and minerals. Yet at the same time Cooper knew only too well the precariousness of his wealth and position and naturally feared what Britain's mercantile restrictions might mean for his lumber sales to the West Indies. What had risen so high could as readily fall: not surprisingly, he became an enthusiastic patriot leader of his tiny town of Glocester. Multiply Cooper's experience of uneasy prosperity many thousand-fold and we have the stuff of a popular revolutionary movement.

**Patriots vs. Courtiers**

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 from above-from hereditary or personal connections that ultimately flowed from the crown or court. Patriots, on the other hand, were those who earned their positions through hard work and talent.

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 was 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.

Thus, 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 deference became absurd and degrading. The Revolution became a full-scale assault on hierarchy.

**Dependency and Slavery**

At the beginning of the eighteenth century the English radical John Toland had divided all society into those who were free and those who were dependent. "By Freeman," wrote Toland, "I understand men of property, or persons that are able to live of themselves; and those who cannot subsist in this independence, I call Servants." In such a simple division everyone who was not free was presumed to be a servant. Anyone tied to someone else, who was someone's client or dependent, was servile. The American revolutionary movement now brought to the surface this latent logic in eighteenth-century radical thinking.

Dependency was now equated with slavery. "What is a slave," asked a New Jersey writer in 1765, "but one who depends upon the will of another for the enjoyment of his life and property?" "Liberty," said Stephen Hopkins of Rhode Island, "solely consists in an independency upon the will of another; and by the name of slave we understand a man who can neither dispose of his person or goods, but enjoys all at the will of his master." It was left to John Adams in 1775 to draw the ultimate conclusion and to destroy in a single sentence the entire conception of society as a hierarchy of graded ranks and degrees. "There are," said Adams simply, "but two sorts of men in the world, freemen and slaves." Such a stark dichotomy collapsed all the delicate distinctions and dependencies of a monarchical society and created radical and momentous implications for Americans.

Independence, declared David Ramsay in a memorable Fourth of July oration in 1778, would free Americans from that monarchical world. Revolutionaries, he added, wanted to create a new republican world in which "all offices lie open to men of merit, of whatever rank or condition." They believed that the reins of state may be held by the son of the poorest men, if possessed of abilities equal to the important station." The revolutionaries believed they were "so far ... republican" that they considered "a man's merit to rest entirely with himself, without any regard to family, blood, or connection."

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 un-genteel 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. 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. For too long, they felt, merit had been denied. "Virtue," said Thomas Paine simply, "is not hereditary."

**Laws of Inheritance**

In their revolutionary state constitutions and laws the revolutionaries struck out at the power of family and hereditary privilege. In the decades following the Revolution all the new states abolished the legal devices of primogeniture and entail where they existed, either by statute or by writing the abolition into their constitutions. These legal devices, as the North Carolina statute of 1784 stated, had tended "only to raise the wealth and importance of particular families and individuals, giving them an unequal and undue influence in a republic, and prove in manifold instances the source of great contention and injustice. Their abolition would therefore "tend to promote that equality of property which is of the spirit and principle of a genuine republic."

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 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 un-free-composed of servants and slaves-had already declined to 13 percent from the 40 to 50 percent that it had been at midcentury. By 1800 less than 2 percent of the city's labor force remained un-free. Before long indentured servitude virtually disappeared.

**Slavery**

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 bondage and un-freedom, 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 un-freedom; 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. 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 ways that their former monarchical society had never needed. The Revolution in effect set in motion forces that doomed slavery in the North and led inexorably to the Civil War.

With the Revolution, all men were now considered to be equally free citizens. Almost at a stroke the Revolution destroyed all the earlier talk of hierarchy and deference. The familial image of government, as monarchy, royalty, and common man, now lost all its previous relevance, and the state in America emerged as something very different from what it had been.

**THE CONSERVATIVE REVOLUTION By: Robert Brown**

The most obvious thing about our American Revolution is that it was hardly a revolution at all. It was, in short, merely a colonial rebellion to preserve the democracy the colonists already had. It was a war for independence, not a revolution.

For the past ﬁfty years, a thesis has been current in the teaching and writing of American history that the society which produced the American Revolution was not a democratic society. The point is usually made that “common man” democracy did not arrive in this country until the time of Andrew Jackson. This concept of an undemocratic society is based on two major assumptions: One, that property qualiﬁcations for voting eliminated a large portion of the free adult male population from participation in political affairs; the other, that inequitable representation heavily favored the older aristocratic commercial areas along the seacoast at the expense of the more recently settled inland agricultural areas. Hence, it followed naturally that colonial political and economic life was dominated by the rich upper classes.

Historians like Howard Zinn and Charles A. Beard accept this thesis that colonial society was undemocratic. They have also generally followed the interpretation that the American Revolution was primarily an effort by the lower classes to gain economic, political, and social equality with their betters. Following the philosophy of Karl Marx, the Revolution, in their view, was one of class conflict.

Zinn and Beard, however, are wrong. If we study the state of Massachusetts, we will see an entirely different story. In Massachusetts, the revolution was fought to preserve a social order rather than to change it. It was not, as Beard has often assumed, a revolution in which un-enfranchised and underprivileged lower classes wrested democratic rights from a privileged local aristocracy.

First, by 1740, Massachusetts was already a middle-class society in which property was easily acquired, and in which a large portion of the people were property-owning farmers. In fact, in 1750, there was more democracy for the common man then there is in America today. A large permanent labor class was practically nonexistent; men could acquire land and become farmers or work for themselves as skilled artisans. This made Massachusetts, and America, unlike Europe. There was nothing in America approaching the gap between the rich and the poor as seen in Europe.

This economic opportunity contributed to political democracy. While it is true that property ownership was a prerequisite for town voting, it is also true that the amount of property required for the franchise was very small and that the great majority of men could easily meet the requirements. In short, over 90% of white men in Massachusetts held enough property to vote. Furthermore, representation was apportioned in such a way that the farmers, not an upper-class aristocracy, had complete control of the legislature. As a result, the people of Massachusetts had a government more responsive to the popular will than we have at the present time. There were far more representatives in proportion to population than we now have, and the representatives were more responsible to their constituents for their actions than are legislators today.

In addition to economics and politics, there were also other signs of democracy in colonial Massachusetts. The system of education was, for its day, undoubtedly the best provided for the common people anywhere at that time. In addition, many democratic practices were used in the operation of the Congregational church, where all male church members could vote. We should re-member that some 98 per cent of the people were Congregationalists. Furthermore, even the colonial militia was democratic in its organization, where militia men elected their commanders. In brief, Massachusetts did not have a social order before the American Revolution which would breed sharp internal class conﬂicts. America was not fighting a revolution to obtain democracy, democracy had already arrived in the colony long before 1776. . . .

If we turn to British-American relations, however, we do not need to search long to ﬁnd areas of conﬂict. The British for many years had developed a mercantilist-imperialist colonial system that had not functioned as expected. The aim of the system, as men at the time frankly admitted, was the ultimate beneﬁt of the mother country. They believed that colonies should be regulated, both economically and politically, to further the well-being of Mother England.

In order to make their Mercantile system effective, the British believed that they had to reinforce authority over the colonies. Their authority had slipped away during Walpole’s “unwise” policy of Salutary Neglect. The British realized they needed to stem America’s growing desire for independence. As part of their plan, British officials called for more colonial revenue which would be administered by Parliament, especially to pay debts from the French and Indian War, as well as pay the salaries of colonial officials and thus remove them from under the dominating inﬂuence of colonial assemblies.

At the same time, there was a rapidly growing population in America, bolstered by a phenomenal birthrate due to economic opportunity and by immigrants attracted by economic and political democracy. These new Americans embraced their democracy.

Clearly, a showdown between the democratic colonists and the aristocratic British was becoming inevitable. A showdown between the British desire to control the wealthy American colonies and the colonial desire for greater independence to protect their growing democracies. When the showdown came with the Tea Act and the Coercive Acts, there was no doubt whatever that the British intended to curtail colonial democracy as a necessary step toward recovery of British authority.

The result was the very thing the British had tried to prevent—American independence. But the war was less a revolution than a fight to preserve the democracy colonists had known for 100 years. Moreover, it was not a war between rich and poor. We search in vain for evidence of class conﬂict that was serious enough to justify revolution. We do not have to look far, however, for copious quantities of proof that colonial society was democratic and that the colonists would fight to keep what they knew.

In recent years it has been frequently said that the British did not intend to tyrannize the colonies by the policies which they adopted. Colonists thought otherwise, however, and one might suspect that many British policies looked like tyranny to them. Consider, for example, trials without juries; taxation by a people who were considered foreigners; appointed governors who could dissolve assemblies; and navigation acts regulating colonial trade in British interests. The colonists clearly thought this British taxation policy was tyrannical. If Britain could tax stamps, they could also tax a man's land, his cattle, his home, or his tea.

So, clearly, Massachusetts had long been accustomed to democratic government and intended to maintain its accustomed system. As one old soldier of the Revolution put it, “the British intended to govern the Americans and the Americans did not intend that they should.” To a people accustomed to democracy, the danger inherent in British imperial controls was far more than a mere threat. When the common people talked of dying for their liberties or pledging their lives and property for the defense of their liberties, they were not dealing in abstractions; and they would not have talked in this way if their society had been dominated by a merchant aristocracy. No one wants to die so a rich man can keep his castle. The American Revolution, in short, showed that democracy in the colonies began much earlier than previously thought, and that the idea of the “common man” had come into his own long before the era of Andrew Jackson.