

Three Tiers for the Radical American Revolution

This essay will focus on three radical-natured tiers of American development leading into the American Revolution. Steeped in Enlightenment Era ideology, the American people experienced the Great Awakening, a social transformation which radically reformed religious institutions and predisposed American colonists to political revolution only a few decades later. This religious radicalism, coupled with Enlightenment era ideals, provided the framework and rhetoric used by contemporary influential thinkers (framers) to advocate for revolution from Great Britain. This ushered in a new radical political idealism which in many ways is a break with the past. The final tier of radicalization was the rapidly deteriorating relationship between American colonists and Great Britain. By the mid-1770s, tensions led many American colonists to lose patience with Britain and begin responding with radicalism, and even terrorism. The American Revolution was based on radical ideas that ultimately and radically transformed the social and political framework of our nation.

One event that took place before the American Revolution, but would later have profound effects on both the willingness of the people and language of the framers, was the Great Awakening:

The Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s was the most profound social upheaval in the history of colonial America. Shaking American Christianity to its core and revitalizing religious commitment even as it threatened colonial America's institutional churches, this first American revolution would herald the political revolution of 1776.¹

¹ Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 21.

Before this event, American settlers did not think religious freedom was a paramount right to all man², but this religious radicalization changed that. The Great Awakening predisposed the American colonists to later justify their grievances with Great Britain on newly formed, arguably radical, religious principles. This movement sparked a new “era of spiritual democracy”³ which transformed the way common people interacted with the spiritual world. People experienced a new freedom to speak out about their grievances, and at the more radical end of the evangelical movement, uneducated men were ordained.⁴ This radicalization would later manifest into a transforming political structure moving away from monarchy, aristocracy, hierarchy of the old world structure.

John Adams’ theological view of how this nation should function was a break with contemporary norms. Adams is quoted proclaiming that “Liberty must at all hazards be supported” and that all people had “a right to it, derived from our Maker”⁵. Taking this radical concept even further, he advocated ruler-accountability for impeding on liberty – “Religion and politics were not strictly separated realms, for the best kind of government enabled people to live good, godly lives in orderly freedom. Such a theology held that rulers – including kings – deserved respect and obedience unless they promoted immorality or tyranny.”⁶ It would be ahistorical to not view Adams’ opinions of proper governance as radical propositions. The legitimacy of the American Revolution was based on this radical religious ideology, combined with Enlightenment era ideals such as Hobbes’ “Life, Liberty, and Property”.

² Ibid., 54.

³ Ibid., 22.

⁴ Ibid., 22

⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁶ Ibid., 13.

Framers used the rhetoric developed by revivalist preachers during the Awakening to “appeal directly to the people in a homespun style filled with biblical allusions. Revolutionary writers and orators like Patrick Henry and even religious skeptics like Tom Paine self-consciously employed an evangelical style to motivate their audiences.”⁷ Here is a passive link between the religious radicalism and motivation behind the formation of a radical new system of governance. An example of this rhetoric at work with the American people is the association of “political tyranny with the spirit of anti-Christ.”⁸ A writer named “Timoleon” wrote that a politician couldn’t revoke liberty without also becoming a tyrant⁹, setting the precedent that lack of liberty was an indication of tyranny, in which case revolution is justified.

Religious radicalization predisposed and prepared American colonist for the framers to propose a new type of governance based on Enlightenment era ideals. The political idealism which framers, like Thomas Jefferson, used to justify the Revolution was in itself radical. At points, perhaps in order to more thoroughly play on Awakening rhetoric, language used in our nation’s founding documents had to be revised in order to avoid hypocrisy, “One of the passages [of the Declaration of Independence, 1776] dropped completely blamed both domestic slavery and Atlantic trade on the monarchy...”¹⁰ It is speculated that Jefferson included this passage to absolve himself of the guilt of slave trading. However this is interesting to point out because it begs the question, were the ideals of the American Revolution more radical than the people writing them down at the time? Surly, it would be much more radical if Jefferson wrote that passage and subsequently freed all his slaves, but Jefferson did not. This makes more sense when

⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁸ Ibid., 33.

⁹ Ibid., 53.

¹⁰ Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 62.

considering the radicalism that is essentially fueling the Revolution – the ideals may be more radical than the people themselves. Utilizing rhetoric to rally the masses, framers were able to form the foundation which these ideals could be one day debated. This becomes clearer with the example of Landon Carter and his response to the “powerful indictment of social inequality.”¹¹ When Carter learned what the Declaration said he was confused and, by the language of the document, assumed/feared he would have to free his slaves. This wouldn’t be the case for almost another hundred years. Here it is transparent that the language of this new radical political idealism was inflated, perhaps to set in motion a manifestation of the Revolutionary ideals later in the future. In other words, the political idealism reflected in the language of the Declaration and Constitution was so radical that it confused many contemporaries, and was not actually fully practiced at the time of its creation, even by many of the American framers.

In addition to Enlightenment era ideals and Great Awakening rhetoric, the relationship between American colonists and the British was rapidly deteriorating:

As early as 1774, General Thomas Gage, commander of the British Army, realized that his forces in America were confronting a new kind of enemy. By September, ordinary people throughout New England had driven royal officeholders from the countryside. Angry farmers, acting outside a clearly delineated command structure, terrorized neighbors who defended the king’s government.¹²

By the mid-1770s, General Gage realizes the American colonists have radicalized and begun to terrorize the British establishment. The tension is so high that it seems as though the wheels of Revolution cannot be stopped anymore, but will have to be engaged by the British forces. Even changes made by British parliament to try and accommodate the colonists, such as repealing the

¹¹ Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 63.

¹² *Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the Nation*, ed. Alfred F. Young et al. (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 53.

Townshend Acts, seemed inadequate for the colonists – “On the very day that Lord North proposed the repeal of the duties, a clash between civilians and British soldiers led to the death of five Americans in Boston [the Boston Massacre].”¹³ This event was then turned into propaganda to garner American support for Revolution across the colonies.

In conclusion, I believe the American Revolution was a radical movement on three accounts. At the base of the Revolution was religious radicalism; newly formed rhetoric provided the highway on which the framers were able to recruit and gain support for revolution from Britain. Religious radicalism, combined with Enlightenment era ideals, manifested into a new radical political idealism, as reflected in the concept of “spiritual democracy.”¹⁴ And in addition, by the mid-1770s the American people had begun to radicalized and terrorize the British establishment. On these accounts, I agree with historian Gordon Wood in that the American Revolution was “as radical and revolutionary as any in history.”¹⁵

¹³ Francis D. Cogliano, *Revolutionary America 1763-1815: a Political History* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 67.

¹⁴ Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 22.

¹⁵ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 5.