3

Americans and Their Revolution: The First 100 Years

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"Yesterday the 4th of July," announced the newspaper, "being the Anniversary of the Independence of the United States of America, was celebrated in this city with demonstrations of joy and festivity." Each of the "armed ships and gallies in the river [was] . . . dressed in the gayest manner, with the colours of the United States and streamers displayed," and at one o'clock, all gun crews onboard began firing "a discharge of thirteen cannon from each of the ships." There was a dinner for members of Congress, Army officers, and even "strangers of eminence," all followed by toasts "breathing independence, and a generous love of liberty" and more banging of artillery.[1]

It was, all in all, quite a "celebration," especially considering that it was the *first* ever such celebration—it was July 4, 1777—and took place in Philadelphia, which in less than three months would be occupied by an unforgiving British army. But at least for that moment, "there was a grand exhibition of fireworks (which began and concluded with thirteen rockets)." *The Pennsylvania Evening Post* solemnly hoped that "the fourth of July, that glorious and ever memorable day," would "be celebrated through America, by the sons of freedom, from age to age till time shall be no more."[2]

Judging strictly by the numbers, the *Evening Post* would probably be gratified by how energetically we have carried on those fiery celebrations of America's independence. In 2024, the American Pyrotechnics Association estimated that 16,000 professional fireworks shows lit up the nighttime skies across the nation on July 4. Just as fiery in their own way,

Coney Island held its annual hot-dog-eating contest, Philadelphia hosted its Pomp & Parade on Independence Mall, and the Boston Pops performed its annual Independence Day concert on the Charles River Esplanade, featuring the usual cannonade that accompanies Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*.[3]

But despite the exuberance, there is still some question about how bright a line should be drawn between 1777's hope that independence would be thereafter celebrated as "glorious" and the way it is actually done two and a half centuries later. The *1812 Overture* was, after all, written in honor of nothing more than the triumph of one absolutism (the Russian imperial one) over another (Napoleon's), representing the diametric opposites of what the American revolutionaries thought they were doing.

The African American Museum in Philadelphia featured a reenactment of Frederick Douglass's skeptical inquiry, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"[4] If anything, it has now become much more conventional, even among professional historians, to speak of the American Revolution not as the work of "the sons of freedom" but as "an internal civil war of extraordinary violence, justified by the rhetoric of a country in peril and folded into . . . a terror erupting with particular force . . . by white revolutionaries on Tories, on local white minorities, and on African and Native Americans," but then "crowded out of the master narrative by invocations of 'The Glorious Cause.'"[5] Perhaps such skepticism about the Revolution is the product of living in skeptical times, when institutions and narratives of every sort have surrendered much of their persuasive power to arguments that reduce all human events to unpleasant questions of power—in the spirit, we should say, of François de La Rochefoucauld's reduction of virtue to "nothing but" (*il n'y a rien*) or Michel Foucault's preference for "pessimistic activism."[6] As the historian Paul Finkelman has written, the loss of historical nuance has created a blind eye to how indifference and even hostility could exist side by side in the young United States, with admonitions to treat the Native tribes fairly and the first movements in the world to end slavery by public legal enactment.[7]

Our modern struggles to remember 1776 stand in vivid contrast to not only the observances in Philadelphia in 1777 but also the recollections of an earlier American historian, George Bancroft, who wrote as a student at the University of Göttingen in 1820, "Oh! My countrymen, never was a land blessed of heaven like ours. . . . My countrymen, we are Americans. The arts and sciences of Europe cannot make us forget it."[8] Far from understanding the American Revolution as a domestic tug-of-war over privilege and oppression, Abraham Lincoln spoke in 1861 of the "battle-fields and struggles for the liberties of the country" as an emblem of "a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come."[9] Although Americans had come to disagree over the Declaration of Independence's meaning by Lincoln's time, for a century they largely treated the Revolution as a glorious event worth commemorating through public celebrations, monuments, primers, and political rhetoric.

Political Ritual

Strains of criticism have long inflected America's recollections of its revolutionary birth. Douglass's famous question on the platform of Corinthian Hall in Rochester, New York, in 1852 was not an exercise in cynical fatalism. It was a frank exposure of a great default on the Revolution's promises, which, as Douglass insisted to his audience of white New Yorkers, "brought life and healing to you" but "stripes and death to me" and to millions of others born, like Douglass, in slavery.[10] Similarly, Lincoln was painfully candid in 1855 when he admitted that, although "the fourth of July has not quite dwindled away" in significance, the spirit of freedom that Philadelphians saluted in 1777—"that spirit which desired the peaceful extinction of slavery"—had "itself become extinct, with the occasion, and the men of the Revolution" and had left the Fourth of July good for little more than "burning firecrackers!!!"[11]

Some of that ambivalence about the Revolution was in American minds almost from the nation's beginning. Sarah Logan Fisher, a Philadelphia

Loyalist who sat unhappily through the independence celebrations in 1777, thought of the revolutionaries as "an ungrateful set of men" who did not understand "the kindness & lenity" of British rule and who "still go on working their own destruction & will one day no doubt reap the reward of their works."[12]

And the revolutionary politicians were not at all gentle in respecting the pursuit of happiness when it was pursued by Loyalists like Fisher. In fact, Fisher's husband was one of 20 prominent Philadelphia Quakers denounced as traitors and thrust into exile without trial by Pennsylvania's revolutionary government. Her neighbor and fellow Loyalist, Elizabeth Drinker (whose husband had also been forced to join the other Quaker exiles), also noticed sarcastically how "the anniversary of Independence and Freedom" had been marked by vandalism of Quaker-owned shops, while Quaker residences had "a great number of windows broke."[13]

But Loyalism was a minority voice, and even more to the point, it lost. That allowed the revolutionaries free rein, over the first few decades of the new republic, to cast the Revolution in terms of almost redemptive glory. "It seems to have been reserved to the people of this country," wrote Alexander Hamilton in the first of the Federalist Papers, that they should "by their conduct and example . . . decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not, of establishing good government from reflection and choice."[14]

In the generation that stretched from 1776 until 1826, Americans believed (according to David Ramsay, the first historian of the Revolution) that the old colonists "were from their first settlement in America, devoted to liberty." They were of one mind "that God made all mankind originally equal" and "endowed them with the rights of life, property, and as much liberty as was consistent with the rights of others."[15]

Americans were also moved "by the consideration that they were no longer to risque their lives for the trifling purpose of procuring a repeal of a few oppressive acts of parliament, but for a new organization of government" that "led them to substitute the majesty of the people, in lieu of discarded royalty."[16] The Revolution was the "unanswerable and

invulnerable bulwark of freedom, the Rights of Man." And from the 1790s onward, public readings of the Declaration of Independence on successive Fourths of July became a kind of American political ritual and a "definition of the rights of man."[17]

Events and Ideas

By the 1820s, the way the American Revolution was fixed in American memory had begun to diverge into two distinct objects of remembrance. One of these would be the Revolution itself, in which attention would be focused on celebrating the events and personalities of the revolutionary era, especially the Fourth of July. The other would fix on the ideas of the Revolution as captured in the Declaration of Independence. These were not necessarily exclusive. As the United States moved past the Revolution's 50th anniversary, it was not difficult to hear these two voices sometimes singing in harmony but also sometimes solo.

Monuments to battles of the Revolution made their debut comparatively late. Lexington installed a modest monument to its militia in 1799. Baltimore erected what may be the first large-scale revolutionary monument—a 178-foot column honoring George Washington—in 1809. John Trumbull's four celebratory depictions—of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the battles of Saratoga and Yorktown, and Washington resigning his commission—were finished and hung in the Capitol Rotunda by 1826.[18]

But remembrances of the Revolution as a political event were well underway in other forms long before the turn was made to "monumentation." Massachusetts made the Fourth of July a state holiday in 1781, marked in Boston by an annual oration that continued until 1876. In 1798, members of Congress "and other citizens" sponsored a Fourth of July banquet at Fouquet's Tavern in Philadelphia. The toasts that went round saluted "National Independence"; "Republicanism, pure, genuine and elective"; and the Constitution—"may it be protected against

unconstitutional laws, the fatal effects of a system of alarm, and the reign of terror"—which was clearly a swipe at John Adams's presidency and the Sedition Act.[19] On the other hand, the same 1798 celebrations of the Fourth in July in Dedham, Massachusetts, rejoiced over "the birthday of American independence" by honoring "our free republican constitution" and "liberty and good government" while lauding Adams—"may his country never deny him that reward, which will be bestowed by his conscience and a posterity"—precisely for signing and enforcing the Sedition Act.[20]

Very quickly, the Fourth of July became a signifier of the Revolution as a whole, since (as one 19th-century elementary schoolbook stated flatly) "on that day this country became a nation; it threw off the shackles of colonial dependence."[21] The holiday also came to reflect contemporary debates over the meaning of the nation whose birth it celebrated. In 1788, for example, anti-Federalist critics of the new Constitution used the Fourth of July to stage a public burning of a copy of the Constitution, which promptly provoked a street brawl with Federalists, armed with clubs and paving stones, "fighting with greatest rage, and determined obstinacy."[22]

During the War of 1812, New York Federalists used the anniversary of independence to jab their Democratic opponents in a slightly less violent form for bringing an unwelcome war down on their heads. They ironically toasted to "the Conquest of Canada," which had been undertaken by "our soldiers without clothing—The chief commander wanting in military skill—Our numbers inferior to the enemy"—all of which they hoped would make President James Madison "weep for his ill-timed expedition."[23] In 1845, one correspondent of an Ohio newspaper complained that "*party*, political party" had in the previous year "attempted . . . to turn the patriotism and hollowed associations of this great day to party aggrandizement."[24] (Emphasis in original.) (And there were moments when some Americans seemed willing to turn the Fourth on its head through their actions rather than their words, as John Marshall did on July 4, 1784, when he bought four slaves, and again on July 4, 1787, when he bought two more.)[25]

Still, whatever reservations some Americans harbored about Adams or Madison as presidents, in the half century that followed independence, there was little shadow cast on the achievement of the Revolution itself.[26] Some argued that the memory of the Revolution could even allay the animosities that had set Federalists and Democrats at each other's political throats at the turn of the 19th century.[27] A "grateful recollection" of the Revolution's issues should, argued Massachusetts Representative Edward Everett in 1833, have "a natural tendency to soften the harshness of party" and "unite the patriotic feelings of every American."[28] But even when the nation was torn apart by the Civil War, Lincoln interpreted the twin victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg in July 1863 as a providential mark of solidarity with the revolutionary struggle, since "the cohorts of those who opposed the declaration that all men are created equal, 'turned tail' and ran" on the Declaration's anniversary.[29]

More than benefiting only Americans, the Revolution was also hailed as an international event. Thomas Paine thought it presaged an entirely "new method of thinking" in 1782. "We see with other eyes; we hear with other ears; and think with other thoughts, than those we formerly used," he concluded.[30] The Revolution spelled the end of "the institutions of the old world," claimed Brown University President Francis Wayland in 1833, so that "there can be no doubt that other governments, following our example, will be formed on the principles of equality of right."[31]

The Revolution was the great occasion that overthrew ancient habits of hierarchy. It demonstrated that liberty, not obedience, was the natural condition for human flourishing, and that alone made it an object of rejoicing for all who lived under tyranny. "When I anticipate . . . the future glory of my country," reflected Ramsay, "and the illustrious figure it will soon make on the theater of the world, my heart distends with generous pride for being an American." He continued,

> The tyrants and landlords of the Old World, who hold a great part of their fellow men in bondage because of their dependence for land, will be obliged to relax of their arbitrary

> treatment, when they find that America is an asylum for freemen from all quarters of the globe. . . . I am confident that the cause of America is the cause of Human Nature, and that it will extend its influence to thousands who will never see it, and procure them a mitigation of the cruelties and oppressions imposed by their arbitrary task-masters.[32]

"Yes," wrote the poet James Kirke Paulding in 1818,

> The bright day is dawning, when the West
> No more shall crouch before old Europe's crest,
> When men who claim thy birthright, liberty,
> Shall burst their leading strings and dare be free.
> Nor while they boast thy blessings, trembling stand,
> Like dastard slaves before her, cap in hand.[33]

Conversely, in 1804 some New York Federalists thought the Fourth of July might be high time to lay anti-British animosity to rest. They deplored the "reading or recital of the Declaration of Independence," with its fiery condemnation of the English king, as "at variance with the just and magnanimous sentiment which concludes the Declaration itself, that we hold '*our British Brethren*,' '*enemies in war*, IN PEACE FRIENDS.'"[34] (Emphasis in original.)

When the Marquis de Lafayette paid his 50th-anniversary visit to the United States in 1824, Pennsylvania Congressman Charles Ingersoll gave a speech marking the great and beneficent changes the Revolution had wrought. "The people have come to be treated with the respect of other sovereigns," Ingersoll declared, and through the example of the Revolution, "the political, intellectual, and physical state of man, is generally improved and improving." The gospel of the American Revolution, said Ingersoll,

> inculcates universal education; throws open all careers to all; superadds chemistry and natural philosophy to the arts of life,

> and political economy to the sciences of government; enacts laws by equal representation; simplifies their enforcement; restrains sparingly, punishes mildly; discourages hostilities, by leaving those to declare war who bear most of the brunt, and acquire least of the glory. Not that it pretends to remould humanity . . . but to give freer scope than heretofore to the doctrine, that . . . justice and moderation prevent wars; and that when they do occur, no military organisation can wage, abridge, or illustrate them like that patriotism, which thinks as well as feels.[35]

The Revolution could thus be celebrated both for what it had boldly achieved and for what it had wisely avoided. Monarchs and monarchists had boasted that "man was unable to govern himself," that a republic like the American one would be "tost by the violence of faction, corrupted by the intrigues of demagogues, or assailed by the sword of ambition" and would shortly force Americans "to undergo the same mutation of government which had overclouded the histories of Greece and Rome."[36] But Americans had taught them otherwise.

Celebrations of the revolutionary anniversary knew no geographical center. In 1813, the Georgian William Crawford, en route to France to serve as American diplomatic minister, jotted in his journal a description of a Fourth of July ceremony at sea, in which "the [crew], with clean Sunday clothes, were mustered, and the law of the United States read to them by their Commander."[37] A decade earlier, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark brought remembrance of the Revolution to the far side of the Mississippi for the first time on July 4, 1804, by firing one of their expedition's little swivel guns and naming a small stream Independence Creek.[38]

By 1845, remembering the Fourth throughout the West had become as formulaic as anything to be encountered in Boston, New York, or Philadelphia. In Cleveland, Independence Day began with a "salute upon the Square" by the local artillery company, which was "answered by a peal from the thirty-two pounder upon the hill . . . which waked the sleepiest

in these burghs with its resounding echoes." The streets "were thronged with pedestrians," and the firemen paraded their engines "bearing a genuine live Eagle," followed by local militia companies and "the Leland's City Band." A public meeting assembled to hear a reading of the Declaration, followed by an oration, a 500-seat dinner, and the inevitable evening "pyrotechnic exhibition" at the courthouse of "Rockets, serpents and Roman candles," topped off by a balloon ascension.[39]

A few hundred miles to the west in Springfield, Illinois, locals followed an almost identical pattern: A procession was "formed at the First Presbyterian Church" with "Standard Bearers," "Young Ladies," and "Young Gentlemen," followed by a reading of the Declaration of Independence, an oration, and then "a dinner" and "toasts."[40]

There is a certain quaint lack of originality in many of these observances. But the very sameness of these events, like Everett's call for a revival of revolutionary unity, was a statement of national solidarity.

Primers in Liberty

The work of remembering the Revolution could not be confined solely to the anniversary of independence or monuments to its battles. "The events of our war of independence . . . should be familiar 'as household words,' to the mind of every child of liberty," declared the *Gazette of the United States* in 1826. "He should learn valour from Bunker's Hill . . . *endurance* of privations from the sufferers of Valley Forge—temperance in success from the victory of Yorktown—and patriotic devotion . . . from the master genius who guided them all," the *Gazette* counseled.[41] (Emphasis in original.) If he (or she) didn't, he would have no one to blame but himself, since the schoolbooks and primers of the early republic teemed with exaltations of the Revolution.

One New Jersey education advocate argued that while in America, where "almost every practical question of importance . . . mixes itself up in politics," it was "fortunate that education is one of those few questions

on which men of all parties can and do meet." But this was only because in the most general sense, no one dissented from the view that the Revolution was fundamentally good.[42] "The love of liberty is natural to man," intoned John Russell's 1838 history textbook ("for the Use of Schools"), but Americans had inherited more than the usual share of it. "They had long cherished the republican principles which had carried them" across the Atlantic Ocean in the first place, and their victory in the Revolution was a universal warning "to those who, unmindful of the rights of the people, would lift against them the arm of power."[43]

Early republic educator Caleb Bingham posited that the Revolution created an "empire of freedom," and he prophesied in *The Columbian Orator*, a popular compilation of rhetoric for students, that it would "produce a revolution in morals as well as politics" around the globe.[44] Already, as Bingham noted in his companion schoolbook, *The American Preceptor*, "the whole European mind has undergone a revolution, neither confined to this or that country; but as general as the great causes which have given it birth, and still continue to feed its growth."[45]

Bingham also argued that the Revolution's intellectual influence extended to women: "Happily for the fair daughters of America, the thick mists of superstition and bigotry are vanishing away; and the sun of science begins to beam upon our land, and to irradiate the female mind." No wonder he could exhort "infant choirs, composed of male and female voices," to "join in praise of our political fathers." The words almost danced off Bingham's pages: "How transporting are the prospects of America! . . . Lo, a Ph[o]enix of empire rises from the ashes of the old world! . . . Here liberty has erected her standard, and bids defiance to despotism."[46]

It was no accident that Lincoln and Douglass took their earliest inspiration from such primers and preceptors.[47] And it was no accident either that when the immense crisis of the Civil War broke over Americans' heads, their instinct was to connect it to the Revolution. Lincoln repeatedly tied the campaign against slavery in the 1850s to the revolutionary example, arguing that slavery's opponents were "walking in the 'old paths' . . . of Washington."[48] He hoped that if the United States could

contain the spread of slavery by placing it "where Washington and Jefferson and Madison placed it, it *would* be in the course of ultimate extinction." (Emphasis in original.) Americans would then be "fighting it in the Jeffersonian, Washingtonian, and Madisonian fashion."[49]

When Lincoln departed from his home in Springfield in February 1861 for his inauguration, he spoke of bearing a burden "greater than that which rested upon Washington." Ten days later, he again conjured the revolutionary example by telling the New Jersey Senate how much his youthful imagination had been stimulated by "the struggle here at Trenton, New-Jersey" in 1776 for "the liberties of the people."[50]

But Lincoln's most ambitious claim to revolutionary bona fides came the following day. Speaking on Washington's birthday at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Lincoln explicitly linked his presidency to the principles of the Declaration of Independence: "All the political sentiments I entertain have been drawn, so far as I have been able to draw them, from the sentiments which originated, and were given to the world from this hall in which we stand." He had "pondered over the toils that were endured by the officers and soldiers of the army" and was willing to say, "If this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle, . . . I would rather be assassinated on this spot than to surrender it."[51]

Jefferson Davis, himself the son of a Revolutionary War veteran and the new president of the Confederacy, made a parallel claim to revolutionary connections, although on different grounds from Lincoln. The Confederacy "illustrate[d] the American idea that governments rest upon the consent of the governed, and that it is the right of the people to alter or abolish governments whenever they become destructive."[52] Davis chose Washington's birthday as the date for his formal inauguration in 1861, just a few weeks before Lincoln's. He took his oath standing at the base of an equestrian statue of Washington—a statue whose image became the iconic center of the Great Seal of the Confederacy.[53]

Lincoln and Davis were far from the only ones to link the Revolution with the secession crisis. "Another Bunker Hill is here—another revolution has begun," cried New York Representative John Cochrane to a

"great mass meeting" of "one hundred thousand" on New York City's Union Square in April 1861. "You are the men to participate in that revolution; you are the men who are to decide its results," he thundered. (A chorus of voices shouted back, "We will do it.")[54]

On the day after Fort Sumter's surrender, the *Chicago Tribune* declared, "The blood which conquered at Bennington and Yorktown . . . has risen, to battle heat. Woe to those who encounter it in the just cause of defending the legacy of our first Revolution."[55] A day later, the *Tribune* added that "from one end of the land to the other the old fire of the Revolution is kindled, and millions of stout hearts are beating responsive to their country's call."[56]

One of Stephen Foster's last songs, "Nothing but a Plain Old Soldier," connected a nonagenarian's service in the Revolution, when "my home and my country to me were dear / And I fought for both when the foe came near," with the present demands of a new war:

> Again the battle song is resounding,
> And who'll bring the trouble to an end?
> The Union will pout, and Secession ever shout,
> But none can tell us now which will yield or bend.
> You've had many generals from over the land,
> You've tried one by one but you're still at a stand,
> But when I took the field we had one in command,
> Yet I'm nothing but a plain old soldier. . . .
> But I've handled a gun,
> Where noble deeds were done,
> For the name of my commander,
> Was George Washington.[57]

There is an eerie echo of this call of the Revolution in the diary of Philadelphian Alexander Wallace Givin, who found himself impelled to enlist in the Union army by a dream

> that Genl Washington appeared to me looking me in the eye said as he raised his hand in a solemn manner, "This country must and shall be free." Then vanished. When I awoke and told the dream to my wife, I said that means for me to go and fight for my country and my flag. My wife said "Go and God be with you."[58]

Givin enlisted the next day in the 114th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry.

A House Divided

Despite the distance between 18th-century political factions such as the Federalists and Anti-Federalists and 19th-century politicians such as Lincoln and Davis, few contested the importance of celebrating the Revolution and its happy and desirable consequences across the century after 1776. There was, for instance, no example of an American monarchist party, no serious proposals for resubmission to British rule, and no repudiations of the revolutionary leaders that anyone could get away with without the risk of tar and feathers.

The Declaration of Independence, by contrast, took on much more controversial weight. It became clear from the 1830s onward that the source of that division was slavery, the continuation of which half the country increasingly deplored and the other half was determined to justify. And since the Declaration's principles became the polestar of the abolition movement, proslavery forces had to somehow either diminish or reinterpret the Declaration to reconcile the meaning of the founding with legalized enslavement.

The conflict over the Declaration and its legacy might be said to have begun even before the Continental Congress adopted the document in 1776. Thomas Jefferson had originally included in the Declaration a denunciation of the slave trade (although not slavery itself) as a "cruel war against human nature itself, violating the most sacred rights of life

and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him"—only to have it removed by the congress to placate states with many slaveholders.[59]

Not that Jefferson did much to draw attention to this deletion. Although in 1774 he had declared that "the rights of human nature" had been "deeply wounded" by the transatlantic slave trade and that "the abolition of domestic slavery is the great object of desire in those colonies, where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state," the deleted portions of the Declaration are something of a high-water mark in Jefferson's personal decisions about slavery and the slaves he owned.[60] He was perfectly cognizant that slavery was a danger to the new republic, but less because it conflicted with his own statement in 1776—that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable Rights, and that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness"—and more because he feared the bloody consequences of any insurrection American slaves might stage for their own liberty. (The Declaration explicitly condemned the king for having "excited domestic insurrections amongst us.") As president, Jefferson was perfectly happy to sign the legislation that banned the importation of slaves in 1808, but he had nothing in view that looked toward abolishing slavery itself. He concerned himself mostly with avoiding an uprising similar to the one that had driven the French from Saint-Domingue (modern-day Haiti).

At his best, Jefferson would claim in 1820 that "the cession of that kind of property (for so it is misnamed) is a bagatelle which would not cost me a second thought"—if it could be done painlessly for slave owners. "But as it is," he continued, "we have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other." Hence, nothing.[61] (He made a similar comment—"we have the wolf by the ears"—to Lydia Sigourney in 1824, but that was about "Indian rights," not black slavery.) At his worst, Jefferson was (unlike his Federalist opponents) stupendously indifferent to the plight of Toussaint L'Ouverture and the black republicans of Haiti,

a kind of personal Thermidor. Nor did he mind selling 85 slaves in the 1790s to pay for the French wines he had come to admire.[62]

Madison, who was the prime mover behind the Constitutional Convention, had long wondered whether emancipation "would certainly be more consonant to the principles of liberty."[63] Though the Madison family depended on slave labor, Madison himself hoped "to depend as little as possible on the labour of slaves."[64] When a slave who accompanied him to Congress in Philadelphia in 1783 refused to return with Madison to Virginia, Madison simply apprenticed him (for a fee) to a Philadelphia Quaker, since he could not "think of punishing him . . . merely for coveting that liberty for which we have paid the price of so much blood, and have proclaimed so often to be the right, & worthy the pursuit, of every human being."[65] This was still well short of emancipation, but it was far better than Jefferson's do-nothing-until-we-do-all approach.

There were many other Americans for whom the Revolution in general and the Declaration in particular made slavery increasingly and steeply unacceptable in the new republic. As early as 1780, *The New-Jersey Gazette* asked the Revolution's most logical question:

> While we are spilling our blood and exhausting our treasure in defence of our own liberty, it would not perhaps be amiss, to turn our eyes towards those of our fellow men now in bondage under us. We say, "all men are equally entitled to liberty and the pursuit of happiness" but are we willing to grant this liberty to all men?[66]

And if the Revolution alone didn't jog consciences on the subject, the juxtaposition of the American and Haitian revolutions did so for others. "If one treats the insurrection of the negroes as rebellion," asked one member of the Pennsylvania legislature in 1791, "what name can be given to that insurrection of Americans which secured their independence?"[67]

In postrevolutionary years, a ferment of emancipation continued to bubble. Massachusetts was the first, through a state constitutional provision and then a court decision, to remove legal protections for slavery. It was followed quickly by Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Vermont, New Jersey, and New York (although the abolition plans in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York followed gradual timetables; in New Jersey, there were still 18 lifetime "apprentices" in the 1860 census).

The new national Congress created by the 1787 Constitution dealt with proposals to tax slave imports; suppress the slave trade; readopt the Northwest Ordinance, which banned slavery from new territories between the Ohio River and the Great Lakes (a law the Confederation Congress had originally passed in 1787); lay restrictions on transporting slaves to the Mississippi and Louisiana territories; and receive petitions to "undo the heavy bur[d]ens, and prepare the way for the oppressed to go free, that every yoke may be broken."[68] And Congress could do that because, as John Quincy Adams insisted in the debates over the Louisiana Purchase, "the Constitution does not recognize *slavery*—it contains no such word." To the contrary, "a great circumlocution of words is used merely to avoid the term *slaves*."[69] (Emphasis in original.) So it was by no means surprising to hear Robert Jefferson Breckinridge, a Kentucky politician turned Old School Presbyterian minister, agree that "slavery cannot endure" in the American atmosphere:

> The just, and generous, and enlightened hearts and minds of those who own the slaves will not allow the system to endure. State after state, the example has caught and spread—New-England—New-York—the Middle States on the seaboard; one after another have taken the question up, and decided it, all alike. The state of slavery is ruinous to the community that tolerates it, under all possible circumstances; and is most cruel and unjust to its victims. No community that can be induced to examine the question, will, if it be wise, allow such a canker

> in its vitals; nor, if it be just, permit such wrong. We argue from the nature of the case, and the constitution of man.[70]

A Proposition of Dangerous Import

Breckinridge's sweet reasoning pointed to one way the new republic might ease away from the taint of slavery, even if he didn't exactly consider how the race of the emancipated slaves would enter into discussions of the equality promised in the Declaration of Independence. Instead, every rumor of slave insurrection froze the blood and hardened the hearts of slave owners like Jefferson, who was convinced that "if something is not done, and soon done, we shall be the murderers of our children"—without doing that obvious *something*.[71]

Even citizens of states that had ended slavery had no desire to see their commercial relations with slaveholders disturbed. And they had even less reason by the 1830s, when new technical developments in processing cotton made slave labor appear ideal for the cheap production of the Industrial Revolution's prime commodity. What was needed to ease slaveholders' pain at the unhappy collision of the Declaration and commercial profit was an ideological principle that would roll back the Declaration's confident description of all men as equal—and this was provided by the wave of toxic Romanticism that lapped up to America's Enlightenment shores.[72]

No one embodied Romantic politics more defiantly than South Carolina's John C. Calhoun. Calhoun went straight to the root of American political self-understanding by insisting that the Declaration, by taking inalienable natural rights as its fundamental premise, was an enormous mistake. "There had never been a proposition of such dangerous import, or which had been so misunderstood, or been productive of so much evil" as the notion that "certain inalienable rights" were natural to anyone, he argued. The notion of natural rights, distributed equally across the human species, was a mere "hypothetical truism," since

"nothing can be more unequal than the quantum of liberty assigned to each individual."[73]

He asserted that liberty, for instance, is not an inherent right, hardwired into every individual, but "a reward to be earned, not a blessing to be gratuitously lavished on all alike." Some people, by Calhoun's estimate, were "too ignorant, degraded and vicious, to be capable either of appreciating or of enjoying it" and thus should not have liberty handed to them in any practical way.[74]

For Calhoun, the obvious example of "some people" was Africans and their enslaved descendants in America. For the "African race," slavery was not simply a labor system to which the power of nations had arbitrarily assigned it but "a positive good" that raised it up and bestowed as much in the way of blessing as it was capable of receiving. Until some sign appeared that "the black race" had moved beyond what Calhoun deemed ignorance, degradation, and viciousness, in slavery it must stay. "I hold [slavery] to be a good, as it has thus far proved itself to be," he asserted in 1837, "and will continue to prove so if not disturbed by the fell spirit of abolition."[75]

Calhoun believed that uneasy whites who appealed to the Declaration and its "created equal" language to condemn black slavery were simply fooling themselves. "If we trace it back," he declared before the Senate in 1848, "we shall find the proposition" about equality "expressed in the Declaration of Independence" had been "inserted in our Declaration of Independence without any necessity." According to Calhoun, the real origins of the American Revolution did not lie in any appeal to the Enlightenment's metaphysics but were instead evolutionary, as British colonists used, developed, and asserted traditional English liberties.[76]

In his telling, the impulse and objects of the Revolution shrank down to the dimensions of a fiscal dispute. Calhoun maintained that "breach of our chartered privileges, and lawless encroachment on our acknowledged and well-established rights by the parent country, were the real causes" of the Revolution, and these were "of themselves sufficient, without resorting to any other, to justify the step . . . in constructing the governments which were substituted in the place of the colonial."[77]

Like the European Romantics, history was for Calhoun an organic process, not a revelation of fixed natural law, and it emerged from the experience and emotional unities people in specific nations felt for each other, their customs, and their land. The American republic was simply a long-term outgrowth of English cultural identity, and it therefore was bound to reveal itself in new developments, in different places, and among the relations of different peoples by "slow and successive experience" for "correction and adaptation."[78]

Calhoun was particularly agitated from the 1820s onward by his resentment of the commercial possibilities that a republic of equal citizens might exploit to disadvantage an agricultural (and slave-owning) elite. The "manufacturing interest" was already beginning to "rear up a moneyed aristocracy" in America, he warned. Though Americans might at that moment see freedom and slavery as the primary national problem dividing "the manufacturing States" and "the Agricultural States," Calhoun (like David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus, and ultimately Karl Marx) foresaw that "the time will come when it will produce the same results between the several classes" and "the contest will be between the capitalists and operatives."[79]

The plantation system, by contrast, preserved what Calhoun imagined was a humane balance among labor, capital, and the environment. Every "plantation is a little community of itself," Calhoun believed, where generous-minded white men cared for contented and grateful black slaves in a quasi-medieval idyll. "Property in our slaves," he argued, "is but wages purchased in advance including the support and supplies of the laborers, which is usually very liberal." And "it ought to be a principle of morals and patriotism," he wrote to Edmund Ruffin in 1835, "that no gain is legitimate that does not leave the land as productive as it was before it was taken."[80]

The result, ironically, was that an imagined money oligarchy was replaced by an all-too-real slave oligarchy. Madison had feared this among the vices of the classical republics he had cataloged before the Constitutional Convention, warning, "In proportion as slavery prevails in a State, the Government, however democratic in name, must be aristocratic in

fact."[81] Whereas a republic demands equality and equality ensures mobility, oligarchy is about hierarchy and stasis for all classes, free and slave alike. "Society is a pyramid," explained the placid editor of the *Nashville Daily Gazette* late in 1860. "We may sympathize with the stones at the bottom of the pyramid of Cheops, but we know that some stones have to be at the bottom, and that they must be permanent in their place."[82]

Calhoun was the most prominent voice questioning the Declaration of Independence's place in the American experience. Only slightly less mincing was the judgment of Henry St. George Tucker—a judge, member of Congress, and professor of law at Jefferson's alma mater, the College of William & Mary, and later at Jefferson's University of Virginia—who drew strict constitutional lines around what kind of independence the Declaration had actually fashioned. Colonies had already declared their independence individually and practically before the Declaration was even composed, Tucker argued, and from that moment, "all dependence on, and connexion with, Great Britain, absolutely and forever ceased." In fact, no declaration by the Continental Congress was even necessary; only "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind required a declaration of the causes, which impelled the separation . . . was proper to give notice of the event to the nations of Europe."[83]

What lay immediately behind this argument was the conviction that the states had staked out their own sovereignty before the collective declaration of July 1776, and they were thus entitled to resume it once slavery seemed to be under threat. The American Revolution and the Declaration were simply afterthoughts.[84] "The time must come," warned William & Mary history professor Thomas Roderick Dew in 1836, when slavery would rescue the nation from its outdated principles. "Domestic slavery, such as ours," he posited, "is the only institution which I know of, that can secure that spirit of equality among freemen, so necessary to the true and genuine feeling of republicanism."[85]

The zeal for "domestic slavery" finally pushed some Southerners into stating what most could not: that not only the Declaration but also the Revolution itself had been a vast mistake. In his infamous "Cornerstone

Speech" in March 1861, the Confederate vice president, Alexander H. Stephens, grasped the nettle most others had been unwilling to touch and denounced the entire revolutionary era for resting "upon the assumption of the equality of races." Unlike the Revolution, he argued, the Confederacy was "the first government ever instituted upon the principles in strict conformity to nature, and the ordination of Providence, in furnishing the materials of human society"—which, in a phrase, were the tenets of white supremacy.[86]

The revolutionary generation had failed to see this, but that failure was merely expected in the organic unfolding of history. "This truth has been slow in the process of its development," Stephens freely acknowledged, but "all truths are and ever . . . slow in development," and it had taken 85 years for racial dominance to be "admitted" as the true principle of government. It only made good evolutionary sense for Stephens to ask, "May we not, therefore, look with confidence to the ultimate universal acknowledgment of the truths upon which our system rests?"[87]

The doubts of Calhoun, Tucker, Dew, and finally Stephens generated a revulsion among antislavery activists, who were incredulous at the proposition that the Revolution had done nothing to promote either national unity or an end to slavery. Nothing seemed clearer to the Southern-born abolitionist Angelina Grimké in 1836 "that slavery is contrary to the declaration of our independence" and "reduces a *man* to a *thing*."[88] (Emphasis in original.) The black abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet described the Declaration to the National Convention of Colored Citizens in Buffalo, New York, in 1843 as "a glorious document" whose "sentiments . . . fell in burning eloquence" on the hearts of the revolutionary generation.[89]

In his celebrated pamphlet, *Appeal* [. . .] *to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, black abolitionist David Walker challenged Americans to consider the hypocrisy that the Declaration illuminated. "Compare your own language . . . from your Declaration of Independence," he demanded,

> with your cruelties and murders inflicted by your cruel and unmerciful fathers. . . .

> Now, Americans! I ask you candidly, was your sufferings under Great Britain, one hundredth part as cruel and tyrannical as you have rendered ours under you?[90]

It similarly enraged the most famous of American abolitionists, William Lloyd Garrison, that "every Fourth of July, our Declaration of Independence is produced, with a sublime indignation, to set forth the tyranny of the mother country," when side by side Americans practiced "such a glaring contradiction as exists between our creed and practice."[91] Garrison was not sure he could "stand up before a European assembly, and exult that [he was] an American citizen," without "the recollection of [his] country's barbarity and despotism" blistering [his] lips.[92] The nation that had unfurled the Declaration as its banner and proposed to fling it out to the world as an example—"We, the boasted pattern for the world"—had "cut down the banner of freedom," exclaimed a contributor to the *Oberlin Evangelist* four months after Calhoun spoke of the Declaration as dangerous, "and planted in its stead the black flag of slavery!!"[93]

But the attempt to diminish the Declaration and the American Revolution in the interests of slavery met its most famous rhetorical check in the famous 1858 debates between Stephen A. Douglas and Lincoln as both vied for the senior US Senate seat from Illinois. From the opening of the campaign in July 1858 until Election Day in November, Douglas never stopped declaring that Lincoln's opposition to slavery meant that Lincoln wanted to abolish slavery, move the freed slaves into Illinois, and give them equal civil rights with white Illinoisans.

> I ask you, are you in favor of conferring upon the negro the rights and privileges of citizenship? Do you desire to strike out of our state constitution that clause which keeps slaves and free negroes out of the state, and allow the free negroes to flow in, and cover your prairies with black settlements? Do you desire to turn this beautiful state into a free negro colony in order that when Missouri abolishes slavery, she can send one

> hundred thousand emancipated slaves into Illinois to become citizens and voters on an equality with yourselves? If you desire negro citizenship, if you desire to allow them to come into the state and settle with the white man, if you desire them to vote on an equality with yourselves, and to make them eligible to office, to serve on juries, and to judge your rights, then support Mr. Lincoln and the Black Republican party, who are in favor of the citizenship of the negro.[94]

Douglas was, at that moment, performing two tricks in political theory: One was his insistence that any advocacy of equal rights included *all* rights—natural, civil, and social; the other was his equally tenacious insistence that black people were not people in the sense the Declaration intended when it described all men as created equal. Douglas believed that the United States was "made by white men, for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever, and I am in favor of confining citizenship to white men, men of European birth and descent, instead of conferring it upon negroes, Indians and other inferior races."[95]

In reply, Lincoln defended the Declaration's absolutism on equality, which placed him squarely on the side of black humanity. "Let us discard all this quibbling about . . . this race and that race and the other race being inferior, and therefore they must be placed in an inferior position," Lincoln urged at the beginning of the Lincoln–Douglas contest of 1858.[96] But he drew a common 19th-century distinction between the natural rights and civil and social rights to which that humanity was entitled. Natural rights were the inalienable endowment enjoyed by every human being, regardless of race, nationality, or even gender; civil and social rights were bestowed by political communities so that different nations may award different opportunities in different ways to different portions of their societies.

Lincoln was not bold enough in 1858 to insist that the Declaration mandated civil and social rights. "I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and black races," he answered Douglas. But he did make it clear that African Americans unquestionably enjoyed

an equality of *natural* rights that made slavery an impossibility in a free republic. Lincoln held that "there is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence—the right of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"—and that "he is as much entitled to these as the white man." Determinations about civil and social rights were the privilege of democratic societies, but not natural rights, which were nonnegotiable. "In the right to eat the bread without the leave of anybody else which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every other man," Lincoln concluded.[97]

Their Immortal Declaration

It would take a bloody civil war to lay Calhoun's dissent—a dissent from the centrality of the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence as events of world-historical import—in the dust. That war was led by Lincoln, who protested that its outcome would reestablish the republic on the "proposition" that had been articulated "four score and seven years" before.[98] In that respect, the Civil War was really a war to decide the long-term outcome of the Revolution—whether it was strictly an 18th-century political event or whether it embodied ideas with irresistible and ongoing application.

At its close, Lincoln's secretary of state and onetime rival, William Henry Seward, pleaded for national reconciliation by appealing to the remembrance of the Revolution and its principles. "The people who have so steadily adhered to the true path of democratic progress and civilization . . . through so many difficulties and at such fearful cost in war," he suggested, will now surely have new "inducements and encouragements to persevere" in "the political equality of all men, which the founders, in their immortal declaration, laid down as the true basis of the Union."[99]

But the place of the Revolution in American historical memory was already shifting. By the 1876 centennial exposition in Philadelphia, it was

appearing in new garb as the freedom to invent new technology. The Revolution would be celebrated for not only American "victories over enemies, foreign and domestic," but

> victories over climate, earth and water . . . clearing away the forests . . . inventing the locomotive engine, to carry, whither they will, the millions of people of the Old World seeking here free homes; inventing the telegraph, to annihilate time and space . . . the sewing machine, to emancipate women from their life's chief drudgery. . . . We but stand upon the threshold of our greatness.[100]

Only 30 years later, the historian Carl Lotus Becker would formulate his famous progressive objection that the Revolution was as much about who would rule at home as it was about home rule. Becker would be followed in 1913 by Charles A. Beard's even more progressive insistence that the founders were a self-interested elite whose chief aim in the Revolution was cementing their own class power. "Our fundamental law was not the product of an abstraction known as the 'whole people,'" Beard proposed in *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, "but of a group of economic interests which must have expected beneficial results from its adoption."[101]

Like Calhoun, progressivism erased principle for interest, replacing race with class as the hidden hand in the American founding. Like Calhoun again, progressives produced a worldly wise understanding of the Revolution, and it blends conveniently with a postmodern sensibility that reduces all propositions to matters of mere economic power. Whether this sensibility is anything that the first 100 years of the Revolution and the Declaration would recognize is another question, one that the 250th anniversary of independence cannot avoid pondering.

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