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The American Revolution at the Movies

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For as long as cinema has existed, people have made movies about the American Revolution. Thomas Edison shot *Bowling Green* around 1896, a date often used to mark the beginnings of the art form.[1] Movies exploring the nation's founding have kept coming in fits and starts ever since, spanning genres from drama to western, fantasy, comedy, musical, and yes, pornography. (Not to be overlooked: *The Spirit of Seventy Sex* appears to have been the only theatrical release sort of about the founding to debut in the nation's bicentennial year.) The filmed version of *Hamilton: An American Musical*, for which Disney paid a whopping $75 million in 2020, is the most recent major entry in the canon.[2] Surely it will not be the last.

And yet, throughout that century and a quarter, movies about the beginnings of the United States have been, almost without exception, stinkers. The problem isn't chiefly one of material or talent. *The Spy* (1914), one of the first major studio releases on the subject, was, after all, "Written by the Greatest Writer of Indian Stories, James Fenimore Cooper. Produced by the Great Special Feature Director, Otis Turner," and "Acted by an Exceptional Cast," as *Billboard* crowed.[3] And still, pffft.

Generations of decorated playwrights, novelists, historians, lyricists, and dramaturges; top-grossing directors; bankable stars—all have foundered on the shoals of the Revolution. None has produced a standard-setting work of film or history, let alone both. There is no American Revolution battle picture with the punch-in-the-gut impact of *Glory* (1989), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), or *Platoon* (1986). No biopic with the insight of *Lincoln* (2012) or *Patton* (1970) or, lest you mutter, "It can't be

done for ye olden days," *Amadeus* (1984). Despite the prolonged impact of the long war for independence on those left behind and a profusion of excellent recent scholarship on women who traveled with the armies, there is no home-front drama with the resonance of *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) or *The Deer Hunter* (1978). And no cinematic breakthrough like *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). If D. W. Griffith's Redemptionist spectacle wrote history with lightning, as Woodrow Wilson is alleged to have said, his Revolution picture, *America* (1924), wrote it with a soggy breadstick.[4]

Why has so much money and talent chased a story so dramatic and important for so many years with so little to show for the hunt? "It remains one of the mysteries of the American cinema why the incredibly dramatic and complex birth of the nation has provided such infertile ground for motion pictures," *Variety* opined in 2000, before making the boneheaded claim that Roland Emmerich's *The Patriot*, starring Mel Gibson, had cracked the case.[5] *The Patriot*, a.k.a. *Braveheart Part Deux*, did no such thing. Still, the question is a good one. For the failures, in all their box-office-bombing glory, have something to tell us about not only the shifting shapes of American culture but also the Revolution itself.

But what? In pursuit of answers, not to mention happiness, I screened a spate of American Revolution pictures with the least randomized, most unrepresentative of focus groups: a couple dozen members of Monticello's staff. We are deeply and perhaps to a distorting degree committed to holding "these truths," though we tried not to let our penchant for historical fact get in the way of a good story when there was one to be found, which was pretty much never. We ate a lot of popcorn, endured a gaggle of turkeys, and hypothesized some truths about why depictions of the Revolution on the silver screen struggle with beginnings, endings, scope, and scale that are less than "self-evident" but may help our own storytelling for 2026 and beyond.

The Problem of Beginnings

If you've ever graded a student's paper on any subject, you know something of the problem of beginnings: that tendency to circle the airport at 30,000 feet, describing the clouds, before finally touching down three paragraphs later. The problem of beginnings is a transcendent narrative challenge, faced by every creator in every medium. The American Revolution offers a particular case in point, for it is an origin story, and as in many origin stories, there is always a turtle beneath the turtle on whose back the world rests. It's hard for a director to begin a story about the first turtle when it's turtles all the way down.

Before I blame John Ford—and blame him I must—let me acknowledge that people of the founding generation recognized the challenge. In 1818, John Adams wrote to the Baltimore newspaper editor Hezekiah Niles, asking, "What do We mean by the American Revolution?" The transformation had been longer and deeper than the war itself. "The Revolution was in the Minds and Hearts of the People. A Change in their Religious Sentiments of their Duties and Obligations," he suggested. *That* shift—"the real American Revolution"—Adams dated to "the Annihilation of the French Dominion in America," around about 1760. Others pushed what Adams called "an awakening and a revival of American Principles and Feelings" still earlier.[6] Thomas Jefferson argued in 1774 that something in the character of the remote Saxon ancestry of British émigrés to North America had predisposed them to free trade, rights claiming, and perhaps even independence.[7]

A great deal of scholarship about the Revolution has followed suit, paring the onion, layer by layer, to find the points of national origin. Starting the road to the American Revolution at the forks of the Monongahela in 1754 may be a perfectly reasonable strategy for a college textbook. But it's a disaster for a feature film hoping to accomplish its business in something under three hours.[8] There are good reasons Oliver Stone didn't begin *Platoon* with the French colonization of Indochina, nor Steven Spielberg *Schindler's List* (1993) with the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492.

Movie after movie, for decade after decade, has failed to convincingly establish the beginning of the revolutionary plot, attempting instead to tell the whole story of the whole of *us*. Griffith's silent *America* opens at some nondescript moment in the 1760s with establishing shots of families playing innocently as soldiers on Lexington Green. Title cards allude to George III and his "evil counselors," as well as to the deposed Massachusetts Governor Francis Bernard, no more a household name in 1924 than he is a century later.[9]

The fighting started before the opening frames of Ford's *Drums Along the Mohawk*, his founding-as-Western epic. Released in 1939, the same year as *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz*, the visual markers of *Drums Along the Mohawk* are so generically "ye olden days" that the production might conceivably have reused costumes from either of those—and possibly both. Log forts, covered wagons, hoopskirts, and indeterminate Injuns seem to have wandered in from other Ford films set in the transmountain West. Visually, as my sons might say, it's giving *1849*.[10]

The Howards of Virginia, a black-and-white 1940 Cary Grant vehicle that numbers among the best of this motley lot, begins in 1754 with its protagonists as schoolchildren and has to grow an entire adult cast before Patrick Henry can thunder his clarion call for liberty or death at the Virginia Convention in Richmond.[11]

In a couple of the zaniest films that could conceivably fit under the big battle tent of the Revolutionary War picture, the squishiness of time is signal rather than noise. Abbott and Costello's raucous ghost story, *The Time of Their Lives*, released in 1946 as a seemingly conscious send-up of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, tacks between the Benedict Arnold and Major John André conspiracy of 1780 and its present day, with plenty of in-jokes about the moviemaking itself. ("Pardon me, didn't I see you in *Rebecca*?" asks a visitor to Danbury Manor of the creepy Mrs. Danvers–style housekeeper.) As the modern-day players search for a letter from George Washington that's the key to the slapstick mystery, another muses, "From butler to psychiatrist in six generations—now that's democracy for you!"[12]

A gentler and wiser then-and-now humor animates *Sweet Liberty* (1986), written by, directed by, and starring Alan Alda, about whom I will not say an unkind word because he reminds me of my dad.[13] Alda plays Michael Burgess, a motorcycle-riding professor of history at a fictional college who has written a deeply researched book about the very real 1781 Battle of Cowpens that's being turned into a film. Michael Caine plays the dual role of actor Elliott James and character Banastre Tarleton as delicious dastards—duelists and winking lechers. The plot gets its energy from the filming of a movie within the movie, as the Hollywood adaptation of Burgess's book pits the professor's faithfulness to the past against the hungers of the box office.

"So I changed a couple of the jokes!" says the scriptwriter, played by Bob Hoskins.

"It didn't have any jokes!" Burgess thunders back. "The American Revolution was not a goddamned vaudeville show!"[14] Alda's character spends much of the film in piqued astonishment about how little people know and how much less they care about the period to which he's devoted his scholarly life.[15]

And this, surely, is part of the problem with the Revolution on film. Successful films count on and burnish at least partial knowledge of the Civil War, which lives on powerfully, viscerally, in American culture.[16] World War II is only just passing from living memory; Vietnam will reside there for decades to come. The Revolution has no such engines of memory and culture behind it, which also means no ready-made audience.

Feature-film directors force themselves to teach—to act as documentarians—in part because it's impossible to presume common knowledge of a complex, long-ago conflict, especially when the instructional energies devoted to it have been scant. High school American history surveys blow by the Revolution in a couple of weeks at most. At the college level, there are many times more offerings on the Civil War.[17] At all levels, most courses on the American founding teach the era's ideas—the war of the press and the pen—rather than its military, political, or social history.

Fifteen years ago, the American Revolution Center conducted a national survey of adult knowledge about the period, and the results were sobering: Nine in 10 of those surveyed thought they would pass a basic test about the period, and eight in 10 of them were wrong. “Americans highly value, but vastly overrate, their knowledge of the Revolutionary period and its significance,” the History News Network reported, rather understating the case.[18]

The center has since become Philadelphia’s insightful and dramatic Museum of the American Revolution. (Full disclosure: I served as a trustee of the museum.) But though the museum and many other civic institutions and educational projects are doing their level best to share the content, skills, and dispositions needed to create the memory that sustaining the Revolution’s principles requires, the knowledge gap seems only to grow.

As measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), student proficiency in US history is not only dismal but declining, with eighth graders nationwide scoring five points lower on average in 2022 than in 2018. Eighth-grade US history, for those who, like me, have deliberately blocked out all memory of that year, is typically when the founding era is taught. Twelve percent of students surveyed by the NAEP offered a proficient answer to the rights included in the Bill of Rights. Fewer than half could complete a matching exercise linking grievances as expressed in the Declaration of Independence to provisions for combating them in the Constitution. About the Revolution’s causes and consequences, the NAEP did not even pose a question.[19]

“I was trying to make history readable, not obliterate it!” Alda’s Burgess tells the movie-within-a-movie’s tone-deaf director.

Comes the response: “Well, who really knows what happened a couple hundred years ago?”[20]

The Promise and Perils of 1776

"Screw historical accuracy! This day is costing us at least $300,000!!" shouts Bo Hodges (Saul Rubinek), the fictional director of *Sweet Liberty*'s film within a film, before shooting a battle scene. He reminds Alda's truth-holding Professor Burgess that successful movies need young audiences, and young audiences want to see a movie do three things: "Defy authority, destroy property, and take people's clothes off."[21]

The American Revolution featured all of those, of course. Still, the point is worth noting: A movie with no audience is, by definition, a failure. If people won't pay to see it, the producers and distributors lose money. And if they lose money, they're unlikely to reinvest in the subject.[22] The threshold for period dramas is higher; it's expensive to counterfeit the olden days.

Of course, so is the world-building required to bring fantasy epics such as *The Lord of the Rings* to life. Making the trilogy cost a reported $281 million. But the return on investment was stratospheric; globally, the three *Lord of the Rings* films grossed nearly $3 billion.[23]

What would it mean to create a $3 billion global market for films about the American Revolution? To ask the question is to ponder what cinema does well. It entertains by plunging us into predicaments that feel real, open-ended, and urgent. The question of *Apollo 13* (1995) is only superficially "Will the astronauts make it back alive?" Ron Howard's movie transcends time and place because it prompts questions that resonate with any viewer: Am I a leader or a follower? When, not if, the emergency arises, will I be equal to the task? Maybe even: What does it mean for a country and its people to dare great things by risking terrible mistakes?

The people and predicaments of the American Revolution not only can but *should* provoke humanistic questions of this sort. Flawed heroes abound. Monticello's Jefferson—the guy who wrote the thing, as we call him in these parts—was America's enduring vernacular philosopher of liberty who enslaved more than 610 people over his lifetime, all the while knowing that slavery was a profound moral wrong. I'd watch that biopic,

especially if Damian Lewis played Jefferson. Excellent source material proliferates. If Lin-Manuel Miranda could tease *Hamilton* from Ron Chernow's doorstop biography, imagine what Steven Spielberg could do with Annette Gordon-Reed's *The Hemingses of Monticello*. Imagine the biopic in which (Lewis's) Jefferson was, in the end, only one among many founders. That would be good history, good cinema, and—dare I say it?—good for America.

But it would be no simple matter to achieve. Hugh Hudson's *Revolution* (1985), starring Al Pacino, surely represents one of the worst investments of time, talent, and treasure in film history, if not in US history. Hudson, an Etonian who knew his way around a war picture, had breakthrough success with *Chariots of Fire* (1981), for which he received an Oscar nomination and won a slew of BAFTAs. What possessed him to tackle Britain's American War, much less to cast Pacino, fresh from *Scarface* (1983), in the lead, is a question better fit for a psychologist than a historian.

The action begins in July 1776, when the Declaration of Independence is read aloud in New York City. (That this actually happened on July 9, and not, as the title tells us, July 4, is the most minor of problems against what follows.) Pacino, playing an illiterate backwoods boatman named Tom Dobb, pulls up to the wharves, looking for work. He finds instead trouble with a capital T, right there in East River city.

Swept into a righteous conflict, he finds only villains. The Tories are rouged fops. The British are sadistic pedophiles. The Patriots are desperate and unprincipled, press-ganging men and even boys (like Tom's suffering son) into the army. Even Washington takes up the lash, flogging wounded men back to the front lines. "*Government is the problem*," joked one Monticello staffer. It was definitely not morning in Hudson's Ronald Reagan–era fantasy of American beginnings.

The film's failures of pace, plot, character, and scene are too numerous to count. Suffice to say that the English county of Devon makes a poor stand-in for Yorktown.[24] The viewer has no idea what this cruel war is over, though Dobbs makes mention in the final frames of heading west to "find us a place . . . where there ain't nobody better than you."[25]

On screen, there ain't nobody worse: Pacino is, in a word, dire, his gelled coif in full '80s glory even amid the filth of flight and battle, his character less stable than his accent, which bounces from Bonnybridge to Bensonhurst and back, sometimes in a single sentence. *New York*'s David Denby compared the performance to "Chico Marx with a head cold."[26] The actor later told his authorized biographer that the film had been released incomplete, suggesting that "more cutting—viewing the movie more as a silent film" might have saved the day.[27] More Harpo, less Chico.

The makers of *Revolution* went big and went home far poorer than they started. Could they throw it over their shoulder like a Continental soldier? They could not. From a budget of $28 million (more than $80 million in 2025 dollars), *Revolution* grossed less than $400,000.[28]

The emptiness at the film's core, comments Brandon Dillard, who directs Monticello's historic interpretation, is the absence of story. A historical film is like the journey through a historic site. "No amount of content knowledge can make a good tour, but a great story will," Dillard notes. *Revolution* had flags—really good flags!—and extras aplenty, but the plot lacked the narrative arc to sustain even a trailer. On Rotten Tomatoes, *Revolution* has earned the rare distinction of a score of 10 . . . on a scale from one to 100.[29]

After *Revolution* bombed, Pacino went to ground for several years. "It was that single film that took the rug out from under me," he recalled.[30] The critic Leonard Maltin predicted that such a "mega-bomb" augured ill for the future. "Only a half-dozen or so movies have dealt more than superficially with the Revolutionary War." He predicted that "it'll be 2776 until we get another."[31]

It took only 15 years till the disaster movie magnate Roland Emmerich, fresh off the global success of the intergalactic action film *Independence Day* (1996), decided to pursue the story of an independence battle much closer to home. Columbia Pictures invested over $110 million in *The Patriot* (2000), starring Mel Gibson, who had cut his blinding white teeth on battle pictures both imperial (*Gallipoli* and *Braveheart*) and cosmic (*Mad Max*).[32] In addition to enlisting a star-studded cast, Emmerich

commissioned a score from John Williams, which has the resonance and the drive of Aaron Copland on acid.

As history, *The Patriot* is wretched, bearing the same relationship to the colonial past as *Godzilla* does to herpetology, as the historian David Hackett Fischer quipped.[33] The most noxious of its failures of fact include the script's treatment of the non-white population. The action takes place almost entirely in South Carolina, a colony more deeply implicated in the plantation nexus than any other on the mainland. Yet its black population—which constituted the majority of its residents—is portrayed as fulfilled, self-determining, and, at least in the household of our protagonist, Benjamin Martin (Gibson), free, which would have been anomalous if not illegal in the revolutionary period. The plot extols the derring-do of militiamen who answer to nobody and deprecates the effectiveness of Continental soldiers who play by the rules of war, a choice at odds with American history and one striking indeed in a movie released only five years after the carnage Timothy McVeigh inflicted on federal workers and their children in the Oklahoma City bombing.

As over-the-top action, *The Patriot* partly succeeds. Emmerich keeps the focus tightly on Martin and his family. Gibson brings the sword-swinging, axe-wielding, whites-of-his-eyes energy he displayed several years earlier in *Braveheart* (1995), absent the blue paint and with the addition of a low-slung ponytail. There is no ambiguity at all about the nature of the enemy. The Patriots are Good, colonials who ally with the Crown are Bad, and the British themselves are Worst, either bloodthirsty sadists or sniveling placemen not even a dog can respect. Martin's alienation of the affection of two Great Danes owned by General Charles Cornwallis offers some of the picture's scant comic relief. Even when the action strains credibility, it's a good bet to root for the man whom dogs love, especially if he can swing a mean tomahawk.

And root audiences did: Whatever else can be said about Emmerich's imagined past, it repaid its producers' considerable investment, grossing more than $215 million, nearly half of that outside the United States.[34] A singular accomplishment for an industry where freedom is anything but free.

Where *Revolution* and *The Patriot* reveal the challenges and opportunities of cinematic maximalism, Peter H. Hunt's *1776* (1972), the filmed version of the 1969 Tony Award–winning theatrical musical by Peter Stone and Sherman Edwards, showcases the power of a focused minimalism inherent in the genre of filmed play. Both time and space are tightly controlled—a bottle episode. The action takes place almost entirely in one room in Philadelphia's Independence Hall in June 1776. Characters unfurl themselves quickly through song and silence: the obnoxiousness of Adams ("Sit Down, John"), the braggadocio of Richard Henry Lee ("The Lees of Old Virginia"), the cold calculation of enslaver Edward Rutledge ("Molasses to Rum"), and the uxoriousness of both Adams ("Till Then" and "Yours, Yours, Yours") and Jefferson ("He Plays the Violin").

Dramatists and historians alike can learn a good deal from the synoptic qualities of musicals. A leitmotif may be a biographer's best friend. Yet while controlling the scene of the action, Hunt, Stone, and Edwards allow dispatches from the outside world—literal dispatches. Abigail writes to John. A nameless courier from the Continental Army, the rare common man in a roomful of dandies, pops in to declaim letters from Washington, taking us into the bloody fields and the starving encampments. Each of his messages concludes with "Your obedient [snare drum], *G. Washington*," returning us to Congress's knowledge of what's happening beyond the fourth wall and why it matters. The courier's power ballad, "Momma Look Sharp," reminds us that war, even bewigged 18th-century war, is hell.

1776 is imperfect as both play and cinema. It's talky, with a great deal of debate and much less singing than a typical musical, 11 numbers to *Hamilton*'s 46. It has pacing problems, including one of the longest first acts in the history of musical theater. The cast—those 56 men battling it out in Congress—represents only the merest sliver of the 2.5 million people of the rebellious 13 colonies, all of whom, in their varied and often opposed ways, were founders of the United States.[35] But by gosh and by golly, we know what the fight is about, both the war for home rule and the war for who will rule at home. We can sense the tensions of the future:

the cleavages of race, condition, and section that would roil the nation for generations and roil it still.

Yet Hunt, like Stone and Edwards before him, is confident in his powers of synecdoche: making a part stand in for the whole. Without synecdoche, historical cinema becomes mere visual encyclopedia. In *Glory*, we allow Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the brave, doomed men of the 54th Massachusetts to represent the tensions within the North and between North and South, the moral arc of the Civil War, and indeed the vicissitudes of War Itself, all in a tight two hours.

War pictures across a wide swath of time and space harness the power of synecdoche as few other genres do. The brigade, the battle, the camp, the casualty, the grunt, the general, the sadistic commandant—each is offered, with profound moral clarity, as a grain of sand that contains dizzying worlds. The formula works outside the United States and across the broad sweep of American history. Think *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) or even the ultimate battle-bottle episode, *Das Boot* (1981). But in too many American Revolution movies, we are everywhere, everyone, all at once. What makes the Revolution so relatively immune to a timeworn storytelling formula?

Who Is This "We, the People"?

As in its later cinematic incarnations, the history of the American Revolution resists easy narration. Its middle and ending are as murky as its beginnings. And its epic cast is hard to get a handle on. For the North America of the founding generation consisted of myriad separate countries—Adams called Massachusetts his country, as Jefferson did Virginia—with a bewildering range of subjects in each of them. Adams alluded to the polyglot polity when he told Niles that it had been "a Singular Example in the History of Mankind" when "Thirteen Clocks were made to Strike together; a perfection of Mechanism which no Artist had ever before effected."[36]

Adams underestimated the complexity of the mechanism as radically as he exaggerated the convergence that had been achieved. Britain's America included 26 clocks, half of which remained in the empire when all was said and done. In the confederated 13, between one-fifth and one-third of the population remained loyal to the Crown. Some 60,000 to 80,000 of those fled the new United States, the rough equivalent of several million Americans today.[37] Anywhere from one-third to two-fifths of the population were, in the words of their countrymen, "wavering," "disaffected," or "flexible"—neutrals, inconstant, and often despised. At the onset of the war, consistent Patriots—the *we* of the cinematic universe—represented no more than 40 percent of the rebellious colonies' population. The American Revolution was a war of colonial liberation, a civil war, and an imperial war all in one.

And that's just loyalty. The picture grows more tessellated still when we dig into demography. More than 50 percent of the population was female. A disproportionate number were children, as in all developing nations. One-fifth were enslaved, some 500,000 men, women, and children.[38] Their political loyalties followed their personal and familial quests for life, liberty, and happiness, which led most often in the direction of the Crown.

Poorer colonials fought beside, as well as against, those who claimed to be their betters. Westering farmers had dramatically different priorities than the Eastern moneyed men who comprised a tiny sliver of the population and an enormous proportion of the legislatures of their states. In the vast interior of the continent—Indian country—several hundred Native nations made their own choices and took their own chances to preserve the *inter*dependence that had sustained them for centuries, if not millennia.

The French diplomat J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's famous 1782 question "What is an American?" gets its weight, then as now, from being so damnably difficult to answer.[39] Crèvecoeur wrote when a common political identity was coming into focus; the Treaty of Paris, then in draft, gave the people of the United States at least paper coherence. In 1776,

even a provisional response to his query would have been hard to sketch. Nor were the nature and character of the enemy all that much clearer, given the involvement of Native tribes, Hessian soldiers, and Canadian colonials who fought alongside the British. As one of my Monticello colleagues noted, the American Civil War, for all its complexity, was a cleaner, clearer, and geographically much tighter conflict.

The dizzying pluralism of the would-be nation's populace was also spread over an unfathomably large and varied geography, across which rapid information sharing was impossible—a factor in the war's conduct in the 18th century and its dramatizations in the present day. A question asked in Boston, needing a reply from Parliament in London, took five or six months to complete the circuit. The situation in the British American colonies was speedier, but not by much. From Griffith's *America* to Emmerich's *The Patriot*, directors of films set in the revolutionary era have leaned on postriders to inch the news from place to place in a desperate attempt to make it plausible that people in western New York or Virginia or South Carolina knew much and cared more about the plight of Boston.

Several generations of recent scholarship have worked heroically to muddy the waters still further. The last major attempt at a scholarly yet driving narrative synthesis of the war was Robert Middlekauff's *The Glorious Cause*, published in 1982.[40] In the intervening decades, diligent scholars, including yours truly, have recovered unsung protagonists, surfaced overlooked perspectives, and excavated tensions within the American populace. We have humanized the Loyalists, ferreted out the shape-shifting neutrals, and complicated the Patriots, from whose paradoxes we cannot and should not turn away.

Even Washington, the indispensable man in the winning of the United States, was a deeply complicated figure. For his exterminating strategy against the Crown's Native allies in western New York, the Seneca nicknamed him *Conotocarius*, or "town destroyer."

In recent historiography, the cause is no longer glorious nor even common. We have, in the most towering recent synthesis, many and various and often conflicting American Revolutions, intersecting in unpredictable

ways, across a vast and divided continent, without a country in sight.[41] The pixelated picture is more accurate; we need to hold *all* these truths to successfully hold any. But all this *e pluribus pluribus* does not an easy cinematic triumph make.

Was it ever thus? I was struck, watching this run of films, by how long directors and their underlying source material, consisting chiefly of justly forgotten novels, have wrestled with cleavages *within* the rebel American population. Both Ford's *Drums Along the Mohawk* and Frank Lloyd's *The Howards of Virginia* get their energy from the tension between honest backwoods yeomen and sneering coastal elites. These are productions, in other words, about what the historian Carl Lotus Becker back in 1909 posed as "the question, if we may so put it, of who should rule at home."[42]

In both films, earnest lower-middling strivers marry well-born women from families who find their daughters' love matches both preposterous and dangerous. Gilbert Martin, Henry Fonda's character in *Drums Along the Mohawk*, snags an elegant Albany bride and promptly spirits her away into the primeval forests of the Mohawk Valley. The war over home rule is distant from this frontier, where pidgin-speaking Iroquoians wander into log cabin living rooms. There's some discussion among Martin's neighbors about a distant conflict over making people pay taxes in which they have no say. But the general message is one of bootstrapping citizen can-do-ism: "Congress can't help us. . . . We have to look after ourselves."[43]

Young Matt Howard, protagonist of *The Howards of Virginia*, hails from western Albermarle County, along the Blue Ridge. A fish out of water in refined Williamsburg even as a schoolboy, he battles his Latin tutor and dreams of "Ohio, where men can be free!" He returns to the colonial capital as Cary Grant in buckskins, a majestic bull in the porcelain shop of refined salons and genteel gambling. His boyhood friend, Jefferson, gets him in a bathtub and outfits him in the proper duds to make the connections that will allow him to succeed as a surveyor of western lands, which, after all, had been good enough for Washington. But Howard can't stand "the constarn things"; he's a big-boned rustic distrustful of "manners"—a natural American when push comes to shove.[44]

Both *Drums Along the Mohawk* and *The Howards of Virginia* were filmed on the eve of America's entry into World War II, which made casting Britain as the enemy of American freedom impossible. In Ford's Oriskany epic, we see no redcoats, only "savage Indians" and their loyalist allies in footage that might well have been retrieved from the cutting-room floor of *Stagecoach*, released the same year. The war Martin and his neighbors experience is a polygonal conflict of all against all, a conflict without ideology—a frontier guerrilla war.

"That's our new flag, the thing we've been fighting for," the Continentals tell the shivering inhabitants of a depleted American fort when they come through to say the war is over.[45] But it doesn't quite ring true. Despite the film's blatant attempt to "stoke the American spirit," as one of my colleagues from the Papers of Thomas Jefferson project said during our watch party, Ford leaves us without a clear understanding of what that spirit is or does.

In *The Howards of Virginia*, too, the enemy is right here at home, in the form of the coastal aristocracy and its anglicized ways, including chattel slavery. The genteel Peytons, the Cavalier clan into which Howard marries, are as remarkable for their prejudices as for their refinement. "You didn't actually labor in the fields?" an appalled Miss Jane Peyton (Martha Scott) asks Grant's Howard. "I thought only . . ." Her voice trails away, picturing the work of enslaved men on her father's Elm Hill plantation.[46]

Howard has represented himself as an expert surveyor, which is wishful at best; Jefferson is accused of having presented him to the family "under false colors," given that he's "nothing but poor white." When Howard asks Fleetwood Peyton, the tidewater patriarch whose worldview is as crippled as his right leg, for his sister's hand, Fleetwood rejoins, "Do you mean she should go to Ohio, and follow you like a squaw?!"[47] Howard means precisely that—the source of both the movie's drama and its comedy.

It seems surprising, given the growth of the scholarly fields of African American history and studies, that slavery figures more largely in *The Howards of Virginia* than it has in any American Revolution movie since. Black actors have named speaking roles as members of the Howards'

enslaved workforce. Their subjectivity is not deeply plumbed; they carry the ideals and the burdens of those who claim to own them. Dicey, Jane Peyton's enslaved ladies' maid, has no patience for the leveling worldview of her mistress's new husband and wants to take her mistress out of the backcountry. "You could love a man till you're fit to bust," Dicey says, "but no lady of quality could make out here."[48]

To modern ears, the effect is uncomfortably like the role of Butterfly McQueen as Miss Prissy in *Gone with the Wind*, released the year before *The Howards of Virginia*. Yet Dicey and her kin are not invisible. And there is the intimation that their day will come. "What's the good of independence if we don't use it to build a new system that's fair to all?" Jefferson asks Howard before writing the thing that started it all.[49] What good indeed?

The Problem of Endings

It's hard to end an essay, and it must be tougher still to wrap a movie, what with all the sets and the trailers and the catering trucks needing to be set to rights. Even so, it's striking that all but one of the movies discussed here faces a disastrous time fading to black. For nearly a hundred years, filmmakers have insisted on fast-forwarding, by hook and often by crook, to the end of the war and beyond, no matter how big the time bump involved.

Though its core battle takes place in 1777, Ford can't holler, "CUT!" in *Drums Along the Mohawk* till Continentals straggle onto the scene five or six years later. *The Howards of Virginia*, too, jumps from the Valley Forge winter of 1777 to Yorktown in 1781 as if possessing Harry Potter's time-turner. *The Patriot* likewise trudges on to Cornwallis's defeat, with the British general played by the late, great Tom Wilkinson sputtering a line worse than his battle tactics: "Everything has changed." *Revolution* ricochets forward to the evacuation of New York in 1783, and please, I beg you, don't make me rewatch the film to figure out how we got there.

Hamilton catapults furthest of all, with Eliza Hamilton's swan song, "Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story," taking place at some indeterminate moment shortly before her own passing, at the age of 97, in 1854.

Maybe we should blame the NAEP scores: If few Americans know the basic outlines of the American Revolution's plot, maybe they need to be reminded that the upstarts won. Or perhaps the sheer improbability of that outcome makes it filmically irresistible to continue to the war's conclusion, as if Butch and Sundance peered out of their shack at the entirety of the Bolivian army and then miraculously prevailed.

Why not make the picture called *Yorktown*?[50] But that would mean the origin story is visible only in the distant rearview. And few filmmakers, it seems, are willing to pick one or the other bookend of a conflict that formally lasted eight years. The result is a whole shelf of nonsense.

The glorious exception is *1776*, which ends with Congress inking the script that formed the credal foundation of our peoplehood. (The bottle episode format forces compression even then; the signatories assemble at once on July 4 in the story, not by fits and starts into August as they did in reality.) We hear a (fictitious) dispatch from Washington explaining the overwhelming odds against the Continentals—a force of 5,000 older men and greenhorn boys—arrayed against five times as many British regulars. "How it will end only Providence can direct," his courier reads.[51] Everything hangs in the balance in the movie's gasp-inducing final frames, as the signers one by one take their places before dissolving into John Trumbull's famed and fanciful semicentennial painting. There is no fast-forward to Yorktown, booyah.

To leave us in medias res, as *1776* does, is to pass the burden of history and its living present to the audience—a republic, if you can keep it, as Franklin is alleged to have said. In a medium dedicated to entertainment, this surely is the essential move. Maybe historians could consider it too.

For the American Revolution is not over. Let Abigail Adams sing the point home: It's *yours, yours, yours.*

Notes

1. American Film Institute Catalog, “Bowling Green,” https://catalog.afi.com/Film/41338-BOWLING-GREEN.

2. Mike Fleming Jr., “Disney Paid $75 Million for Worldwide Movie Rights to Lin-Manuel Miranda’s ‘Hamilton’; Biggest Film Acquisition Deal Ever?,” *Deadline*, February 3, 2020, https://deadline.com/2020/02/disney-paid-75-million-hamilton-movie-deal-lin-manuel-miranda-largest-film-acquisition-ever-1202849929/.

3. See the advertisement for *The Spy* in *The Billboard*, May 30, 1914, 52, Internet Archive, https://ia801909.us.archive.org/BookReader/BookReaderImages.php?id=sim_billboard_1914-05-30_26_22&itemPath=%2F12%2Fitems%2Fsim_billboard_1914-05-30_26_22&server=ia801909.us.archive.org&page=leaf00053.

4. Wilson probably didn’t say it, per Mark E. Benbow, “Birth of a Quotation: Woodrow Wilson and ‘Like Writing History with Lightning,’” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 9, no. 4 (2010): 509–33, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20799409.

5. Todd McCarthy, “The Patriot,” *Variety*, June 16, 2000, https://variety.com/2000/film/reviews/the-patriot-2-1200462809/.

6. John Adams to Hezekiah Niles, February 13, 1818, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6854.

7. Thomas Jefferson, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* (Williamsburg, VA, 1774).

8. Wanting to think about narrative conventions within a standard cinematic time frame is my excuse for sweeping prestige TV serial dramas like *John Adams* and even *Turn: Washington’s Spies* off the stage here.

9. *America*, directed by D. W. Griffith (D. W. Griffith Productions, 1924).

10. *Drums Along the Mohawk*, directed by John Ford (Twentieth Century Fox, 1939).

11. *The Howards of Virginia*, directed by Frank Lloyd (Frank Lloyd Productions and Columbia Pictures, 1940).

12. *The Time of Their Lives*, directed by Charles Barton (Universal Pictures, 1946).

13. Like, a lot.

14. *Sweet Liberty*, directed by Alan Alda (Universal Pictures, 1986).

15. Sing it, brother. I still remember the cocktail party, in the 1980s, when I told some business folk that I studied 17th-century New England. “You mean, like, Cotton Mather???” Indeed.

16. American culture where—spoiler alert—the South won.

17. There is no easy way to get reliable data, but searching for courses with “American Revolution” or “Civil War” in their titles on CollegeTransfer.Net, which tells college transfer applicants where they might find courses on subjects of interest, offers a reasonable kludge. AcademyOne, CollegeTransfer.Net, website, https://www.collegetransfer.net/.

18. History News Network, "American Revolution Center Releases National Survey Results: 83 Percent of U.S. Adults Fail Test on Nation's Founding," December 3, 2009, https://www.historynewsnetwork.org/article/american-revolution-center-releases-national-surve.

19. National Assessment of Educational Progress, "NAEP Report Card: U.S. History," https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ushistory/results/scores/. For questions, see National Assessment of Educational Progress, Questions Tool, https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/nqt/searchquestions.

20. *Sweet Liberty*, directed by Alda.

21. *Sweet Liberty*, directed by Alda.

22. For a generation, we've seen this principle operate in reverse, in the growth of the Marvel and DC Comics cinematic universes: If it packs the theaters, make it again.

23. Eammon Jacobs, "'The Lord of the Rings' Made Almost $3 Billion at the Box Office—so You Might Be Surprised by How Much Its Actors Got Paid," *Business Insider*, September 17, 2024, https://www.businessinsider.com/lord-of-the-rings-cast-salaries-pay-2024-9.

24. Benedict Nightingale, "A Yankee Revolution in England," *The New York Times*, July 14, 1985, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/07/14/movies/a-yankee-revolution-in-england.html.

25. *Revolution*, directed by Hugh Hudson (Goldcrest Films International and Viking Films, 1985).

26. Denby quoted in David Wolf, "Pacino: Master of the Method," *Financial Review*, May 9, 2014, https://www.afr.com/politics/pacino-master-of-the-method-20140314-ixkws.

27. *Al Pacino: In Conversation with Lawrence Grobel*, ed. Lawrence Grobel (Gallery Books, 2006), 182–83.

28. The Numbers, "Revolution (1985)," Nash Information Services, https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Revolution.

29. Rotten Tomatoes, "Revolution," https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1028715-revolution.

30. *Al Pacino*, 182–83.

31. Leonard Maltin, *Leonard Maltin's 2001 Movie and Video Guide* (Plume, 2001), 1169.

32. *The Patriot*, directed by Roland Emmerich (Columbia Pictures, 2000).

33. Fischer, quoted in Thomas Doherty, "At Last, Our Revolution Done Right," *The Boston Globe*, July 16, 2000, E2.

34. Box Office Mojo, "The Patriot," IMDbPro, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl3244918273/weekly/?ref_=bo_rl_tab#tabs.

35. I have written elsewhere at some length about *1776*. See Jane Kamensky, "The *1776* Project," October 13, 2022, *The Atlantic*, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/10/1776-musical-broadway-founding-fathers/671717/.

36. Adams to Niles, February 13, 1818.

37. Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 357.

38. See, for instance, US Census Bureau, *A Century of Population Growth from the First Census of the United States to the Twelfth, 1790–1900*, June 1909, https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1909/decennial/century-populaton-growth.html.

39. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, "Letter III—What Is an American," in *Letters from an American Farmer* (London, 1782), https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/letter_03.asp.

40. Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763–1789* (Oxford University Press, 1982).

41. In Robert G. Parkinson's *The Common Cause*, the revolutionary cause is made common only by summoning racial rhetorics against black and Native Americans. Robert G. Parkinson, *The Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution* (Omohundro Institute, 2016). See also Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750–1804* (W. W. Norton, 2016).

42. Carl Lotus Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760–1776* (University of Wisconsin, 1909), 22.

43. *Drums Along the Mohawk*, directed by Ford.

44. *The Howards of Virginia*, directed by Lloyd.

45. *Drums Along the Mohawk*, directed by Ford.

46. *The Howards of Virginia*, directed by Lloyd.

47. *The Howards of Virginia*, directed by Lloyd.

48. *The Howards of Virginia*, directed by Lloyd.

49. *The Howards of Virginia*, directed by Lloyd.

50. The brilliant historian Kathleen DuVal is working on a new book about Yorktown. Maybe the movie will follow.

51. *1776*, directed by Peter H. Hunt (Columbia Pictures, 1972).