Did the American Revolution have a revolutionary impact on American life?

**Viewpoint:** Yes. The American Revolution transformed American society into a nation founded on what was regarded as radical principles that subordinated the function of government to natural law.

**Viewpoint:** No. The American Revolution was a conservative movement intended to preserve the existing social, political, and economic order.

As divided as historians are over the causes of the American Revolution (1775-1783), they are in even greater disagreement over its consequences. In one interpretive camp are those who assert that the Revolution was “the most radical and most far-reaching event in American history,” while their opponents claim that it was “culturally, politically, socially, and economically a conservative movement.” This disagreement, in part, is the product of varying views of what constitutes a revolution. Those scholars belonging to the conservative school of interpretation define *revolutionary* in terms of the more violent and tumultuous French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions. These revolutions involved crowds of the poor and oppressed demanding food, the execution of thousands of political prisoners, the destruction of the ruling class, the overthrow of political institutions, and the emergence of a special style of dress and behavior.

Measured by this standard, the American War of Independence could hardly be called a revolution. Instead, it was a conservative movement that sought to preserve the existing social, political, and economic order. The planter-merchant class who led the Revolution were not victims of either poverty or British oppression; neither were they intent on destroying artificial privilege, promoting social mobility, or making way for the “natural aristocracy.” Indeed, the new state and federal charters created during the Revolution were conservative documents that largely maintained the political status quo throughout the eighteenth century. Moreover, the common folk, who enjoyed widespread political opportunities and economic and social mobility, did not resent the leadership of the powerful and therefore did not demand social or political leveling. They, too, were conservatives who joined the American cause to oppose British efforts to infringe on their rights as Englishmen. In short, the Revolution was a defensive movement to maintain the rights and liberties that Americans had always enjoyed.

Those historians who maintain that the American Revolution was revolutionary argue that there is radicalism in ideas, values, traditions, and customs. They therefore measure innovation by the amount of social change that actually took place, especially in regard to how people related to one another. For example, they point out that during the revolutionary generation Americans were transformed from monarchical, hierarchy-ridden subjects to the most liberal, democratic, egalitarian, modern, and commercial-minded people in the world. This dramatic metamorphosis radically changed the personal and social relationships of people, especially among women and the ordinary folk, by giving the former increased rights and opportunities and the latter greater respectability (some even say dominance), dignity to their menial
labor, and a heightened sense of class consciousness. At the same time, the Revolution also changed the culture of Americans and altered their understanding of “history, knowledge and truth.” Finally, the Revolution, by freeing America from British trade and manufacturing restrictions, released “entrepreneurial and commercial energies that transformed the economic landscape of the country.”

These conflicting interpretations aside, any worthwhile assessment of whether the American Revolution was revolutionary must include several pertinent questions. How should one define revolution? Was American society democratic or undemocratic during the late colonial period? Did the Patriot leaders and their middle- and lower-class followers have different or similar goals for the Revolution? Were reforms that occurred during the revolutionary era the product of factors already in place during the colonial period or were they the result of a conflict between the upper and lower classes provoked by the War of Independence?

**Viewpoint:**
Yes. The American Revolution transformed American society into a nation founded on what was regarded as radical principles that subordinated the function of government to natural law.

In February 1761 a pivotal event in American political history unfolded in the Boston courts. James Otis, the principled and energetic advocate general, resigned his office so that he could challenge the legality of Parliament’s recently enacted writs of assistance, which were general search warrants enforced against local merchants to stop their persistent smuggling. What remains of the speech, which lasted five hours, was preserved through notes recorded by an astute and reliable observer of the proceedings, a youthful John Adams. A good portion of Otis’s argument against the “villainy” of the writs was couched in routine language well steeped in the legacy of long-established British liberties and the cultural inheritance of common law. Otis argued that general search warrants, which failed to legally identify the specific object of the government’s suspicions prior to the search, were in egregious violation of legal precedent and governmental practice. In sum, such methods were an insult to Crown and custom. In particular, the general writ perturbed that “essential branch” of “English liberty” ensuring the sanctity of a man’s house. “A man’s house,” Otis declared, “is his castle; and whilst he is quiet, he is as well guarded as a prince in his castle. This writ, if it should be declared legal, would totally annihilate this privilege.” In accordance with the law as established on British tradition, only specific writs limiting a controlled search for contraband were legitimate under common law and were consonant with his Majesty’s legitimate sovereign power. A general writ opposed this crucial and fixed British principle.

Under this part of the argument, Otis did not offer anything particularly new or revolutionary; his case was built on established practices of personal liberty and restricted government. Attention was soon drawn, however, to a remarkable and decidedly radical departure from the political and legal norms of the times. Otis turned his argument away from historical precedent and institutional usage and toward something far less tangible, outside the influence of any given society, government, or historic lineage. Otis focused upon the universal eternal laws of nature and the inherent rights of human beings, an appeal to a standard of principle beyond the context of a specific culture or national heritage. In this way Otis fused the rights of Englishmen with something far more metaphysical and transcendent: ethical first principles higher and weightier than cultural usage. The writs of assistance, as offensive as they were to the customary liberties enjoyed by subjects of the British Crown, were even more insulting to liberties that all human beings enjoy under natural law and that are infused through fundamental natural rights. General search warrants, a matter of locally administered constabulary policy, were not only wrong because they were against the laws of Britain; they were fundamentally wrong in their nature because they were perversely contrary to that higher law preceding and legitimating all forms of government. These laws owed nothing to parchment or decree but were available to the light of reason contained within all human beings and not subject to any human power—laws that St. Thomas Aquinas had five centuries earlier identified as flowing from the Mind of the Creator, that Alexander Hamilton would later claim to be written into the inner hearts of all human beings by the hand of the Divine, and that Thomas Jefferson would soon after identify as stemming from the “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.”

Otis asserted that “every man, merely natural, was an independent sovereign, subject to no law but the law written on his heart and revealed to him by his Maker, in the constitution of his
nature and the inspiration of his understanding and his conscience. His right to his life, his liberty, no created being could rightfully contest. No government, as a product of “created beings,” is mighty enough on its own authority to enact, promulgate, and enforce arbitrary laws. Thus, every man is his own sovereign by nature and not by custom, convention, or status. Life and liberty are “inherent and inalienable” rights. No creature, no matter how wise or powerful, can produce these rights; no political community can presume to generate these rights; and no institution can reasonably claim to grant these rights. The rights that Otis spoke of, which were in his argument supported by the conventions and historical precedent of English law and political practice, were nonetheless acquired prior to the sovereign will of any English government or the tender mercies of any colonial official. Otis understood the heart of the conflict to involve what Adams referred to as rights both “natural and English.” This principle, that rights are not the product of human will or historic development but are inherent in all human beings by God’s design, is that element that makes the American War for Independence (1775-1783) revolutionary, a principle reaching back to the arguments of English philosopher John Locke and Aquinas and explicitly well established as the point of division from the mother country at least fourteen years before the “shot heard round the world.”

Many students of political history are inclined to qualify the American Revolution as primarily a war for independence and not truly revolutionary in the fuller sense of that concept. This argument stems from the historic fact that, as revolutions go, the American variety, while still a violent civil war, was not roiled by the social cataclysm and economic upheaval characteristic of more-radical events in other countries. What happened in Russia (1917) and France (1789-1799), the argument correctly asserts, did not occur in America. There was no extensive social rearrangement among the classes, no economic reinvention, no workers’ revolt, no redistribution or abolition of property, no abolition of religion or destruction of an established church, no revolutionary “justice,” no new calendar, no cult of personality, no reeducation camps—in sum, no millennial aspirations. Indeed, after all the smoke cleared, institutionalized oppression remained, most notably in the lamentable and shameful preservation of slavery even after several thousand African Americans bravely joined their white comrades in the military. Socially and economically, the war produced independence but not revolution, or so the argument maintains.

If revolution is to be understood only in terms of social and economic upheaval, then what happened in eighteenth-century America was not a revolution. Additionally, if one adheres scrupulously to these criteria, then what happened in twentieth-century Germany was revolutionary. For if sudden and dramatic social and economic transformation are the only legitimate standards that one is allowed to consider in assessing revolutions, then the stunning and willful ascent of the Nazi Party in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s is the real thing, while the
American assertion of the right to limited self-government in the name of higher principles is not. The former immediately and utterly mutated German society at every level, while the latter merely affirmed the elusive and eternal principle of natural law and right as the only legitimate basis for political power.

If one is not so confined in defining revolution, it is in this affirmation of natural law and right that one finds America to be a revolutionary society. Perhaps it is in the appeal to higher principles over and beyond interest and utility that makes the American Revolution more radical than revolutions enmeshed in the dense matrix of social structure and economic necessity. Early-nineteenth-century French writer and politician Alexis de Tocqueville once famously remarked on the comparative equality of conditions already present in late colonial America (slavery notwithstanding), a quality of society that owed its existence to the lack of residual feudal structures and the seeming abundance of apparently open land. While disparity in wealth was a feature of American society both before and after the Revolution, barriers between the rich and poor were not as insurmountable as in Europe, and wealth as a whole was far more fluid than in any society at that time. While it cannot be denied that economic conditions and social status influence nearly every political act, noble or ignoble, revolutionary or otherwise, it was primarily a revolutionary principle and not material exigency or class enmity that drove the colonists to revolt.

The issues that divided Patriots from Loyalists in the decades in question involved acts of Parliament that held financial consequences for the colonists, but those results were not onerous. Writs of assistance, while obnoxious, were not burdensome on honest merchants and were an understandable, albeit clumsy, measure on behalf of desperate officials addressing an illegal drain on revenue. Levies and duties imposed on colonial merchants were often lighter than those in England. As nineteenth-century English historian Lord Acton observed, the price of tea was cheaper in Boston than it was in Bristol; indeed, this price seemed a reasonable one to pay for booting the French out of North America. The British colonies in America were prosperous and secure, in large part the result of the efforts of the British Army and Navy and of Parliament's long-standing practice of allowing the colonists broad latitude in managing their own public affairs. From an economic and social perspective, there was no need for dramatic social and economic reformation, revolutionary or otherwise. In fact, it was against the interest of the colonies to break from the safety of the world's wealthiest and most powerful empire. The revolutionary principle of right, however, not the exigent demands of interest, moved the colonists to rebel. This event was a monumental turn in the political history of the world, one that made manifest the moral ideas of government based on the essence of freedom rather than the requirements of force. As Acton concluded while musing over the Boston Tea Party (1773), it was the mild beginning of the greatest Revolution that had ever broken out among civilized men. The dispute had been reduced to its simplest expression, and had become a mere question of principle. The argument from the Charters, the argument from the Constitution, was discarded. The case was fought out on the ground of the Law of Nature, more properly speaking, of Divine Right. On that evening of 16th of December 1773, it became, for the first time, the reigning force in History. By the rules of right, which had been obeyed till then, England had the better cause. By the principle which was then inaugurated, England was in the wrong, and the future belonged to the colonies.

While the Revolution responded to a variety of issues, in brief, the revolutionary principles that motivated the Americans involve three general claims: that there is a law of nature that transcends and governs all legitimate political and legal institutions; attached to this law of nature are "certain inalienable rights" of the individual that cannot be abridged or denied by any government; and that all legitimate government rests on some form of consent, which, when drawn to its logical conclusion, means that the sovereign power ultimately rests in the people themselves while remaining limited by the law of nature and the fact of natural rights. The colonists resolved to withdraw from their association with the Crown and to establish a new order based on these truths. It was not the actual burden of paying new taxes that nettled the colonists; it was the appalling fact that they were being taxed without their consent. Britain's Parliamentary government was rooted in the custom of "virtual representation," linking subjects to their representatives by virtue of national affiliation. Members of Parliament represented all subjects of the Crown on the grounds that they were all common associates within the same polity. Representation was accidental; it was a function of circumstance, justified on common sociohistoric grounds with no appeal to objective, transcultural principle, and there was no deliberate choice made by free citizens. The colonists viewed representation differently. They agreed that representatives were advocates of their constituents' interests, but they argued for free election conducted locally and based upon a set of criteria distinct from mere social membership. Representatives, from the colonists' perspective, were deputies conveying popular will and operating under the governing concept that they were agents chosen by a consenting electorate. This
principle is objectively situated beyond the historic community and is grounded upon an abstract concept, that government is legitimate only when the people explicitly consent to its institutions, dynamics, and offices and actively participate in some fashion in the selection of those commissioned to govern. Hence, the contextual claim of virtual representation is supplanted with the more radical and revolutionary assertion that representation can only be properly so called when it is removed from the accidents of passive membership and rooted in substantive direct consent. Thus, the revolutionary clarion proclaims “No taxation without representation.” What had been previously expressed by Locke and developed by eighteenth-century English Whigs, the direct forerunners to the American revolutionaries, was now a principle applied by a segment of the British polity who radicalized the debate over representation by insisting that they were not simply deferential subjects of the Crown but that they were consenting citizens of the realm. Those who “virtually” represented them in Parliament rendered representation unreal.

The colonists, therefore, could not consent to the admittedly modest Stamp Act (1765) levies, and it is this lack of consent that was the point of principle from which the Americans drew their objections to Parliament’s actions. The amount of taxes and duties imposed in the 1760s and 1770s was incidental. Government by official fiat—whether mild, moderate, or severe—was deemed in all cases to be intolerable; government by consent of the governed was expected. “No created being can rightfully contest” the natural liberties of the individual, and no created being can govern contrary to the liberties of its citizens.

Above all, what is truly revolutionary about the American Revolution stems from its metaphysical underpinnings, namely, that sovereign power is always subordinate to the principles of natural law, and that these principles are fixed to the attendant notion that natural rights inhere in all persons by virtue of their humanity. This assertion was not simply a rhetorical flourish concealing more mundane motivations; rather, it flows from comprehension of and adherence to an eternal verity. Granted, no one can read the hearts of others, past or present, and it may be that a good number of revolutionaries cynically employed the language of Locke and the Whigs for their own selfish purposes. The language was important, however; the first two paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence (1776) deliberately provide its most forthright and eloquent expression. If one removes those paragraphs, one still has a powerful indictment of King George III and his ministers. From the beginning Jefferson and his associates saw fit to explain that all government is based on consent, asserted by individuals who are unqualifiedly created equal, and instituted for the sole purpose of guaranteeing the protection of the inalienable rights of free, equal, consenting individuals. General search warrants, regardless of the circumstances; taxation without valid representation, regardless of the monetary percentage; and all of the many grievances enumerated in the Declaration are intolerable not simply because they violate English law and inconvenience the colonists, but because they are in violation of those higher principles of natural law and right. It was not “bread and peace” that was promised by the Sons of Liberty, for the colonists had both in ample supply, but rather their insistence upon the universal truth that no government holds title to the natural rights of its charges. Nothing can be more revolutionary than this simple fact, and more dangerous to the minions of government by force, however benign or despotic that force might be.

Great revolutions vary from age to age: some are propelled by necessity, others are undertaken only because of an idea—still others combine both. Those revolutions that endure and resonate with greatest power are the ones that are driven by transcendent principles that exist prior to any material or social condition or contingency. They speak to human beings simply as human beings. A revolution that is about more than material necessity and interest is a revolution undertaken by the free and for the sake of freedom itself. Otis understood this fact during the faint, initial murmurs of the American Revolution. That quintessential radical Thomas Paine understood the magnitude of this concept when speaking of America as liberty’s last true asylum. The perceptions of the actors who were immersed in the events cannot be dismissed—they comprehended their own struggle in enduring, transcendent terms. The social and economic ramifications remain in dispute, and perhaps that is as it should be. In that which is most innovative and influential, the ideas and principles themselves, the answer is clear: the American struggle for liberty was and remains revolutionary.

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Viewpoint:

No. The American Revolution was a conservative movement intended to preserve the existing social, political, and economic order.

Assessing the impact of the American Revolution (1775–1783) proves to be dangerous, for an event of that magnitude inevitably presents a
multifaceted history, whether in its origins, implementation, or outcome. Any evaluation of the consequences of the revolution depends not only upon the absolute changes that occurred as a result of independence but also upon an understanding of the colonial period under British rule as a comparative backdrop. Additionally, consideration may be accorded other principal revolutions of the modern era in assessing the significance of the American Revolution. Even the application of the term revolution to describe the American matter may be questioned. Opinions may vary, but the American Revolution was a conservative affair.

In their Declaration of Independence (1776), the Americans were inadvertent revolutionaries. Indeed, revolution, as the word entered the lexicon of early modern Europe, referred to the natural sciences, specifically to the regular movement of heavenly bodies that seemingly revolved in the skies. Applied metaphorically to the concerns of mankind, revolution denoted the irresistible movement of governments, eventually coming to signify the restoration of governments once lost. Hence, the Glorious Revolution (1688), the event through which the term revolution assumed its current place in the language, represented the restoration of monarchical rule as known by the English before the tyranny and Catholicism of King James II. In their Revolution almost a century later the Americans sought to restore or “revolve back” their polities to the earlier purity of the English governmental system that had become corrupted under the Hanoverians.

Although the American Revolution appears eminently modern because it brought forth a new nation, the revolutionaries initially had not sought a break with Great Britain. As Benjamin Franklin later wrote, “I never had heard in any Conversation from any Person drunk or sober, the least Expression of a wish for a Separation, or Hint that such a Thing would be advantageous to America.” In fact, during the eighteenth century an increasing Anglicization of the colonies occurred as Americans looked to their mother country for appropriate norms of behavior—political, cultural, and otherwise. Powerful mimetic impulses were at work, and at the time of the Revolution, England “remained the only common denominator among Americans, who in other respects differed from each other far more radically than they differed from Great Britain,” according to historian John M. Murrin. Even for many revolutionaries, the break with England was a profoundly unsettling event, with psychologically traumatic consequences for men such as Landon Carter of Virginia.

The Revolution, then, hardly represented an outpouring of nationalistic spirit. In the vote on the resolution for independence in the Continental Congress many of the delegates displayed a decided lack of enthusiasm for their enterprise. Ultimately, the decision for independence hinged on technical, legal issues about the nature of the British constitution and about the relationship between the Crown and its subjects. The first couple of paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence (1776) contain Thomas Jefferson’s philosophic musings that were designed to assuage foreign potentates and bolster the courage of the revolutionaries at home. Even then, the Virginian’s assertion that “all men are created equal” embodied connotations of a legal nature quite different from those that the phrase later assumed. Jefferson not only borrowed two-thirds of the phrase “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” from other intellectuals but also surely subsumed property in his unspecified rights in the Declaration, if indeed the right to property was not part of pursuing happiness.

Beyond the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson revealed his professional calling as a lawyer in the remainder of the document when, in effect, he directed a legal brief against George III. After contending that the King tyrannized his subjects, Jefferson supported his accusation by leveling several specific charges against the monarch, all of which together constituted the bulk of the Declaration and that part of the document that was so critical at the time when the Continental Congress hoped to appeal broadly to Americans for support and to unify them in their quest for independence. In sum, Americans had been forced to defend their British heritage, which had been corrupted by George III, Lord Frederick North, and Parliament. The colonials fought to preserve or restore their rights and their liberties, as opposed to seeking that which they did not possess.

Thus, the American Revolution evolved as a colonial war of liberation. Circumstances forced Americans to seek self-determination. The congeries of English colonies by definition constituted an unstable society, subject to external intervention and often negative interference, largely for the benefit of the mother country, as might be expected in a mercantilist empire. Yet, by 1763 virtually all the colonies had achieved a sufficient maturity in their political, economic, and social institutions that they might stand alone. All they required was a catalyst to drive them from their mother country, and England obliged. Following years of unavailing appeals for redress of grievances, the decision to seek independence was reluctantly made in 1776. Colonials would have agreed with Herbert Aptheker, the eminent Marxist historian, who later wrote, “the right of
self-determination . . . lay at the heart of this revolutionary effort.”

Indeed, securing the right of self-determination looms large when assessing the Revolution, for major changes occasioned by independence were few. True, by the end of the eighteenth century the states had shed their few trappings of European feudalism—primogeniture, entail, and quitrents—but none of those institutions had greatly affected the colonial scene. Primogeniture and entail might have achieved some significance in the socioeconomic order of Rhode Island, New York, and the Southern colonies, but there and elsewhere the abandonment of those protections for estates went largely unnoticed. Quitrents were collected with a modicum of success in royal Virginia and proprietary Maryland, and to less advantage to the Crown in South Carolina. The renunciation of quitrents little altered the course of taxation in post-Revolutionary America.

The institutional structure of religion changed but slightly, with the exception of the disestablishment of the Church of England, which became the Protestant Episcopal Church. Yet, other than in Virginia and South Carolina, the establishment had rested lightly upon the colonial populace. Georgia contained only two Anglican churches in 1769. Moreover, the Congregational Church continued its establishment in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire well into the nineteenth century. The Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches established separate American identities after the war, though the last had just barely gained a foothold in the colonies before the Revolution. The independence of the Congregationalists, Baptists, and Society of Friends (or Quakers) in America occasioned little difference in their church policies after the Revolution.

The status of minorities changed little following the Revolution. An occasional woman—"Molly Pitcher" (Mary Ludwig Hays of New Jersey) or “Robert Shurtleff” (Deborah Sampson of Massachusetts)—found indirect or devious means to serve in the military, but such actions were highly irregular. Many others were forced to assume a more public role in life by taking over farms or small businesses as male members of the family saw action in the Continental Army, in the state militias, or in partisan bands. Most women, however, returned to their traditional domestic sphere as the war concluded and the men came back home. The revolutionary state constitution of New Jersey allowed women to vote, but that inadvertent, anomalous loophole was closed in 1807. While the revolutionary fervor might have spawned the notion that women were entrusted with preserving and transmitting the new nation’s republican conscience, historian Mary Beth Norton admits that the “role of the republican mother was limited.”

In fact, women’s rights made little headway in the aftermath of the Revolution. Abigail Adams had written to husband John before the war, “By the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors.” John responded, “Depend on it, we know better than to repeal our masculine systems.” Adding to the determination of John Adams was the growing influence in the United States of the English jurist William Blackstone, whose popularity helped confirm male domination. Many years passed before the Seneca Falls Convention (1848) declared the equality of men and women, and many more were needed to make that contention a reality.

Ostensibly, the Revolution marked the beginning of the end of slavery in the Northern states. Yet, only Vermont, with a handful of slaves, abolished the institution through organic law. In other states opponents of slavery struggled mightily to realize even gradual-emancipation legislation, and then the results were problematic. Despite Pennsylvania’s famous Abolition Act (1780), slaves remained in the state until the late 1840s. New Jersey’s law in 1804 had little immediate impact. New York in 1827 finally liberated slaves born in the eighteenth century. Revolutionary egalitarian philosophy dislodged bondage slowly, and only in those areas where slaves were few.

The institution remained firmly fastened upon the South. Slave owners such as Patrick Henry and Jefferson occasionally released their bondsmen, but usually only in their wills. As Henry noted, he did not know how he could survive in his lifetime without his slaves. Many of Jefferson’s slaves had to be sold to satisfy his creditors. The bonded population in the South rose rapidly even without the benefit of legal immigration, spread westward as the nation expanded, and received the cachet of the government via “popular sovereignty” and the Dred Scott decision (1857). Rather than set the stage for the abolitionist crusade of the nineteenth century, the American revolutionaries, by their failure to take decisive action against slavery, brought forth the national cataclysm of the Civil War (1861–1865).

Other marginalized groups in society found little comfort in the aftermath of the Revolution. The status of indentured servants remained unaltered by the war. Free African Americans, whose small numbers increased rapidly after the Revolution, not only feared enslavement by unscrupulous whites but also saw their rights increasingly circumscribed by legislation. Native
Americans suffered as well. After devastating the Cherokee in a military campaign in 1776–1777, white militia returned in 1780–1781 to deliver a crushing blow to the natives living in the mountains of Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia. Historian James H. O’Donnell III concluded, “In many ways, the Cherokee Trail of Tears had its beginnings during the period of the American Revolution.”

From the standpoint of the colonial economy the Revolution had a noticeably disruptive impact. The dynamic, capitalistic spirit, so evident in the United States after the war, antedated the conflict—whether in fishing, whaling, shipping, and small manufacturing in New England; finance and shipping in the middle region; or commercial agricultural operations in the South. All states, however, suffered from wartime military incursions, the loss of British markets and protectionism, and the attempt to reorganize the economy at home and develop new avenues of trade abroad. Especially hard hit was the export sector that probably accounted for the preponderance of economic growth and expansion of the colonies and the states. As a result of the Revolution, per capita income in the United States declined drastically and might not have reached prewar levels until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Politically, the postrevolutionary landscape resembled that of the colonial era. According to Robert E. Brown, early Massachusetts evinced a middle-class society in which property was easily acquired and so broadly distributed that most adult males qualified for the franchise. Economic opportunity thus contributed to political democracy, a circumstance unchanged by the Revolution and even confirmed by the Massachusetts state constitution of 1780. The liberality of the suffrage led Brown to conclude, “In many respects, the people of Massachusetts had a government more responsive to the popular will than we have at the present time.” The political inclusiveness and widespread support for the Revolution that characterized Massachusetts, and also obtained in Virginia, in the estimation of Robert E. Brown and B. Katherine Brown, led them to the conclusion that the Revolution was fought to preserve a democratic social order.

Beyond local politics, the colonies became states that in turn created a national government based on the Articles of Confederation (1781). By their constitutions the states sought to confirm the basic political precepts of the colonies before the Revolution, including the primacy of the lower house of the legislature, representative government, and the protection of fundamental English rights. The Articles of Confederation, which bore some passing resemblance to the rejected Albany Plan (1754), provided for the weakest of national unions, leaving the states mostly independent and enjoying an equality with one another in the
national legislature, circumstances not greatly different from the pre-Revolutionary era.

Whether politically or otherwise, the failure of the American Revolution to produce meaningful change other than independence led to a conservatism that contrasted sharply with other modern revolutions, particularly the French Revolution (1789–1799). The French Revolution, not the American, set the world aflame, imbuing the word revolution with its present connotations and overtones. The restricted impact of the American Revolution, stemming from its innate conservatism, proceeded from its limited objective—self-determination, or the fulfillment of society, not its destruction. The Revolution produced a Declaration of Independence, not a Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789). Americans, in the words of early-nineteenth-century French writer and politician Alexis de Tocqueville, were “born free.” They did not have to battle an ancien régime with its aristocracy, national army, and national church, such as found in France. Thus, wrote Aptheker, the American Revolution did not have the “profoundly transforming quality that more basically social ones have,” such as the anti-feudal English and French upheavals and the anticapitalistic revolutions of the twentieth century.

The American Revolution resulted in changes, of course. Principal among them was independence, but overall the tenor was restrained. Institutional life required no basic alterations. Colonials sought to retain their English legal rights, which explains the current attachment in the United States to British traditions such as trial by jury, due process, right of petition, and narrow definition of treason. The product of circumstances and limited objectives, the American Revolution, so initially successful, failed to lead to a revolutionary tradition as in France. Although they became “symbols of a world revolution, the Americans were not in truth world revolutionaries,” claimed historian Louis Hartz. The American Revolution was a conservative revolution.

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References


