Historians Views on the Causes of the Revolution

Was there a principle cause of the Revolutionary War?

1

LOUIS HACKER

To see the Revolution simply as a struggle for democratic rights in the political sphere to build the whole theory of the Revolution around the slogan "No Taxation Without Representation," and to consider it merely as a continuation of "the Englishman's long struggle for political liberty," in the face of the almost immediate repeal by Parliament of the Stamp Act and the Townshend duties and despite the fact that in the colonies themselves (as in England) the great mass of the adult population was disfranchised anyway this is to make confusion worse confounded . . . The events of 1763–1775 can have no meaning unless we understand that the purpose of the general program was to protect the English capitalist interests which now were being jeopardized as a result of the intensification of colonial capitalist competition, and that English statesmen yielded quickly when a fundamental principle was not at stake and only became more insistent when one was being threatened . . . The struggle was not over high-sounding political and constitutional concepts: over the power of taxation and, in the final analysis, over natural rights, but over colonial manufacturing, wild lands and furs, sugar, wine, tea and currency all of which meant, simply, the survival or collapse of English merchant capitalism within the imperial-colonial framework of the mercantilist system

2

JOHN RICHARD ALDEN

In the winter of 1774–75 the British government learned that America had become a powder keg. Blame for this situation must be attributed in far larger measure to the inadequacies of George III and British politicians than to the activities of the radical leadership in America. Failure of the British supporters of the post-1763 policy to sustain their program over the objections of those who urged conciliation produced vacillations between harshness and weakness which, in turn, stiffened or invited American resistance. Had the new policy been firmly and steadily pushed in the Stamp Act crisis, it is barely possible that American resistance might have been peacefully overcome. But wiser by far than a consistent course of coercion would have been the abandoning of the effort to turn back the colonial clock. An American policy based upon recognition of the maturity of the colonies and of their value to the mother country, together with an attitude of good will, might have postponed indefinitely the era of American independence. Neither George III nor any Cabinet member had ever been in America; they did not know the strength and spirit of the colonies, were unaware that they could not permanently be kept within the empire except upon their own terms.

3

JAMES TRUSLOW ADAMS

It is a great mistake to think of public opinion as united in the colonies and as gradually rising against British tyranny. Public opinion is never wholly united, and seldom rises to a pitch of passion without being influenced — in other words, without the use of propaganda . . .

The years preceding the final secession of the colonists may be divided into three periods. During the first, from the passage of the Sugar Act to the practical repeal of all obnoxious legislation in 1770, the different groups were by force of circumstances united in opposition to the policy of England. The merchants needed no propaganda to realize that their business was being seriously interfered with, though they cared little about the popular catchwords that were being used by the new leaders of the people to inflame them . . . But by 1770 the merchants' grievances were settled, and from then until 1773 all desire for agitation and "rocking the boat" disappeared among the richer classes. Up to that point, the popular anger had served their own cause . . .

From the first [Samuel] Adams and those working with him had realized the necessity of democratic slogans in the creation of a state of mind . . . His political philosophy was eagerly lapped up by a populace smarting under hard times . . . The establishment of government by free consent of all had become imbedded in the mind of the average man, as an essential part of the American dream . . .

4 ARTHUR SCHLESINGER

A complicating factor in the revolutionary movement was supplied by the religious conditions existing in the colonies . . . Religious antagonisms were of chief importance in accentuating differences between the colonies and the mother country that already existed because of economic and geographic reasons

The great majority of the colonists belonged to the dissenting sects, and for historic reasons it was natural that there should be more or less distrust and jealousy felt by them toward adherents of the Church of England, among whom the royal officials and their hangers-on were prominently to be found. Indeed, the two hundred and fifty Episcopal clergymen officiating in the colonies on the eve of the Revolutionary War had all received ordination in England, and most of those in the northern provinces were pensioners of an English missionary society The antagonism to England on this score was undoubtedly increased during the revolutionary period in many parts of America by the persistent rumor that the English government was planning to send bishops to the colonies. It was John Adams's belief, expressed in after years, that the widespread dread of an Anglican episcopate and an established church contributed "as much as any other cause" to sharpening the keen edge of popular antipathy against the mother country. As the radical party grew stronger, Anglican clergymen had to decide whether they would observe the patriotic fast days proclaimed as a protest against England and, finally, whether they would omit in their services the prayers for the king. Those who persisted were in many cases roughly handled.

5 PETER ODEGARD

. . . our own revolutionary fathers were masters of the science and art of propaganda. At the outset of the revolution a small minority, gradually they finally transformed an apathetic and somewhat reluctant majority into a united people and launched a great nation upon its dynamic and imperial course . . .

The symbols and slogans which they used carried conviction because they were fortified by facts and events within the experience of nearly every colonist. There was widespread discontent with the Trade and Navigation Acts, the Grenville and Townshend Acts, the Stamp Act, and the unnumerable stupidities of a mercantilist policy applied to a colonial economy lush for laissez faire. There was the Boston Port Bill, the Quartering Act, and the incredible folly of the Boston Massacre. All of these were grist for the propagandists' mill and they took full advantage of them.

But there was more than economic frustration to give substance to their symbols. There was the tradition of freedom reaching back to Magna Carta, the inalienable rights of Englishmen under the English Constitution, and the rapidly rising sun of eighteenth century liberalism and enlightenment. The propagandists took their ideological weapons from the arsenal of the enemy himself, from the writings of Coke and Blackstone, Bentham and John Locke. The American Revolution is but another illustration of the fact that there is nothing more irresistible than an idea whose time has come.

LOUIS HACKER	JOHN RICHARD ALDEN	JAMES TRUSLOW ADAMS	ARTHUR SCHLESINGER	PETER ODEGARD
Thesis	Thesis	Thesis	Thesis:	Thesis:
Supporting Evidence	Supporting Evidence	Supporting Evidence	Supporting Evidence:	Supporting Evidence: