

Pete Ahrens

“An Imperfect Vision: Icons of Transformation in the American Revolution”

Perhaps more than in any other episode of the American saga, the appellation “great” applies to the men and women, words, and deeds of the Revolutionary period. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a New Englander of the generation following the American Revolutionary era, suggested that history is only biography. Thomas Carlyle, his slightly older British contemporary and correspondent, declared that the history of the world was but the biography of great men.¹ A great man, or woman, can be the catalytic cataract that changes the speed and direction, the flux and volume, of his or her age’s stream of events, as the river of human life wends its way through the entropic landscape of historical force and cosmic chance. Such greatness, and the good luck that attends it, penetrates even the grandest myth with the kernel of historical truth.

That the conditions were favorable for the success of an anti-colonial rebellion along the Atlantic seaboard of late eighteenth century British America was conclusively demonstrated by events. After two centuries, the outcome seems to carry the certainty of a logical syllogism. But that outcome was not visible in the decades between 1763 and 1800. Posed to take advantage of those conditions was a class of visionary men endowed by the ideals of the Enlightenment who inspired a cohort of men of action empowered by their robust and dynamic colonial way of life. They fought for and won the right to create a new independent republic, governed by a democracy fashioned from notions of equality and liberty. But their magnificent success bore a dangerous imperfection.

The great men of the American Revolution suffered, in their own time, a defeat of vision. Slavery was passed over by the Declaration of Independence and left on the table

by the Constitutional Convention. It was beyond their power to remedy, not because they could not or even chose not to act—we shall see that their greatest man did act—but because *the end of slavery was beyond their vision*. Vision must precede action: the abolition of slavery had to be visualized and understood on a personal level. In this, the American Revolution made only a beginning.

The concept of the American independent republic, as Pauline Maier shows in *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*, was the logical consequence of colonial rebellion. To lift the hand of Parliament's increasingly onerous acts from the shoulder of British America, it would be necessary to sever the sinews of King and Country. "Independence from Parliament ... meant independence from Britain." From the point of view of a reflective colonial activist, separation could be deduced from English political principles. Government upheaval was practically an English custom. British Americans saw the Glorious Revolution of 1688, less than a century in their collective past, as the precedent for their arguments, and their declarations. From the English Revolution had come the Whig principles of John Locke that "emphasized the contractual origins of government and the right of the people to judge their rulers." Locke's ideas were "accepted everywhere in America" as "a statement of principles built into the English constitutional tradition." The Declaration of Rights of 1689 "became for the colonists a sacred text" that "provided a statement of established, fundamental political and legal truths."² The Glorious Revolution gave the American colonists a frame of reference for political action. By the mid-1770s, state and local declarations proliferated throughout the Colonies.

A key attribute of the nascent American political character emerged: politicization by personification. Taxation without representation agitated the American colonials, challenging their self-reliance and self-esteem by denying their sense of equality with British subjects of the Crown. The Parliament's intolerable legislation recast as the acts of George III enlarged their agitated resentment to a widely held (by no means unanimous) rebellious sentiment. In varying degrees of eloquence, this sentiment was documented in the state and local declarations, where "all described the Americans' situation and the need for Independence the same way." The "colonists faced a King who stood resolutely behind the right of Parliament to pass laws for the colonies." The state and local declarations focussed on this perceived royal contempt, adding various "whereas" to mention British methods of warfare, Parliament's Prohibitory Act, the touchy subject of German mercenaries, and other obnoxious English intrusions on colonial self-government. Thomas Paine's 1776 *Common Sense* drove the point home. His personification of the source of oppression in King George III expressed the evil of "monarchy and hereditary rule" as English "constitutional errors." The separation of colonial government from the British monarchy was necessary to the popular right of representation. Independence was required to "derive power not from birth but from the ballot." Maier observes, "To attack the King was ... a constitutional form. It was the way Englishmen announced revolution."³

Although the American Revolution was essentially a colonial rebellion, it was the English who had changed. The American Revolution was driven to a great extent by conservative yearnings "to recover the remembered peace and freedom" of the colonial heyday that did not demand the overthrow of the King but merely separation—

independence—from him and his Parliament. The earlier English tribulations of regicide and the destruction of the old regime were not required. The political task 3,000 miles distant from the Mother Country was perhaps thereby made to appear more palatable, if not easier (the British Army had returned in force to the new continent). Yet because Independence implied the creation of an entirely new government, it “marked a more dramatic departure from the past than ... 1689.” The body of the Declaration of Independence, like its documentary forebears, was a recitation of grievances against George III. “Independence was justified only if the charges against the King were convincing and of sufficient gravity to warrant dissolution of his authority over the American people.”⁴

Beyond Independence lay the formation of a new republic, the raucous galaxy of former colonies bound together in nationhood. To build a path from the former to the latter—for the American Revolution to succeed—Americans had “to raise the vision of a future so compelling that in its name men would sacrifice even life itself.” Men who have been called great now enter Maier’s scene. The state and local declarations, the words of Paine in *Common Sense*, of John Dickinson in the 1775 “Declaration of the Taking Up of Arms,” the Lockean meditations of George Mason, were summarized, distilled, elaborated, and refined by Thomas Jefferson. To what extent Jefferson’s product was actually shaped by the advice of Franklin, edited or supervised by the Congressional Committee of Five appointed to the task, we do not truly know today, but we have the extraordinarily well-crafted result. Maier’s exposition of the formulation of the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence makes explicit the implicit meaning of “American Scripture.” The “laws of nature and of nature’s god” are connected by “self-evident”

truth to the “inalienable rights” of “all men...created equal.” The right of men, “their duty,” to engage in revolution to “secure” the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, is boldly and unambiguously asserted. Maier shows that as the document itself, as an object, became a secular sacrament, its content, especially the startling language of its preface, became a lasting icon of the ideal of the American Revolution. It rings to this day as humanity’s clearest chime of freedom.⁵

In his contrarian historical matrix of narratives about the oppressed and marginalized peoples of the American Revolutionary Era, *The Unknown American Revolution, The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America*, Gary B. Nash examines the convoluted eddies of internal conflict splashing in the irresistible stream of the struggle for Independence. “Revolutions have always begun with an insurgent minority, and the American Revolution was no exception.”⁶ Chaotic conditions produced revolutions within the Revolution.⁷ Nash’s significant contribution is his focus on the people, all manner of “insurgent minorities,” social and racial groups co-opted, ignored, or overwhelmed by the force of the Revolution. Some of Nash’s people, such as the African Americans responding to Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation, opposed the Revolution itself. Nash peers with compassion into the convection currents traversing the diverse sub-strata of Revolutionary society, each vortex swirling in its own struggle for independence.

Nash de-emphasizes the “great man” in favor of the common man, but he sometimes complains about what great men did, or could have done but did not. The “double war” driven by land speculation in the fertile Ohio River Valley is a case in point of history and historiography. He adds his professional peers to his complaint, including

Maier. Nash harshly criticizes “the silence” of his fellow historians regarding Jefferson’s “pungent” characterization of “merciless Indian savages.” Perhaps Nash’s accusations are somewhat overly broad. Maier, for one, discusses at length the “inconsistency between American principle and practice,” at least in connection with slavery. However, it is downright impossible to dispute Nash’s claim that “most of the troubles with Indian nations began with white land hunger, unscrupulous trading, and arrogance.”⁸

Nash, as do many historians, reserves his greatest criticism of the founders for their failure to abolish slavery at the time of the American Revolution. Here Nash has located the central contradiction of the American Revolution. Implicitly accepting Maier’s view of the sacramental nature of the Declaration, he first notes John Adams’ prediction at the time that “the Second Day of July 1776 [administrative details delayed the moment to the Fourth Day] will be the most memorable Epocha [*sic*] in the history of America ... [I]t will be celebrated by succeeding generations ... commemorated by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty.” Then Nash raises Samuel Hopkins’ warning regarding slavery that “if the leaders of the nation struggling for independence did not erase this ‘national sin,’ the American people would never survive God’s wrath.” It is a sublime clue to the enlightened Christian underpinnings of the American Revolutionary Era, to which I will return later, and to the credit rather than disrepute of the era’s leadership debates that the matter came up at all. In Nash, the sentiments of liberty and equality rage among his “insurgent minorities,” formative harbingers of more successful democratic movements already in motion.⁹

Nash is at his best when his narrative matrix parses such social harbingers of democracy. Nash’s account of the 1778 “Fort Wilson Riot” is convincingly evocative of

the challenge the young and vigorous spirit of democracy, in its various combinations of insurgent minorities, would present the Revolutionary republic. The issue at hand, germinated in the currency crisis produced by the expense of war, was the liberty of merchants to set their own prices against the equality of artisans and tradesmen implicit in their demand for “just prices.” The riotous pattern recurs throughout the late eighteenth century, often in Pennsylvania; as it did again in 1781 with the Pennsylvania Mutiny, and later, in the 1790s, with the Whiskey Rebellion in Western Pennsylvania and Kentucky. Benjamin Rush gave voice to a Tory-like anguish at the “sad prelude...of the future mischiefs [*sic*] our constitution will bring upon us.” Rush, of course, was referring to nasty democratic influences on the bold vision of the new independent republic. ““They call it a democracy,”” Nash quotes Rush, ““a mobocracy in my opinion would be more proper.””¹⁰

Nash’s people sometimes moved with the current, sometimes against the current. Their salient feature was movement, mass action on their own behalf. Their hope was that the great new formative ideal of equality and liberty was not a myth. For some of Nash’s people, women and African Americans, after decades and even centuries of struggle, the myth would become real. For others, the Native Americans, the myth did not exist.

Jefferson saw his own time as a “Heroic Age.”¹¹ One might stretch Emerson and Carlyle to suppose that the lives of men are the source of all myths. Two of the most well known schoolboy myths of the American Revolution are Paul Revere’s ride and the death of Alexander Hamilton in a duel with Aaron Burr. They bracket the era like bookends. Revere, the man of action, performed his greatest service to the new republic even before

it claimed its independence. Hamilton, the man of vision, did much to prepare and sustain the republic for its future. Revere and Hamilton were two very different heroes at opposite ends of the mythic spectrum, as different in their greatness as in their personalities and their life stories.

David Hackett Fischer's *Paul Revere's Ride* is a rich narrative of the man, a practical and dedicated Boston patriot, and his glorious moment on the night of April 18, 1775, the eve of the battles of Lexington and Concord. Born in America of Huguenot stock and a skilled silversmith, Revere, like his Boston compatriots, was devoted to the colonial liberties he saw England attempting to strangle. Revere "believed that he was defending the inherited folk rights of New England: its ancient custom of self-government, its sacred idea of the covenant, and its traditional way of life."¹²

In *Revere*, Fischer finds a people's hero, a man of action who flawlessly executed his role to show the Revolutionary promise of unconventional warfare by the Americans' successful employment of communication and celerity to achieve victories at Lexington and Concord and along the British retreat to Charlestown. Revere's ride to alert the countryside and mobilize the local militias to the approach of Thomas Gage's British forces has become a canonical American revolutionary image of the fight for liberty. Revere's historical act contained the quintessential heroic metaphor of the man of action: horsemanship. Revere was often charged by his fellow patriots to deliver critical information over great distances; the evidence is that he always did. Fischer splendidly conveys the exhilaration of the skilled equestrian that Revere himself must have known.¹³

"Many other riders helped Paul Revere to carry the alarm," Fischer writes. Fischer convincingly makes the case that more than a "solitary courier," Revere was "an

organizer and promoter of a common effort in the cause of freedom.” Of very great value is Fischer’s observation that Revere and his Boston colleague Dr. Joseph Warren “were unique in the breadth of their associations” with the revolutionary movement in Boston. Fischer assembles a combined roster of hundreds of individuals to show that Revere and Warren were the most linked hubs of a network of Boston revolutionary societies, associations, lodges, and committees. Fischer’s finding, indicative of “a loose alliance of many overlapping groups,” offers an important insight into the “inner harmony” and organizational strength of the patriots. In a corollary to Nash’s “unknown revolution,” the *known* Revolutionary movement in New England, and possibly throughout the colonies, “was more open and pluralist than scholars have believed.”¹⁴

As the early morning of April 19, 1775 arrives, Fischer’s story is not reluctant to leave Revere with his advancing British captors to follow the action as the British formation marches toward perpetual ignominy at Lexington Green and its fate at the Concord Bridge. With excellent maps, this is an exciting tale told well. There is honor and atrocity enough for both sides, a lasting tone of the eight-year war that begins here.

“On both sides,” Fischer’s elegiac epilogue begins, “many of the men who fought at Lexington and Concord died in the long and bitter war that followed.” Dr. Joseph Warren was among them. Killed at Bunker Hill, his body was later identified “by the artificial teeth that Revere had wired into Doctor Warren’s jaw.” Paul Revere passed a brief and disappointing military stint relatively unscathed, then lived on in peace to improve his artisan skills and knowledge of metallurgy. A “Federalist of the old school,” Revere supported the Federal Constitution and his influence with the Boston mechanics “is commonly thought to have turned the narrow balance” toward Massachusetts’

ratification. When Revere died, apparently a happy man in the fullness of age in 1818, “the myth and legend of his acts was only beginning.”

Ron Chernow’s massive psychohistory and cultural synthesis, *Alexander Hamilton*, follows the crowded, tangled life of the brilliant “master builder of the new government,” from his birth of uncertain heritage in the Caribbean to his unjust and untimely end below the New Jersey Palisades in 1804.¹⁵

In many ways, Hamilton seems to be the man the Enlightenment was meant to produce. An aide and close associate to General Washington during the Revolutionary War, the political and economic shortcomings of the Confederation government would soon yield to Hamilton an unparalleled opportunity. “As a member of the Washington family, Hamilton ... stumbled upon the crowning enterprise of his life: the creation of a powerful new country.” Launching his political career from his post-war home in New York, Hamilton guaranteed his ascent in the American Revolutionary Era pantheon through his amazingly energetic activities to create and ratify the new U.S. Constitution. (Hamilton’s lifelong output of writing is literally mind-boggling.) This was the new phase of the American Revolution: “what sort of society America ought to be.” Ratification of the Constitution was the first step. To achieve ratification, Hamilton conceived and supervised the visionary project that would become “the masterpiece known as the Federalist Papers.” Chernow provides an excellent detailed survey of these essays written by Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. The effectiveness of *The Federalist*, and his expanding network of valuable connections, earned Hamilton the Treasury post in President Washington’s administration.¹⁶

Chernow offers a cogent paragraph on the source of greatness in the American Revolutionary Era. “Part of the answer is that the Revolution produced an insatiable need for thinkers who could generate ideas and wordsmiths who could lucidly expound them.” The war phase was over, but the Revolution was still in progress, and Hamilton filled both criteria as well as any man living. “The immediate utility of ideas was an incalculable tonic for the founding generation.”¹⁷

Hamilton left a substantial record of accomplishment when he departed Washington’s administration in 1795. “Bankrupt when Hamilton took office, the United States now enjoyed a credit rating equal to that of any European nation.” His advocacy of the use of military force to suppress the Whiskey Rebellion, triggered by his tax policy to retire the Revolutionary war debt, had been ordered by Washington. “He had laid the groundwork for both liberal democracy and capitalism and helped to transform the role of the president from passive administrator to active policy maker, creating the institutional scaffolding for America’s future emergence as a great power.” Where Fischer placed Revere in the day before Revolution, Chernow places Hamilton in the day after Revolution. “If Washington was the father of the country and Madison the father of the Constitution, then Alexander Hamilton was surely the father of the American government.”¹⁸

To trace a sample of Chernow’s frequent psychohistorical analysis, in Hamilton’s enlightened vision for the people (he was an early abolitionist) there lurked an unsettling, earthier vision of the people. Throughout his career, Hamilton was attacked for his sometimes unsubtle aristocratic leanings; at the same time, he favored a strong authority

to guide the republic. “Hamilton often seemed a man suspended between two worlds,” Chernow remarks.

Too often, his political vision harked back to a past in which well-bred elites made decisions for less-educated citizens. This contradicted the advanced economic thinking expressed in his vision of a fluid, meritocratic elite, open to talented outsiders such as himself....

This was the great paradox of his career: his optimistic view of America’s potential coexisted with an essentially pessimistic view of human nature. His faith in Americans never quite matched his faith in America itself.¹⁹

There is a lingering question about the deeper Hamilton. If Paul Revere practiced horsemanship, Alexander Hamilton practiced brinksmanship, to the point of courting disgrace, and even death. On the first point, Hamilton benefited greatly from living his political career in the eighteenth century rather than the twenty-first. Upon discovering his romantic indiscretion with a blackmailing tart named Maria Reynolds while in search of financial scandal, Hamilton’s embarrassed enemies apologized profusely; of course, the business—and her conniving husband—came back, uglier than ever, to haunt him later. At the very same time that he juggled this tawdry affair, Hamilton produced an impressive survey of the promise of capitalist industry, his prescient *Report on Manufactures*, in December, 1791. It is as though Hamilton thought one sphere of endeavor would morally balance the other! Indeed, the liberal sheet *Aurora* mocked him for thinking so. Hamilton was prepared “to sacrifice his private reputation to preserve his

public honor,” Chernow explains with an exquisite comment. “Hamilton was incapable of a wise silence.” The preservation of honor would be Hamilton’s ultimate undoing. By the relentless elevation of a trifling remark to “the mad and elliptical logic of dueling,” the irrational Aaron Burr, Jefferson’s vice-president and uncannily frequent face in the New York crowd around Hamilton, cloaked murder with honor to maneuver Hamilton, with the latter’s inexplicable cooperation, into a fatal encounter.²⁰

One of the great misfortunes of the American Revolutionary era is that Martha Dandridge Custis burned the personal correspondence of her second husband, George Washington.²¹ Her reason for doing so cannot possibly outweigh the loss to posterity. Only the barest outline of the inner man remains today, difficult to discern in the brilliant reflection of the outer man over more than two centuries of American history.

Henry Wiencek’s thoughtful, almost journalistic micro-history, *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves and the Creation of America*, establishes the useful hypothesis that the genuinely great man’s attitude about the peculiar institution changed over his lifetime. Wiencek infers from his evidence that Washington ultimately acted upon his personal views, but offers no firm theory upon which to judge whether this was the decision of the outer man or the inner man.

The people of late eighteenth century Virginia are very near in Wiencek’s hands-on history. The world of Washington becomes visible. The strange barrier of psychic distance and moral denial that separated whites from blacks quickly emerges during an examination of a plantation ledger of his Latane kin near Washington’s birthplace. “It was as if they inhabited the same place, but in different dimensions.” Washington the planter stood for much of his life behind the same barrier. “The slaves and he did not

inhabit the same logical universe.” Wiencek writes movingly of a Virginia society that included Mr. and Mrs. Washington which “reveals the capacity of the masters and mistresses to tolerate profound psychological dislocation.”

The evolution of slavery from a simple labor system into a complex, multigenerational nexus of social entanglements, property rights, secret family ties, and inheritance customs had thrown their tight little world out of joint... Some slaveholders saw the moral contradiction and some did not...

Wiencek asserts that Washington was “flabbergasted to encounter enslaved kin.” He discovers that the Custis slave Ann Dandridge, living at Mount Vernon, was Martha’s half-sister. “This discovery ... completely undercuts the image of the Washingtons as radically separate and aloof from their slaves; it adds layers of questions to Washington’s final decision to emancipate his slaves; and it takes us deeply into the psychology of mastery.”²²

To probe this state of mind, where “[p]rivate interests inevitably intersected with public power,” Wiencek attempts to draw a connection between Washington’s interests as a planter and local judge with his future commitment to the U.S. Constitution. Wiencek quotes Washington to show that the “governing principle of his life as a planter” was to seek “tranquility with a *certain* income.” In this, Wiencek hears an “eerie echo” of the Preamble’s phrase asserting the people’s intent to “insure domestic tranquility.” Wiencek’s connection stretches the implication of “domestic” about as far as it will go, for Washington’s position as a judge placed him in “a rigidly hierarchical society” where

“the highest priority was maintaining the order of things.” The local dispensation of justice often involved the sorting out of property and propriety issues of race and gender, and the disposition of mixed-race children. Justice was mastery, the judge was master. Slave kin, the sexual connection between male masters and female slaves, the fearful combination of race and sex, were the manifestation of the threat of the irrational to the “the carefully constructed authority of the hierarchy.” The social and economic elite of this hierarchy sought the comfort of rational control. A judge would act to remove the irrationality and insure the tranquility of control. Wiencek explains, “Slavery offered not just labor but the psychological comfort of mastery itself. It was part of the mode of being to have people at one’s command. That power could be intoxicating. Even George Washington felt it.”

There is a problem with Wiencek’s purported connection. Washington’s “basic equations” and obsessive list-making leave little doubt about his affinity to well ordered, hierarchical systems. His career as plantation manager, judge, general, and president certainly illustrates the outer man’s significant reservoir of leadership skills. He was, at all times, in power, in command. But Washington’s comment on tranquility on the plantation was made in a letter in 1796; he had already spent the greatest years of his life seeking to achieve the tranquility ordained by the Constitution. Wiencek has confused the chronology of conjectured thought maturation in his subject. He has replaced his question about the psychology of mastery with a question about the psychology of tranquility.²³

Yet Wiencek is not wrong. Now he is on the trail of the inner man. “Before he donned his Olympian raiments [*sic*] ... [t]he existence of ... mixed-race children was a

part of the fabric of Washington's world." Perhaps Washington had indeed come to perceive in the faces of slaves who resembled his relations that something in his world was out of joint; something sexual and familial that a man like Washington would not have discussed, if at all, outside the most private conversations or correspondence. In January, 1789, "Washington declared ... his regret over slavery and confided his plan for an emancipation, and his intention that the children of slaves should have 'a destiny different from that in which they were born.'"²⁴

Washington's premonition of an early death—he was 64 when he left office in 1796—may have opened a door for him that the men of his time could not or chose not to see. In his retirement from the presidency Washington sought his truest comfort in the familiar "rigorous routine of farm life." For him, a pleasant day of the land's work at Mount Vernon was tranquility. His public career over, at peace with his world, his thoughts may have wandered beyond the mundane. Wiencek recounts at length Washington's 1798 remarks to an English visitor. Washington mused on the end of slavery. The vision of the outer man of public duty is set forth in the concluding dominant clause, "I can clearly foresee that nothing but the rooting out of slavery can perpetuate the existence of our union." The preceding clause hints at the intensely private vision of the inner man, "I pray for it, on the score of human dignity." On this score, his self-interest and the national interest were indistinguishable; the life of the man and the life of the nation were not. He could act only for himself. In his will, Washington instructed, "all the Slaves which I hold *in my own right*, shall receive their freedom."²⁵

The inner man and the outer man came together in an individual act of personal grace to preserve his own human dignity, and perhaps his immortal soul. An imperfect god, he could not free all men. The apotheosis of George Washington did not require perfection.

The “transformation of the ‘heart’ might take myriad outward forms,” writes Dee E. Andrews in *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800, The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture*. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Methodism, a non-conformist offshoot of the Anglican Church based on tolerance, missionary zeal, and enthusiastic religious experience, “a model of practical Christianity,” had gained a foothold in America. Founded on the ideas of John Wesley, the Calvinist George Whitefield, and other Anglican reformers, this new movement found a fertile niche in the fervor of the first Great Awakening. Arriving in Philadelphia in 1769, the first Wesleyans sensed the opportunity presented by the colonies’ diversity, “restless and often unchurched.” Methodism’s itinerant preachers carried an evangelical message of Christian conversion and “sanctification”—purification of one’s relationship to Christ—through individual renewal of the soul to the people of America.²⁶

Andrews’ American Methodists are Nash’s people. Guided principally by the “plebian” but astute Francis Asbury, the “extraordinary heterogeneity of the Methodist movement” cast a net of emergent order over the vaulting energies released in Revolutionary society. Espousing “ecumenical themes,” it quite literally gathered many walks of life together in community convocations of stimulating preaching and apparently often rousing responses to its emphatic and broad-minded spiritual focus on the revival of the spirit.²⁷

As early as the “Christmas Conference” of Methodist preachers in 1784, the movement’s antislavery attitude was articulated. The inclusive spirit of the Wesleyans sought out slaves and free blacks. The “Methodist evangelization of the black population in the greater Middle Atlantic ... was a stunning success.” Andrews highlights the career of the prominent Philadelphia black preacher Richard Allen and the important story of the evolution, evidently encouraged by Asbury, of the African Methodist movement within a movement. Even a well-organized and highly motivated movement could not sustain abolitionist momentum before 1800. The political and economic “contradiction between the rhetoric of natural rights ... and the practice of ... captive bondage” was too great a chasm for a mission centered on individual experience to span. “The Methodist Church all too quickly jettisoned its antislavery militancy. But black followers applied the religious message of liberation to their own condition.” Autonomy became the realizable goal of the African American preachers, in lieu of the as yet unattainable abolition. “Methodism ... reflected ... the ‘black drive for autonomy.’” The “viable African Methodist alternative ... would serve as a spiritual wellspring for African Americans for generations to come.”²⁸

The rapid expansion of Methodism in the early decades of the nineteenth century shows that their mission clearly filled a need felt by the people of the countryside. “The American Methodists ... epitomized the democratic fervor of American religion in the burgeoning American republic.” Methodism, at the forefront of “the great homogenizing force of evangelical Christianity,” radicalized revolution into reform with its missionary goal of “spiritual egalitarianism of the revival.”²⁹

“By the early nineteenth century, America had already emerged as the most egalitarian, most materialistic, most individualistic—and most evangelical Christian—society in Western history.” Gordon S. Wood explores the meaning of radical transformation in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. Radicalism is the startlingly new intellectual process of change inherent in the Enlightenment. In the socioeconomic sphere, it is exponential growth or decline, over the multiplicative; in the political sphere, it is the acceleration of rebellion to revolution, the deceleration of revolution to reform, or the inversion of revolution to counter-revolution. Beyond the direct impacts of victory in war and establishment of self-government, Wood describes the radical effect on the American experience. “The Revolution not only changed the culture of Americans—making over their art, architecture, and iconography—but even altered their understanding of history, knowledge, and truth.” In its vision and actions, the American Revolution was *essentially radical*. “Most important, it made the interests and prosperity of ordinary people—their pursuit of happiness—the goal of society and government.”³⁰

The British American network of economic interests, sociopolitical information, and human migration, created a critical confluence of ideals, ideas, and individuals in the American Colonies. In 1763, the Western Atlantic stood at the threshold of something entirely new to the scale and dimension of Western culture. By 1800, the American Revolution was the manifest result of a whole system actualized by radical change. “The founding fathers were unsettled and fearful not because the American Revolution had failed but because it had succeeded ... only too well.” Wood identifies two radical political transformations in the Revolution. The first transformation was the colonial

liberation from monarchy to establish an independent republic. The second transformation, enabled by the first, was the personal liberation bestowed by equality and liberty to create a democracy. The catalytic radicalism of the total commitment to independence drew upon the dual imperatives of equality and liberty to create, not without conflict, a resilient republic and engender, not without pain, a durable democracy.³¹

Emerson essayed that we are wiser than we know. Carlyle asserted that history is the essence of innumerable biographies.³² The finite sum of human lives is history, their indefinite integral is myth. The founding fathers inhabit the most honored place in American history and myth for by their vision and their actions they set a great people in motion. The democracy born in their republic still prospers. Their failure to abolish slavery became the great work of their grandchildren. The apostolic connection of equality and liberty to their posterity has never been broken. The revolutions within their Revolution whirl on, from halls and battlefields to hearts and minds. Of that people can be said—encouraging our belief that the truths of history shape the horizon of myth—that none of them were as great as all of them.

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Notes

1. *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 3d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 131, 207.
2. Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 23, 87, 51.
3. *Ibid.*, 90, 78-80, 31, 32, 38.
4. *Ibid.*, 30, 94, 105.
5. *Ibid.*, 95-96, 236.

6. Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution, The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 11.
7. Gary B. Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 67.
8. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution*, 172, 213-214. Maier, 198.
9. *Ibid.*, 207, 210-211.
10. *Ibid.*, 307-320.
11. Maier, 181.
12. David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 28.
13. *Ibid.*, 106-107.
14. *Ibid.*, 138, 64, 301.
15. Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 479.
16. *Ibid.*, 157, 243, 249.
17. *Ibid.*, 251.
18. *Ibid.*, 481.
19. *Ibid.*, 234, 232.
20. *Ibid.*, 374-375, 534-536, 697, 723-731.
21. Henry Wiencek, *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves and the Creation of America*, (London: Pan Macmillian, 2005), 358.
22. *Ibid.*, 25, 40, 85-86.
23. *Ibid.*, 128, 119, 130-131.
24. *Ibid.*, 133, 310.
25. *Ibid.*, 344, 352, 354.
26. Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800, The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 24, 15, 39.
27. *Ibid.*, 42, 41, 31-38.
28. *Ibid.*, 71, 132, 124, 137.
29. *Ibid.*, 222, 243-244.
30. Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 230, 8.
31. *Ibid.*, 368.
32. *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 131, 207.

¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 3d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 131, 207.

² Pauline Maier, *American Scripture*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 23, 87, 51.

³ *Ibid.*, 90, 78-80, 31, 32, 38.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 30, 94, 105.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 95-96, 236.

⁶ Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 11.

⁷ Gary B. Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 67.

⁸ Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 172, 213-214. Maier, 198.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 207, 210-211.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 307-320.

¹¹ Maier, 181.

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- ¹² David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 28.
¹³ *Ibid.*, 106-107.
¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 138, 64, 301.
¹⁵ Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 479.
¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 157, 243, 249.
¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 251.
¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 481.
¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 234, 232.
²⁰ *Ibid.*, 374-375, 534-536, 697, 723-731.
²¹ Henry Wiencek, *An Imperfect God* (London: Pan Macmillian, 2005), 358.
²² *Ibid.*, 25, 40, 85-86.
²³ *Ibid.*, 128, 119, 130-131.
²⁴ *Ibid.*, 133, 310.
²⁵ *Ibid.*, 344, 352, 354.
²⁶ Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 24, 15, 39.
²⁷ *Ibid.*, 42, 41, 31-38.
²⁸ *Ibid.*, 71, 132, 124, 137.
²⁹ *Ibid.*, 222, 243-244.
³⁰ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 230, 8.
³¹ *Ibid.*, 368.
³² *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 3d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 131, 207.