

ISSUE 6



Was the American Revolution a Conservative Movement?

YES: Carl N. Degler, from *Out of Our Past: The Forces That Shaped Modern America*, rev. ed. (Harper & Row, 1970)

NO: Gordon S. Wood, from *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1991)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Pulitzer Prize-winning author Carl N. Degler argues that upper-middle-class colonists led a conservative American Revolution that left untouched the prewar economic and social class structure of an upwardly mobile people.

NO: Prize-winning historian Gordon S. Wood argues that the American Revolution was a far-reaching, radical event that produced a unique democratic society in which ordinary people could make money, pursue happiness, and be self-governing.

Was the American Revolution a true revolution? The answer may depend on how the term *revolution* is defined. *Strict constructionists*, for example, perceive revolution as producing significant and deep societal change, while *loose constructionists* define the term as "any resort to violence within a political order to change its constitution, rulers, or policies." Historians agree that American Revolutionaries fulfilled the second definition because they successfully fought a war that resulted in the overthrow of their British rulers and established a government run by themselves. However, historians disagree over the amount of social and economic changes that took place in America.

Early historians did not concern themselves with the social and economic aspects of the American Revolution. They instead argued over the causes of the Revolution and refought the political arguments advanced by the rebelling colonists and the British government. George Bancroft was the first historian to advance the *Whig*, or *pro-American*, interpretation of the war. America won, he said, because God was on our side.

Bancroft's view remained unchallenged until the beginning of the twentieth century, when a group of *imperialist* historians analyzed the Revolution from