

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

the perspective of the British empire. These historians tended to be sympathetic to the economic and political difficulties that Great Britain faced in running an empire in the late eighteenth century.

Both the Whig and the imperialist historians assumed that the Revolution was an *external* event whose primary cause was the political differences between the colonists and their British rulers. In 1909, however, historian Carl Becker paved the way for a different interpretation of the Revolution when he concluded in his study of colonial New York that an *internal* revolution had taken place. The American Revolution, said Becker, created a struggle not only for home rule but also one for who should rule at home. This *progressive*, or *conflict*, interpretation dominated most of the writings on the American Revolution from 1910 through 1945. During this time progressive historians searched for the social and economic conflicts among groups struggling for political power.

Since World War II, most professional historians have rejected what they considered to be an oversimplified conflict interpretation of the Revolution by the previous generation of progressive historians. Robert E. Brown, in his studies on colonial Massachusetts and Virginia, argued that America had become a middle-class democracy before the American Revolution. Consequently, Brown maintained, there was no need for a social revolution. Most influential have been the works of Harvard University professor Bernard Bailyn, who used a neoconservative approach in analyzing the Revolution. In his *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 1968), Bailyn took ideas seriously once again and saw the colonists implementing the views of radical British thinkers in their struggle for independence. The most recent statement on the American Revolution from the neoconservative perspective is *Becoming America: The Revolution Before 1776* by Jon Butler (Howard University Press, 2000). In it, Butler argues that American colonial society—politically, socially, and economically—was dramatically transformed between 1680 and 1770.

In the first of the following selections, Carl N. Degler argues the neoconservative view of the American Revolution, maintaining that the upper-middle-class colonists led a conservative Revolution that left untouched the prewar economic and social class structure of an upwardly mobile people. This essay is an excellent example of the loose constructionist definition of revolution.

Since the late 1960s, historians have written a great deal about blacks, women, Native Americans, and “ordinary” people. This neoprogressive interpretation of America’s past has also made views on the events surrounding the Revolution more complicated. See the collection of articles in *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* edited by Alfred F. Young (Northern Illinois University Press, 1976).

Gordon S. Wood has given a new dimension to the neoprogressive studies of the Revolutionary era. In his book *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, he argues the strict constructionist view that the Revolution produced major social changes. In the second selection, taken from this book, Wood maintains that the American Revolution was a radical event because America was the first nation to hold democratic values, allowing ordinary people to make money, pursue happiness, and rule themselves.