

THE DECLINE OF  
AMERICAN LIBERALISM

BY

ARTHUR A. EKIRCH, JR.

PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY



LONGMANS, GREEN AND COMPANY

NEW YORK · LONDON · TORONTO

1955

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LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO., INC.  
55 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK 3

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO., LTD.  
6 & 7 CLIFFORD STREET, LONDON W 1

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO.  
20 CRANFIELD ROAD, TORONTO 16

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PUBLISHED SIMULTANEOUSLY IN THE DOMINION OF CANADA BY  
LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO., TORONTO

FIRST EDITION

973  
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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 55-11447

Printed in the United States of America

## A Revolutionary Shift in Emphasis

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THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION was an event of transcendent importance in the history of the liberal tradition. In America it brought to a climax the ideas of liberal society that had been slowly developing in the thirteen colonies during a century and a half of British rule, while in England and on the continent of Europe the Revolution became an inspiration to liberals, who saw in the fighting across the Atlantic the dawn of a new era in the Western world. The role of the American Revolution was thus twofold. On the one hand, it represented the culmination of the localized colonial demand for home rule and, on the other, it seemed the opening phase of a world-wide struggle for a more liberal and humane society.

But despite the liberal hopes that it inspired, the American Revolution nevertheless was not without its dangers so far as liberalism was concerned. However liberal in its general outlook and broader intentions, the actual Revolution was not always equally liberal in the means that it used to attain its goal. Taking the more optimistic view of its significance, the Beards in their *Rise of American Civilization* assert that "in nearly every branch of enlightened activity, in every sphere of liberal thought, the American Revolution marked the opening of a new humane epoch."<sup>1</sup> But against

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this dictum of the Beards is the severe judgment of another American scholar, Vernon L. Parrington. Although he recognized that the American Revolution had certain social consequences which gave an impetus to American liberalism, Parrington maintained that the Revolution on the whole indicated the triumph of the middle class and the encroachment of a new spirit of nationalism and Americanism upon the older, local frontiers of colonial days.

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This marked the turning point in American development; the checking of the long movement of decentralization and the beginning of a counter movement of centralization — the most revolutionary change in three hundred years of American experience. The history of the rise of the coercive state in America, with the ultimate arrest of all centrifugal tendencies, was implicit in that momentous counter movement.<sup>2</sup>

The line of thought that led directly to the American Revolution first began to take definite form in the atmosphere of native liberalism pervading the colonies by the middle of the eighteenth century. In the decade before 1776 the unceasing colonial struggle for greater self-government turned into a demand for home rule, and then finally into an open attack upon the whole monarchical principle. In the political philosophy developed by various American spokesmen, ultimate reliance was placed upon the argument that individuals had certain natural rights which governments violated at their peril. Included among these rights, to which the colonials had grown accustomed, was not only political self-rule but also a large measure of economic freedom. On both the political and the economic side, the American position was thus frankly individualistic.

Though there was little explicit democratic thinking in the colonies on the eve of the Revolution, the colonial period was still one of progress toward democracy, especially

along individualist lines. The early Revolutionary leaders — James Otis, Patrick Henry, and the Adamses — all denounced British interference with individual freedom and appealed to the concept of the natural rights of man. Colonial patriots, in other words, were thinking in terms of the negative side of government, and their liberalism was at first critical, and even destructive, in its emphasis.

The most zealous of all the Revolutionary leaders in arguing the case for radical democracy was Samuel Adams, a professional agitator who came close to being a forerunner of the modern political demagogue. His saving grace, however, was his ardent belief in the principle of home rule. According to Parrington,

Love of the New England town-meeting democracy was bred in his bones. More clearly than others he saw the danger of erecting a governing class irresponsible to the popular will. He was, in short, the embodiment of the rising spirit of the eighteenth century that found expression in individualism, that exalted liberty and hated tyranny — a spirit that had for its ultimate purpose the reduction of the powers of the political state.<sup>3</sup>

Adams used the Boston town meeting as his particular forum, and through a network of local committees of correspondence helped to keep up intercolonial enthusiasm for the Revolutionary cause. But the violent propaganda that he directed against both the British and the American aristocracy illustrated the danger that the Revolution represented for a more traditionally liberal course of action. An extremist himself, Adams and his coworkers incited their fellow Americans to instances of mob violence out of keeping with a liberal spirit of toleration, or with legal procedures.

Although liberals of a more conservative persuasion drew

back in alarm from such episodes as the Stamp Act riots or the Boston Tea Party, obviously a revolution could not be carried on as an entirely peaceful affair. Accordingly, no matter how liberal in its intentions or ends, the American Revolution was destined inevitably to invade the liberties of some individuals. Crèvecoeur, the French agriculturist residing in America, complained bitterly and eloquently of this radical, terroristic side of the revolutionary process, and he himself suffered the fate of fellow moderates in losing his property and undergoing social ostracism.<sup>4</sup> Though the Revolution was thus in many ways also a civil war, including its moments of terror and brutality, still the important fact to be noted is that it was conducted with little violence to minority or dissenting opinion. Loyalists who insisted on their views were the most oppressed, but patriot leaders could hardly have been expected to countenance an outright opposition, or the extension of aid and sympathy to the British cause. Even so, trial and execution for treason was rare or even nonexistent, and those who kept their feelings to themselves, or who agreed to accept the various American tests of loyalty, were for the most part able to survive the Revolutionary crisis with their persons and property unimpaired.

Prerevolutionary radicalism and mob violence indicated in part that Americans were ready to take up the challenge of declaring their independence and thus formalize their Revolution. Political independence, expressed in a later age in terms of national self-determination, was an idea that Thomas Paine, a recent emigrant to the colonies, depicted most attractively for his fellow Americans. In his famous tract *Common Sense*, which he published opportunely in January 1776, Paine argued the justice and necessity of separation from Great Britain. Beginning with his well-known distinction between a society and a government — "Society

in every state is a blessing, but Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil — ” Paine attacked the theory and practice of the British monarchy. Scorning reconciliation as “a fallacious dream,” he pictured the advantages of peace and prosperity which a separated America would enjoy. Declaring that a “Government of our own is our natural right,” he also envisaged the America of the future as a refuge for freedom and as “an asylum for mankind.”<sup>5</sup>

Paine’s pioneering work struck a responsive chord throughout the colonies. Actual hostilities, of course, had already begun at Lexington and Concord, and it was therefore becoming daily more obvious that Americans could not long keep up the fiction of loyalty to the crown, while they were busily engaged in fighting the king’s soldiers. Independence was in the air, and it was the particular glory of Paine’s work that he expressed so well what many Americans felt but could not bring themselves to the point of avowing. The actual Declaration of Independence, however, was not formulated until six months later, when the Continental Congress approved the words written by Thomas Jefferson.

Better than any other single document, the Declaration of Independence stated the liberal political philosophy on which the ideology of the Revolution was based. In its celebrated opening sentences, Jefferson expressed the American faith in natural rights — “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Governments, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, were instituted to secure these rights. But whenever any government destroyed them, the people in turn had the right to alter or abolish the government — though the Declaration added: “Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes.”<sup>6</sup>

The worthiness of the American cause was then further demonstrated in the Declaration by a long bill of particulars drawn up against the English crown. This familiar, and necessarily exaggerated, list of American grievances reduced itself in essence to the charge that the British had violated American liberties, not only the liberties of the colonial governments but also the personal freedom of the rank and file of the citizenry. Although the Declaration obviously stated the American case in the most favorable terms possible, it was nevertheless significant that Jefferson's language was basically mild and dignified. It partook the liberal spirit of the times and argued the cause of revolution in a rational and restrained manner. The Declaration accordingly had little of the flavor of the typical revolutionary manifesto. Instead of calling Americans to arms, it appealed to world opinion to recognize the justice and merits of the American position.

While the Declaration of Independence ably summarized the American philosophy of political liberalism, the task of translating that philosophy into action still remained. It was therefore in the constitutions drafted by the various states during the course of the Revolution that one sees the practical application of the principles expounded in the Declaration. These constitutions were an expression of the importance that Americans attached to having a definite written document, specifying the personal and property rights of the citizen and the limited powers allowed government. All of them included a declaration of rights based on the 1689 English bill of rights, and the major emphasis was on liberalism in the sense of freedom from government interference. The people were to retain their sovereignty, while government acted as their agent. "In every instance in these early state constitutions," as one historian later wrote,



the state is presented as created by the people, and existing solely for the good of the individual. Its sole duty is stated to be to protect him in the full enjoyment of his natural and inalienable rights. Public officials are declared to be the trustees of the people; the right of revolution is inherent in society. In no instance is the state presented as the provider of office, the creator of monopolies.<sup>7</sup>

The powers of state governments were not only limited in extent, but they were also divided among governor, courts, and legislature. At the same time, the individual was guaranteed freedom of speech, press, and religion, and granted the right to bear arms, to petition peacefully, and to join together in associations of his own choosing. Although the stress in both Declaration of Independence and state constitutions was on the rights of the people, not all persons were included in the term — women, Negro slaves, and white servants being exceptions. This limitation troubled the conscience of some of the Revolutionary leaders, but the greater part probably thought in terms of freedom and equality only for those already free or of freedom for political man as he existed in the eighteenth century. Also, as T. V. Smith has pointed out, it was not so significant that the framers of the Declaration did not assert an absolute equality as it was “that they did not feel it necessary to say in what respects men are *not* equal.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, the question of equality was at least left open. After Independence, the suffrage continued to be limited by property qualifications, so that perhaps only a quarter of the adult male population was able to vote. But in the eighteenth century this moderate concession to popular rule was regarded as a real advance toward democracy, and on the whole the state constitutions, especially those that were adopted in the early stages of Revolutionary enthusiasm, were looked upon as political documents radical for their time.

Surveying the provisions of these first state constitutions, a prominent modern historian has concluded:

Truly no governments on earth have ever been instituted with so little authority to do ill, as those of the American states. Yet, not content with that, the framers of constitutions even limited their governments' power to do good, lest it be perverted to their hurt.<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, many of those who thought of the war in terms of a continuing social revolution were disappointed that the new constitutions did not go further in providing positive government intervention in regard to the abolition of slavery, the separation of church and state, or the support of public education. Moreover, most of the constitutions showed little recognition of the humanitarian ideals current in the midst of the Enlightenment, although state legislatures in the North were beginning to provide for gradual emancipation. Pennsylvania's constitution, perhaps the most liberal of all, contained clauses respecting the more humane treatment of criminals and protecting the rights of aliens. And in Virginia, George Mason was the author of a comprehensive bill of rights which served as a model for other states.

In the realm of property and economic rights, the Revolutionary constitutions and statutes went far to advance the tenets of liberalism. Restrictions on the land in the form of quitrents, entail, and primogeniture were abolished. British mercantilism, with its limits on colonial overseas trade, and its prohibition of American migration beyond the Appalachians was rendered obsolete by Independence. This emancipation of commerce and industry, plus the downfall of the older landed aristocracy, helped to accomplish an economic revolution in which the trend was toward a freer society of smaller estates and individual farms. Economic

and social shifts of a leveling nature also were made possible by the intimidation or expulsion of the loyalists, with perhaps as many as one hundred thousand fleeing the United States.

The American Revolution was liberal in its assault on the political and economic privileges of the British and Tory aristocracy. But the social and economic revolution accompanying every wartime situation, while it liberates and elevates one group or class, only does so at the price of creating a new aristocracy. In the process of fighting the Revolution, economic advantage and social privilege were by no means eliminated. Much loyalist property, for example, found its way into the hands of a new group of wealthy landed proprietors. Such transfers sometimes did more to advance speculation in land prices than to further the achievement of an agrarian diffusion of property. Army contracting also resulted in the creation of new wartime fortunes, while merchants in addition were able to prosper from an expanded foreign commerce and from privateering. Trading with the enemy, especially by way of the British West Indies and Canada, was illegal, though not unusual. Throughout the war years American farmers helped to supply the British armies with foodstuffs. This unpatriotic practice, however, became unavoidable when farmers were enclosed within the British lines or threatened with confiscation of their goods if they refused to sell. Over the economic course of the war as a whole there was a heavy emphasis upon inflation, speculation, and profiteering, in which merchants as prominent as Robert Morris were implicated. Although there were attempts both in Congress and in the states to curb inflationary price increases, most governmental regulation of the period was favorable to business. In its social and economic effects, the war therefore had its selfish as well as its liberal side.<sup>10</sup>

Although it did not eliminate privilege, the Revolution sounded a liberal note in its avoidance of despotism or dictatorship. Certain students of the American Revolution, in their pains to stress the fact that it was a social revolution as well as a war for independence, have made the point that the Revolution was a real revolt with mob violence and a reign of terror. This was especially the case in respect to the harsh treatment meted out to avowed loyalists and British officeholders, but it was also a tribute to the essential moderation and liberalism of patriot leaders that they fought the Revolution with so little violation of individual rights. What was truly liberal about the Revolution was not the extent to which it had to resort to violence and terror in freeing Americans from British rule, but the way in which it was able to avoid the substitution of new American despotisms for old British tyrannies.

The parallels between the American and other revolutions are fascinating, but it is also important to remember that Washington did not become a Caesar, a Cromwell, or a Napoleon. Among revolutionary movements in general, the American struggle was unique in the degree to which it maintained a balance between military discipline and individual freedom. Protesting British authoritarian rule, Americans were careful to avoid giving their own government too much power in either civil or military affairs. It is true that there was much fear of a military dictatorship, but the civil authorities in both Congress and the state governments were ever watchful and suspicious of any indications of military encroachment upon their powers. Washington, though he complained bitterly of the lack of troops and supplies, was careful to avoid serious conflict with civilian leaders. At the close of the war, the "father of his country" retired gracefully to private life, while he used his influence to prevent a nas-

cent *coup d'état* organized by a discontented group of ill-paid officers.

But, perhaps, nothing better illustrated the liberal climate of opinion during the War of Independence than the way in which many Americans, despite the state of hostilities, were able to carry on their normal peacetime interests and pursuits. This was true not only of those in regions unaffected by the war, but also applied to civilians caught within the lines of the embattled armies. In an age when total war was still off in the future, noncombatants were able to enjoy certain rights and immunities. American scientists, for example, continued to correspond with their colleagues in England. Thus a Harvard scholar in a letter to the secretary of the Royal Society in London maintained that "political disputes should not prevent communication in matters of mere science," nor did he see how anyone could "be injured by such an intercourse." Benjamin Franklin and other American patriots retained the good will of old acquaintances in England, and to Franklin, Sir Joseph Banks, the distinguished naturalist, affirmed: "I respect you as a Philosopher & solicit the continuance of your friendship." Moreover, American students, despite the war, continued to go abroad to study medicine in Scotland, or painting in London under the aegis of the American expatriate Benjamin West. One of West's students, Benjamin Trumbull, who went to England after a period of service in the Continental army, had the misfortune to be arrested and imprisoned, but he was finally released and allowed to proceed to the Continent and thence home. It seemed therefore that, as one authority has pointed out, "The associations of American liberals and intellectuals with their English counterparts were scarcely interrupted by the war."<sup>11</sup>

In general, loyalty to the patriot cause did not prevent

Americans from continuing the various international strands of their private lives or their own special intellectual interests. Despite the heightened nationalism and patriotism of the war years, Americans retained in a high degree an international and cosmopolitan outlook. George Washington called himself "a Citizen of the great republic of humanity at large," while Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and others held fast to the world-wide interests and views of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. In the same fashion, European philosophers and statesmen paid tribute to the success of American arms and referred to the achievement of United States independence as the beginning of a new epoch in world affairs.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, in spite of final victory and the preservation in large measure of the forms of a liberal society, it has been suggested that many Americans found the war a disillusioning business.<sup>13</sup> The more radical political and economic thinkers were especially disappointed. The principles of freedom and equality that they had asserted with such confidence at the beginning of the struggle for independence had become tarnished by the seven dreary years of war and fighting. It had not always been possible to conduct the war by individualistic or democratic procedures, and the very fact that colonial liberalism had been carried to the point of rebellion and civil war involved a necessary conflict with such major strands of the liberal tradition as peaceful change, toleration of dissenting minorities, and supremacy of civil government. Fastening their attention on local self-government and social change, colonial liberals were not prepared for the conservative countermovement and nationalistic consolidation that followed the war. This reaction was most marked in the case of the army officers who threatened a *coup d'état* in 1783, but it was also to be reflected in the general decline of liberal principles after the war.