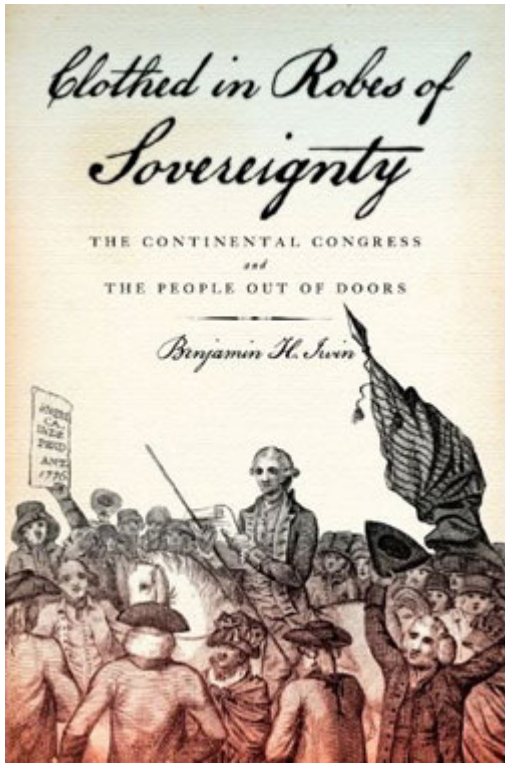


# Making the Nation



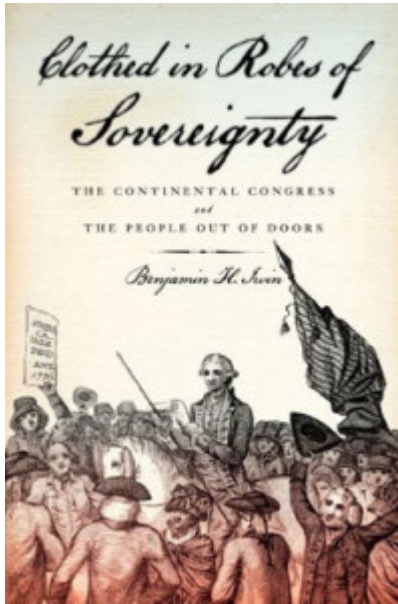
The Continental Congress has received scant attention from the academic community in recent decades. The scholarly zeitgeist tends to portray its members as perpetually frozen in John Trumbull's painting of the moment they declared independence, carrying out a famous act that everyone recognizes. But this image has little connection to the social and cultural history that has enriched our understanding of the lives of the men and women who experienced the beginning of the United States. While millions from around the world queue up for the chance for a few moments in the room where the Continental Congressmen performed their most significant work, scholars have seen their story as self-evident, and turned attention to other groups—pamphlet writers in scattered towns, the crowds that gathered on Pennsylvania's State House lawn, the men and women who met at colonial taverns and coffeehouses, the men who enlisted as soldiers in the army the Congress created, and the individuals and groups who lived through the revolution: white and black, men and women, rich and poor.

Benjamin Irvin has resuscitated the Continental Congress in light of recent historiographical method, capturing the way it crafted and then used its own authority, the methods it took to draw an American imagination into supporting a newborn American national cause, and finally, how it lost that authority amidst a failing economy and increasing success by other people who carried out this nationalizing mission better.

As Irvin breathes life into the group, they are meeting in Philadelphia, seeking redress from the government in London for oppressive policies of

taxation and military action. Those tales are oft-told, but where Irvin's book moves into new territory, and where the great benefit of this excellent study of politics and culture establishes itself, is showing the ways that the colonial leadership strove to build on earlier means of authority while at the same time breaking with both the empire and earlier customs. The effort was both tricky and dangerous, the author relates. Immediately upon gathering, congressmen used manners, possessions, and customs of entertainment to show one another and the people of the city around them that they deserved their new level of authority. In their clothing, style of meeting, attendants, and entertainments, they revealed patterns of refinement and gentility. Irvin's work dovetails nicely into earlier, seminal works by Richard Bushman and T.H. Breen that explained the meaning of these patterns, and adds to that historiography by showing the ways those characteristics came into question as Congress sought ways to protest the king's ministers' actions. "The Continental Congress worked concertedly to supplant the tokens and habits of the British nation with fresh ones devoted to the United States. It implemented codes of conduct by which patriotic Americans could distinguish those who belonged to their imagined community from those who did not" (10).

By proscribing the rich entertainments that all social ranks had been using for years to establish their position or ambition as Britons, Congress sought to impose frugality and economic restraint as a means to unite a divergent people. Irvin's book shows that actually carrying out this sea change of political behavior could be a double-edged sword. Congress created the Articles of Association to draw the people to its cause. Closing theaters and puppet shows, stripping funerals of their lavish display and opulent gifting, and calling on hostesses and hosts to refrain from sumptuous meals all allowed the colonists to join in a shared sacrifice of war. But when Congress itself attempted to underpin its authority in entertainments like a proposed grand ball for Martha Washington, the people's displeasure became palpable. Even as it called for an end to public dances, Congress found itself in a very complex minuet with the people of the new nation's largest city, a people willing to use old methods to enforce a new nation's rules.



Benjamin H. Irvin, *Clothed in Robes of Sovereignty: The Continental Congress and the People Out of Doors*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 392 pages, \$34.95.

Irvin uses the concept of a “people out of doors” to explicate how Americans experienced and affected this era of change. “Eighteenth-century Britons used the descriptive phrase ‘out of doors’ to distinguish popular political action and discourse—that which took place in taverns, in coffeehouses, and out in the streets—from official proceedings that unfolded within the halls of government” (14). Through folk ritual, “rough music,” and outright mob violence, the people out of doors chose their own level of acceptance of the Congress’ policies and proclamations. As Irvin discloses, the people out of doors could take various levels of resistance and acquiescence to the Congress’ proclamations—ideals that had little hope of success without persuading the people to lend their support.

Whigs were not alone in seeking to shape public opinion and crowd action during the revolution. Tories were aghast at the rising tide of protest and the actions of the revolutionary leaders, and Irvin’s narrative explores the ways in which a group of these pro-government men blasted the “upstarts” in the Continental Congress. Focusing on the writings of Church of England ministers Thomas Bradbury Chandler, Samuel Seabury, and Myles Cooper, the author reveals that while some crowds shouted their approval for Congress’ declarations and followed its calls to boycott, fast, and pray, others shuddered at the direction that their colonies were heading. “The hopes of all moderate and considerate persons among us ... were long fixed upon the general *American Congress* ... But the poor *Americans* ... are doomed to disappointment,” Irvin quotes Chandler as writing in 1774 (52). In the months that followed, the three and others of their ilk crafted rhetoric that sought to undermine the congressman’s authority on a very basic level: his manhood. These Tory clergymen connected their disdain for the Calvinists of New England with that region’s leadership

in the revolutionary movement, Irvin writes. By “accusing New England delegates of zealotry, loyalist pamphleteers suggested that these radicals had given themselves over to unmanly emotional excess” (58). Indeed, this battle of masculinity was a game played by both sides: Congress was not above questioning its own member’s manliness when it disagreed with Francis Hopkinson’s presenting bills for his designs for American flags and symbols; earlier, John Adams stressed the “manly” manner in which the body declared independence in 1776.

From its first meeting in the autumn of 1774, and far more once it returned to Philadelphia in the midst of leading a people at war in the spring of 1775, Congress faced a daunting spectrum of tasks: organizing an open rebellion against the mightiest military force in the world, creating a new economy, and uniting the citizens of a country that did not exist yet with newly minted nationalistic feelings. How would Congress create this imagined community? Irvin suggests that the new government used a collection of tactics: “To animate the American people, to rally them for war, to coax their faith in independence and their affection for a newborn republic, the Continental Congress fashioned an artful material and ceremonial culture for the Revolutionary United States” (4-5). Irvin’s study explores the varied ways that Congress did this, ranging from proclamations of annual fast days to celebrations of key historic moments to remembrances of fallen leaders by the first, restrained state funerals.

Congress employed art as one of its central tools to shape public opinion from the first days of the Revolution. Americans today are used to the symbolic representation of nationalism, and immediately recognized symbols—eagles, flags, and stars and stripes adorning everything from ceremonial bunting behind presidential candidates to boxer shorts and beach towels—might allow observers to easily forget that all of this is a historical construct and that as the nation emerged, the founding fathers struggled to find recognizable images that gave meaning and identity to the people. The Congress used material objects ranging from swords to monuments as it strove to unite the people for war. Congress’ decision to print millions of dollars in unbacked paper money in June 1775 released a currency that bore symbols meant to unite a people in the not yet united States of America. Enlisting Benjamin Franklin, whose printing career had bloomed decades earlier by printing paper money for the colonies of New Jersey and Pennsylvania, the Congress released bills bearing images from nature and usages of the ever-popular number thirteen. “By crafting rituals, celebrations, and objets d’art, Congress appealed not merely to reason, but to emotion, passion, faith, morality, sensibility, and aesthetics. This was not a volitional model of governance, but rather an affective one” (5).

But as Irvin goes on to show, the Continental Congress’ creation of this artifice was not enough to maintain its position, and the ritual and celebration it created failed to uphold its authority in light of the devastated economy and challenges to its rule that came from groups ranging from the aristocratic Society of the Cincinnati to the poorly fed and clothed

Pennsylvania soldiers whose crowd action sent the Congress scrambling away from Independence Hall into an embarrassing meander across the new country. Increasingly impotent and unpopular, the reign of the Continental Congress would be short, yet significant. The country that the Continental Congress created survived, and other authorities embraced the methods, if not the exact actions or symbols, that the Congress and the people had used to create the nation. As Irvin concludes, "The Continental Congress helped to establish this vital tradition of American democracy; the people out of doors made it their own."

This article originally appeared in issue 12.3 (April, 2012).

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