

# Revolution Reborn



Revolution and Civil War

At one time the word *revolution* conformed to its literal meaning, as a rotation around a fixed point, like the orbits of planets around the sun or the rise and fall of Fortune's wheel. By the end of the eighteenth century, a *revolution* was a transformative event that human beings created rather than endured.

To ask whether the American Revolution was a civil war is to resurrect a debate that helped give the word its new meaning. In the eighteenth century, political thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic debated long and hard about what form of government was most likely to prevent the fratricidal conflicts that sundered nations. Conservatives argued that monarchies were the most stable of governments. Champions of republics claimed the opposite. In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine argued that "monarchy and succession have laid (not this or that kingdom only) but the world in blood and ashes." Hence, for Paine and other republicans, the conflict that produced the American republic was not a civil war. It was a revolution.

As David Armitage has observed, "This conceptual opposition between revolution and civil war generated a set of preconceptions, even prejudices, which still endure. Civil wars appear sterile and destructive, while revolutions are fertile with innovation and productive possibility. Civil wars hearken back to ancient grievances and deep-dyed divisions, while revolutions point the way toward an open and expansive future." Think, for example, of the way Americans have debated the current conflict in Syria. To call it a civil war is to suggest that it is simply another turn of the wheel in an ongoing struggle between factions. Only a revolution is worth supporting.

Dozens of topics can be folded into a symposium like this one. To ask whether a revolution is a civil war narrows the topic considerably, forcing us to focus on the war itself, the violent and more troubling part of the story. What appears most disturbing to Americans raised on stories of Minutemen is the notion that the lines between sides were ambiguous and shifting. One paper at the Philadelphia conference retold the story of how a Patriot troop captured British General Richard Prescott outside Newport, Rhode Island, in 1777 and spirited him away in his nightshirt. This story generated winks and laughter at the time, and it continued to do so, in local variants, well into the nineteenth century, either as a hero story about the exploits of the Patriot commander or as a farce about the General's loss of his breeches. The author of the paper read it instead for clues to the adaptive strategies of people who did not seem to belong to either narrative—a Loyalist wife, an African American slave, and a trembling sentry.

[Bill Pencak and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich discuss provisioning.](#)

Another paper showed how coercive measures implemented by both parties in the conflict forced people to choose sides. Another revealed the way those who survived the war adopted multiple identities. Yet another saw in case studies like these a larger narrative about resistance. As disaffected Americans tacked back and forth between sides, ignoring militia calls, refusing to pay taxes,

and harboring deserters, they resisted what we have come to think of as the Patriot cause. If we seldom hear such stories it may be because, after the war, even the Founding Fathers wanted to forget the many ways in which what they came to call a revolution was in truth a civil war. [As Michael McDonnell said](#), "Today, in a new era when the American Revolution is often held out as the exception in the seamless transition from colonies to a new nation and invoked as a model for others, we would do well to remember."

I think about the American Revolution when I read my daily newspaper. When I think about families fleeing besieged cities or nervous young men shooting into fractious crowds, I think of the strange contingencies that led to what we now consider a revolution. These stories undercut popular assumptions about that struggle. Both print and on-line reports of the bombings at the Boston Marathon in April 2013 noted that it occurred on "Patriot's Day," a holiday in Massachusetts honoring the shots fired in Lexington and Concord in April 1775. "The bombings at today's Boston Marathon would be horrific on any day," *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne wrote, "but there is something particularly disturbing that they happened on Patriots' Day... In a sense, it's our first day as an independent nation." We don't like to remember that nobody knows who fired that first shot on Lexington Green.

Shortly after I came to Harvard in 1995, a story made the rounds of the Internet that the history department had replaced a venerable course on the American Revolution with one that focused on quilts. There was no question about what newly appointed faculty member was responsible for such a travesty. As a matter of fact, I did not mention quilts in my course on revolution. But I did build an entire lecture around an embroidery. It was a highly stylized pastoral embroidery filled with fruit, flowers, and happy couples. To me it represented the oft-repeated ideal that liberty meant each man might sit under "his own vine and fig tree." Through a close examination of the embroidery and the context in which it was created, students came to understand how the pursuit of happiness for some people led to the enslavement or destruction of others. I don't believe anyone who understands American history can ignore the ways in which our nation's revolution, its civil war, and the long saga of its struggle against American Indians were deeply entwined.

To understand the American Revolution, I believe we need to understand these common threads.

## Further Reading

See David Armitage, "Every Great Revolution is a Civil War" in Keith Michael Baker and Dan Edelstein, eds., *Scripting Revolution* (Stanford University Press, forthcoming). [Michael A. McDonnell](#)'s essay "Resistance to the American Revolution," in Jack P. Greene and J.R. Pole, eds., *A Companion to the American Revolution*, reflects on the various communities who for a variety of reasons did not embrace the Patriot cause. (Oxford, 2000): 342-351.

My essay “‘Pursuits of Happiness’: Dark Threads in the History of the American Revolution” points to the ways in which the American Revolution was not an unalloyed good for many peoples in North America. See Jennifer M. Shephard, Stephen M. Kosslyn, and Evelyn M. Hammonds, eds., *The Harvard Sampler: Liberal Education for the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011): 341-366. For the quoted column on the significance of the Boston Marathon bombing taking place on Patriot’s Day, see E.J. Dionne Jr., [“Patriot’s Day Defiled,”](#) *Washington Post*, April 15, 2013.

This article originally appeared in issue 14.3 (Spring, 2014).

---

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich is the 300th Anniversary University Professor at Harvard University. Her books include *A Midwife’s Tale* (1990), *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (2001), and *Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History* (2007).