

Local Safety, National Violence



I have never been in a down-and-dirty fist fight. I have never been roughed up by the police. I don't hunt. I do not own a gun or knife and do not know anyone who does. And, of course, I have not performed military service. I am, then, in every respect typical of the vast majority of historians who have opined about violence and the American Revolution since the Vietnam era. The history of violence in revolutionary America, where written at all, has for the most part been written by pacifists, as Richard Maxwell Brown, writing in the shadow of the Vietnamese freedom struggle, noted acerbically. [But this is also a history written by the victors, in which critical denunciation of the violence inflicted by white revolutionaries on Tories](#), on local white minorities, and on African and Native Americans, is crowded out of the master narrative by invocations of "The Glorious Cause." Even those many American historians who note the extreme violence that has characterized much of the internal history of the United States of America, let alone American actions with respect to peoples overseas, have struggled to incorporate this understanding into narratives of the American Revolution. Yet this tendency has not stopped a significant minority of historians—employing concepts of "othering" or "enemysip" drawn more broadly from the behavioral sciences—from arguing that the American experience, whatever that was, is globally normal. "That's just the way revolutions work" goes the knee-jerk mantra.

[There are some good reasons for the puzzling treatment of violence in the American Revolution](#), but the consequences of the academy's failure to come to

terms with the scale and nature of the nation's violent birth have had, for most of the twentieth century at any rate, the unfortunate tendency to present America as an exceptional case. Take the obvious question: Did revolutionary America generate the headline-grabbing violence familiar to history from the French experience as "Terror"? The default response to this question is "No." If by "the" or "a" Terror we understand the exemplary public execution of socially and politically prominent individuals on quasi-judicial principles so situational as to be subsequently incomprehensible then, no, America did not experience a Terror. The American Revolution was not characterized, for however brief a period of time, by the erection of a gibbet in every cross-roads hamlet on the continent. A large part of the explanation for this can be found in the fact that Loyalists and British nationals left America before they could be executed. Adjusting for population, the American Revolution produced five times as many émigrés as the French. In addition, the most obvious subversive scapegoat and candidate for execution—the African American slave daring to claim freedom for himself—had a monetary or military value that trumped his affront to the revolutionary claims of white freedom fighters. The fact that some visible internal enemies of the Glorious Cause were worth more at auction in the West Indies or serving as substitutes in the Continental line than they were dead helped prevent one kind of Terror.

However, if we mean by Terror something closer to the reality of the French example—an internal civil war of extraordinary violence, justified by the rhetoric of a country in peril and folded into a formalized war for independence directed against external troops and their savage native allies, a terror erupting with particular force whenever and wherever these two wars collided—then the answer is "Yes," the American Revolution generated a Terror. Discussions of violence at the conference generally accepted that the revolutionary era was marked by an interleaving of forms of violence and the thick loyalties such forms create. Perhaps recent events in Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Iraq, and Syria have once more sensitized academic writers to the violence that accompanies and prompts the collapse, implosion, or overthrow of established states. If so, how might such sensitivity re-birth the study of the American Revolution? Perhaps by prompting (once more) the question of whether, *by virtue of its inherent violence*, the American Revolution could or could not have produced an outcome other than the federal constitutional settlement.

David Hendrickson has ingeniously described that federal settlement as a peace pact between American states familiar with violence and all too conscious of the possibility of near-perpetual internecine warfare on the continent. This argument at least accepts the prevalence of actual, rhetorical, and imagined violence in the United States of America in the last quarter of the eighteenth

century. But is Hendrickson's metaphor of the Constitution as a "system" analogous to the Congress of Vienna justified? That America's violent revolution did not produce civil war of the kind that Hendrickson's federal "peace pact" was designed to prevent raises interesting questions. We know from the example of slavery that long-enduring polities can be built on long-enduring violence, and we would not describe slave societies as ever or exactly "peaceful." Why do people perpetuate, by continuing to live within, societies in which violence, both threatened and actual, is a constant of life? The standard answer is that they become inured to it, that violence is something done to people. (By whom? Through what agency? Why?) Sophie Wahnich's ingenious *In Defence of the Terror* twists the received wisdom in ways that historians of American violence might find instructive.

In the French case, Wahnich argues, it was the people who launched the slogan of "la patrie" in danger and thereby put Terror on the agenda: "Citizens asserted their sovereignty by demanding to be the first agents of public safety." So too in America, where committees tasked by citizens with protecting them from internal and external enemies sprang up before Congress convened and in advance of the sanction offered by the Continental Congress. It was the people of the several states, not Congress or state legislatures, who first demanded that a test of loyalty be a condition of citizenship. And in locality after locality it was "the people" who were prepared to use violence to ensure that their own safety and the safety of their loved ones was secured at the expense of the physical, mental, and political well-being of real or imagined enemies. Of course, "the people" also delegated the right to inflict pain and violence on their enemies both to the several states and the federal center, but the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is one among many prominent manifestations of an equally powerful desire to keep matters of public safety local. In America this version of the revolutionary settlement is celebrated, while in France it is lamented. In the French case the appropriation of popular sovereignty through the claim of the people to command their own defense is lamented for producing the twisted logic of Robespierre, the dictatorship of Napoleon, and the counter-revolutionary theories of de Maistre.

What moral might we draw, then, from the study of the much more long-established and equally violent defense of local safety in the case of America? What might we gain from asking why the American case is celebrated not just by the modern Tea Party movement but also by muscular liberals who hold it is as an article of faith that one cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs? Jefferson backed away from the position that blood was the tree of liberty's natural fertilizer. We know now that too many omelets are bad for the health. Having established that the American Revolution was indeed violent and that its violence lay at the heart of state-formation in the era, will the American academy bring forth a revisionism comparable to that of Francois Furet, for whom the Terror of the French Revolution prompted reflections on the Gulag and the matrix of totalitarianism? To its credit, the American academy has produced humane denunciations of the perversion of the logic that ends justify means in the case of American foreign policy. Will it now domesticate that critique?

Further Reading

Richard M. Brown made his dig that histories of violence have been produced predominantly by pacifists in *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York, 1975). Interesting post-Yugoslavia reflections on the Terror can be found in Sophie Wahnich, *In Defence of the Terror: Liberty or Death in the French Revolution* (London, 2012).

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