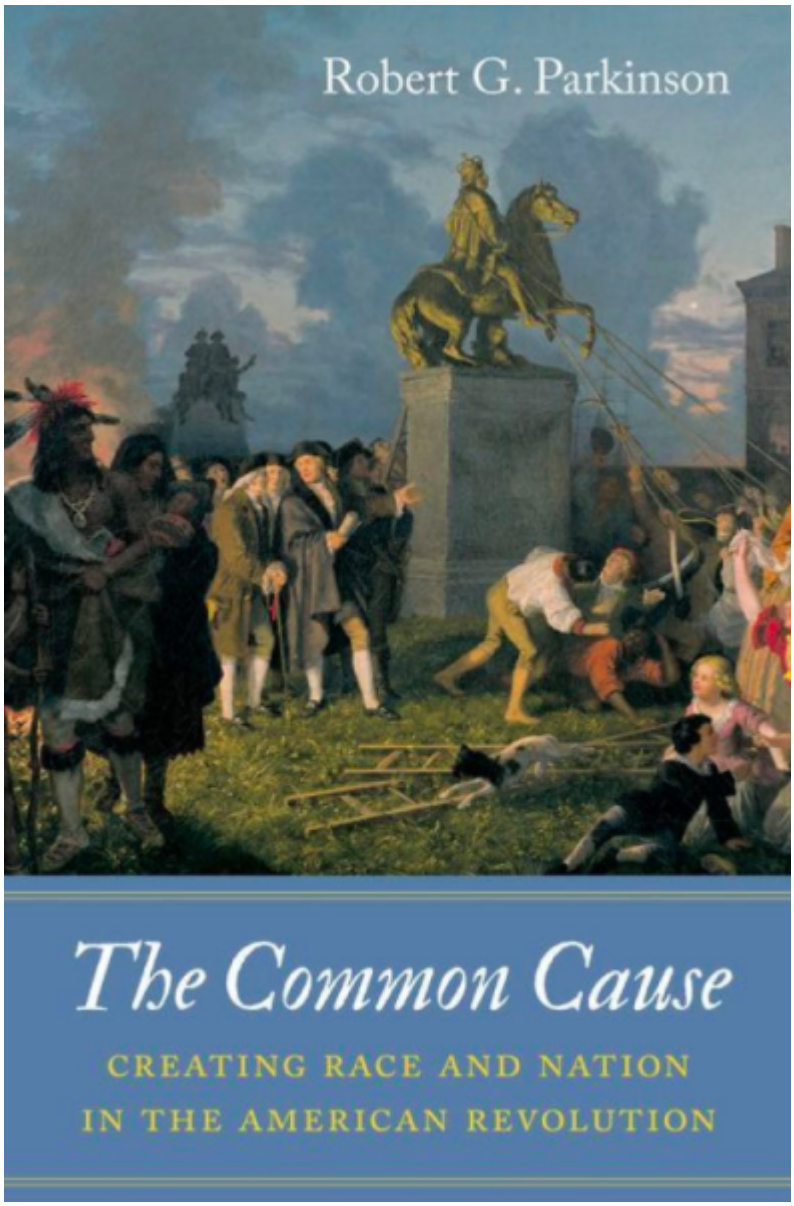
Media “Propagation” in the Making of Revolution



Robert G. Parkinson, *The Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. 768 pp., $45.

In the politicized atmosphere of 2017, few Americans deny the significance of the national media to the narration and interpretation of contentious political issues. Many also lament the alleged "liberal media" or "conservative media" bias and reminisce about a time when news sources could be trusted for their balanced, apolitical presentation of events. If there ever was a time immemorial when American media was unbiased, it was certainly not during the Revolutionary War. Indeed, historian Robert G. Parkinson demonstrates how patriot printers actively constructed and circulated a pro-independence narrative through colonial newspaper exchange networks during the 1770s and 1780s. Their efforts united the thirteen disparate colonies into a cohesive political, cultural, and military alliance against Great Britain, an alliance that would eventually coalesce into the independent United States. In his book *The Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution*, Parkinson argues that without newspaper printers' pro-independence spin, the Revolutionary War would probably have ended in British victory. Yet more than that, *The Common Cause* reveals that colony-wide unity depended on breaking down the deep cultural connections and shared national identity between colonists and Great Britain. While enlightenment ideology and economic pressures were important, Parkinson argues that the survival of patriots' "common cause" in the face of the Revolutionary War's many setbacks was possible only by "associating [Britons] with resistant slaves, hostile Indians, and rapacious foreign mercenaries" and circulating this story of racial and ethnic difference throughout the colonies via newspaper exchange networks (20). Patriot forces constructed race while they created a new nation.

Scholars of the American Revolution have long recognized the significance of colonial newspapers, but Parkinson argues that they have focused on the wrong sections. Historians have pored over the front pages, where printers inserted

political essays spouting Revolutionary ideology of liberty and natural rights, and the back pages, where the economic consequences of British taxation and the agency of African Americans appeared in advertisements for imported goods and runaway slaves. Parkinson instead points to the “war stories” in colonial newspapers’ middle pages as printers’ most powerful contribution to the common cause. The “succinct paragraphs, the extracted accounts, the mundane details: these items—largely hidden in plain sight from scholars thus far—were essential to political and, especially, military mobilization during the Revolutionary War” (14). Because printers were describing real events, scholars have overlooked the significance of these war stories and have not understood the profound impact they had on the patriot cause.

The Common Cause explores how these seemingly innocuous stories of military events distanced colonists from their “cultural cousins” by associating Britons with colonial “proxies,” particularly African Americans, American Indians, and, to a lesser extent, German mercenary soldiers. Printers and American politicians attributed slave resistance to irresponsible British policies like Dunmore’s Proclamation and blamed violent confrontations between white settlers and “savage” Native Americans in the colonial backcountry on British Indian agents. Newspapers also circulated accounts of Hessian atrocities, since these German troops were in North America only as British mercenaries. Over the course of the war, Americans bought in to the racial and cultural appeal of the common cause. How could colonists still identify with their “cultural cousins” when the British were personified in the colonies by escaped slaves, savage Indians, and violent Hessians?

Parkinson employs a traditional chronological narrative of the Revolutionary War, but he interprets military and political developments through the lens of newspaper accounts and exchange networks to reveal the ongoing, active construction of colonial unity. The book begins in the war’s early years when Britain recruited Indian allies and encouraged slave resistance to minimize military expenses. Ironically, these cost-cutting measures backfired. Parkinson argues that it was the use of these proxies, not ideological or economic issues, that first convinced lukewarm colonists to oppose British rule. Fears of British-sponsored slave insurrections and military alliances with the Creek and Cherokee, for example, drove Carolinians to protest and mobilize against their royal governors in 1775. Newspapers exchanged stories of British intrigue and southerners’ opposition, which furthered the common cause by proving to undecided colonists in other regions that Carolinians supported revolution. Parkinson even notes that news of events in the Carolinas surpassed reports of Washington’s appointment to the Continental Army, proving how news of British proxies was more important to patriot unity than Washington himself.

In chapter after chapter, Parkinson offers his own survey of the war while revealing how patriot newspapers circulated war stories designed to support the common cause within the changing context of the Revolution. In many instances, the actions of British proxies received even more coverage than patriots’ military success. Americans remember the siege of Yorktown, for example, as the

momentous climax of the struggle for independence. During late summer and early fall of 1781, however, patriot printers exchanged more news of Indian-white violence on the New York frontier than reports of Washington's entrapment of Cornwallis. These stories "underscored British crimes as much as Cornwallis' invasion did" (516). For years after Cornwallis's surrender, newspapers continued to advance the common cause by reporting on the violence between white settlers and Native Americans in the trans-Appalachian West.

Although many printers abandoned their prewar attempts to report events neutrally and instead deliberately spun stores to create a dichotomy between colonial heroes and British villains, Parkinson hesitates to label patriot newspapers as propaganda. The term "recalls totalitarian systems, mass media, corporatism, and disinformation campaigns" and does not fit within the historical context of the American Revolution. He instead prefers to categorize such patriotic reporting as "propagation": printers and patriot leaders used newspaper exchange networks to "grow more patriots" (18). In addition, the existence of a powerful exchange network long before the outbreak of war allowed the common cause rhetoric to reach all but the most distant colonial settlements. The thirty-seven newspapers published throughout the colonies on the eve of the Revolution connected disparate colonists who would otherwise have little knowledge of one another.

Parkinson devotes the book's first chapter and three detailed appendices to outlining exactly how the network connected newspapers to other newspapers and colonists to other colonists and supports his claims through a case study of the *Pennsylvania Journal*. William Bradford, editor of this Philadelphia newspaper, printed around 1,700 copies of the *Journal* each week in 1774, and over the course of the next two years his subscriber base expanded both numerically and geographically as colonists demanded more news of military events and political developments. Only a third of the newspapers ended up in the hands of Philadelphia residents, while post riders and watercraft delivered the other issues to interior Pennsylvania, New England, other Atlantic colonies, the Chesapeake Bay, southern colonies, and even Caribbean ports. Bradford printed local Philadelphia news, but he also included news from other papers in the *Pennsylvania Journal*, linking his customers to other newspaper circulation networks in addition to his own. The *Journal* is the only Revolutionary-era newspaper with surviving account books, but if even some of the three dozen newspapers had a similar geographical footprint, it is safe to say that patriot rhetoric blanketed the thirteen colonies. Though wartime events would significantly disrupt the newspaper exchange network, it remained the most effective way to spread the common cause and create colonial unity in opposition to British proxies.

Printers and patriot leaders constructed the common cause to generate support for the Revolutionary War, but Parkinson argues that it also had a lasting effect on the place of British proxies within the new nation. Because of the constant rhetoric about Native American "savagery" and their raids against white frontier settlers during the war, American Indians became racially marked

as inherently incapable of American citizenship, including those who had fought alongside patriot forces. African Americans experienced a similar fate. Parkinson notes that northerners' ambivalence to slavery's expansion in the southern United States was a natural outgrowth of the common cause. Northerners dampened their antislavery sentiments during the war to gain slaveholders' support, so when southern politicians insisted on proslavery policies in the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution, northerners' wartime accommodation set a precedent for the postwar period. German troops, however, did not experience the lasting effects of the common cause. In the later stages of the war, patriot leaders deemphasized earlier Hessian atrocities. Germans did not exhibit the same cultural and racial differences as people of color, and patriot leaders willingly accepted them as American citizens so long as they pledged loyalty to the new nation. Many scholars, such as Rogers Smith and Douglas Bradburn, have pointed to the racialization of American citizenship during the early Republic and antebellum decades, but Parkinson demonstrates in *The Common Cause* how these racial restrictions were forged during the war for independence in the service of creating colonial unity.

The Common Cause is more than 700 pages long, yet Parkinson's clear prose and logical structure make it a joy to read. Parkinson's analysis contains innumerable examples of how newspaper coverage of British proxies contributed to the patriot cause throughout the the Revolutionary War. The book's length appears daunting, but Parkinson's argument requires such extensive evidentiary support. *The Common Cause* is based on correlations between exchanged war stories and Americans' response, and Parkinson provides little direct evidence from colonists themselves that explicitly connects newspaper accounts to their individual support of the patriot cause, presumably because such evidence does not exist. This is certainly a limitation for Parkinson' argument, but his exhaustive research into thousands of newspaper articles allows him to overcome this lack of direct evidence. The abundance of common cause rhetoric against African Americans, Native Americans, and Hessian troops within colonial newspapers combined with Parkinson's narrative of wartime events support his claim about a common patriotic appeal constructed in opposition to these groups. Historians of the American Revolution will undoubtedly continue to stress the significance of ideological issues or economic pressures, but Parkinson's impressive analysis based on thousands of newspaper articles will force future scholars to engage with his uncomfortable argument that American independence rested on racism and ethnocentrism.

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