

dragooning Americans, might he not then turn to dragooning Englishmen? It was the belief of the Whigs that George III intended to resurrect royal prerogatives of Stuart and Tudor times; that he would make himself a despot. That peril the Whigs—and Burke in particular, with fierce invective—considerably exaggerated; but it is easy to be wise by hindsight. George III was a more formidable adversary than ever James II had been. Where James had been timid and indecisive, George was courageous and tenacious; and often George was clever, if obdurate, in his aspiration to rule as a Patriot King. At the end, Burke came to understand that in the heat of partisan passion he had reviled his king unjustly; and in his *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796) he called George “a mild and benevolent sovereign.”

Yet neither to the American Patriots nor to Burke, in 1774 and 1775, had George III seemed either mild or benevolent. Upon the assumption that King George meant to root up the liberties of Englishmen—to trample upon the British Constitution—the dominant faction of Whigs in America determined to raise armies and risk hanging. They declared that they were resisting pernicious innovations and defending ancient rights: that they were true-born Englishmen, up in arms to maintain what Burke called “the chartered rights” of their nation. They appealed to the Declaration of Rights of 1689; they offered for their violent resistance to royal authority the very apology offered by the Whigs of 1688. In the older sense of that uneasy word “revolution”, they were endeavoring to prevent, rather than to make, a revolution. Or such was the case they made until a French alliance became indispensable.

This thesis that the Patriots intended no radical break with the past—that they thought of themselves as conservators rather than as innovators—scarcely is peculiar to your servant. It is now dominant among leading historians of American politics. It is most succinctly stated by Daniel Boorstin in his slim volume *The Genius of American Politics* (1953). “The most obvious peculiarity of our American Revolution is that, in the modern European sense of the

word, it was hardly a revolution at all," Boorstin writes in that forthright book. "The Daughters of the American Revolution, who have been understandably sensitive on this subject, have always insisted in their literature that the American Revolution was no revolution but merely a colonial rebellion. The more I have looked into the subject, the more convinced I have become of the wisdom of their naïveté. 'The social condition and the Constitution of the Americans are democratic,' De Tocqueville observed about a hundred years ago. 'But they have not had a democratic revolution.' This fact is surely one of the more important of our history."

The attainment of America's independence, Boorstin makes clear in his writings, was not the work of what Burke called "theoretic dogma". What most moved the Americans of that time was their own colonial experience: they were defending their right to go on living in the future much as they had lived in the past; they were not marching to Zion. To quote Boorstin directly again, "The American Revolution was in a very special way conceived as both a vindication of the British past and an affirmation of an American future. The British past was contained in ancient and living institutions rather than in doctrines; and the American future was never to be contained in a theory."⁵

This point is made with equal force by Clinton Rossiter in his *Seedtime of the Republic: the Origin of the American Tradition of Political Liberty* (1953). In the course of his discussion of the thought of Richard Bland, Rossiter remarks that "Throughout the colonial period and right down to the last months before the Declaration of Independence, politically conscious Americans looked upon the British Constitution rather than natural law as the bulwark of their cherished liberties. Practical political thinking in eighteenth-century America was dominated by two assumptions: that the British Constitution was the best and happiest of all possible forms of government, and that the colonists, descendants of freeborn Englishmen, enjoyed the blessings of this constitution to the fullest extent consistent with a wilderness environment." Men like Bland—and those, too, like Patrick Henry, more radical than Bland—regarded themselves as the defenders of a venerable constitution, not as marchers in the dawn of a Brave New World. As

Rositer continues in his chapter on the Rights of Man, "Virginians made excellent practical use of this distinction. When their last royal Governor, Lord Dunmore, proclaimed them to be in rebellion, they retorted immediately in print that he was the rebel and they the saviors of the constitution."⁶ It was the case of James II and arbitrary power all over again.

Or turn to H. Trevor Colbourn's study *The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (1963). "In insisting upon rights which their history showed were deeply embedded in antiquity," Colbourn writes, "American Revolutionaries argued that their stand was essentially conservative; it was the corrupted mother country which was pursuing a radical course of action, pressing innovations and encroachments upon her long-suffering colonies. Independence was in large measure the product of the historical concepts of the men who made it, men who furnished intellectual as well as political leadership to a new nation."⁷ Here we have for authority the famous sentences of Patrick Henry, in 1775: "I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience. I know of no way of judging the future but by the past." The appeal of even the more passionate leaders of the American rising against royal innovation was to precedent and old usage, not to utopian visions.

The men who made the American Revolution, in fine, had little intention of making a revolution in the French sense (so soon to follow) of a reconstitution of society. Until little choice remained to them, they were anything but enthusiasts even for separation from Britain. This is brought out in an interesting conversation between Burke and Benjamin Franklin, on the eve of Franklin's departure from London for America; Burke relates this in his *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*.

"In this discourse Dr. Franklin lamented, and with apparent sincerity, the separation which he feared was inevitable between Great Britain and her colonies. He certainly spoke of it as an event which gave him the greatest concern. America, he said, would never again see such happy days as she had passed under the protection of England. He observed, that ours was the only instance of a great empire, in which the most distant parts and

members had been as well governed as the metropolis and its vicinage: but that the Americans were going to lose the means which secured to them this rare and precious advantage. The question with them was not whether they were to remain as they had been before the troubles, for better, he allowed, they could not hope to be; but whether they were to give up so happy a situation without a struggle? Mr. Burke had several other conversations with him about that time, in none of which, soured and exasperated as his mind certainly was, did he discover any other wish in favour of America than for a security to its *ancient* condition. Mr. Burke's conversation with other Americans was large indeed, and his inquiries extensive and diligent. Trusting to the result of all these means of information, but trusting much more in the public presumptive indications I have just referred to, and to the reiterated, solemn declarations of their assemblies, he always firmly believed that they were purely on the defensive in that rebellion. He considered the Americans as standing at that time, and in that controversy, in the same relation to England, as England did to king James the Second, in 1688. He believed, that they had taken up arms from one motive only; that is, our attempting to tax them without their consent; to tax them for the purposes of maintaining civil and military establishments. If this attempt of ours could have been practically established, he thought, with them, that their assemblies would become totally useless; that, under the system of policy which was then pursued, the Americans could have no sort of security for their laws or liberties, or for any part of them; and that the very circumstance of *our* freedom would have augmented the weight of *their* slavery."⁸

Such were the language and the convictions of the American Patriots, as Rossiter puts it, "right down to the last months before the Declaration of Independence." Then what account do we make of the highly theoretical and abstract language of the first part of the Declaration of Independence, with its appeal to "the laws of Nature and of Nature's God", to self-evident truths, to a right to abolish any form of government? Why is Parliament not even mentioned in the Declaration? What has become of the English constitution, the rights of Englishmen, the citing of English precedents, the references to James II and the Glorious Revolution?

These startling inclusions and omissions are discussed penetratingly by Carl Becker in *The Declaration of Independence: a Study in the History of Political Ideas*, first published in 1922. Indeed the language of much of the Declaration is the language of the French Enlightenment; and more immediately, the language of the Thomas Jefferson of 1776, rather than the tone and temper of the typical member of the Continental Congress.

“Not without reason was Jefferson most at home in Paris,” Becker writes. “By the qualities of his mind and temperament he really belonged to the philosophical school, to the Encyclopaedists, those generous souls who loved mankind by virtue of not knowing too much about men, who worshipped reason with unreasoning faith, who made a study of Nature while cultivating a studied aversion for ‘enthusiasm,’ and strong religious emotion. Like them, Jefferson, in his earlier years especially, impresses one as being a radical by profession. We often feel that he defends certain practices and ideas, that he denounces certain customs or institutions, not so much from independent reflection or deep-seated conviction on the particular matter in hand as because in general these are the things that a philosopher and a man of virtue ought naturally to defend or denounce. It belonged to the eighteenth-century philosopher, as a matter of course, to apostrophize Nature, to defend Liberty, to denounce Tyranny, perchance to shed tears at the thought of a virtuous action.”⁹

The Francophile Jefferson, in other words, was atypical of the men, steeped in Blackstone and constitutional history, who sat in the Continental Congress. Yet the Congress accepted Jefferson’s Declaration, unprotestingly. Why?

Because aid from France had become an urgent necessity for the Patriot cause. The phrases of the Declaration, congenial to the *philosophes*, were calculated to wake strong sympathy in France’s climate of opinion; and as Becker emphasizes, those phrases achieved with high success precisely that result. It would have been not merely pointless, but counter-productive, to appeal for French assistance on the ground of the ancient rights of Englishmen; the French did not wish Englishmen well.

Here we turn again to the quotable Daniel Boorstin (who differs somewhat with Becker). It is not to the Declaration we should look,

Boorstin suggests, if we seek to understand the motives of the men who accomplished the American Revolution: not, at least, to the Declaration's first two paragraphs. "People have grasped at 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,' forgetting that it was two-thirds borrowed and, altogether, only part of a preamble," Boorstin writes. "We have repeated that 'all men are created equal,' without daring to discover what it meant and without realizing that probably to none of the men who spoke it did it mean what we would like it to mean." Really, he tells us, the Revolution was all about no taxation without representation. "It is my view that the major issue of the American Revolution was the true constitution of the British Empire, which is a pretty technical legal problem."¹⁰

Amen to that. Burke declared, looking upon the ghastly spectacle of the French Revolution, that it is not merely mistaken, but evil, to attempt to govern a nation by utopian designs, regardless of prudence, historical experience, convention, custom, the complexities of political compromise, and long-received principles of morality. The men who made the American Revolution were not abstract visionaries. Suffering practical grievances, they sought practical redress; not obtaining that, they settled upon separation from the Crown in Parliament, as a hard necessity. That act was meant not as a repudiation of their past, but as a means for preventing the destruction of their pattern of politics by King George's presumed intended revolution of arbitrary power, after which, in Burke's phrase, "the Americans could have no sort of security for their laws or liberties." That was not the cast of mind which is encountered among the revolutionaries of the twentieth century.

The careful study of history is of high value—among other reasons because it may instruct us, sometimes, concerning ways to deal with our present discontents. I do not mean simply that history repeats itself, or repeats itself with variations—although there is something in that, and particularly in the history of revolutions on the French model, which devour their own children. (Here I commend Crane Brinton's book *The Anatomy of Revolution*, and D. W. Brogan's book *The Price of Revolution*.)¹¹ I am suggesting,

rather, that deficiency in historical perspective leads to the ruinous blunders of ideologues, whom Burckhardt calls "the terrible simplifiers"; while sound historical knowledge may diminish the force of Hegel's aphorism that "we learn from history that we learn nothing from history."

The history of this slippery word "revolution" is a case in point. Political terms have historical origins. If one is ignorant of those historical origins—if even powerful statesmen are ignorant of them—great errors become possible. It is as if one were to confound the word "law" as a term of jurisprudence with the word "law" as a term of natural science. If one assumes that the word "revolution" signifies always the same phenomenon, regardless of historical background, one may make miscalculations with grave consequences—perhaps fatal consequences.

The American Revolution, or War of Independence, was a preventive movement, intended to preserve an old constitutional structure for the most part. Its limited objectives attained, order was restored. It arose from causes intimately bound up with the colonial experience and the British constitution, and little connected with the causes of the French Revolution. In intention, at least, it was a "revolution" in the meaning of that term generally accepted during the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century.

The French Revolution was a very different phenomenon, as was its successor the Russian Revolution. These were philosophical revolutions—or, as we say nowadays with greater precision, ideological revolutions: catastrophic upheavals in the later signification of the term "revolution". Their objectives were unlimited, in the sense of being utopian; their consequences were quite the contrary of what their original authors had hoped for. To apprehend the French Revolution, we still do well to turn to the analyses by Tocqueville and by Taine; for the Bolshevik Revolution, we have the recent books by Solzhenitsyn, Shafarevich, and others. "To begin with unlimited liberty," says Dostoievski, "is to end with unlimited despotism." Or, as Burke put it, to be possessed liberty must be limited.

A considerable element of the population of these United States

has tended to fancy, almost from the inception of the Republic, that all revolutions everywhere somehow are emulatory of the American War of Independence, and ought to lead to similar democratic institutions. Revolutionary ideologues in many lands have played upon this American naïveté, successfully enough, from Havana to Saigon. This widespread American illusion, or confusion about the word "revolution", has led not merely to sentimentality in policy regarding virulent Marxist or nationalistic movements in their earlier stages, but also to unfounded expectations that by some magic overnight "democratic reforms"—free elections especially—can suffice to restrain what Burke called "an armed doctrine." How many Americans forget, or never knew, that in time of civil war Abraham Lincoln found it necessary to suspend writs of habeas corpus?

Knowledge of history is no perfect safeguard against such blunders. It did not save Woodrow Wilson, who had read a great deal of history, from miscalculations about the consequences of "self-determination" in central Europe. It did not save his advisor Herbert Hoover, who knew some history, from fancying that an improbable "restoration of the Habsburg tyranny" in central Europe was a more imminent menace than live and kicking Bolshevism or the recrudescence of German ambitions. Nevertheless, knowledge of history generally, and knowledge of the historical origin of political terms, are some insurance against ideological infatuation or sentimental sloganizing.

The crying need of our age is to avert revolutions, not to multiply them. Recent revolutions have reduced half the world to servitude of body and mind, and to extreme poverty, in Ethiopia and Chad, in Cambodia and Timor, in fifty other lands. What we call the American Revolution had fortunate consequences because, in some sense, it was a revolution not made, but prevented. Folk who fancy the phrase "permanent revolution" are advocating, if unwittingly, permanent misery. The first step toward recovery from this confusion is to apprehend that the word "revolution" has a variety of meanings; that not all revolutions are cut from the same cloth; that politics cannot be divorced from history; and that "revolution", in its common twentieth-century signification, is no

highroad to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The Constitution's Framers, in 1787, wanted no more revolutions; and President Washington, in 1789 and after, set his face against the French revolutionaries.

NOTES

1. E. J. Payne, *Burke: Select Works*, Vol. II, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1898), pp. xiv, 304 n. And see Burke, *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, in *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (London: Rivington, 1826), Vol. VI, pp. 159–179.
2. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in Payne, *op. cit.* Vol. II, pp. 36–37. In Burke's era, Whigs approved of the Revolution of 1688, and Fox's Whigs thought of the French Revolution as a Gallic equivalent of what had occurred in Britain a century earlier. But the employment of the word "revolution" was ambiguous; Sir Joseph Jekyll, lawyer and Whig politician, early in the eighteenth century, did not use the word in its sense of coming full cycle, but thought of it as signifying radical and violent overturn; so he distinguished the triumph of William and Mary from the evil of genuine revolution. Burke found it awkward, but necessary, to make the same distinction. In short, the history of *revolution* is complex etymologically.
3. Maurice Ashley, *The Glorious Revolution of 1688* (New York: Scribner's, 1966), p. 198.
4. Ross J. S. Hoffman, *Edmund Burke, New York Agent* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1956), p. 191.
5. Daniel Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 68–69, 94–95.
6. Clinton Rossiter, *Seedtime of the Republic: the Origin of the American Tradition of Political Liberty* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953), pp. 270, 395.
7. H. Trevor Colburn, *The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), p. 190.
8. Edmund Burke, *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, in *The Works of*