

**“A Revolution to Conserve”**  
**by Clinton Rossiter**

Obviously from the title of his article, Clinton Rossiter proposes that the goal of the American Revolution was to conserve or preserve what the colonists had, rather than to bring sweeping change. He points out that the American colonists, due to their heritage and their experience, enjoyed a high level of democratic development including political institutions with direct representation, religious tolerance, and economic and social mobility. These gains, enjoyed during a long period of salutary neglect, were threatened by new British policies enacted following the French and Indian War. The revolution began as a protest by loyal British subjects seeking restoration of their British rights, but the colonists eventually realized that their rights could only be preserved (conserved) by separating from Britain.

While Rossiter recognizes regional differences within the colonies, he believes a high degree of consensus about democracy and rights bound them together. Four features of colonial experience contributed to this consensus and hastened the independence movement including a common British heritage, the vast distance between the colonies and Britain, the colonial frontier experience, and the conflict between Britain and the colonists over their status in the Empire.

British heritage, itself, was an important factor in the democratic development of the colonies. Britain began its experiment with democracy all the way back in 1215 with the Magna Carta. Over time, England developed a representative parliament, jury trials, and guaranteed individual rights and liberties. At the time of the revolution, approximately 70% of the colonial population was English and believed they held these same rights.

The vast distance between Britain and the North American colonies added to a sense of independence in two ways. First, by necessity the colonists developed self-government and became self-reliant. Left on their own with little initial support from England, they passed their own laws, taxed themselves, provided their own defense and developed their own social and political institutions. Even when colonial laws were disallowed by Parliament, frequent disruption of trans-Atlantic mail and delays in communication meant the colonies followed their own practices anyway. Non-enforcement of Navigation Acts and trade restrictions led to widespread disregard for British authority. Added to the problems of distance, the frontier experience of the colonists also contributed to their growing sense of independence. The old European attitudes of class and nobility were not readily transferred to the colonies. On the frontier, ability, rather than nobility, was rewarded with economic success and social status. The availability of land not only had a decentralizing and democratizing influence as the colonies expanded further west, but led to better labor conditions and wages in the cities as the labor force was constantly being drained by the lure of western land. Again in a frontier, values of self-reliance, equality, and voluntary cooperation were reinforced.

While the colonists viewed themselves as British subjects with British rights and as equal partners within a benevolent empire, the British viewed the colonies as dependent on and subordinate to England. This conflict between Britain and her colonies reinforced the shared views of the colonists that they were being treated unfairly and that their rights were being violated.

Rossiter points out that most of the colonials came from the middle and lower classes of Europe looking for improved economic opportunity, social status and individual freedom. While 65-70% were English, the other 30-35% were a diverse group of Scots, Scotch-Irish, Germans, Irish, Dutch, & Swedes who added to the democratizing influences socially, politically and economically, but bore less loyalty to the

crown. Most were protestant which added strength to the dissenting, individualistic character of colonial religion.

Rossiter concludes that the colonial success in gaining independence and creating a new, stable democracy, was due to the fact that they “went to war for liberty knowing ... what liberty was.” They therefore fought to “conserve” the rights and liberties they had long enjoyed rather than to create some new, untried system of government.

### **“A Revolution to Conserve” by Clinton Rossiter**

1. Was the conflict conservative (to keep what they had) or revolutionary (to achieve major changes)?
2. Did the conflict with England grow from consensus among the colonists (if so, about what) or from internal conflicts among the **colonists** (if so, over what)?
3. According to Rossiter, what were the colonists trying to conserve or preserve by separating from Britain?
4. Explain how each of the following factors contributed to a growing consensus about democracy, rights and independence:
  - A. English heritage
  - B. British v. Colonial views of colonists’ status within the Empire
  - C. Remoteness of colonies
  - D. Frontier experience
5. What was the ethnic and socio-economic background of the colonial “Patriots?” Explain the connection

### **“Radicals vs. Conservatives” by Merrill Jensen**

Historian Merrill Jensen observes the inherent conflicts within the colonies that mirrored the conflicts between the colonies and Great Britain. She sees the issues of class and political representation as being central to the internal colonial conflicts just as economic concerns and the geographic location of political power led to conflicts between the colonies and Great Britain.

By the middle of the 18th century most of the economic and political power of the colonies was located along the Atlantic coast, in the hands of merchants in the North and Planters in the South. While those in control of colonial political institutions (the upper classes) were willing to use democratic arguments to attack the control exercised by Great Britain, they were not willing to relinquish their own control within the colonies by expanding political power to those of the lower classes and those who had moved to the western frontier. In fact they imposed property qualifications for voting and even higher qualifications for office holding, denying the poor townspeople political participation. As the population moved westward, they refused to redistribute representative districts, leaving westerners with little or no say in their colonial governments. While the established political leaders in the colonies complained that England set laws for them based on “virtual representation,” the colonial leaders imposed the same virtual representation on the western regions of their own colonies. Thus, “by the middle of the century a small minority of the colonial population wielded economic and political powers which could not be taken from them by any legal means. This political oligarchy was able to ignore most of the popular demands, and when smoldering discontent did occasionally flare up in a violent outburst, it was forcibly

suppressed.” (Examples: Bacon’s Rebellion and the Regulator Movement)

Radicals and conservatives are not synonymous with revolutionists and loyalists. The “radicals” in the colonies were drawn from the economically and politically disenfranchised of the cities and western frontier. While most of the poor were politically inactive, strong leaders emerged. If the radicals hated the local aristocracy more than they hated the British, why rebel for independence? The radicals saw a close alliance between Britain and the local aristocracy. Faced with rebellion by the masses, the aristocrats would turn to Britain to restore order. If the colonies were separated from Britain, the radicals would have a better chance to defeat the local aristocrats. Also, in the process of fighting Britain, the radicals would be able to arm and organize to take power in the aftermath of the independence war. While most radicals were “revolutionists” favoring independence, not all revolutionists were radicals. Some conservatives also supported independence though most were probably opposed.

The “conservatives” were those who wanted to preserve the aristocratic or oligarchic nature of colonial government. However, even conservatives who opposed independence supported the campaign against British violations of colonial rights. What most conservatives hoped for was to stay within the British Empire where they had close economic ties to Britain and her other colonies, while regaining the local political rights, including control of their taxes, that they had enjoyed prior to 1763. While some joined the call for independence to secure their rights, most conservatives sought their rights within the Empire.

As the colonial aristocracy (rich merchants and planters) launched their protests and boycotts aimed at repeal of British laws like the Stamp Act and the Townshend Duties, they enlisted the lower classes in their demonstrations. However, the leaders of the radicals used these opportunities to mobilize and organize the masses. They were able to unite “under the guise of a patriotic defense of American liberties. Thus, used as tools at first, the masses were soon united under capable leadership in what became as much a war against the colonial aristocracy as a war for independence.”

The Articles of Confederation, the first government organized after independence and a radical victory, decentralized power to the individual states and provided for local government and eventual statehood for the territories. However, Shays’ Rebellion demonstrated the weakness of the Articles in protecting the property rights of the aristocracy and led to calls for a more centralized authority. While local government and statehood provisions continued to be the pattern for governing western territories, the Articles of Confederation were soon replaced by a more centralized government in the Constitution of 1787.

#### **“Radicals v. Conservatives” by Merrill Jensen**

1. Was the conflict conservative (to keep what they had) or revolutionary (to achieve major changes)?
2. Did the conflict with England grow from consensus among the colonists (if so, about what) or from internal conflicts among the colonists (if so, over what)?
3. Describe the distribution of political power within the colonies on the eve of the revolution.
4. Who were the “radicals” in the colonies? What did they expect to achieve by separating from England?
5. Who were the “conservatives” in the colonies? What did they hope to see happen in their relationship with England?
6. Why did the government established under the Articles of Confederation serve the interests of the “Radicals”?
7. Why is the adoption of the more centralized government under our present Constitution considered a victory for the “Conservatives”?

**“The American Revolution as a Colonial War for Independence”**  
*by Thomas Barrow*

Thomas Barrow has responded to the controversy amongst historians regarding the basic question of: “How revolutionary was the American Revolution?” Some historians believe it is the result of an internal revolution based upon internal social and/or political turmoil; others believe that it was an external revolution because none of the fundamental colonial institutions or traditions suffered during the revolution.

Barrow, on the other hand, felt that they may have missed the real issue: there is no clear-cut definition of what a revolution really is. Some revolutions, like the French and Russian ones, follow the classic formulas for the revolutionary restructuring of society: an archaic, repressive regime is replaced with something new and more open, more flexible, and more adaptable. The dilemma for historians has been to fit the American Revolution into the classic mold.

Because colonies, by their nature, are unstable, their political control is always subject to external intervention and negative interference. An unstable political system cannot fulfill its vowed intent to satisfy the requirements and the interests embodied within its society. Thus, the classic pattern of revolutions replacing repressive stability with a more open stability cannot be attained. The American Revolution is better viewed as a colonial war for liberation.

America had a sense of self-determination. It had more than enough grievances against its mother country to produce fundamental disagreement. America had the advantage that it was run under the commercial guise of empire, and not imperialistic efficiency. England's periods of salutary neglect allowed a high degree of colonial self-government and the development of effective political units. By 1760, the process toward self-government was well established. The reaction to the tightening of English imperial controls solidified their self-determination.

America, however, had a similar heritage with other wars for liberation: it had in its midst a group of men whose interests and situation tied them to the existing structure and whose orientation toward preservation of colonial status outweighed their objections to the England's rule over them. They called for moderation. They were torn between their native interests and instincts and their fascination for the dominant culture of the mother country. This view, characterized by historian Bernard Bailyn, emphasized our revolution as “opposition” from within, rather than one of liberation from the outside. The literature and language of the dominant culture was, then, used against it for purposes of opposition.

This opposition, coupled with the high degree of self-government during their colonial status, led them to create a decentralized government under the Articles of Confederation. In this way, each state freely sought as much autonomy as possible. While a logical step, it produced more confusion and turmoil. James Madison, in Federalist No. 10, offered the Constitution as a better way to resolve the instability brought about under the Articles. Factions would have difficulty extending their influence beyond the local sphere, unless their cause was truly representative of the nation itself.

A revolution, such as the French Revolution, was undertaken to destroy the most destructive aspects of its society and to replace the “old” with the “new.” A war of liberation, like the American Revolution, sought to achieve self-determination and the fulfillment, or completion, of its society, not its destruction.

Both types of revolutions differ in their goals and in the process by which they attempt to fulfill them. The French, while destroying its old society, found itself preserving more of the old than the original revolutionaries desired. The wars of liberation, while seeking an effective national political structure, may inadvertently create a radicalism that carries the original society far beyond its former course.

Throughout, Barrow emphasized the significance of unity in determining the degree of success for a revolution. In this regard, he stated, the American Revolution was unique in its orderliness and, thus, in its ability to sustain and maintain its original goals. It also remains distinct from the classical pattern of the French and Russian Revolutions which followed.

**“American Revolution as a Colonial War for Independence” by Thomas Barrow**

1. Was the conflict conservative (to keep what they had) or revolutionary (to achieve major changes)?
2. Did the conflict with England grow from consensus among the colonists (if so, about what) or from internal conflicts among the colonists (if so, over what)?
3. How was the purpose of the American revolution an outgrowth of the fact that the conflict was between Englishmen and England? Why does this factor cause the American revolution to differ from independence movements by native populations against a foreign ruler?
4. What were the goals of the colonists in seeking independence?
5. Why did the Articles of Confederation fail to achieve these goals?
6. Explain Barrow’s contention that ironically the French Revolutionaries kept more than was intended while the American Independence War changed more than was intended.

**“Conflict and Consensus in the American Revolution”  
by Edmund Morgan**

Edmund Morgan addressed the differing historical interpretations which emphasized either the conflicts among the Founders or the consensus achieved by the revolting colonists.

On one hand, those eager to side with conflict tried to establish the class conflict in which some colonists felt more endangered and oppressed by the Revolutionists than they did the mother country. The result was that all those who were so disaffected sided with the Loyalists, no matter what their status or wealth. If anything, Morgan saw it as struggles, within the upper class, for office and power. The reputations of such “new” contestants as Patrick Henry came against the more established and successful within his own class.

On the other hand, while there were acknowledged disputes between the “patriots,” they also experienced the extraordinary social mobility already underway in eighteenth century America. The American colonies had struggled through the social transition from indentured servitude to the point where upwards of half a million Americans were slaves.

Though the struggle would eventually intensify into a Civil War, the continued reliance upon slave labor in the South actually provided a stability which allowed the free population to experience and enjoy rapid and significant social mobility. As Morgan would say, “...the greatest irony of a Revolution fought in the name of freedom, a Revolution that indeed advanced the cause of freedom throughout the world, that the men who carried it out were able to unite against British oppression because they had so completely and successfully oppressed the largest segment of their own laboring population.”

If discontent manifested itself during the Revolution, it involved conflicts between the prevailing interests and control exerted by the eastern regions over the settlers in the West. Unlike Europe, the American colonies had absorbed the redoubling of their populations every twenty-five years. The resulting impacts forced large numbers to emigrate from the older, settled regions to the West. The Paxton Boys, the Regulators, the Green Mountain Boys, and Shay's Rebellion all reacted to the insensitivity of the eastern establishment to western needs.

Morgan implies that the East-West conflicts between colonists mirrored the conflict between the "western" colonies of America and the "eastern" Parliament in England which controlled them. They lacked viable representation; they were isolated. The conflicts which presented themselves in this struggle were easily recognized and manipulated by the British, and even in the Continental Congress itself. Voting alignments within the Congress split along both East-West and North-South lines. Slavery and its future would create the pronounced dissension between North and South.

If, as we know, these forces did not disengage the united colonies, what sort of consensus enabled Americans to contain the immediate threats to their Union and the sectional and class conflicts which would grow in time? Morgan proposed that "nationalism" was the strongest single force binding the Americans of the Revolutionary period together. But nationalism alone could not overcome the conflicts which might divide the Revolutionists. Morgan cited a racial consensus which didn't allow the issue of freedom for blacks to threaten their union. In addition, these Revolutionists also possessed two other sources of power: most of them owned the land on which they lived and a very large number owned guns. Land ownership meant economic and political power; guns gave them firepower.

It was precisely the British failure to recognize these facts that necessitated the American recognition of the economic power and firepower they required to maintain themselves as a single nation. The United States, though, could begin its independence appropriately with the declaration that all men are created equal because their population was equalized by that same economic power and firepower.

Finally, it was "the absurd opinion that all men are equal" which would become the basis of the American consensus which grew out of the Revolution. It invites resistance by the oppressed, and it requires accommodation by the oppressor. Indeed, it is an absurd sort of consensus that rests upon an invitation to conflict.

**"Conflict and Consensus in the American Revolution" by Edmund Morgan**

1. Was the conflict conservative (to keep what they had) or revolutionary (to achieve major changes)?
2. Did the conflict with England grow from consensus among the colonists (if so, about what) or from internal conflicts among the colonists (if so, over what)?
3. Who made up the "loyalists?" Who made up the "patriots?" How does this pattern affect consensus within the Patriot movement?
4. Why does Morgan say that political conflicts were within the upper class, rather than between classes?
5. Explain Morgan's statement: *The great irony of the revolution was that "Americans were able to unite and carry out the revolution (in the name of freedom) because of total subjugation of the slaves."*
6. What were the sources of conflict within the colonies?
7. What were the sources of consensus that bound the colonies together allowing a union to develop?

**“Women in the Revolution”**  
**by Mary Beth Norton**

The American Revolution was more than a series of battles. It was a civil war, bringing profound consequences for all of society. The prolonged disruption of normal life patterns changed the role of women from being largely domestic into fields from which they had been previously excluded.

Regional differences were evident. New England was the first to experience the war, but after the British evacuated Boston in 1776, the region was relatively free of conflict except for coastal areas that remained subject to attacks. The Middle states, especially around New York and Philadelphia, bore the consequences of continual British presence from 1777-1783. The South spared until after 1778, suffered continual British attack and guerilla conflicts, devastating the region both economically and socially. Regardless of the region, however, American women shared similar experiences: threat from enemy troops, disease, and decisions relating finance and political affairs of their husbands.

There are many historical records of panic and terror among families where British troops destroyed homes and possessions. Women, like those in Boston, had to choose between fleeing to protect themselves and their children or remaining to protect homes exposed to gunfire across enemy lines, with little access to food or firewood (stolen by the British for fuel) or that risked being burned or destroyed by British troops as they tried to destroy the economy and spirit of the Americans.

Even after the troops left, epidemics of disease like smallpox and dysentery remained. Women were faced with monumental decisions. Little could be done about dysentery, but smallpox had a new and risky defense: inoculation. Smallpox followed the army camps and the British employed a “hellish policy” of intentionally spreading the disease. Women had to make the decision of whether to place her family in “mortal danger” by risking introducing live portions of the disease into the body, in hope of preventing infection, or waiting and risking the deadly infection. Both choices tempted death.

Fear of attack and brutality are found in accounts of rape especially from the region around New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. Attacks by British soldiers upon young women were systematic and brutal with threat of death or disfigurement for resistance.

In southern regions around Virginia and the Carolinas conditions differed from the Northern experience in terms of length and intensity of the battles. The “Banditti” style of plundering and guerilla attack devastated the southern region with looting, plundering, destruction of crops and desertion of the Negro workforce. “Day[s] of terror” came with British troops accompanied by armed blacks robbing homes of clothing and jewelry and leaving the people constantly preparing to flee.

Whereas white women faced trouble and distress at the hands of the redcoats, black women had a decidedly different experience. The British offered slaves the opportunity to win liberty, without restriction to age or sex. The irony is that this British effort to undermine the southern workforce caused thousands of slave women, sometimes with their whole families, to seek refuge with the same armies that represented oppression and devastation to the white women. This irony became more intense during the process of the peace settlement. Former slaves were not always safe in British encampments occasionally being recaptured and returned into slavery; after treaty negotiations began, many slaves to be returned to their former masters. However records show that approximately 10,000 black slaves left on British ships out of Savannah and Charleston alone prior to the end of the war. Regardless of the final outcome, black women faced an intense quandary during the war. Running to the redcoats meant

risking their lives and those of their children but gaining the possibility of freedom; staying meant remaining in bondage but with family intact. Both were wrenching decisions.

Women were profoundly affected by their husband's politics. Patriot wives fared better than loyalist wives. Loyalist wives were frequently forced to seek refuge behind British lines. Once their husbands professed loyalty to the Crown, regardless of their own feelings, loyalist wives risked loss of homes and possessions, which they generally forced to abandon and flee to "alien" lands in England, Canada or the West Indies.

Women could accompany their soldier husbands as cooks, nurses, or laundresses, but generally only women who had no other means of support during their husband's absence sought this option. In the camps women did most of the work but this was generally regarded as a hindrance. (One strike against camp conditions did improve some poor conditions for women.)

Women who had previously engaged in business adjusted best to the new circumstances of war. However, society still restricted women's activities and without Power Attorney arranged by her husband a woman had no legal ability to conduct business. Not all women were deterred from successfully conducting the affairs of home and business during these times. Many women had to devise new means of supporting their families during their husband's absence. When the men returned many women were quite reluctant to return to a position of subservience to their husbands.

The experiences and disruptions of the war affected all Americans. The cumulative result was a partial breakdown of gender roles. However, only minor changes resulted. Lines between masculine and feminine traits were less defined but they did not disappear. War did show there was no sharp line between men and women in responsibilities. Women did not gain substantially but respect grew for the role of women, and her obligation to create the backbone of the country — a supportive home in which to raise republican sons to love and serve their country -- was elevated. Prior to the revolution, domesticity seemed unimportant; post-revolution the social significance of the household and family was more recognized. American began to comprehend a woman's importance beyond the private household and marital relationship. Roles of men and women were seen as complementary but not identical. In spite of brief experiments with woman's suffrage, such in New Jersey, women still had political rights subjected to her husband. Within the legacy of the American Revolution can be seen the earliest seeds of the future woman's revolution. Although Republican womanhood eventually became Victorian womanhood the earliest vocabulary of the woman's rights movement had been born.

### **"Women in the Revolution" by Mary Beth Norton**

1. Illustrate the similarities and differences in the experiences of women in the various regions of the colonies during the American revolution.
2. Explain the challenges and opportunities for women during the war period including:
  - A. health and disease
  - B. threats from soldiers (contrast white and black women's vies of the Redcoats)
  - C. financial roles
3. How were women affected by their husbands' political activism prior to and during the revolution?
4. What impact did the war have on the role of women in society in both the short and long term?
  - A. economically
  - B. politically
  - C. socially
5. To what extent was the American Revolution a Radical or a Conservative Movement? Explain.