Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution

In 1775, Samuel Johnson had already identified the central paradox of United States history. He notoriously challenged British readers to explain why ‘we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes’. Generations of historians have tried to answer that question. How could a movement espousing belief in liberty include so many slaveholders? More importantly, why did it build a republic so thoroughly implicated in enslavement and frontier race war?

Typically, historians have responded by crediting the American Revolution with imperfectly realized but laudable ideals, as well as with crucial contributions to 19th-century reform. Over the last decade, however, many historians have dispensed with treating the American revolutionary era as an ideologically coherent moment. Instead, they depict it as a moment of complicated social division and civil war, part of a wider context of Atlantic and continental conflict. Their accounts suggest the violence – which neither began nor ended with the imperial crisis – helps explain subsequent decades of racial hatred and oppression in the United States. In their emerging synthesis, however, racism’s role in the American Revolution itself, as an intellectual and political founding moment, is elusive. The old paradox of the liberty-minded slavedriver remains.

In The Common Cause, his new contribution to this synthesis, Robert G. Parkinson presents a bold explanation of the contradictions between patriot leaders’ ideals and the republic they built. He leaves
mostly unexplored the inconsistencies in their personal beliefs. Rather than their core principles, *The Common Cause* argues, their war effort established white supremacy as the basis of United States citizenship. From the beginning, patriot publicists defined the war against Great Britain as a war against non-white peoples.

At the heart of Parkinson’s book is the difficulty of uniting 13 disparate peoples in a ‘common cause’ against a powerful and generally beloved parent nation. To resist the empire, Parkinson writes, colonists needed both ‘to make the familiar alien’, in order to cut emotional ties with Britain, and ‘to see common-ness in one another’, in order to muster the will to fight (p. 21). Both needs, rebel leaders realized, could be met by supplying American audiences with stories about the English king’s control over three alien forces: European mercenaries, Native American allies, and escaped slaves. Patriots energetically circulated stories about the combined menace. As they did so, they convinced other white Americans not only to hate the British, but also to view non-whites as passive tools of a foreign power.

They propagated such stories mainly through newspapers, which Parkinson examines in a delightful close study that amounts to a book within the book. His key insight here is that the most important section of a typical newspaper was the interior, where most news items were placed, rather than the front page, where one might read a political treatise or a public document. Parkinson shows that the resistance movement in Massachusetts, where nearly a quarter of the colonies’ newspapers operated, were early to recognize the importance of the inside pages. Later, the Continental Congress would direct printers to circulate particular items of information throughout the colonies. As the war began, the interior pages were the primary means by which most Americans learned what was happening, and over time, the balance between European news and colonial stories shifted. Increasingly, colonists were reading about each other rather than the European metropoles.

Although the London ministry was slow to understand their full strategic importance, Parkinson relates that the mainland colonies’ three dozen newspapers were targets of war by late 1775. In Virginia, the royal governor Lord Dunmore dispatched marines to seize a press at Norfolk in September. A Connecticut militia company retaliated by confiscating the printing type of a New York City loyalist. By then, it was clear that local newspapers were part of larger communication networks alongside the famous committees of correspondence. In a process already familiar to historians of early American print culture, editors circulated news by ‘exchanging’ their papers, copying from each other’s pages to move news relatively quickly around the continent. In addition, although surviving details are scarce, they maintained their own regional distribution networks, arranging transportation to send copies to subscribers in the countryside.

On a technical level, Parkinson’s key contribution to the history of early American newsprint is to pair the local and continental dimensions of circulation. He documents the reprinting of specific stories across the colonies (an impressive task by itself) and describes the operations of particular printers. The most important of these to *The Common Cause* is William Bradford, not only because his *Pennsylvania Journal* was centrally located in Philadelphia but also because its subscription books from 1774 and 1775 have survived. From these, Parkinson derives a detailed picture of how copies of the *Journal* circulated, showing that the imperial crisis dramatically increased its subscriptions. To that information he adds a close study of the *Journal*’s contents, determining that 40 per cent of its news items during 1775 came from other colonial newspapers, and that as the war began, these included an increasing number of stories from places beyond the middle colonies and Boston.

With that valuable new knowledge of communication infrastructure as a basis, Parkinson devotes most of *The Common Cause* to documenting the war that passed before the eyes of colonial readers between 1775 and 1783 – what he calls the ‘Revolutionary War’, as distinct from the political ‘American Revolution’. The resulting narrative is built around moments of psychological and propagandistic rather than military significance.

The war of the newspapers, in Parkinson’s account, was a war of convergences and juxtapositions. When news of the opening shots in Massachusetts reached Virginia and South Carolina in early May 1775, for
example, it coincided with panic about rebellions planned by the enslaved along the James River and insurrectionary sermons preached in Charleston by ‘Black David’. If white southerners had any trouble connecting these terrors to the new war, Lord Dunmore, serving the king entirely too well, clarified matters by threatening Virginia’s capital with bombardment and emancipation. Meanwhile, the second Continental Congress, assembling in Philadelphia the same month, was preoccupied with reports that the Indian superintendent Guy Johnson planned to incite frontier attacks in New York. Parkinson shows that newspapers stoked both sets of fears and relayed them around the country; the New-York Journal and the South-Carolina Gazette printed a claim that London was sending 78,000 guns and bayonets ‘to put into the hands of Negroes, the Roman Catholics, [and] the Indians and Canadians’ (p. 94). From the start, then, the war of the colonial imagination was a proxy war.

On both sides, Parkinson writes, white leaders assumed the empire had the power to control black and Indian fighters, to whom they ascribed little agency. Through the rest of 1775, as colonists waited for the main power of the British military to reach them, stories abounded of British officials instigating insurrection. Some of the stories were true. Parkinson argues, however, that outrage over such provocations as Lord Dunmore’s promise of liberty to enslaved men who joined the British, and his commissioning John Connolly to raise a force of Ohio Indians, resulted from careful work by patriot printers. They populated their pages with the names of these and many other villains – white men who threatened the continent with warfare by non-white surrogates. Directing everything, colonists came to believe, was the king himself. Thus, Parkinson argues, the long bill of indictment against George III in the Declaration of Independence should be understood as a crescendo of fear, ending with the charge that patriots saw as the greatest crime: fomenting slave rebellion and frontier massacres. On Long Island, a public reading of the Declaration inspired a crowd to blow up a royal effigy bearing a black face and a feather headdress.

Of course, King George threatened America with German mercenaries as well. Despite their importance in the summer of 1776, however, Parkinson suggests the Germans’ hold on the colonial imagination was limited. Europeans, unlike African Americans and Indians, could be rehabilitated. After General Washington’s easy capture of 1,000 Hessians at Trenton, Parkinson writes, newspapers began depicting them as hapless fellow victims of monarchy. The rhetorical shift, undertaken in part because of the need to cement German Americans in the common cause, underscores the Revolution’s ongoing dehumanization of non-whites.

During late 1776 and 1777, as colonial enthusiasm for the war ebbed, Parkinson argues, patriot printers kept the revolutionary spirit alive with sensational new tales of atrocities – notably the death of the young loyalist Jane McCrea, apparently at the hands of General John Burgoyne’s Wyandot scouts. In 1778, after the French treaty shifted major military operations to the south, the anti-Indian rhetoric of the patriots only intensified, and actual warfare with Native Americans escalated. In the Wyoming Valley of northeast Pennsylvania, when a British and Iroquois force killed hundreds of militiamen, newspapers inflated the death toll with thousands of imaginary women and children. A year later, when Washington ordered General John Sullivan to retaliate against the Iroquois homeland, destroying its settlements – crops and food stores included – 13 patriot newspapers reprinted Sullivan’s report to Congress in full. These events have been told before, but Parkinson invests them with new purposefulness; they were part of an organized propaganda war. His evidence bears this out, although throughout the book he may ascribe greater clarity of intention to the printers than they had at the time.

In the southern colonies, later British campaigns seemed to confirm patriot rhetoric as enslaved black Americans fled their plantations, often to British lines. Newspaper coverage in the South, however, was very poor; when Charleston fell in May 1780, word reached Paris (via London) before it reached Thomas Jefferson in Virginia. Parkinson argues that this contributed to the famous chaos of the southern theater. In the absence of effective means to manage public opinion, the inland South descended into directionless civil war. He argues, however, that the common cause rhetoric remained powerful. It helps explain why, even as a British army threatened Charleston and state officials contemplated total surrender, John Laurens could not persuade South Carolina to consider enlisting slaves in its defense. In those places where thousands of black soldiers (or Stockbridge, Oneida, or Tuscarora Indians) did fight for the United States during the Revolution,
patriot newspapers refrained from mentioning the fact. In print, African Americans and Indians could only be the enemy.

_The Common Cause_ argues that the consequences of patriot rhetoric lasted long after the Battle of Yorktown ended major North American operations in 1781. Not only did patriarchic racism lead to, for example, the slaughter of 90 neutral Lenape by white militia at Gnadenhutten, Ohio, in 1782. It also wrote Native Americans and black Americans out of the national social compact. This conclusion of Parkinson’s is provocative. Other historians do not deny that the American founding was compromised by slavery, but many have argued the Revolution promoted the liberation of the enslaved, at least in northern states and elsewhere around the Atlantic world.(3) In _The Common Cause_, however, Parkinson depicts the war effort as a long-term retardant on any egalitarian impulses the revolutionaries may have had.

In this respect, the evidence Parkinson provides is persuasive, though one might wish his book devoted more space to the post-war settlement. His final chapter surveys how American literature, art, and historiography depicted the Revolution from the 1780s to the 1810s, demonstrating that whites’ fund of racial fear had diminished little by the time a second British war began. Meanwhile, on the frontier, uncertain conditions left behind by the Treaty of Paris in the 1780s and 1790s promoted the celebration of white settlers as patriotic heroes, to the detriment of Native American inhabitants. The final chapter also examines the implicit theory of citizenship embraced by American law during that period, especially in the 1790 naturalization act, which limited US citizenship eligibility to aliens who were free and white. Parkinson argues that the logic of treating non-whites as passive proxies during the war limited the white public’s ability to conceive of them as independent members of the state afterward. These arguments are compelling.

Paradoxically, however, focusing on printed accounts means _The Common Cause_ itself seems to downplay the active public roles that African Americans, if not patriot-allied Native Americans, played during the revolutionary era. This forecloses discussion of events that would prove crucial to black activism and free northern African-American identity in the early republic. In addition, Parkinson sometimes seems to divide the Revolution against itself, treating the war effort and the patriots’ core ideas as entangled but fundamentally different elements, in a way that protects the latter from some of the most troubling implications of his account. Citizenship theory aside, it seems to me this has the curious effect of divorcing white American nationalism from white American idealism, limiting the impact of his interpretation. Nevertheless, _The Common Cause_ also provides a powerful basis for examining both issues in new ways. In particular, I would be interested in Parkinson’s answer to the question whether core patriotic ideals themselves were refracted by the medium of wartime newsprint and changed by the course of events. How, for example, did newspaper exchanges shape public convictions about representation, natural rights, or indeed the abstract injustice of enslavement, as the war continued?

Overall, _The Common Cause_ is an account that deserves attention from any historian studying early American national identity, racism, western expansion, or print culture, not to mention historians studying the Revolution itself. In clear prose, discussing a vast research program, Parkinson effectively reevaluates the meaning of the entire continental war – and through it, the nature of the American founding.

**Notes**


The author appreciates Jonathan Wilson's careful, thoughtful review.

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