Searching for Meaning: The Legacy of the Founding Fathers and Their Revolutionary Narratives

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Introduction: The Myth of the "Standard" Revolutionary Narrative

The 1960s saw an increasing popularity of social or "bottom up" history among professional historians. These new social historians focused their research interests on recreating the lives of "ordinary" historical figures from the past. By determining how the average man lived during the Civil War or Victorian Britain, historians placed value on these "minor" historical actors and enhanced posterity's understanding of the time period examined. The questioning of traditional normative or institutional historical narratives was byproduct of the efforts of these social historians. "Is the meaning or significance of Historical Event X that is presented in high school textbooks really the meaning or significance of Historical Event X that would have been felt by Historical Event X's average contemporary?"

As a result of the questioning of traditional narratives, historians wrote numerous revisionist histories seeking to reinterpret significant historical events from the point of view of "outsiders" or those not within the traditional social power structures. One of the favorite revisionist history subjects for historians was and is the American Revolution. Numerous historians have sought to reinterpret the Revolution through the eyes of the average citizen of Boston or to determine the significance of the Revolution for groups outside of the Revolutionary power structure such as blacks, Indians, and women. In his seminal work *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, Gordon Wood argues that the principal feature of the American Revolution was the way in which it changed how men viewed themselves, society, and class structure. Historians such as Carol Berkin have argued that the American Revolution represented the beginning, not the climax, in the

struggle for independence among women.[1] For the thousands of black loyalists who had served in the British army during the war, the end of the Revolutionary War meant a choice between returning to slavery or leaving the country. The author of this paper had the unenviable experience of spending one Fourth of July holiday on a Sioux Indian reservation where he was told that Independence Day should be termed "Enslavement Day," a sign of how bitterly many American Indians still feel at having been left out of the promises of Revolutionary rhetoric.

All of these revisionist histories, however, have a shared major failing. They all assume to be challenging a monolithic, singular experience common to all individuals within the Revolutionary power structure. Essentially, these historians base their arguments on the premise that there was a shared, identical experience among Revolutionary leaders that has become the standard telling of the story of the American Revolution and has given the Revolution its "meaning." In turn, these historians then set about telling the story of the Revolution from the perspective of various outside groups. What these historians fail to realize is that there is no standard experience or story even among the Revolutionary elites. To the Revolutionary leaders who were the intellectual successors to the Enlightenment, the Revolution represented an opportunity to create a new breed of man capable of disinterested republican leadership. To political theorists, the Revolution and the creation of the United States provided a test case for the large federal democratic republic. To others the Revolution was a purely nationalistic event, nothing more than the birth of a new nation. To others the Revolution merely conferred

[1] Berkin, Carol. *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for American Independence*. New York: Random House, 2006.

elite status on a new group of individuals by dismantling the British colonial power structure and replacing it with a new group of colonial elites.

The purpose of this paper is not to undermine the legitimacy of those social historians who sought to interpret the meaning of the Revolution to contemporary outsiders. Instead, this paper seeks to expand on previous historians efforts and examine several Revolutionary leaders' sentiments concerning the meaning of the Revolution. By asserting that the Revolution did not have a singular, fixed meaning even to its leaders, the author hopes to show the competing motivations that spurred Revolutionary leaders to take action and how those motivations manifested themselves in the leaders' telling of the story of the Revolution in retrospect.

To do this the paper will examine the writings of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, John Jay, and James Madison. Each of these Revolutionary leaders was uniquely situated in positions of power during the Revolutionary War and the Early Republican period. Aside from their unique perspective on the Revolution, each of these individuals is particularly interesting to study because of the fact that they lived beyond the early Republican period. This longevity allowed these founders to work out a well developed perspective on what they saw to be the meaning of the Revolution and to produce a significant narrative that they hoped to pass on to subsequent generations of Americans.

Through an examination of the correspondence between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson and the personal memoirs and diaries of John Jay and James Madison from the later years of their lives, the fears of these founders concerning the breakdown of the Republican ideal and the rise of party politics, the power of the federal government, the continued problem of slavery, and the concern with how posterity would remember them

is evident. In working out these fears, these figures came to very different conclusions about what the Revolution meant.

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson

From the beginning of American history Virginia and Massachusetts have held a position of influence. They were the first two colonies, they were centers of agriculture, trade, and commerce during the colonial era, and they took a leading roll in the Revolution and the creation of the new republic. Therefore it comes as no surprise that the two leading figures in the formation of Revolutionary ideology, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, were from Virginia and Massachusetts respectively. More than Franklin, Madison, or any other Revolutionary figure, Jefferson and Adams shaped the ideas that successive generations would come to associate with the American Revolution. The perfectability of man, natural rights, and the idea of Republican virtue were all ideals that, if not created or "discovered" by Jefferson or Adams, were at least articulated by them more eloquently than any of their contemporaries.

However, what is often forgotten is the fact that both Adams and Jefferson lived long past the Revolutionary and early republic periods. It was in the years after they had left public life that they restored their relationship which had been nearly destroyed by party politics. Their correspondence from these years shows two elder statesmen attempting to grasp the reality and meaning of the Revolution forty years later. Were they pleased with the way the Revolution had turned out? Did they see the high-minded ideals they had fought for as being corrupted by the vulgarity of democracy? Had the federal Constitution bastardized the Revolutionary principles concerning central authority? By examining Jefferson and Adams' correspondence after they left public life,

it can be determined that Adams and Jefferson felt that the some of the principles of the Revolution had fallen victim petty politics, but at the same time viewed their Revolution as an enlightening influence on the world and unique in its place in human history.

In the presidential election of 1824, Andrew Jackson won a plurality of votes in the Electoral College. However since no candidate was able to garner an overall majority, the election was sent to the House of Representatives where John Adams' son, John Quincy Adams, won election as president. In 1828, two years after both Jefferson and Adams passed away, Jackson would win election as president ushering in a new era of populism, patronage, and interest group politics. While the Jacksonian era may have been marked by all of these developments, they were well underway in the first two decades of the 19th Century.

Jefferson and Adams were disturbed by these new developments. Had they not fought for representative democracy because they believed that men filled with republican virtue would naturally be able to live above the fray of self-interest? Jefferson had argued that the only way for the young republic to survive was for interest groups to put aside their squabbles and elect an "aristocracy of merit." In a letter to Jefferson Adams admitted he felt that even if his son should win election to the presidency, that his administration would be a failure because of "conflicting factions."[2] Jefferson was likewise concerned with the rise of factionalism in United States politics. While Jefferson saw the usefulness of political parties as a part of "natural, as well as civil history," he abhorred the fact that political leaders would "take part personally in the

[2] Cappon, Lester J. ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John* Adams. Vol. 2. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1959. p. 606.

violent contests [elections]."[3] To both Jefferson and Adams, this campaigning on the part of candidates represented a turn from the disinterested republican leadership that they had envisioned as essential for the survival of the country to a meaner, self-interested political landscape. Even Jefferson, who had constantly championed the power of popular government, tried to dismiss the popular outcries against the contested election of John Quincy Adams as "angry squibs" by "scriblers" attempting to sell newspapers by appealing to the lowest common denominator.[4]

Not only were Jefferson and Adams concerned with the political leadership of the United States, but they were also greatly troubled by social changes they saw as being against the principles of the Revolution. In matters of religion, both were troubled by the changes that had come with the Second Great Awakening. As children of the Enlightenment, Adams and Jefferson valued reason above almost all other virtues. The resurgence in evangelicalism and emotionalism represented a rejection of the Revolutionary principles of reason. In a moment of anger Adams exclaimed that "This would be the best of all possible Worlds, if there were no religion in it!!!"[5] He also reasoned that those seeking to pursue their own interests had "added Prostitutions of it [the death of Christ], that fill or might fill the blackest and bloodiest Pages of human History."[6]

Jefferson was similarly dour in his assessment of the evangelical movement. In response to the American Bible Society's plan to translate and distribute the Bible into the Far East, Jefferson said that evangelicals might as well "put the torch to the Asiatic

[3] Ibid p. 336.
[4] Ibid p. 609.
[5] Ibid p. 509.
[6] Ibid p. 488.

regions."[7] However, Adams and Jefferson reserved their most scathing criticisms for Catholicism. Adams stated that "free government and the Roman Catholick religion can never exist together in any nation or Country."[8] He saw Catholicism as being a characteristic of the absolutist regimes in Europe and therefore incompatible with free society.

The way Jefferson and Adams viewed Catholicism is indicative of the way they viewed the Revolution in general. They saw Catholicism as a defect of Old Europe but one that could be remedied through the inevitable triumph of rationalism. Far from being a uniquely American phenomenon, Jefferson and Adams saw the Revolution and Revolutionary ideals as being a beacon of free society around the world. In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson intentionally used the term "inalienable rights" as opposed to the more common term "rights of Englishmen." He believed that the basis of these rights was a common "moral sense ... as much a apart of our constitution as that of feeling, seeing, or hearing."[9] In fact, Jefferson saw Great Britain, the ultimate enemies of the Revolution as being the logical heirs to Revolutionary ideals. During the bread shortages and general strikes of 1816, Jefferson deemed the British government to be on the brink of collapse. He expected a total revolution in Britain to result in Britain. When the British sought an example on which to model their new government, Jefferson thought "They will probably turn their eyes to us, and be disposed to tread in our footsteps, seeing how safely these have led us into port."[10]

[7] Ibid p. 496.
[8] Ibid p. 571.
[9] Ibid p. 492.
[10] Ibid p. 499.

Not only did Jefferson expect the American Revolution to influence Old Europe, but he also expected it to spread to areas of the globe without Western traditions. In an exchange in the early spring of 1818, Jefferson and Adams discussed the ongoing revolutions in South America. Adams felt that as long as the "Roman religion" was a dominant influence in Central and South America that these nations could not hope to govern themselves in a free society. He openly wondered if the South Americans would be better off under Spanish rule. Jefferson, however, disagreed saying that "Surely it is our duty to wish them independence and self-government, because they wish it themselves, and the have the right, and we none, to chuse for themselves."[11]

In their relationship, Jefferson seems to have been constantly assuring Adams that the Revolution was a success and that the freedom that they had set forth on the globe was not only the natural state of man, but also the only station that was morally defensible for humanity. Whether this was because Jefferson was trying to reassure Adams or himself is difficult to tell. There is no doubt Jefferson was troubled about the meaning and the practical consequences of the Revolution. While Adams was more inclined to discuss the political occurrences of the day, Jefferson was far more likely to reminisce about or try to determine the meaning of the Revolution. In a letter from 1825, Jefferson summed his thoughts on the worldwide impact of the Revolution by stating that "should the cloud of barbarism and despotism again obscure the science and liberties of Europe, this country remains to preserve and restore light and liberty to them. In short, the flames kindled on the 4th of July 1776 have spread over too much of the globe to be extinguished by the feeble engines of despotism."[12]

[11] Ibid p. 522-524.
[12] Ibid p. 575.

If Adams and Jefferson saw the Revolution and their part in it as being the event which "discovered" natural rights and unleashed a tide of freedom upon the world, then how did they see Revolution in terms of human history? This is a difficult question, one to which Adams and Jefferson themselves may not have had answers. Obviously, they saw the Revolution as a turning point in human history, the fulcrum on which modern social and political structures would turn, but what they seem to have never been able to grasp is where the experiment of representative democracy would lead.

Adams often couched his sentiments regarding the place of the Revolution in religious terms. Ironically, a man who fought so hard for so long for religious freedom was motivated chiefly out of a sense that God wanted man to be free. In an 1823 letter to Jefferson, he stated that "Right and justice have a hard fare in this World, but there is a power above who is capable, and willing to put all things right in the end."[13]

Some of Adams greatest concerns about the Revolution were how its heroes would be remembered. In 1815, Adams wrote an entire letter to Jefferson expressing his concern that there would never be a comprehensive history of the Revolution. Adams didn't fear that there would not be enough documentary evidence to produce a work on the Revolution, but he instead feared that the Revolution was such a momentous occasion that no one person would be up to the task of writing a comprehensive history. Adams wondered "Who shall write the history of the American revolution? Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?"[14] Adams was not just worried about the ability of any one person to write a history of the Revolution, but he was also worried that some of the major characters of the years before the war broke out would be forgotten. He was

[13] Ibid p. 591.
[14] Ibid p. 451.

angered at the fact that George Washington and Alexander Hamilton had received grand orations and general grieving upon their deaths, but the young nation had "buried [James] Otis, Sam. Adams, [John] Handcock and [Elbridge] Gerry in Comparative Obscurity."[15] One must wonder if Adams preoccupation with the remembrance of more obscure Revolutionary figures had to do with a fear that he would be forgotten by subsequent generations.

Jefferson had his own issues with the Revolution, although he seems to have felt that his place in it was relatively secure. His greatest fears concerned the problems left unsolved by the Revolution. Among these fears, slavery was his chief concern. Jefferson generally welcomed challenges in his public life, but slavery was an issue he was uncomfortable with. During the debate over the Missouri Compromise, Jefferson confided in Adams that instead of taking a definitive stand on slavery, he wished congress "would parlay awhile, and give us time to get out of the way."[16] This sentiment was not shared by Adams who saw slavery as one of the greatest evils of the young republic. It should not be assumed that Jefferson did not find the institution of slavery to be immoral. However, he felt that a change in the institution could not be made without the fear of the union collapsing.

Neither Jefferson nor Adams came to a definitive position on the Revolution. Both were troubled by the issues left unresolved, and both worried about the way posterity would regard the Revolution and their place in it. However, both did understand the enormity of what they had accomplished. Jefferson's last letter to Adams was delivered by the former's grandson. Jefferson was anxious for his grandson to meet

[15] Ibid p. 488.
[16] Ibid p. 570.

Adams. Jefferson told Adams that "Like other young people, he wishes to be able, in the winter nights of old age, to recount to those around him what he has heard and learnt of the Heroic age preceding his birth, and which of the Argonauts particularly he was in time to have seen."[17] Jefferson understood he and Adams were special. He understood that they had changed the way that men related to one another and how men thought about themselves. While Jefferson may not have been able to comprehend exactly the course the Revolution would take, he seems to have reveled in the ambiguous possibilities available to Americans and the world at large. As he told Adams, "I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past."[18]

James Madison

Few if any of the founding fathers have been as misunderstood, ignored, or underappreciated as James Madison. Adams, Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and even to a certain extent Alexander Hamilton have been made into demigods. Madison, however, remains an almost peripheral figure. This is ironic when one considers the fact that few Revolutionary figures had the diverse experience of Madison. He was a member of congress, Secretary of State, and the President. He was the author of the Constitution, a document on which he staked his reputation, several of the *Federalist Papers*, and the Bill of Rights. A protégé of Thomas Jefferson, Madison helped to draft the Virginia Declaration of Religious Freedom, yet he would break with Jefferson on the establishment of the new federal government and side with Jefferson's political enemy Alexander Hamilton. However, after the ratification of the Constitution,

[17] Ibid p. 614.
[18] Ibid p. 485.

Madison returned to Jefferson's Republican camp generally opposing most of Hamilton's measures including the Bank of the United States and the assumption of state debts.

How then is a man with such broad political and ideological experience so ignored? In examining Madison's writings from the end of his life we see a man far different from the demigod figures of Jefferson and Adams. Madison's later writings show a man who was almost despondent over poor finances, the prospect of a nation divided by slavery, and his fear that he would be judged harshly by posterity. Perhaps Madison's fears were self-fulfilling, and his near obsessive concern with how history would view him colored the way in which contemporaries and posterity have judged him.

The chief feature of Madison's later writings is his concern about his place in the pantheon of Revolutionary figures. Drew McCoy characterized Madison's final years by saying that, "during the final six years of his life, amid a sea of personal troubles that were threatening to engulf him ... literally sick with anxiety, he began to despair of his ability of make himself understood by his fellow citizens."[19] In acts that ranged from egregious falsification to the bizarre, Madison tried to amend his past writings to come into line with accepted contemporary political orthodoxy. When asked about Jefferson's and his involvement in the drafting of the Kentucky Resolutions, a document which asserted a state's authority to withdraw from the Union, Madison forcefully denied any involvement although Jefferson was the document's author and Madison the editor. Madison inked out old sections of his papers in order to hide his early support for Hamilton or to conceal criticisms he levied at such national heroes as Washington or Lafayette. Not wanting to be seen as a closet federalist, he asked Jefferson to remove *The*

[19] McCoy, Drew R. *The Last of the Founding Fathers: James Madison and the Republican Legacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989. p. 151.

Federalist Papers from the University of Virginia library. His most bizarre behavior was his fascination with and envy of Jefferson. After Jefferson died, Madison began forging letters in Jefferson's handwriting in order to make Jefferson appear more supportive of Madison's earlier policy proposals. Eventually, Madison began writing his own letters in Jefferson's handwriting.[20]

Madison's most energetic efforts to preserve his legacy came in the form of his defense of his role as the author of the Constitution. In an 1833 speech, then Virginia Senator and future President John Tyler, skewered Edmund Randolph for what he saw as an abandonment of Jeffersonian Republican ideals in his support for the creation of the national government and the ratification of the Constitution. Tyler accused Madison and Randolph of attempting to create a government that would "render the States nothing more than the provinces of a great Government" and to create "a Supreme Executive ... to veto state laws."[21]

Madison's response to Tyler is nothing short of extraordinary. Madison dually attempts to take credit for Randolph's proposals while at the same time defending Randolph. Madison argues that the measures Randolph advocated were almost exactly what had been adopted by the Constitutional Convention and that the current federal government had proven not to be repressive or overbearing. Madison supports both of these claims by submitting for Tyler's examination several pages of his notes regarding the proposed form of the federal government. At the same time he adds that while the Randolph may have been the one to introduce the Virginia Plan in committee at the

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[20] Wills, Gary. *James Madison.* New York: Times Books, 2002. p. 162-163.
[21] Hunt, Gaillard, ed. *The Writings of James Madison: Comprising His Public Papers and His Private Correspondence, Including Numerous Letters and Documents Now for the First Time Printed.* Vol. 9. New York: Putnam, 1910. p. 502.

convention that "the resolutions proposed by him, were the result of a Consultation among the Deputies [of Virginia]."[22] It is odd to think that a former president worried about his reputation being usurped by a man who had been dead for twenty years to the point that he would subject himself to ridicule, yet this is the Madison who emerges again and again from the pages of correspondence at the end of his life.

Madison's desire to protect his legacy is evident in an essay entitled "Sovereignty" which he penned in 1835. In "Sovereignty," Madison addresses the constitutional crisis of the nullification movement. This movement sought to advance the principle that if a state found a federal law to be objectionable, then the state had the authority to nullify the said law inside of its borders. Such a principle was not only an attack on Madison's masterpiece, the Constitution, but it was also a challenge to the entire institution of federalism and the large republic. In "Sovereignty," Madison elaborates on his argument that he set forth nearly fifty years earlier in *Federalist No. 10* that a large republic was not only a way to protect the rights of individuals by ensuring that competing factions would keep any one faction from gaining too much power but also a means of maintaining order. In stating that:

> "It follows, from no view of the subject, that a nullification of a law of the U.S. can as is now contended, belong rightfully to a single State, as one of the parties to the Constitution; the State not ceasing to avow its adherence to the Constitution. A plainer contradiction in terms, or a more fatal inlet to anarchy, cannot be imagined,"[23]

[22] Ibid p. 504.
[23] Ibid p. 575.

Madison argues against nullification by contending that if states are able to nullify the laws they dislike, then competing factions are eliminated in the aforementioned states leading to tyranny and anarchy.

It should come as no surprise that Madison staked so much of his reputation on the Constitution. To Madison, the Constitution was the Revolution. From his experience as an ally of Jefferson in the Virginia legislature, Madison was known as a man capable in legislative settings. Much of his work on the Constitution and the Bill of Rights was behind the scenes in drafting and brokering support for legislation. In *Federalist No. 10*, Madison had challenged Montesquieu's position that faction was detrimental to the existence of a large government. To Madison the Revolution, embodied in the Constitution, was a new governmental paradigm. In Madison's mind, the Constitution took on an almost mythic stature. In an essay written for the *North American Review*, Madison wrote that the Constitution was a document "having in no model, the similtudes and analogies applicable to other systems of Government, it must more than any other, be its own interpreter according to its text."[24] The Constitution was a document Madison humbly equated with "pure wisdom." The text was unlike any other government document before, and attacks on the Constitution either by the nullification attempts of John C. Calhoun or the liberal interpretation of the text by Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall were tantamount to destroying the Revolution.

In an ironic twist, considering that Madison was a leading revolutionary, Madison argued that the Constitution essentially made revolution unnecessary. In the same essay,

[24] Peterson, Merrill D. ed., *James Madison: A Biography in His Own Words*. New York: Newsweek, 1974. p. 399.

he articulated his belief that the Constitution contained significant provisions for all political problems that might arise in saying:

> "Should the provisions of the Constitution as here reviewed, be found not to secure the Government and rights of the States, against the usurpations and abuses on the part of the United States, the final resort within the purview of the Constitution, lies in an amendment of the Constitution according to a process applicable by the States."[25]

Essentially, Madison views revolution to be unnecessary, because if the federal government becomes destructive of state's rights, the states may amend the Constitution to eliminate the federal government's ability to be oppressive. By making the federal government superior yet beholden to the states, the Constitution, in Madison's, eyes created a new governmental paradigm that preserved liberty, maintained order, and ensured the perpetual existence of a unified United States so long as the text of the Constitution was strictly adhered to.

Yet despite all of Madison's apparent confidence concerning the infallibility of the Constitution, it is evident from his writings that a singular fear dominated Madison's opinion of the future prospects of the United States. By the nullification crisis of the 1820s and 1830s, slavery had become the central divisive issue in the United States. The Missouri Compromise had temporarily eased concerns over the problem of slavery in the United States, but slavery loomed on the horizon as the major domestic policy issue in the young nation. Madison, with greater clarity than his contemporaries, recognized the problem.

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[25] Ibid p. 403.

In response to the continuing expansion of settlement into its western frontier, the state of Virginia called a constitutional convention to address the issue of apportionment in 1829. Madison, 78, was called out of retirement to help negotiate a compromise between the state's eastern gentry and western settlers. The greatest point of contention between easterners and westerners was over how slaves would be counted. The westerners from the mountainous regions of Virginia where small, slaveless farms dominated the landscape did not want to count slaves towards the total census number for apportionment. Eastern plantation owners, who depended on slave labor, wanted slaves to count towards the total census number. Madison, it was hoped would affect a sort of compromise along the lines of the "Three-fifths Compromise" in the Constitution.[26]

However, as the convention progressed, it became obvious that western interests were bound to lose out to eastern, aristocratic interests. In his last public act, an aging Madison addressed the convention and pled for an apportionment compromise saying:

> "It is due to justice: due to humanity: due to truth: to the sympathies of our nature: in fine, to our character as a people, both abroad and at home, that they [slaves] should be considered, as much as possible, in the light of human beings; an not as mere property. As such they are acted upon by our laws; and have an interest in our laws. They may be considered as making a part, tho a degraded part of the families to which they belong."[27]

Although Madison's comments do not strike a modern reader as being particularly progressive, there were few at the convention who would not have considered Madison's speech to be radical. While Madison was ostensibly speaking

[26] Wills p. 160-162.
[27] Peterson p. 391.

about the need to at least count slaves in some fashion because of their dual condition as both human beings and property, he began to use language generally associated with the abolitionist movement. In juxtaposing his statement about the humanity of blacks against his argument that in "Republics, the great danger is that the majority may no sufficiently respect the rights of the minority,"[28] Madison made a plea that surpassed the simple issue of apportionment in Virginia. In his last public act, Madison was very plainly asking for at least a gradual end to the institution of slavery both for the benefit of black slaves and the sake of the union.

In assessing Madison's mental state after the convention of 1829, Drew McCoy writes that "The convention of 1829, we might say, pushed Madison steadily toward the brink of self-delusion, if not despair. The dilemma of slavery undid him."[29] In writing to Henry Clay in June 1833, Madison allowed himself to fully express his desperation and frustration over the possibility of secession:

> "What MADNESS in the South, to look for greater safety in disunion. It would be worse than jumping out of the Frying-pan into the fire: it wd. be jumping into the fire for fear of the Frying-pan."[30]

Madison's great fear of disunion at the end of his life gives tremendous insight in to the way in which he viewed the Revolution. Jefferson and Adams feared the prospect of disunion, they were also troubled by the moral blight that slavery placed on the young nation. How could Adams and Jefferson test their theories regarding the perfectability of man when such a large portion of the United States population was being deprived of their liberty? Madison's chief fear, on the other hand, was disunion. Undoubtedly he

[28] Ibid p. 390.
[29] Wills p. 162.
[30] Hunt p. 517.

would have agreed with Jefferson and Adams that slavery was a moral problem, but his greatest fear was that a disagreement over slavery would destroy the union. If the union was destroyed, then Madison's argument that the large federal republic and the Constitution were not the perfect form of government and legal document, respectively, would be destroyed. For Madison, the Constitution and the large federal republic represented the greatest achievements of the Revolutionary era. He had placed all of his intellectual abilities and political effort into defending and promoting these two institutions, and at the end of his life, slavery threatened to make Madison's life work irrelevant. When viewed in this context, it is no wonder that the end of Madison's life was marked by fear and depression.

John Jay

In the same way Madison's fears for the young republic at the end of his life illuminated his perception of the "meaning" of the Revolution, John Jay's fears show a man who saw the Revolution as being distinctly American. Jay is one of the few men in United States history to have served in the highest levels of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. As a member of both the first and second continental congresses, Jay must have been thoroughly imbued with philosophical doctrines concerning the rights of man. From 1779 to 1783, Jay was minister to Spain. In this capacity, he served as one of the chief negotiators of the Treaty of Paris, which ended the Revolutionary War. After returning from Spain, Jay served as Secretary of Foreign Affairs, the predecessor to the modern day Secretary of State, under the Articles of Confederation government. After the ratification of the Constitution, Jay was nominated to serve as the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, a position he

resigned after falling out of favor with the Washington administration. Jay's last government position was the governorship of New York, which he held from 1795 until 1800.

Two features mark Jay's public life. The first was a commitment to pragmatic foreign policy. As minister to Spain, Jay secured the aid of Spain against the English during the American Revolution. However, his term as Secretary of Foreign Affairs was marked by a strategy of preserving the United State's autonomy in the area of foreign policy, and as Chief Justice, he served as a special ambassador to Great Britain to negotiate a treaty to solve unresolved disputes left over from the American Revolution. The Jay Treaty, much to the dismay of hard-line elements of Jefferson's party, granted favorable trade rights to the former enemy Great Britain at the apparent expense of former allies France and Spain.

The second feature that marked Jay's public ideology was a commitment to a strong federal government. Jay's term of service as the Secretary of Foreign affairs convinced him of the need for a strong federal government that would be supreme to the state governments. His many difficulties in representing thirteen semi-autonomous entities that often failed to speak with a single, unified voice led him to join Madison and Alexander Hamilton in writing the *Federalist Papers*. Jay wrote *Federalists Nos. 2, 3, 4, 5, and 64* all of which with the exception of *64* highlighted the need for a strong central government to effectively dictate foreign policy and protect United States autonomy abroad. It was in the anti-Federalist mood of 1795, that Jay resigned as Chief Justice, and during the watershed Republican victories of 1800, Jay decided to retire from public life, declining the Federalist Party's nomination to run for governor of New York and

President Adam's nomination to serve a second term on the Supreme Court, citing the Court's want of "energy, weight, and dignity, which are essential to its affording due support to the national government."[31] Ironically, Jay's declination of Adams' nomination forced Adams to nominate John Marshall, the justice who would establish the Supreme Court as the ultimate authority of judicial review, use the Court as a method of strengthening federal authority, and fulfill Jay's hope that it would provide "due support to the national government."

Jay passed away in 1829 leaving little correspondence in his retirement as compared to his public life. However, his letters from the intervening years between his retirement and death show a man afraid that the federal government he had worked so hard to build and protect would fail to be preserved under Republican administrations that chose to leave too much authority to the states. Jay's concerns about the strength of the federal government and its ability to defend itself from enemies both foreign and domestic show that Jay viewed the Revolution not as Jefferson or Adams, viewing the Revolution as a watershed moment in human history, or as Madison, viewing the Revolution as having created a new paradigm by which men were governed. Instead, Jay viewed the Revolution in nationalistic terms, choosing to see the events of 1763 to 1789 as the birth a new nation and a new people.

In the years immediately following his retirement from public life, Jay's chief concern continued to be the issues left unresolved with Britain by the Treaty of 1794 and the inability of the Republican administration to deal with such issues. Having known and been a collaborator with Jefferson for several years, Jay did not trust Jefferson to

[31] Letter to John Adams January 2, 1801. Accessed via Columbia University's John Jay Papers Online Image Database. Hereafter, any letter without a collection reference was accessed via this database.

handle the dangerous and complex issues of foreign policy, fearing that Jefferson's ideological models of human perfectibility would fail to be useful in the real world. In letter dated January 20, 1803, Jay wrote to Rufus King, then minister to Great Britain, that the death and anarchy of the French Revolution should have taught Jefferson the "Vanity of expecting that from the Perfectibility of human nature & the Lights of Philosophy the multitude will become virtuous and wise, or their Demagogues candid and honest."[32] Jay went on to predict that "eruptions from that Volcano [France], should again desolate some of the neighboring countries," and again bring Europe to the point of war.[33] Jay feared that Jefferson's affinity for French philosophers such as Rousseau and Voltaire, his sympathy for the revolutionary, antimonarchical nature of the French cause, and his hatred of the English would draw the United States into the next act of the war between England and France on the losing side.

Despite Jefferson's change of heart regarding France or his increased inclination to use federal power as seen in the Louisiana Purchase, Jay never warmed to Jefferson or the Republicans. Despite the Republican hegemony of the 1810's and 1820's, a period in which many former Federalists and Federalist ideals were incorporated into the Republican Party and Republican ideology, Jay failed to show much faith in Republican government. In fact, Jay had soured to the ideas of political parties and seemed dour in his assessment of democratic politics in general. In a letter to William P. Beers dated April 8, 2007, Jay lamented that:

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[32] Freeman, Landa M., and Louise V. North and Janet M. Wedge, eds. *Selected Letters of John Jay and Sarah Livingston Jay: Correspondence by or to the First Chief Justice of the United States and His Wife.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2005. p. 282.
[33] Ibid p. 282.

"The rulers in democratic societies are generally men of more talents than morals. There can be but little connection between cunning and virtue, and therefore (except now and then in particular instances) our affairs will commonly be managed by political intrigues."[34]

Jay's cynicism concerning contemporary politics put him at odds with members of both major political parties, but few leaders bore the brunt of Jay's disgust in the way James Madison did. Madison and Jay had been collaborators on *The Federalist Papers*, and Jay had appreciated Madison's efforts in the passage and ratification of the Constitution. However, the early Republic period saw Madison switch allegiances and return to the Republican Party. Madison's attempts to curb the Washington and Adams administrations' power and his feuding with Hamilton over the role of the federal government had turned Madison into a dangerous figure in Jay's eyes. Jay was perplexed as to why Madison would fight so hard for a strong central government only to oppose so many of its measures. Madison became an even more dangerous figure in Jay's eyes during the War of 1812.

From the Peace of Paris to the Jay Treaty, Jay's chief foreign policy goal had been to keep the United States out of war with Britain. As such, it is no surprise that he called Madison's request for a congressional declaration of war against Britain in 1812 "neither necessary, nor expedient, nor seasonable."[35] Jay, like most federalists, viewed the war with Britain as an imprudent and unnecessary undertaking by a relatively weak nation against the strongest military power in the

[34] Letter to William P. Beers April 18, 1807.
[35] Letter to Peter Van Schaak July 28, 1812.

world. Jay feared that war with Britain, an experience that he had spent his entire adult life trying to prevent, could lead to the diminishing of United States power or even the disintegration of the republic.

That his onetime collaborator and longtime friend Madison would lead the United States into war with Britain was even more hurtful for Jay. Jay could not understand how a man with Madison's intellectual and leadership abilities could lead the United States into what he saw as the most disastrous foreign policy decision in the history of the United States. When the United States Ambassador to Britain Gouverneur Morris asked Jay to support DeWitt Clinton in the 1812 presidential election against Madison, Jay responded that he would be willing to support Clinton but only "for reasons which have less relation to his [Madison's] personal qualifications, than to the existing state of things."[36]

Jay's ideological compatriots gave him as much or more reason to fear the dissolution of the Union during the War of 1812 as the Republicans. The fear that the pro-British federalist strongholds of New England and New York would secede from the union terrified Jay. During the war, Jay came to believe that only a federalist administration could appease both the English and the secessionist movement in New York and New England. As he told Peter Van Schaak, "Commotions tending to a dissolution of the Union, or to civil war, would be serious evils. A change of measures would result from a change of rulers, and public opinion is the proper means of effecting it."[37]

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[36] Letter to Gouverneur Morris September 21, 1812.

[37] Monaghan, Frank. *John Jay: Defender of Liberty Against Kings and Peoples, Author of the Constitution and Governor of New York, President of the Continental Congress, Co-Author of the Federalist, Negotiator*

The war exposed Jay's dilemma of serving two masters – the Federalist Party and the United States. Despite his disagreements with Republican policies, the war, and Madison in general, Jay opposed any moves that could be construed as giving support to the secessionist movement in New York and New England. When he was invited by Morris to attend an anti-war convention in New York, Jay declined fearing that the presence of the secessionist bloc at the convention coupled with his presence could be scene as a tacit approval of the secessionist movement. The difficulty of toeing a line that both opposed the war and the secessionist movement appears to have had a significant effect on Jay. His correspondence after the war contains few references to politics or current affairs and focuses mainly on personal matters. The one significant postwar political debate Jay weighed in on was slavery.

As governor of New York, Jay had proposed and signed into law legislation for the gradual abolition of slavery in that state, and the Missouri Crisis of 1819 again gave him reason to comment on the "peculiar institution." Madison, while opposing slavery in principle, argued that it was a Constitutionally guarded institution. Jay disagreed. In his last truly public act, Jay wrote an open letter published in several newspapers stating that slavery "ought not to be introduced nor permitted in any of the new states," but instead "ought to be gradually diminished and finally abolished in all of them."[38] He quoted the Declaration of Independence written by Republican Party founder and hero Thomas Jefferson stating that "ALL men are created equal." Such sentiments again exposed Jay to criticism as being

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of the Peace of 1783 and the Jay Treaty of 1794, First Chief Justice of the United States. New York: Bobbs, 1935. p. 434.

[38] Letter to Elias Boudinot November 17, 1819.

anti-Southern. President James Monroe went as far as to accuse Jay of trying to establish "a monopoly of power in the eastern portion of the Union" by eliminating the institution of slavery.[39]

Such public backlash does not seem to have fazed Jay. In fact Jay comes across in his correspondence as less concerned about his place in the legacy of the Revolution than do Jefferson, Adams, or Madison. The only real instance of Jay showing concern about how history would remember him was in a series of correspondence between himself and Adams. In 1821, a Philadelphia publisher announced his intention to publish the official journals of Adams and Jay at the Paris Peace negotiations.

Jay was terribly concerned as to whether or not the "journals" were authentic. When he contacted the publisher, he was told that the journals were merely very short official documents. Jay deduced that these documents were probably excerpts of his official papers, and he feared "how judiciously such extracts have been selected or combined."[40]

Jay's thoughts on the "meaning" of the Revolution are far more difficult to deduce than Adams, Jefferson, or Madison's. Jay possesses neither the powers of reflection that made Jefferson such a tortured soul, nor the powers of speculation that allowed Adams to prophesy as to the direction the American Revolution would take around the globe. Equally frustrating is Jay's absence of an obsession concerning his place in the history of the Revolution that marked Madison's life

[39] Stahr, Walter. *John Jay: Founding Father*. New York: Hambledon, 2005. p. 373.
[40] Letter to John Adams May 7, 1821.

and allowed future generations of scholars tremendous insights into his inner workings.

Instead, in Jay we see a man who is proud of his accomplishments but lacks the bravado of a Jefferson or the meticulousness of a Madison. Jay appears to be the most utilitarian of the four founders examined. His concern with a neutral American foreign policy and a strong federal government centers not on any deeply held ideological belief concerning the moral rightness of such positions, but instead these policy decisions are the result of protecting the nation that he created.

When viewing the America of John Jay through modern eyes, the historian is too eager to see the development and growth of the American state as an inevitability, and so the narrative that has developed is that such growth was inevitable. In constructing such a narrative, historians have ignored the legitimate concerns of men such as Jay who saw the young nation as having her roots in a tenuous foundation. Jay's concerns regarding the sustainability of the American Republic show us what the "meaning" of the Revolution was to him. To Jay, the Revolution marked the true birth of the American people. Jay's proclivity to call political idealists "demagogues" or to equate "pure democracy" with "pure whisky"[41] precludes the historian from deeming the man an idealist. However his concern for protecting federal institutions or the memory of Washington as an intellectual and his willingness to help James Fennimore Cooper compile a history of the Revolution paints the picture of a man who was deeply concerned with the preservation of the American experience.[42]

[41] Stahr p. 375.
[42] Stahr p. 375.

More than any of the other founders, Jay saw the Revolution as distinctly American. He and his compatriots had created a nation that given the time to develop would rival the great powers of Europe. If nothing else, Jay's narrative of the Revolution shatters the myth of a standard elite narrative centered on the creation of a large republic designed to protect natural rights so that man might achieve his highest state.

Conclusion: Rethinking the Standard Revolutionary Narrative

As the author has attempted to show in the preceding pages, the American Revolution was not a set experience with a set meaning even for those individuals at the highest levels of the Revolutionary power structure. The meaning and the story of the Revolution varied significantly from individual to individual based on the goals and objectives of each of the leading players in the formation and preservation of the American state.

How then may modern historians evaluate Revolutionary leaders, or the Revolution in general, in terms of its ability to accomplish the goals of leaders such as Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Jay? Were these leaders pleased with the way subsequent generations were inheriting the principles of the American Revolution, and how successful have intervening generations been in preserving the "meaning" of the Revolution according to Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Jay?

The answers appear to be disturbing to a great extent. Jay is the easiest for the modern historian to evaluate. If one accepts the argument that the primary meaning of the Revolution to Jay was a nationalistic meaning, then he appears to have been the most successful in passing his narrative along to subsequent

generations. While most Americans embrace the ideals of liberty and representative democracy and advocate the spreading of such ideals around the globe, the average American associates the American Revolution with the founding of the United States. Patriotism, or a sometimes illogical commitment to the abstract notion of the United States or what the United States "stands for," trumps the ideals of the enlightened, rational man or the rightness of the large federal republic in the pantheon of American ideals.

Not only has Jay passed on his "meaning" of the Revolution more effectively than Jefferson, Adams, or Jay, but the United States has conformed to his vision to a greater extent than it has Adams', Jefferson's, or Madison's. The United States is today the most powerful nation in the world, economically and militarily stronger than the nations of Europe combined. Also, the Union is strong and a high degree cultural homogeny exists. Despite the regional differences of the country, few citizens of the United States identify themselves by their state residency, instead identifying simply as Americans.

Additionally, because Jay showed no real concern with his place in the telling of the American Revolution, the contemporary historian does not have to scrutinize how effectively Jay was able to insert himself personally into the telling of the Revolution. Despite the fact that Jay is portrayed as a relatively minor figure when compared to the likes of Washington, Hamilton, or Franklin, such an assessment does not seem to be out of line with Jay's wishes as his concern for the growth and preservation of the United States seems to trump any concern over his personal standing.

The evaluation of Madison's ability to promote his meaning of the Revolution is more of a mixed bag. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights are regarded as almost sacred documents to most Americans, akin to the Bible to Christians or the Koran to Muslims, and Madison's model of the large federal republic that preserves state or provincial rights has become the governmental model for developing nations around the world. In this respect, one could argue that Madison of all the founders was the most successful at articulating and passing along his meaning for the Revolution. However, Madison, like Jay, has been relegated to second-class status among the founding fathers, and despite recent attempts by historians such as Joseph Ellis to promote the importance of Madison to popular audiences, it appears that Madison's many attempts to secure the prominence in popular culture of a Jefferson or Washington have failed.[43]

In much the same way that it is difficult to derive a singular meaning of the Revolution for Jefferson or Adams, it is equally difficult to evaluate the level of satisfaction Jefferson or Adams would have when viewing the United States today or their ability to make their narrative of the Revolution, the standard Revolutionary narrative. What is unquestionable is their place in the popular history of the Revolution. Adams and Jefferson have been made into demigods and maintained the "Argonaut" moniker Adams applied to the two of them. One thinks that Jefferson would cringe over the creation of the welfare state, the "intrusive" regulation of commerce, or the dominance of industrial and financial interests in political lobbying. However, there is no doubt that the United States and the world have become more meritocratic, and in this way we may consider Jefferson and

[43] Ellis, Joseph. *Founding Brothers: the Revolutionary Generation.* New York: Knopf, 2000.

Adams to be correct. Their Revolution was a turning point in human history, after which the ideals of liberty and natural rights would be promulgated, even if not necessarily embraced, around the globe. As for the creation of the new Republican man, the assessment of that figure is somewhat dourer. Self-interest has not been eliminated and the perfectible, enlightened, disinterested leader has not emerged to lead the nations into peace and prosperity. This is the greatest failure of Adams' and Jefferson's narrative.

What is striking to the author is how brilliant these four founding fathers were. It would be truly hard to imagine any politician today producing works of political theory on the level of those produced by Jay or Madison. Likewise, it would be exceptionally unlikely to see modern politicians engage in a dialogue concerning the nature and perfectibility of mankind or the "discovery" of human rights in the way Jefferson and Adams did. Perhaps the United States and the world have fallen victim to the success of the founders. The system of government that rewarded creativity and ingenuity and encouraged a hierarchy of merit has encouraged those with merit-worthy skills to engage in business, industry, or scholarship. The kind of men who went into public service in period of the early republic today choose other professions.

It is incredibly difficult to imagine such a group of leaders ever rising to the fore again in the United States if not the world, and the absence of comparable modern figures has only made the accomplishments of the founders more incredible. The popular reverence for the founders, their exceptional place in history, and their incredible ability to promote their respective narratives and

incorporate those narratives into the "standard" Revolutionary narrative leads one to agree with historian Merrill D. Peterson's argument that these "philosophical statesmen in an age of revolution" are only "comparable to each other."[44] However in comparison, we see that any notion of a single, monolithic meaning of the Revolution is a chimera.

[44] Rev Dialogue

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