bear on the key problems of Revolutionary strategy, induce the strange ambivalence built into the federal system? Or did massive participation in the war convince Americans, once it had been won, that sheer numbers and raw courage, not professional diplomacy or professional armies, gave the nation guaranteed security from any foreign threat, and so permitted Americans to grow up without thinking much about the rest of the world? Like our original question, these are more easily asked than answered. But, however difficult to define precisely and to prove beyond doubt, the legacy of the American Revolutionary War was real, and it shaped American life unto Lincoln’s day and beyond.

FREEDOM AND PROSPERITY IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

BY RICHARD L. BUSHMAN

Reflection on the meaning of the American Revolution began even before independence was declared and has never ceased. John Adams was speculating on the implications with Mercy Warren in January of 1776, and at the end of his life was still raising the question, “What do we mean by the American Revolution?” The Bicentennial more than simply celebrating the event has become an occasion for reopening the inquiry. We still ask John Adams’ question. We want to know what really changed with independence, and what fundamental principles underlay the Revolutionary movement.

The revolutionaries’ own reflections almost always began with one basic point: the change from monarchy to republic. That was the transformation which one nineteenth-century orator said was “the most important event, humanely speaking” in world history. After independence a writ from the king was no longer necessary to call an election, his representative, the royal governor, was not required to complete the legislature and enact a law, and the king was not present symbolically in the courts. There had been two potent components in the government under monarchy, king and people, each represented in all significant decisions. Now there was but one, the people, and the great network of officials who had derived their commissions from the king and governed according to his instructions, received their authority from the people and ultimately were accountable to them. All that had gone on in the king’s name now transpired under the authority of a government based on popular consent. As significant as all that was and is, does that exhaust the meaning of the Revolution? The transition from monarchy to republic occurred

at the level of government. What about ordinary people? Did the substitution of an elected president for an hereditary king affect them in ways that could be felt? What changes occurred in the aspirations, the prospects, the self-image, and the personal relations of individual men and women?

For sixty years historians have been pursuing these questions in a particular form. They have asked if one class of men, defined by their economic or social position, was displaced from power at the Revolution and another substituted. Or to refine the issue, was the authority or advantageous position of one class weakened and the position of another improved? Although the researchers have been assiduous, competent, and numerous, the answer seems to be "no." New men rose to high positions in government and the economy, institutions such as the church establishments in certain colonies were dismantled, and the American population was set in motion as never before, but there is slight evidence that wealth and power were systematically shorn from one class of men and bestowed on another, or even that there was any substantial effort to do so. Although individual faces changed, the same kind of men governed after independence as before.3

Republicanism was not without consequences for everyday life, but the changes were not in material relationships. The significant alterations, it is now becoming increasingly apparent, occurred in the realm of values.4 The values generated and confirmed in the Revolu-

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The portrait of Washington by Gilbert Stuart, called the Athenaum head because it came eventually into the possession of the Boston Athenaum, was the result of Washington's third sitting for Stuart. The President endured it only because Martha Washington wanted a Stuart portrait of her husband. Stuart preferred it to the other portraits because he was able to bring a little life into Washington's stolid countenance. The President's face lit up when Stuart steered the conversation to horses and farming. The results were so pleasing that Stuart refused to part with the picture; he knew he could make a fortune turning
The two portraits suggest how rulers were to command respect in monarchy and republic: by the over-awing magnificence and might of office in one, and by the simple grandeur of character in the other. With that lesson, we also learn to what personal qualities men and women were properly to aspire in each society. In a monarchy, life at its best was embellished with a splendor, though scaled down from the king's magnificence, that was stripped from the republican. Personal qualities alone distinguished George Washington and presumably those who took their cues from his example.

As the eighteenth century presented its ideal ruler and person in the portrait, society as a whole was pictured in the procession. Unlike our parades, eighteenth-century processions were carefully crafted depictions of the social structure. Their purpose was to instruct the populace and inculcate respect. The great procession of state in the monarchy exemplified the social ranks descending from the king. Careful attention was given to the exact placement of each individual to avoid any slight to honor or degradation from what was after all one's place in life. Once established, the order of the procession was published throughout the empire for the edification of those who could not join the multitudes lining the route.

The order of George III's coronation procession appeared in the Boston Gazette on November 16, 1761. Twenty-eight years later, on October 19, 1789, Boston welcomed George Washington as president with a procession of citizens whose designated places were equally revealing of the social structure of the new republic. What were the differences? The coronation procession was a forthright statement of the structure of honor under monarchy. At the head, the king's herb woman with her six maids strewn sweet herbs in the path, followed by a life and four drums in livery coats of "scarlet richly faced," a drum major, "eight Trumpeters, four a breast, in rich Liveries of crimson Velvet," kettle drums with crimson banners, and eight more trumpeters. Thence the procession rose gradually — there were eighty-seven entries in all — from six clerks in chancery, chaplains, sheriffs of the City of London, aldermen, the king's solicitor, gentlemen of the privy chamber, through Baronesses and Barons in the "Robes of Estate," Bishops, Viscountesses and Viscounts, Countesses, Earls, Duchesses and Dukes, to the Lord Chancellor and Archbishop of Canterbury. The penultimate climax was the Queen in her royal robes attended by the Lord Bishops of London and Westminster, covered by a canopy and preceded by the ivory rod with the dove, the scepter with cross, the Queen's crown, and followed by the train-bearer with sixty-seven ladies of the bedchamber. At the peak of the procession was the king, also preceded by regalia — St. Edward's staff, the golden spurs, the scepter with cross, the sword of state, St. Edward's crown, the orb with the cross, the chalice, and paten — and followed by supporters of the train, master of the robes, gentlemen of the king's bedchamber, standardbearers, captains, yeomen of the guard and others. The king in his royal robes proceeded under a canopy supported by the Barons of the Cinque Ports and accompanied by the Bishops of Durham and Bath and Wells.8

Besides the ascent of titles which all could recognize as boys and girls today know the relative standing of lieutenant and captain, there was in the actual procession a steady crescendo of magnificence in costumes and trappings. The king's climactic position with full regalia signified his leadership in all the dimensions of power — state, church, military, society, wealth. The common people stood to the side, admiring and cheering as the splendor of the realm swept by.

There is verticality in Washington's procession, too, but of a much different shape.9 At the head are town and military officers, selectmen, treasurer, clerks, magistrates, followed by the educated professions, clergy, physicians, and lawyers, and the economic elite of merchants and ship captains. Then followed forty-six divisions of tradesmen and

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9The broadside announcing the procession is reproduced in James Henry Stark, Stark's Antique Views of ye Towne of Boston (Boston, 1901), p. 284. Washington's procession is related to others of the era in an unpublished paper by Claudia Bushman, "Federalist Boston in Procession."
artisans, "alphabetically disposed," as the broadside noted, "in order to give general satisfaction." At the tail of this dachshund-shaped society were seamen, out of alphabetical order to signify their marginality. Each group had a yard-square white flag emblazoned with an emblem of its craft. Besides the egalitarian flatness of the body of the procession, the very presence of the citizens in the procession instead of on the sidelines in an undifferentiated mass signified that republican equality implied participation. The ordinary man was a working member of the body politic.

From the vantage point of the cordwainers and rope-makers in Washington's procession, society looked much different than it did to the anonymous London workers observing the coronation procession. Society and government did not tower above the citizens of Boston to such stupifying heights. Washington, the selectmen, the ship-captains certainly took precedence, but none of the trappings of state enveloped them: no drums and trumpeters, no robes, no regalia, no heralds, no canopies, no choirs or musicians. Washington rode into the city on horseback, bare-headed, wearing his old army uniform. Not only were the heights thus reduced, but the lower orders were raised. They were given a position, a name, and an identity in the procession of state. Whereas under monarchy there was height, magnificence, and exclusiveness, republican society was more level, simple, and comprehensive.

The simplicity of the procession's idealized republicanism was not unfamiliar in Boston, nor entirely out of keeping in eighteenth-century Philadelphia. Republican morality grew out of and elaborated Puritan values. The colonies had always been more egalitarian than the mother country, out of sheer necessity if nothing else. Few peers had ever touched foot on the American shore. None of the colonial aristocracy lived with the magnificence of England's greatest nobles. Colonial assemblies met in modest structures; governors conducted the affairs of state from their parlors. The simplicity of Washington's dress was in the Quaker spirit as well as the republican.

The tendency of colonial society before independence, however, was away from, not toward simplicity. As prosperity permitted colon-

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ials to erect great houses and adorn themselves in fine clothes, they happily did so. The southern gentry had been the first to build mansions and mimic the manners of English aristocrats. Philadelphia and Boston merchants never quite attained the same level of dignity in manners, attire, or residence — at the Continental Congress, the Adams cousins deployed the courtly style of the southerners — but New England had seen the erection of scores of mansions in its own port towns. No one was more susceptible to the allure of fine living than John Hancock. To the dismay of the Adamses, Hancock succumbed to “the glare of Southern manners and the parade of courtly living” at the Second Congress. After his election to the congressional presidency, Hancock hired four liveried servants mounted on caparisoned horses to accompany his carriage. Twenty-five horsemen rode before and twenty-five after, holding drawn sabers. Thus his entourage clattered about Philadelphia. The assimilation of republican after independence forbade that form of ostentation in a public official. Even one so lacking in sensibility as Hancock would have sensed the rightness of Washington’s horseback entry into Boston in his old army uniform. Republicanism reversed the trend toward splendor in colonial society, at least for public officials.⁹

The diminution of grandeur was one quality of republican society. Judging from the portraits of the heads of state, the preeminence of character was another. Republican partisans made much of that contrast. On the eve of independence, John Adams asked one of his favorite correspondents, Mercy Otis Warren, which form of government she preferred. “Pray Madam, are you for an American Monarchy or Republic?”¹⁰ As the sister of James Otis and wife of the patriot James Warren, Mercy Warren’s actual preferences were well known to Adams. He adopted the pose of a questioner to make a point:

Monarchy is the genteelst and most fashionable Government, and I don’t know why the Ladies ought not to consult Elegance and the Fashion as well in Government as Gowns, Bureaus or Chariots.

For my own part I am so tasteless as to prefer a Republic, if We must erect an independent Government in America, which

you know is utterly against my Inclination. But a Republic, altho’ it will infallibly beggar me and my Children, will produce Strength, Hardiness Activity, Courage, Fortitude and Enterprise; the manly noble and Sublime Qualities in human Nature, in Abundance. A Monarchy would probably, somehow or other make me rich, but it would produce so much Taste and Politeness so much Elegance in Dress, Furniture, Equipage, so much Musick and Dancing, so much Fencing and Skating, so much Cards and Backgammon; so much Horse Racing and Cockfighting, so many Balls and Assemblies, so many Plays and Concerts that the very Imagination of them makes me feel vain, light, frivolous and insignificant.¹¹

Adams’ chain of images was meant to characterize the pursuits of a courtier under monarchy and the meaning of royal magnificence in the lives of those who lived under a king. In sum they evoked the moral tone of monarchy. “vain, light, frivolous, and insignificant.” There was no equivalent set of images for republicanism, but the contrasting morality is sharply defined: “Strength, Hardiness Activity, Courage, Fortitude and Enterprise; the manly noble and Sublime Qualities in human Nature.” Subjects of a king were soft, weak, flimsy. Citizens of a republic were strong, enduring, vigorous.

Adams makes explicit what is implicit in the portraits and the processions. Besides being a form of government, republicanism was a distinctive blueprint for social and personal morality. The magnificence which the king rightly claimed for himself under monarchy set the tone for an elegant and self-indulgent courtly style. Such grandeur was inappropriate in a republic where men were more on an equal plane and all participated in government. More important, self-government developed and required virtue in the citizens of a republic. Simplicity and a manly character were the foundations of the state. The courtier could be trivial, weak, soft; the simple republican had to be energetic, determined, hardy. The plain dress and the stern integrity in Washington’s face were the grand pattern for every republican.¹²

In 1776, however, they were still a pattern, not a reality. After

¹¹The fullest description of republican morality is in Wood, Creation of the American Republic, chaps. 2-3.
expanding upon the sublime qualities of a republican to Mercy Warren, Adams confessed to one difficulty:

Virtue and Simplicity of Manners are indispensably necessary in a Republic among all orders and Degrees of Men. But there is so much Rascallity, so much Venality and Corruption, so much Avarice and Ambition such a Rage for Profit and Commerce among all Ranks and Degrees of Men even in America, that I sometimes doubt whether there is public Virtue enough to Support a Republic. There are two Vices most detestably predominant in every part of America that I have yet seen which are incompatible with the Spirit of a Commonwealth, as Light is with Darkness; I mean Servility and Flattery. A genuine Republican can no more fawn and cringe than he can domineer. Shew me the American who cannot do all.\(^\text{12}\)

So serious was the problem that Adams wondered if Americans were adequate to the task of manning a republic. So possessed were they by avarice and ambition, that men of all ranks pursued gain at the expense of the public interest. Provisioners at Cambridge charged the Continental army the highest possible prices. Soldiers who enlisted for two or three months walked off with the guns issued them. Moreover, instead of displaying the manly independence that was the hallmark of the true republican, Americans cringed before the great. That was the way of monarchy, to kneel before the king, kiss his hand, yield one’s will to his, and thus with all who bore his commission or claimed the title of gentlemen. A republican stood alone, defended his rights, resisted domination. The contrary tendency made Americans vulnerable to the poison of corruption and incapable of defending their rights.

The structure of republican values made the Revolutionary leaders acutely sensitive to the indicators of public virtue. The fate of the nation depended on the patriotism, the independence, and the energy of its citizens. The leaders were particularly alert for tell-tale signs of decay, luxury and dissipation.\(^\text{13}\) It was the pursuit of courtly


grandeur that weakened Europe and kept it in chains, and America could easily follow. In the midst of the war, Adams received a doleful report from Mercy Warren’s husband, General James Warren, that “all manner of extravagance prevails here in dress, furniture, equipage and living, amidst the distress of the public and multitudes of individuals. How long the manners of this people will be uncorrupted and fit to enjoy that liberty that you have long contended for, I know not.” Observing the same symptom a few years later, John Adams deplored “that spirit of dissipation, vanity and knavery, which infects so many Americans and threatens to ruin our manners and liberties, in imitation of the old world.”\(^\text{14}\)

Through the 1780s the Old Republicans, as they called themselves, found many causes for despair, some great, operating on a national scale, others tiny but symptomatic of inner rot. In 1784-85 Bostonians organized a tea assembly which assumed the title of the San Souci Club. Each male subscriber received one ticket for himself and two for ladies which entitled them to an evening of card-playing and dancing and a choice of free tea, coffee, or chocolate, or wine, negus, punch or lemonade on payment. The assembly circumspectly closed at midnight, but this respect for propriety was insufficient to placate an “Observer” (probably Sam Adams) who launched a series of attacks in the Massachusetts Centinel in the winter of 1785.

If there ever was a period wherein reason was bewildered, and stupified by dissipation and extravagance, it is surely the present. Did ever efficinacy with her languid train, receive a greater welcome in society than at this day. New amusements are invented — new dissipations are introduced, to dull and enervate those minds already too much softened, poisoned and contaminated, by idle pleasures, and foolish gratifications. We are exchanging prudence, virtue and economy, for those glaring spectres of luxury, prodigality and profligacy. We are prostituting all our glory as a people; for new modes of pleasure, ruinous in their expenses, injurious to virtue, and totally detrimental to the well being of society.

Like so many of his countrymen, "Observer" saw dissipation and extravagance as a cause of the fall of empires. It was that failure at the center that brought great nations to ignominy.

Did we consult the history of Athens and Rome, we should find that so long as they continued their frugality and simplicity of manners, they shone with superlative glory; but no sooner were effeminate refinements introduced amongst them, than they visibly fell from whatever was elevated and magnanimous, and became feeble and timid, dependent, slavish and false.

"Observer" had many words for the process of degeneration — dull, enervate, languid, softened, poisoned, contaminated, feeble, timid, dependent, slavish, false. Such was the mind robbed of strength and energy, and therefore defenseless against oppression.\(^{15}\)

The Boston Tea Assembly closed, but through the decade corruption manifest itself on every side: paper money assemblies, conventions and riots, Shays's Rebellion, refusal to pay taxes and debts. In 1786 Washington sorrowfully admitted to John Jay: "We have errors to correct. We have probably had too good an opinion of human nature."\(^{16}\)

What was to be done? John Adams had observed to Mercy Warren in 1776 that "it is the Part of a great Politician to make the Character of his People, to extinguish among them the Follies and Vices that he sees, and to create in them the Virtues and Abilities which he sees wanting."\(^{17}\)

Washington and Jay had reached the conclusion that alterations in the fundamental constitution were required to enable the government to perform that role. "The virtue like the other resources of a country, can only be drawn to a point and exerted by strong circumstances ably managed, or a strong government ably administered," Jay wrote in 1786.\(^{18}\) The "strong circumstances," by which he meant the Revolutionary War, were now behind the nation, and only strong government was equal to the task.

\(^{15}\)The description of the club is found in ibid., p. 322; the quotation is from Massachusetts Centinel, January 15, 1785.


Washington concurred: "I do not conceive we can exist long as a nation without having lodged some where a power, which will pervade the whole Union in as energetic a manner as the authority of the State governments extends over the several States."\(^{19}\) With that in mind the constitutional convention met in Philadelphia the following June to compensate as best it could for the shortcomings of American virtue.\(^{20}\)

Adams's and Washington's misgivings were empirical. They and many others were disappointed in the blatant avarice and weakness they observed. Only later, after the war, did Americans come to recognize that beyond mere weakness there was a fundamental contradiction in the heart of republicanism. Republicanism was always thought of as a fragile government because it made such heavy demands on public virtue. In time its weakness came to appear to be theoretical as well as practical. It seemed to carry within itself the seeds of its own destruction.

The source of the contradiction lay at the very heart of the Revolutionary movement and flowered from there into the post war republicanism. It began with the most resonant protest in the Revolutionary years: the objection to taxation imposed without the colonists' consent. The amount of the taxes was not in question, nor was simple devotion to a traditional principle of English governance the crucial point. The objection was to the use of the tax moneys once they flowed unchecked into the treasury. Americans believed they knew what avaricious officials would do with a brimming treasury which could be refilled at pleasure. They would naturally and inevitably use public funds for personal gain and self-indulgence, clothe themselves in finery, build mansions and palaces, ride about in elaborate carriages.

Besides living in case and luxury, greedy rulers surrounded themselves with underlings who ate at the great ones' tables. Offices, pensions, favors supported a small army of dependents. "Are not pensioners, stipendiaries, and salary men (unknown before), hourly multiplying on us, to riot in the spoils of miserable America?" Josiah Quincy asked, as he contemplated the expansion of the customs service. "Does not every eastern gale waft us some new insect, even
of that devouring kind, which eats up every green thing? Is not the bread taken out of the children’s mouths and given unto the dogs?"21 Worse still, Americans themselves were drawn into the ministry’s orbit of influence. The ambitious and greedy among the colonists lusted for offices at the government’s disposal and fawned and cringed before superiors to obtain them. “Every day strengthens our oppressors and weakens us,” Sam Adams wrote. Thus the ministry cruelly used the colonists’ taxes to pay for the placemen, pensioners, corrupt legislators, and servants who were the foundation of the ministers’ tyrannical power.22

The demands of this monstrous system were insatiable. It would consume the wealth of the people until they were totally impoverished. Taxation without representation gave the ministry license to plunder without hindrance.

If they have right to lay on us one tax, they have another, if they have right to take one shilling from us without our consent, they have as good right to take all, and strip us naked of every thing.23

In time the nation would divide between those who labored and those who robbed, as the ministry wrested from the colonists the fruits of their labor to pay for the balls and assemblies, horse races and cockfights, and the other indulgences of ministerial lackeys. Tyranny would impoverish the industrious while the lazy and selfish grew rich in positions of honor and power. That was the misery awaiting the colonies should the Parliament lay taxes without the consent of the American people. The Revolution was fought to prevent this conspiracy from reaching its ultimate conclusion in a kind of semi-feudal slavery.

Slavery, the forcible deprivation of the fruits of one’s labors, was the negative pole of Revolution. What lay at the positive pole? What was the Revolution fought for? Liberty was to be free of official leeches and bloodsuckers and to enjoy the fruits for oneself. Free and equal government, a New Englander said looking back on the halcyon days before Parliamentary taxation, “secured us from oppression and plunder.”24 This was the simple test of governmental rectitude. "Every Ploughman knows a good Government from a bad one, from the Effects of it: he knows whether the Fruits of his Labour be his own, and whether he enjoys them in Peace and Security."25

What was left then when tyranny had been subdued but to labor and enjoy the fruits? One could of course write poetry and worship God, but the radical rhetoric implicitly pointed the mass of citizens in a single direction. Designing rules were notable for plundering the people of property. It followed that securing, pursuing, and enjoying property was the most valuable privilege of the free man. “The object of public virtue, is to secure the liberties of the community,” a Boston orator said at the end of the war summing up the sequence of historical causes and effects, “a security of liberty admits of every man’s pursuing, without molestation, the measures most likely to increase his case.”26

This was the beginning of the contradiction, for the conditions of freedom in turn affected the character of the free. The results of liberty had been axiomatic for centuries. Charles II had identified two traits of free men in his Answer to the Nineteen Propositions in 1642: “the good of democracy is liberty, and the courage and industry which liberty begets.”27 John Adams’ list of republican virtues had on it “Activity, Courage, Fortitude and Enterprise.”28 The reasons for heightened industry were manifest. Evil governors were “Enemies to private Property. . . . to drain, worry, and debase their Subjects, are the steady Maxims of their Politicks. . . . In this wretched Situation the people, to be safe, must be poor and lowd: There will be but

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22To Elbridge Gerry, Boston, October 29, 1772, in Harry Alonzo Cushing, ed., The Writings of Samuel Adams, 4 vols. (New York, 1904-08) 2: 341.
24Samuel Williams, A Discourse on the Love of our Country . . . (Salem, 1775), p. 18.
25Boston Gazette, May 12, 1755.
little Industry where Property is precarious.” By contrast, the assurance of securely possessing one’s property and the fruits of one’s labor infused people with “the efficacious motives of universal industry.” “This will take place,” said Ezra Stiles in his famous treatise on The Rising Glory of America, “if every one can enjoy the fruits of his labor and activity unmolested.” In America the “sweet and attractive charms” of liberty had filled people “with a most amazing spirit” which promised to operate “with great energy.” “Never before,” Stiles said with some exaggeration, “has the experiment been so effectually tried of every man’s reaping the fruits of his labor and feeling his share in the aggregate system of power.” The prospects were unlimited because, as Montesquieu had said, “Countries are not cultivated in proportion to their fertility but to their liberty.” With no vicious rulers to plunder or oppress and each man lord of his own soil, in full command of his own production, the American had every motive to work. The nation was bound to prosper. By 1795 a preacher could congratulate the nation on its achievement:

To enumerate the marks of private prosperity would lead me beyond the limits of a sermon. It is, besides, unnecessary. They are seen and felt by all the inhabitants of our land. That people in general of nearly every class and occupation enjoy a state of unusual prosperity; that the means of a comfortable

The paeans of praise in time became almost obligatory, for prosperity was the ultimate endorsement of American government. “Our constitution of government,” it was acknowledged, are “the source of most of our social and domestic felicity.” Since prosperity was ever the mark of the free, “we should vouch peace and prosperity; we should call up increase of wealth and population; we should exhibit health, happiness and public and private felicity” to prove the superiority of the American system. Their political advantages virtually obligated Americans to prosper. “Let us have all the means possible of subsistence and elegance among ourselves,” Ezra Stiles wrote in 1783, “if we would be a flourishing republic of real independent dignity and glory.”

Subsistence, yes, but elegance? As post-Revolutionary Americans pursued the logic of republican freedom, warning signals began to go up. “Let us not flatter ourselves too much,” a preacher warned, “with an ideal of the future prosperity and glory of these United States.” In 1783, the year of the peace treaty, the Fourth of July
orator in Boston, John Warren, Boston’s most eminent physician, explicitly laid out the contradictions in republicanism for his audience. The exquisitely truth was that the success of a republic brought it to the edge of its own destruction. “So nearly is the most prosperous condition of a people, allied to decay and ruin, that even this flattering appearance conceals the seeds, that finally must produce her destruction.” Why was this so? Because the security of liberty permitted every man to pursue his livelihood without molestation and hence “to place him in a state of independent affluence.” “Nothing is more conducive to these ends than a free and unlimited commerce, the encouragement of which is undoubtedly the duty of the Commonwealth.” While prosperity itself was in the interest of all, the trouble with commerce was that it stratified society. The immediate effect “is usually an augmentation of wealth, but as it is generally impossible for every subject to acquire a great degree of opulence, the riches of the state become accumulated in the coffers of a few.” Thus the end of republican egalitarianism. A few were lifted up by wealth and enabled to resume the magnificence and luxury of the court, whence corruption flowed. “The passions of the great almost invariably extend to the body of the people, who to gratify an unbounded thirst for gain, are ready to sacrifice every other blessing to that, which in any degree, furnished them with the means of imitating their superiors.” Self-indulgence at the top trickling down, Warren warned, started society on the familiar descent.

Bribery and venality, the grand engines of slavery, have been called in to the assistance of the aspiring nobles, who, in this case, never fail to make the deluded people pay them the full price of their prostitution.

This accession of power, acquired by the consent of the people themselves, enables their governors to assume the reins of absolute control, to burst all the bonds of social obligation, and finally to extort by violence, what formerly they were obliged to purchase; accustomed to a habit of sloth and idleness, the subjects are rendered too effeminate to apply themselves to labor and fatigue, or if they do it, are soon discouraged by the rapaciousness of their rulers, a spirit of faction and uneasiness becomes generally prevalent; impressed with that awful respect with which the trappings of wealth universally inspire a people that have been accustomed to view it as the measure of human felicity, they are too pusillanimous to relieve themselves from their burden by an united effort of the whole.

After that come rioting to plunder the rich—a kind of insurrection easily suppressed—discouragement of agriculture, decline of population, impoverishment; “till at length they fall an easy prey to the first Despot, whether foreign or domestic, who offers them the yoke;—Such is the fatal operation of luxury, almost invariably the consequence of unbounded wealth.” And such the completion of the cycle of history from liberty, security, industry, and prosperity to inequality, luxury, servility, and tyranny. The very success of the republic in achieving prosperity led on directly to its downfall.37

Was there an escape from that fateful circle? John Warren himself, the orator of the day, recommended history and more oratory:

Go search the vaults, where lay enshrined the relics of your martyred fellow-citizens, and from their dust receive a lesson on the value of your freedom! When virtue fails, when luxury and corruption shall undermine the pillars of the state, and threaten a total loss of liberty and patriotism, then solemnly repair to those sacred repositories of the dead, and if you can, return and spurn away your rights.

In objects of patriotic sentiment—“the picture which brings back to your imaginations, in the lively colours of undisguised truth, the wild, distracted feeling of your hearts!”—Americans might find the determination to heed that admonition, “nor barter liberty for gold,” and the American star shine on “‘tis stars and suns shall shine no more, and all the kingdoms of this globe shall vanish like a scroll.”38

Mercy Warren, less affected by the rising tides of romantic sentimentalism than John Warren, wondered near the end of her history of the Revolution if reversion to a traditional social order might neutralize the ill effects of overabundant prosperity. Writing after 1800, when the full effects of freedom were becoming visible, she foresaw that “from the rage of acquisition which has spread far and wide, it may be apprehended that the possession of wealth will in a short time be the only distinction in this young country. By this it may be feared that the spirit of avarice will be rendered justifiable in the opinion of some as the single road to superiority.” She toyed with the notion of “some mark of elevation” other than “pecuniary compen-

37Warren, Oration pp. 9-12.
38Ibid., pp. 30, 32.
sation” that would inspire Americans to acts of glory in the public service. Recognizing that she skirted perilously close to the return of a titled aristocracy, Warren pondered “how far honorary rewards are consistent with the principles of republicanism.” Her scheme rather than being a practical solution to the problem of prosperity was a measure of how desperate one “old republican” had become.\(^{39}\)

What was the ultimate resolution of the contradictions in freedom and prosperity? Republicanism required simplicity, austerity, rigor, while freedom meant security and industry, and thence prosperity and luxury. At some inevitable juncture the two collided. The elegance and inequality of commerce clashed with the spartan restraint of republicanism. In the twilight of their lives John Adams plaintively asked Thomas Jefferson, “Will you tell me how to prevent riches from becoming the effects of temperance and industry? Will you tell me how to prevent riches from producing luxury? Will you tell me how to prevent luxury from producing effeminacy intoxification extravagance, Vice and folly?”\(^{40}\) No answer was given.\(^{41}\)

“A nation’s identity,” Erik Erikson has said, “is derived from the ways in which history has, as it were, counterpointed certain opposite potentials.”\(^{42}\) The Revolution endorsed and energized two values, Spartan simplicity and the pursuit of wealth. Both were authentically republican and American; both have survived two hundred years. In the mode of austerity, Americans read Walden and admire Thoreau’s twenty-eight dollar house built with his own hands from used lumber. Rebellious American young people in recent years have donned shabby clothes and imitated the poor, knowing full well they strike a chord in adult consciences. The jeremiads of modern ecologists ring true partly because they require us to return to a simpler life.


\(^{42}\) *Childhood and Society* (New York, 1964), p. 244.

And yet austerity has always been the minor theme. Walden is usually a mere respite preliminary to a more energetic pursuit of wealth. Modern Americans are more likely to purchase a waterbed than to read the *Whole Earth Catalog* or learn to live on five acres of land. Prosperity has become almost a right of citizenship. Today’s America would disappoint and disgust Sam Adams: but then so did Boston of the 1780s. He retired from the governorship in 1797 a broken, palsied man and remained, as John Adams observed, “a weeping, helpless object of compassion” until his death in 1803.\(^{43}\) Like other revolutionaries, he mourned the nation’s abuse of its independence.

Americans need not, however, lose confidence because of Sam Adams’s lament. He represents only half of the Revolution. Republicanism fostered two impulses, both of them worthy. It is the task of Americans to reconcile the conflicting demands of freedom and prosperity without repudiating either. Rather than locking the Republic in a paralyzing contradiction, history’s challenge to America is to find some employment of her great wealth which, instead of softening and enervating character, will, through the self-discipline of compelling purpose, help its citizens rise above selfishness and vanity in the service of the general good.