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## The American Revolution

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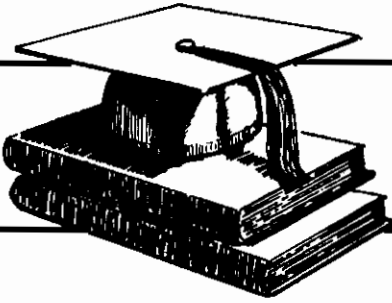
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## PROFESSIONAL READING

### Review Article

#### The American Revolution

John Adams, the sage of colonial America, raised three questions in 1815: "Who shall write the history of the American Revolution? Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?" Page Smith, an eminent 20th century historian, has answered the challenge of these questions by producing a mammoth two-volume tome.\* It is a formidable accomplishment and reveals just about everything that anyone would want to know about the American Revolution.

At this time when the book market is flooded with a plethora of books, articles, and monographs on the American Revolution, the first natural reaction by anyone reasonably familiar with this period in American history will be to ask: "Why still two more volumes on the Revolution?" But one should not be intimidated, for this work takes on a new dimension as Professor Smith unfolds his brilliant and colorful narrative. The first part of *A New Age Now Begins* is largely social and cultural history describing the emergence of colonial America's consciousness of being uniquely "American" and tracing the slow and unrelenting drift toward independence, and the remaining portions

deal largely with military and political events.

The author, a professional historian of high standing, a longtime scholar of early American history and culture, includes among his many publications the highly acclaimed two-volume biography of John Adams. His leitmotif as a historian is that "the truth of an event is to be found in the full and careful telling of it—that . . . the event, properly told contains its own interpretation." In his latest work he carries out this maxim unreservedly.

Page Smith subtitles his monumental work *A People's History of the American Revolution* because he has concluded that the Revolution was essentially a people's movement. He stresses the fact that the Revolution, as John Adams wrote, took place in the "hearts and minds" of Americans long before the direct, revolutionary action happened. This is the main theme of his narrative, and he proceeds to trace this development in the early chapters on life in colonial America. Professor Smith, master historian that he is, gives an incisive interpretation of this first popular movement of modern times:

The fact was that nothing like it has happened before in modern history—the movement of a *whole people*, or enough of them to make a revolution, to assert themselves on the stage of world history. . . . The colonists were doing something so new in human experience that they could only explain it in terms of something

\*Smith, Page. *A New Age Now Begins: a People's History of the American Revolution* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976), 2 vols.

## 114 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

old: a "fight to preserve their constitutional rights as Englishmen."

The colonists' aim was not just to free themselves from the mother country but to initiate a new age that would be copied as a model by people suppressed and exploited throughout the world. Indeed, the American Revolution was the stimulus for what one historian has called the "Age of Democratic Revolutions." Another unique aspect of this revolution was that the War for Independence was distinguished by its emphasis upon "legality," i.e., rights of Englishmen and rights of man. We would do well to remind ourselves that the Revolution was both a war for independence and a civil war, but it certainly was not a class war in the sense that so many future European revolutions were to be class wars.

Professor Smith presents some new viewpoints, including the thesis that the British cause was hopeless, that American independence was sooner or later a sure thing. As he describes it:

For the Americans, it was a matter of simple endurance. They had only to endure to be independent, and endure they did—but at the cost of infinite suffering and hardship, at the cost of many lives and much property, at the cost of much bitterness between patriot and tory neighbors, between sons and fathers, friends and relatives.

By the careful and full use of narrative history (as Professor Smith says in his Introduction, "A narrative full of surprises, of dramatic adventures, defeats, victories; of words, speeches, newspapers, letters, diaries, journals and public documents"), the reader is swept into the events themselves—the long and weary deliberations of the Continental Congress, the enormous problems that faced the states, the British side of the revolution with its divided loyalties, a balanced treatment of the major and military events, including the significant

naval warfare by the American privateers, the untold sufferings the colonists endured—and stirred by these events the reader shares the same emotions with the Americans of the 18th century.

A good half of the narrative is devoted to military campaigns and naval aspects of the war. The naval officer who has just completed his graduate courses at the Naval War College in strategy and tactics will relish and thrive on the descriptions of warfare embodied in these volumes. It is in his treatment of the war that the author shines and gives an *élan vital*—a new freshness to the campaigns which are familiar to most of us, and describes many of the unknown minor engagements as well in the Southern Campaign and the frontier war in the West. His treatment of the unheralded minor engagements such as Cowpens, King's Mountain, Hobkirk's Hill, and Green Spring Farm in the Southern Campaign (18th century guerrilla warfare) shows that the struggle in America was "less a story of contending armies than of ordinary citizens determined to be free." Nor does he neglect the striking figure of George Rogers Clark and the frontier fighting which, although it was "less important from the military point of view than what it reveals about the temperament of the frontier settlers, who constituted such a colorful and consequential element in the evolving American character."

Smith shows himself to be a capable military historian. He captures the full reality of military events in which "men died, often painfully and horribly, or suffered desperate wounds, went hungry, sweated with fear." He pays great tribute to the common soldier who continued to fight in spite of great hardships and sufferings because he considered himself a revolutionary soldier determined to overthrow tyranny.

Joseph Martin, an enlisted man, wrote in 1777:

I had experienced what I thought sufficient of the hardships of a

military life the year before, although nothing in comparison to what I had suffered in the present campaign. We had engaged in the defense of our injured country and were willing, nay, we were determined to persevere as long as such hardships were not altogether intolerable. . . . But we were now absolutely in danger of perishing, and that too, in the midst of a plentiful country.

Later, as an old man, Joseph Martin wrote: "Almost everyone has heard of the soldiers of the Revolution being tracked by the blood of their feet on the frozen ground. This is literally true, and the thousandth part of their suffering has not, nor ever will be told."

In particular, the accounts of Bunker Hill, George Washington's Christmas-time attack on Trenton, and General Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga to General Gates are excitingly new.

The naval story revolves about the fact that naval warfare made a vital contribution to the American victory, but the Americans made only a comparatively small contribution to the naval warfare. Yet Smith does not neglect the part played by the three classes of American vessels as represented in the Continental Navy, the individual state navies, and the thousands of privateers. It is significant to note that the American Navy, born during the Revolution, began the great traditions of the United States Navy.

Professor Smith does a first-rate job in describing naval warfare, as for example:

Naval warfare in the eighteenth century much like land warfare, counted heavily on a devastating initial shock at close range, a brutal battering force too much for human flesh and blood to endure, too much for a ship, however stout, to withstand. From thirty to fifty-five cannon of large caliber, throwing pro-

jectiles that weighed as much as fifty pounds, belched forth destruction. Often it was destruction to their own crews, as guns exploded under the pressure and were turned into murderous shrapnel, or broke loose from their fittings and hurtled backward, smashing bulkheads into kindling.

His chapter describing John Paul Jones in his epic Battle of the *Bonhomme Richard* vs. *Serapis* is brilliant and fascinating.

Professor Smith does not dwell upon the global aspects of the Revolution where fighting took place over the western oceans: the Caribbean, Grand Bank of Newfoundland, Strait of Gibraltar, and the North Sea, which were part of the great series of 18th century Franco-British naval wars. For this reason, the naval buff may want to address himself to a recent book by Antony Preston, David Lyon, and John Batchelor, *Navies of the American Revolution*, and still another by the artist Norman Van Powell, *American Navies of the Revolutionary War*. Both books have magnificent illustrations, including many in color, along with essays and descriptive notes on the maritime war abroad.

Page Smith's new viewpoints on the French military and naval alliance, the Battle of Saratoga, and the Siege of Yorktown require thorough study and are best left for the reader to evaluate. These are good places for the well-informed recent Naval War College graduate to apply his graduate studies and meet head-on the conclusions of this excellent historian.

His colorful vignettes brimming with keen insights into the human character of the people who played great and small roles in the American Revolution make for illuminating reading. But best of all is his broad treatment of George Washington as a selfless person, a heroic general, and an astute politician. Many

## 116 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

historians have treated the Revolution as the personal achievement of George Washington. Professor Smith destroys this myth without demeaning Washington's greatness. Moreover, he succeeds admirably in rescuing our Revolution from the stigma of being merely "Washington's War."

Washington appears not as a distant and even slow-witted hero, but as an amiable, skillful manager of men, and all this without sacrificing his integrity. His faults are presented along with his military tactical errors—most of them of minor importance except for the Battle of Monmouth. Actually, forces under Washington's command lost more battles than they won. Professor Smith argues succinctly that Washington having "molded an army by the most herculean efforts, . . . had simply to keep it in existence to ultimate triumph. That he had created it and was able, in the face of every discouragement to preserve the army was the seed of the new order." All of which he accomplished by the absolute power of determination and force of personality.

It is interesting also to read the author's personal estimates of Washington's character in the chapters entitled "Congress, Rope of Sand" (pp. 1769-1777), and "The Army Disbands" (pp. 1792-1797). It is indeed a classic treatment and comparable to James T. Flexner's recent single volume (a condensation from his prizewinning four-volume study) *Washington: The Indispensable Man*. Here, for example, is one brief paragraph from *A New Age Now Begins*:

His genius was the ability to endure, to maintain his equilibrium in the midst of endless frustrations, disappointments, setbacks and defeats. The American colonists had only to likewise endure to become their own masters—free and independent—and George Washington became the symbol of that determination to endure.

Smith has chosen to omit footnotes and we should rejoice in this, although some professional historians may frown upon his lack of systematic footnoting which he says is the "classic imprimatur of scholarly respectability." But he can be forgiven for this deletion since an academic production of this size with didactic footnotes would be cumbersome, lead to distraction, and could easily add another volume to the already existing two volumes.

This work is intended primarily for the general reader. But it should be evident even to the casual reader of history that the author has consulted all of the primary sources, "the words and actions—as recorded in letters, diaries, journals, newspapers, public documents and memoirs—of the men and women who were involved in the event out of which this nation was born." He quotes judiciously in the main part of the text, which allows the narrative to move smoothly, creating without impediment a complete awareness of the Revolution as the People's Revolution. A bibliographical note describing the main sources appears at the end of volume II, but this may not appease the academicians.

Smith summarizes his conclusions as follows:

The American Revolution is still a potentially vital force in our national life and in our future and the future of the human race; the Revolution was not the work of a few middle class radical intellectuals . . . nor was it the consequence of a quarrel over the profits from the colonial trade. It was a profound popular movement of a people, or a substantial portion of those people, against the state of dependence and subordination in which they found themselves in relation to the mother country. In the long struggle that resulted from the effort of Americans to be masters of

their own destinies, a new understanding of the relations between the governors and the governed developed, a new sense of the potentialities that lay in ordinary men and women, a new appreciation of possibilities of a better life for people in every continent and every nation.

And finally, he adds: "If we can understand our proper relation to the American Revolution, I believe we will be much better able to cope with the often demoralizing and confusing world in which we live today."

His last chapter "Novus Ordo Seclorum," which is an impressive summary of his 1,814 pages of history, merits a careful reading and will be welcomed by all for its retrospection.

Because the story of our American Revolution has been treated by Smith as all body and soul, it merits a permanent place in the personal library of every naval officer at sea or at home. Reading a few chapters, such as the ones on Arnold's March, the Boston Massacre, or Bunker Hill, will easily whet the appetite for a complete reading of this impressive work.

When the reenactment of the battle at Concord Bridge took place in April 1975, a sign fluttered over the festivities which read: "The Revolution is not over." The words have deep meaning for the revolution indeed is not over—and the United States must continue to give it impetus and direction. America must reawaken itself to what President Ford called the "American concept and fulfillment of liberty that have truly revolutionized the world." Reading these volumes will be helpful in stimulating this revival, for Professor Smith has successfully recreated and revived the era of the American Revolution—the People's Revolution.

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Binkin, Martin, and Record, Jeffrey. *Where Does the Marine Corps Go From Here?* Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1976. 93pp.

This study examines the U.S. Marine Corps to determine its role in current and future U.S. defense requirements. Binkin and Record believe the Marine Corps with an amphibious assault capability is necessary but that there should be changes in the Corps' posture and mission orientation. Their findings are that the Marine Corps is not organized to meet the likeliest threats to our national interests; that its air arm requires too large a proportion of the Marine Corps' budget; and that to maintain the present size of the Corps, many people who do not fit the "good men" category must be accepted.

After presenting their critical findings the authors make the following recommendations:

1. Retain only four regiments with associated air, and structured primarily for amphibious warfare.
2. Transfer one BLT from the Pacific to bolster U.S. capabilities in the Middle East.
3. Sharply reduce the size of the Marines' tactical air capability.
4. Disband most of the Marine Corps Reserve.

Should these recommendations be adopted there would still be a question of what to do with the remaining Marine personnel. The authors offer four possibilities:

1. Reduce USMC personnel ceiling to reflect the new structure as presented in the four recommendations stated above. A personnel strength of 112,000 would result.
2. Assign the Marine Corps ground responsibility in Asia presently borne by the Army. Corps personnel strength here would be 175,000.
3. Give Marines the assignment as the U.S. quick reaction force, thus replacing the Army's 82d Airborne Division. A Corps of 142,000 would result.