Was the American Revolution a revolution?

The American Revolution, which began in 1775, was the first movement of the colonial revolutionary period that would last until the early 1820s. The British, French, and Spanish Empires in the new world would all suffer break away republics. Nominally, these revolutions were engaged with the Enlightenment, but individually they were quite different from one another. Some were exceedingly violent and created great change from their previous societies. Others were more conservative and merely continued their previous social system with a new political front. Some vacillated wildly from one extreme to the other during the course of their revolutions. Examining the American Revolution in the context of the rest of this period gives great insight into the goals of the American founding generation, and the rest of the revolutionaries as well. Was the American Revolution a true revolution? It was most certainly a revolution, however, it was by far the most conservative movement of the revolutionary period.

The American Revolution was a particularly conservative action entirely in keeping with the British constitution. There are two historical arguments for the outbreak of the American Revolution. The first is the “Whig Explanation,” or as Joseph D. Reid has suggested it rightly be called the “Declaration of Independence explanation” (Reid 81). This explanation essentially suggests that the Americans revolted against British rule and fought a war for exactly the reasons
they claimed in the Declaration of Independence. They were upset over acts passed after the end of the Seven Years War that had introduced what they viewed as unfair burdens on the colonists. These burdens violated their British constitutional rights to “representation and individual liberties” that “had a long history in England” (McColley 91). Thus when the colonists let loose their battle cry of “no taxation without representation” the British government should have recognized “no novelty at all but rather a revival of seventeenth-century English liberalism” (McColley 91). This complaint of representation was the same as Parliament's from the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

The American victory at Yorktown and subsequent negotiations secured the colonies economic and political freedom from the British Empire. This freedom, however, did not mark any kind of revolutionary change and merely continued their attempts to secure British rights. In fact, the Articles of Confederation, the governing constitution for the United States “preserved a decentralized confederation of states” (Ferling 223). The colonies retained their autonomy, the autonomy that they had sought from the British Parliament through appeals from the First Continental Congress. Although American leaders eventually sought to change the way the colonies, now states, were governed by the union's central government in 1787 by creating a new Constitution this government was still extremely conservative (Ferling 261). Washington, Adams, and others had no intention of upending the social structure of the nation. Washington in particular was “happy to see those who had traditionally held sway in America continue to exercise dominion over it” (Ferling 270). The new Constitution retained the essential features of the British system, with a two house legislature made up of people's representatives and an upper house controlled by the elite of each state making laws, and an executive enforcing those laws.
Perhaps most importantly the new government retained for itself one of the most hated powers of the British system: the power to tax in the face of popular opposition.

If the Whig argument is correct, then the Americans fought for and won control of their fundamental British Rights. In true conservative fashion, the American government almost immediately began to trample on American rights just as the British had done in the 1770s. In 1790 the American Congress passed a tax on distilled spirits, particularly whiskey. The residents of the western counties of the United States petitioned their new government that this tax was essentially undemocratic for two reasons. First, the tax was being levied by a government that seriously underrepresented these counties according to the law (Flynn and Griffin 143). Second, the tax was levied by the congress made up of “social betters” and not by the whiskey-consuming class (Flynn and Griffin 141). Washington's administration took bold action and marched the army against rebel forces in 1794, a mere twenty years after Washington and others had begun their own campaign against a distant under representing government bent on filling its coffers on the edge of its empire. Surely this represents a conservative government that did not enact radical changes.

The second argument for the outbreak of the American Revolution focuses on the “imperial explanation.” Here Reid suggests that “George III and Parliament [were] united in poverty rather than tyranny and with their understanding of the thirteen colonies beclouded from long inattention forced by wars and other calls of Empire” (Reid 81). Reid suggested that the revolution's second explanation was a result of poverty from the Seven Years War victory, along with a fundamental misunderstanding of the colonials. The first part of the explanation remains conservative. In fact, Reid suggests that this “interpretation presents the colonists' Revolutionary
ideals as but means to secure place and wealth to particular colonists, rather than as ends uniting all” (Reid 81). Hardly a revolution at all; merely a transfer of economic position from London merchants to New York merchants. The second portion of Reid's description dealing with the government's misunderstanding is more problematic from the conservative view.

Some scholars such as Gordon Wood have indicated that the American Revolution was something particularly “radical” suggesting that the second part of Reid's take on the “imperial explanation” may be correct. There may in fact have been a gulf between the Americans and their British cousins that had developed during the period of Salutary Neglect leading to a revolutionary change on the part of the Americans. Americans, in the imperial argument, claimed rights to self rule that were merely a custom, and not a right in the eyes of the crown. As Clinton Rossiter posited in the 1950s “Revolution grew naturally and harmoniously out of the everyday habits and activities of early Americans” (McColley 92). One of these habits was self rule, and the exclusive right to tax the colonies. Wood suggested that the Americans took the opportunity of Revolution to “abolish what remained of monarchy and to create once and for all new, enlightened republican relationships among people” (Wood 169). As the revolution proceeded Wood argued that Americans came to view “any position that came from any source but talent and the will of the people” “underserved and dependent” (Wood 177). Americans were, after all, fighting for independence in every sense of the word. Men in the American republic “would be 'equally free and independent,' and property would make them so” (Wood 178). Viewed from this angle the revolution appears to be earth shattering, but viewed in context, it is far less so.

The American Revolution did not happen in a vacuum, but rather in the context of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. When viewed through this lens, the Americans did very little
that was in fact revolutionary. Wood's claim that land made people free and independent was largely true elsewhere in the British Empire as well. In fact, the story of English expansion was about gaining land, and therefore property, in Scotland, Wales, and Ireland for the wealthy to set up new baronies and counties; to create new land holdings for commercial power (Ferguson 46). The Americans were little different from the British in this regard, and in fact continued a century of expansion for new lands to be ruled in North America. The rights the Americans fought for were British rights of “liberty and representation” (McColley 91). When other parts of the empire requested the same British rights after the Americans, the British decided not to fight. During the nineteenth century the British government expanded self rule and autonomy throughout the empire in order to avoid the American disaster (Ferguson 92).

Outside the British Empire the American actions appear even less radical. When the French Revolution erupted in 1789, the call was for liberté, égalité, and fraternité. These were hardly the rights or ideals of the Bourbon Kings who, in Louis XIV, had declared “l'estat est moi.” Indeed, Gertrude Himmelfarb has noted a major difference between the American and French Revolutions. In the United States those writing on the theory of good governance, or legitimate governance, were the same as those who governed (Himmelfarb 149). Such was not the case in France until after the Revolution. When given the opportunity to violently, and literally, remove the head of state, the French chose to do so again and again until the rise of Napoleon put an end to the terror. These French revolutionaries tried to unmake Bourbon society, from the church, to the vote, to the calendar (Shaw 39). It was Napoleon who cemented the French Revolution’s appeal to reason through his exercise of the *philosophes* “predilection of … enlightened despotism” (Himmelfarb 163). Even the later revolutions of Spanish South America
proved more revolutionary than the United States. They, too, fought for principles of economic liberty, liberalism, and republicanism as had the United States (Knight 159), but here again these were hardly the rights and prerogatives the Spanish crown granted Spanish subjects.

The American Revolution was a revolution only in the strictest sense that it changed the political authority. The revolution, however, was exceedingly conservative. The American elite led the charge in defense of their British rights, and retained the authority to exercise or curtail those rights once political power was secure. They granted no emancipation to the landless or the enslaved. The French did liberate both these latter groups, at least for a time. The Americans never sought to overthrow their system, merely to enforce it. Other revolutionaries from Argentina, to Haiti, to France did intend to remake their societies in a new image, one in keeping largely with what Britain and its empire already was.
Works Cited


