The American Revolutionary War scarred an entire generation of Americans, whether they served in the military or not. Richard Durfee (1758–1845), who helped to defend the waters around Tiverton, Rhode Island, belonged to that generation. Like so many men, he served short terms in the militia; when not in the militia, he struggled to keep body and soul together. “The want of men to do the work,” he remembered in 1832, “who had mostly gone into public service, was not the only or main difficulty in the way of tillage of the earth.” The town was a constant battleground. “The beasts of the plow had been carried off by the enemy from the shores, or were removed back into the country out of their reach, or had been converted, for food, to the use of our own army.” If a farmer did “plant his land, he was never sure of receiving his crop” but “was in constant jeopardy of losing it through the hostile attacks of the enemy” and “by the numerous wants and necessities of our own army, which lay encamped” in town. Unable to make a living, townsmen “entered the regular army” in great numbers. Without men to till the soil, and with both sides taking what they did make,
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dearth haunted the town. “Some people” had to grind “flaxseed and cobs together to make bread” or make “potato bread” and stew “sweet apples” and ground “cornstalks to obtain the juice to boil down as a substitute for molasses.”¹

Richard Durfee’s account provides only one example of the powerful hold the memory of the American Revolutionary War exerted on the American public. Veterans who remembered how they had fought and suffered for freedom, and remembered the suffering that wives and children had endured with them, demanded rights to vote, to put men like themselves in office, and to make public policy—rights their rulers were loath to concede. Angered by the refusal of their betters to listen to their pleas as citizens who had won the war, common folk rebelled in Maine, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, and the entire backcountry, challenging the legitimacy of the new state and national governments. Memories of the war turned the 1780s and 1790s into the most violent peacetime decades of our national history and permeated the politics of that era. Thereafter, the American Revolution became the common theme of patriotic celebrations, framed debates over the rights of pensioners well into the 1830s, and justified strikes by female mill workers in the 1830s and 1840s.²

Voluminous evidence of the impact of the war on early American life—its violence, its immediate impact, the memories of those who lived through it, its political significance—abounds. George Washington and General Nathanael Greene peppered their papers with insights into the behavior of soldiers and their officers and details of military-civilian relations during the war. The evidence confronts us in the petitions of debtors and rebels of the 1780s and 1790s; it resonates in the insistence of rulers to call in paper money and impose deflation on the country; it figures in the debates over the ratification of the Constitution. Nor did the memory die. Thousands of men wrote long narratives of their service (as required by the Pension Act of 1832); dozens of veterans wrote reminiscences

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²30
full of searing reports of privation. In the 1840s Elizabeth Ellet inter-
viewed hundreds of female survivors of the war period. Taken
together, these sources point to the enduring significance of the
war—its battles, its marches, its violence, and its indignities.3

None of this should surprise historians familiar with the impact
of the Civil War and World War II on the American public and pol-
itics. Yet historians of the Revolutionary War have largely erased
this violence from historical memory, and with it the connection
between war and politics in the new nation. Even the greatest his-
torians of the era blot out the sounds, sights, and smell of war that
drifted just outside the homes of the pamphlet writers, newspaper
editors, and political leaders whose works they interpret. Instead,
historians often jump from the conflict with Britain between 1765
and 1775 to the battles over the Confederation and the Constitution
of the period between 1783–1789. Gordon Wood, in his magisterial
Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787, related the ideas of
thinkers and politicians, great and small, but described neither the
bloodshed that the makers of constitutions observed or endured nor
the demands of those left behind by the new constitutional order.
Alfred Young’s edited collection Beyond the American Revolution
explored the social relations of race and class after the war, but
rarely considered how the war itself shaped those social relations.4

The lack of interest in this history of violence and its relation to
politics defies easy explanation. In part, it grows out of the con-
tinuing marginalization of military history in the academy. The eigh-
teenth century witnessed nearly continual war, yet historians write
as if Americans lived in peace. Military matters represent for them a
detour from the main events of American history. Military historians
have not helped, with their emphasis on Revolutionary War cam-
paigns, war generals, strategy, and tactics. Yet this hardly explains
the failure of social historians of the Revolution to consider the
experiences of Americans in wartime. These historians have empha-
sized human agency; they seek, in E. P. Thompson’s famous phrase,
to recover ordinary people’s experience from “the enormous condescension of posterity.” Perhaps they have avoided the war years because the most heroic and class-conscious events took place before and after the war; perhaps they are embarrassed by the violence and terror of their heroes.

Unless we understand the Revolution as a war—a violent and protracted conflict—we shall not understand it at all. All Americans, including the slaves, free women, Indians, workers, and immigrants favored by social and cultural historians, experienced the horrors of the Revolutionary War and drew political morals from it. Mainstream early American historians, however, need to pay attention to military history, beyond the social history of the war and beyond fashionable concern with runaway slaves and camp followers. The strategies and tactics generals pursued affected everyone who stood in the way of their armies, structuring the experience of civilian and soldier alike. Several decades ago, the new military historians drew social and political implications from military action. We should revive their promising initiative, which would enrich the narratives of battles and generals, put a human face on the war, and raise new questions about post-war society and politics.⁵

The Experience of War

How can historians understand the way Americans experienced the American Revolutionary war? “There is no revolution,” Arno Mayer writes, “without violence and terror; without civil and foreign war; without iconoclasm and religious conflict; and without collision between city and country.” Revolutions begin when political authority collapses and contending groups struggle to gain control over the apparatus of state coercion. Violence becomes necessary when revolutionaries work to form, sustain, and legitimate new governments, and, as warfare continues, it breeds vengeance and revenge in an endless cycle. Revolutionary wars, Mayer
continues, push revolutions toward more radical ends, inciting counterrevolutionary violence from those who wish to maintain the old order. From the experience of war and terror, ideologies develop to legitimate the behavior of untried, desperate leaders and to mobilize followers. After the end of the war and defeat of the counterrevolution, victorious revolutionaries romanticize and sanitize the violence their victory had required, even as they demonize the violence of those just defeated.  

Mayer’s model downplays events prior to the outbreak of revolutionary wars and perhaps overemphasizes wartime violence and its inevitable connection to revolutionary change. Ideologies may precede Revolution, and, as Mayer recognizes, may justify violence even when they have little revolutionary content. Yet Mayer’s analysis does help to distinguish truly revolutionary movements (like the American Revolution) from civil wars or wars of independence (apparently like those in Latin America during the early nineteenth century).

The American Revolution conforms in some measure to Mayer’s model. A republican, Whig ideology justified independence, but wartime violence led ordinary citizens to push the Revolution in a more democratic direction. Violence and terror (both personal and political) permeated the country; civil war turned neighbor against neighbor and community against community; the war spread to Canada and the West Indies. This terror and violence touched families everywhere—in long-settled farm communities as well as in the supposedly uncouth backcountry. At the same time, patriots quickly destroyed all symbols (like statues) of the monarchy and invented new symbols (liberty poles) of revolutionary fervor. Revolutionary violence and a political counterrevolution, albeit without an invasion of monarchists, permeated the country into the 1790s, long after the war ended. Any explanation of this violence and terror ought to begin with a recovery of the violence but end with speculations about its meaning.
The Revolutionary War devastated the countryside, where the vast majority of the people lived. British blockades and patriot embargoes cut off trade, ruining markets and forcing farmers into subsistence production, while military mobilization reduced the supply of dependable labor to plant, cultivate, and harvest what crops farmers could plant. At the same time, immigration ceased and slave workers abandoned their masters whenever the British army approached. Up to half the free white men of military age served in Army, militia, or guerrilla units. Soldiers marched aimlessly across the countryside, going hungry, wearing their clothing to rags, and suffering from infections and wounds. With trade stopped and men away from home, food shortages became common, isolated families starved, and women rioted for cheap bread and salt. Men who sought to save their families from destitution deserted their units in great numbers.

No war—except Indian wars and the Civil War in the South—left Americans more destitute and desolate. Battles took place in every part of the new nation. Maps of the military campaigns, available in every survey textbook, demonstrate the ubiquity of warfare. The lines that represent marching armies and the symbols that represent battles nearly fill the maps, from New England to Georgia to Kentucky. These lines and symbols are not abstractions. They show armies marching through hundreds of villages and thousands of farms, passing through fields full of crops, meadows, orchards, and woodlands. Farmers and villagers thus held a front-row seat at nearly every battle.

Armies and militias requisitioned grain, cattle, and horses from every corner of the country in exchange for worthless certificates for future payment. When footloose and hungry young men marched off to war, neither food nor other property was safe from seizure. Soldiers overran farms, plundered crops and livestock, and burned fences for firewood. Their commanders raided and strafed coastal communities and led armies in wars of annihilation against their
enemies; they often refused to distinguish between civilian friend and civilian foe. Patriot, French, and British troops, with their In-
dian and German mercenary allies, joined the fray, spreading vio-
lence wherever they marched. Contending governments confiscated farms, and marauding armies burned grain, houses, and barns, or turned their horses onto corn or wheat fields. When armies ap-
peared, thousands of families abandoned their homes in fear and became refugees. Seeking revenge, refugee men joined guerrilla units and plundered those who had forced them to flee. Soldiers infected with fevers or smallpox spread their germs to nearby civilians, and injured men returned as permanent invalids to their communities, their limbs full of musket balls and shrapnel. The end of the war left great swathes of the country desolate, and it took three decades for family income to attain pre-war levels.7

It is hard to grasp the enormity of the destruction, violence, dis-
sent, and conflict the war unleashed. The surreal fury resembled Bosnia or the Sudan or the World Trade Center, and our popular and academic culture make it even more difficult to comprehend. Text-
books and best sellers alike evoke images of great men who made a new and unique nation, patriotic soldiers who fought for freedom, Americans who formed a new culture, free and enslaved people who peaceably asserted civil and political rights. None of these conven-
tional images are wrong—but they are incomplete. Working from them, historians view our Revolution as less bloody, less violent, and less radical than the French, Russian, or Chinese Revolutions. The American Revolution, Arno Mayer contends, sought a restora-
tion, not revolutionary change, and thus avoided the furies of other revolutions. For that reason, the new United States did not have to contend with the bloody counterrevolutions of France and Russia.8

And yet, the closer historians get to the war on the ground, the more it resembles other revolutions. The example of Westchester County, New York, demonstrates the severity of the violence. Nei-
ther side conquered the county, but both wanted to control it because
of its strategic location on the Hudson just north of New York City, a gateway that connected the city and Long Island with Connecticut and the Hudson River Valley. Westchester came to resemble the bombed-out French villages of World War II, and its people may have suffered genuine trauma. From 1775 through 1782, the county became a no man’s land whose four thousand families enjoyed neither personal security nor freedom from plunder. Contending armies, militias, and partisan bands took farm surpluses and left families with too little to last through winter. They raided friend and foe alike to pilfer personal property, steal livestock, burn barns and houses, and cut trees and fences for firewood. Soldiers and criminal gangs looted what armies and militias left behind. In this violent atmosphere, both sides tried to gain farmers’ allegiance. Far from winning the hearts of the populace, indiscriminate looting by both sides left farmers numb, frightened, disaffected, neutral, and insistent on running their own lives.

Observers painted a bleak picture. Continental Army surgeon James Thatcher wrote in his journal that Westchester had been a “rich and fertile” country whose “farms appear to have been advantageously cultivated, but” in 1780 it had “the marks of a country in ruins.” Many had “abandoned their farms”—the Tories escaped to New York City, and the patriots went “into the interior of the country.” The few farmers who stayed “find it impossible to harvest the produce. The meadows and pastures are covered with grass of a summers growth, and thousands of bushels of apples and other fruit are rotting in the orchards.” With the fields abandoned, Thatcher’s unit took “two hundred loads of hay and grain, and ten times the amount might have been procured, had teams enough been provided.”

Decades later, the Rev. Timothy Dwight, who had been chaplain in 1777 with American forces in Westchester, recalled the devastation. Often “actually plundered,” farmers “always were liable to this calamity.” “Their houses . . . were in a great measure scenes of desolation. Their furniture was extensively plundered or broken to
pieces. The walls, floors, and windows were injured both by violence and decay, and were not repaired because they had not the means of repairing them, and because they were exposed to the repetition of the same injuries.” Their farms stood desolate and deserted. “Their cattle were gone. Their enclosures were burnt” for fuel or “thrown down where they were not. Their fields were covered with a rank growth of weeds and wild grass.” The families who stayed on their farms feared to venture out, except for “a rare and lonely excursion to the house of a neighbor,” afraid of “new injuries and sufferings.” “They feared everybody who they saw and loved nobody.” This terror never left them: Their “faces lost every trace and animation and feeling”; “to every question they gave such an answer as would please the inquirer; or, if they despaired of pleasing, such a one as would not provoke him.” When “you treated them kindly, they received it coldly, not as a kindness, but as compensation for injuries done them by others.”

The destruction began early in the war. In November 1775, a Whig raiding party from Connecticut kidnapped several Tories and looted silver and guns from them. A year later, Continentals and British regulars fought all over the county, and both sides practiced indiscriminate plunder. Hessians, an aide to British General William Howe saw, “unmercifully pillaged,” taking “every necessary of life,” even “wearing apparel of women and children.” Retreating Continentals behaved worse, plundering White Plains and then burning the village (including the homes of both Whig and Tory), leaving men like patriot tavern keeper Miles Oakley, whose house and barn were burned and papers plundered, “without any means whatever of obtaining a subsistence.” As women and children screamed, soldiers removed their property and set their homes ablaze. When Mrs. Adams pleaded with Major John Austin to save her home, he contemptuously replied that he burned the village “Because you are all damned Tories.” As the chairman of the county’s Committee of Safety concluded, the Continental Army
instead of protecting its inhabitants from the enemy did plunder and distress them more than the very enemy themselves, taking with them our stock, household furniture, and even our farming utensils.”

Wanton destruction by both sides continued throughout the war. The two armies fought in 1776, and their soldiers and officers from both sides participated equally in plunder. The British, General Washington informed General Nathanael Greene, had not only plundered inhabitants, but “many helpless women had even the shifts taken from their back by soldiers’ wives after the great plundering had done.” In turn, American officers stole furniture, clothes, cattle, and horses. In 1777 American troops burned so many fences in Peekskill that the farmers fled their homes, for they could no longer raise livestock. Two years later, American troops on a foraging expedition “returned loaded with plunder,” their leader Aaron Burr remembered, some from “friendly families,” who later “made piteous appeals for stolen goods and horses.” In the summer of 1779, British forces under Banastre Tarleton raided Poundridge, where they burned a church and the house and barn of a militia leader. When the French arrived at White Plains in 1781, they naturally joined in the plunder.10

Both armies took provisions and fodder. In late 1776, General Charles Lee took his men through the county to get all the “stout and able horses—all the Cattle fat and lean—all the sheep and hogs,” leaving families a few cows or hogs for subsistence. At the same time, the army confiscated surplus blankets, took grain at the current price, and ordered farmers to thresh wheat so they could get straw for bedding. Although Lee demanded his men not “plunder and insult the wretch’d people” and give certificates for what they took, farmers saw little distinction between this legal thievery and plunder. About the same time, John DeLancey, a Tory gentlemen turned partisan, raided through the county, even taking twelve hogs for his own meal from an eighty-year-old neutral farmer. As soon as
they received news of the foragers, farmers hid their cattle in cellars or woods.

Foraging continued throughout the war, leaving farmers unable to feed their families. In 1777 and 1778, the two armies fought over supplies in the county. In July 1778, for instance, 2,500 men under General John Dixon Kim went to “collect all the live stock” in the southern part of the county, leading “the men and women the owners of the stock,” to follow the army “with dejected countenances, soliciting indulgence, as if they had lost their All.” In March 1778, 300 British and Loyalist troops raided cattle during daylight; two years later, Loyalist militia took 300 sheep and 200 cattle before plundering the inhabitants. In November 1781, Governor Clinton ordered the militia to “impress all the Fatt, Swine &c below the American Lines in West Chester County above what may be barely sufficient to subsist the inhabitants”; after soldiers gathered enough food for the expedition, they went on the “grand forage” to take “a variety of corn, hay, &c. And about 40 swine.” In September 1782, long after the war ended, the British came from the city to Westchester on a grand forage.11

With rations always meager, soldiers lived off the land. A Hessian officer remembered that “when on the march we received nothing but salt pork, cracker, and rum for rations.” But they took whatever food they found, for they “were not forbidden to get provisions.” In September 1778 they stopped at a farm in Yonkers, “cleaned out” a “large potato field,” slaughtered “fowls, pigs, and beef,” and “gathered hay and straw and made ourselves good beds.” Several weeks later, when at White Plains, the men “halted at a very pretty house,” barged in, demanded and received milk and butter, and then “snatched up all the fowls and pigs,” took chickens, and filched fruit.12

Not only did armies repeatedly raid the county and collect provisions there, but early in the war Patriots and Loyalists formed militias to terrorize their enemies. Loyalist militias, out for plunder
and the property of both Whig and Tory, raided farms in Westchester (and adjacent Bergen County, New Jersey), to capture and even kill patriots as well as to take booty. Some 700 Loyalist militia accompanied the British army into Westchester in late 1776 and destroyed all they could find. In winter and spring 1777, when conflicts over forage between the two armies erupted, Loyalist “cowboys,” patriot militias, and common thieves (some in the militias) raided county farms. The Loyalists, for instance, kidnapped a number of prominent Whigs and took five hundred cattle and uncounted sheep and hogs. Kidnappings, horse stealing, plunder of cattle, and destruction of houses continued into 1781 in a never-ending cycle: Tory “Cowboys” and “Refugees” would plunder and steal livestock, inciting Whig militias to respond in kind. Not content only to plunder and terrorize their enemies, both sides plundered and terrorized their allies as well. In June 1779, Patriot militias not only frightened farmers by “cutting them and beating them with their drawn swords” but placed their guns on the “Breast of a woman . . . who had [been] laying in but 3 or 4 days.” That same year, the British (and their Tory allies) burned two villages, the men plundering so much as not to “leave as much as an Iron pott.”

By 1778, the contending forces had turned many families into refugees, especially in the no-man’s land between the armies. If refugees stayed in the country, they suffered more violence. In the fall of 1778, Patriots appeared at a Tory refugee camp near Morrissania and “plundered & burnt the huts of the Refugees,” leaving 490 “poor men,” most of whom had “large families,” without lodging or food. A Welsh officer reported that the British Army gave these people tents, food, and soldiers’ pay as long as “they continue under the present circumstances,” while the army in New York simultaneously urged residents to donate money to support the same people. In 1780, more Loyalists turned refugees, for Patriot authorities made them move from the battle zone to the interior and allowed them to take just six months’ food.
Elsewhere, civilians experienced a hell as deep as Westchester’s. Indian wars broke out all over the backcountry. Patriot forces answered raids by Indians and Tories with savage destruction. After the Iroquois raided New York settlements, the Continental Army destroyed Iroquois lands and dwellings, burning down forty villages and thousands of acres of grain. In response, the British and their Indian and Loyalist allies made the entire backcountry uninhabitable. Wars of conquest continued after the end of the Revolution and ended in the Ohio Valley only in 1794, when the United States, after much struggle, finally forced Indians there to leave their homes.\(^{15}\)

Every white family experienced plunder, assault, privation, military service, or knew a friend, neighbor, or relative who did. Bands of intense and almost continual violence and destruction could be found all over the country. British incursions and occupation led to diminished trade and presaged starvation on Maine’s coasts. From 1776 to 1782, both armies wintered and marauded in the populous New Jersey region between New York City and Philadelphia, repeatedly overrunning each others’ territories, confiscating property, and on occasion assaulting men and raping women. Between 1780 and 1782, British and American forces destroyed crops, killed civilians, and overran territory throughout the Carolina and Georgia backcountry. Inhabitants in other areas suffered intermittently. The British and the Continental armies reduced southeastern Pennsylvania to penury in 1778, and at the war’s end the British invasion of North Carolina and Virginia devastated much of that region. The British raided coastal Connecticut towns, Chesapeake rivers, and New Jersey ports. They conquered New York City, Long Island, Philadelphia, and Charleston and sent thousands of refugees to patriot areas even as they welcomed Loyalist refugees fleeing from patriot-held areas.\(^{16}\)

This census of revolutionary violence translates into commensurate human suffering. People, not places on a map, experienced violence and its consequences, and the experience touched everyone.
Granted, a few places—Massachusetts (after the British evacuated Boston), southern New Hampshire, inland Connecticut, northern and western Maryland, and the Shenandoah Valley—escaped marauding armies, battles, and military occupation. But even the people of these regions endured widespread hardship. Armies confiscated crops, livestock, clothing, and other goods; sons and husbands faced military drafts; diminished markets forced farmers into subsistence production; inflation destroyed the buying power of city folks. Suffering thus enveloped the new nation—and her citizens demanded just recompense for it.

The Politics of Wartime Depravation
What political consequences resulted from the violence of the Revolutionary War? Wartime terror can provide abundant opportunities to settle old scores, to steal property, to organize bandit gangs, but such violence has neither political purpose nor consequences. In the heat of war, the military directs violence to specific goals, not to ideological change. Yet the violence and bloodshed perpetrated during revolutionary wars often have had subsequent political consequences, whatever their ostensible, immediate purposes. Such consequences defy neat predictions. They can turn peaceable folk into savages bent only on revenge and lead their government into political violence against enemies and friends. Victors may retaliate by exiling the losers and redistributing their property. After vicious warfare, revolutionary leaders have often transformed their military authority into authoritarianism and created governments more corrupt and vicious than the one they defeated.

The violence and privation of war may sustain radical demands for freedom and rights of slaves, women, or the poor. Ordinary folk, in an orgy of revolutionary fervor, may incite rebellions for freedom, democracy, or plebeian rule, which may in turn split common folk into contending camps of revolutionists bent on change and traditionalists fearful of losing the privileges afforded them.
by the old regime. The endless permutations of class conflict may intensify violence, while wily leaders may twist such radical demands and rebellions into support for dictatorships, or conservative opponents may use them to foment bloody and divisive counter-revolution.

In America, the violence of the Revolutionary War had an immediate political impact, with mixed results. With some justice, Loyalists dubbed new governments (run by irregular committees or conventions) as tyrannical and dictatorial. With no less justice, Indians saw patriots as despoilers of their lands, and patriots viewed British occupation as despotic. To retain the loyalty of the people, local leaders granted them new democratic rights to influence and even make policy. The British refused to reestablish civilian government in areas they conquered, even when their Loyalist subjects demanded it. Wars of revenge, some with a racial component, were uncontrollable in parts of New York, New Jersey, and the backcountry. The temporary victors took the property of those they defeated and forced them to pledge loyalty to the new regime, and if the other side regained control, it returned the favor.

The rich and powerful strove to overturn the egalitarian conclusion of the war. At war’s end state authorities confiscated and resold around three million acres of Loyalist lands, most of which passed into the hands of men of wealth. Some tenants in New York and Maryland did nonetheless buy the land they had been leasing and thereby joined the ranks of freeholder-voters. Overall, no massive redistribution of property occurred. Federal and state governments sold or gave away millions of acres stolen from the Indians, thereby placating some small farmers. Debtor legislation and rural rebellion by discontented farmers, however, persuaded rich men to foment a successful coup-d’etat at the Constitutional Convention. The Constitution they formulated in secret gave new (and, Antifederalists argued, despotic) powers to the state and faced opposition from a majority of the citizenry.17
Representative and democratic, the new nation was nonetheless composed of free citizens. Once the violence ended, communities re-instatement of representative government and even welcomed a few Loyalists back. Pushed from below, the ruling class—the lawyers, merchants, and great planters who ruled the country and owned most of its wealth—admitted the justice of some plebeian demands, especially those made by farmers and master craftsmen, and refused to install either a new monarchy or a new aristocracy to rule over the masses. Every state resounded with radical demands for the emancipation of slaves, full citizenship rights for all free men, citizen control over local institutions, and debt relief. If the South supported slavery with renewed vigor, every northern state emancipated its slaves, albeit gradually. Although nearly two more centuries passed before aggrieved groups such as African-Americans, white women, and Indians gained full citizenship rights, men of the Revolutionary generation progressed further on the road to democracy than the men of any other contemporary polity.18

No short essay can demonstrate a clear connection between this growth of democratic sentiment and the violence of the Revolution. To do so would require detailed reconstructions of local conditions before, during, and after the war and, especially, evidence that ordinary folk insisted on gaining democratic rights because of their military service or their families’ suffering. We can, however, delineate the plausible relationships between violence and democracy. Historians who have ignored the terror that prevailed during the 1780s and 1790s have implicitly denied the existence of any connection. Rather, they suggest that the Revolution itself—in the sense of the making of new governments and building of new ideologies—implausibly accounts for the emergence of democratic politics. Yet how could such an experience as universal as the terror of the war years leave no political traces? Violence itself might have led to demands for democratic politics; yet in other revolutions, violence could (and did) lead to repression, dictatorship, and tyranny. Here,
in contrast, I am arguing that only the kind of revolutionary violence common in the American revolution, combined with prior experience with republican institutions such as widespread property holding and voting rights, could and did encourage democratic aspirations and politics after the war.

What distinguished the American Revolution—and especially its democratic conclusion—from other, more authoritarian revolutions? The main explanation probably lies in the prior relations between ruled and rulers and in the political participation, military service, and beliefs of ordinary citizens and soldiers during the war. But wartime policies of both sides and the fighting traditions of the British world doubtless played a role as well. Revolutionary success in sending into exile thousands of Loyalists, the most likely group of counterrevolutionaries, and the promise (however unfulfilled) of freedom to slaves reduced greatly the number of internal enemies to challenge the new regime. And, finally, the attitudes of the ruling class—the republican ideologies they devised in the pre-Revolutionary decades and their responses to dissent and rebellion after the war—deflected potential conflict.

Popular rule, however limited and fictional, framed pre-Revolutionary politics and greatly affected wartime policies. The American colonies enjoyed higher levels of political participation under the control of a gentry ruling class than contemporary France or twentieth-century Russia or China. Property-holders, a substantial majority of the free heads of household, regularly voted for members of the provincial assemblies. Men of small property served on juries and in other minor local offices, and county courts listened to the petitions of citizens and regularly fulfilled their needs by building bridges and roads. New England, Long Island, and eastern New Jersey householders often attended town meetings, where they decided the tax rate, voted for local officials, and debated issues of the day.19
To legitimate their polity, colonial leaders borrowed and shaped the dissident thought of English Whigs, who had emphasized the liberties of the English constitution and the ways that representative institutions had protected them from the tyranny of both the aristocracy and the people. As assemblies, dominated by the wealthy, gained power over appointed governors, American commentators emphasized this republican “popular” element in their government. In their world, virtuous gentlemen ruled over deferential plebeians, who were happy to enjoy the rights their betters protected. During the Revolution, with violence everywhere, ordinary citizens misjudged the meaning of this Whig thought, pushing it in distinctly democratic directions, but only its prior existence as an elite ideology allowed for its transformation.²⁰

This republican element in the colonial polity meant that revolutionaries could not coerce participation in their rebellion. They had to earn respect and support. Even before war broke out, the Boston merchants and lawyers and southern planters who had fomented revolt understood that they had to mobilize the free population if they were to gain redress of their grievances on taxes and imperial regulations. They and their rich artisan allies organized the Sons of Liberty to oppose the Stamp Act and other British measures. Poor artisans and sailors, their jobs at stake, opposed British taxes—but the riots they fomented aimed as much at overmighty rulers and English impressment as at unfair taxation. Rulers encountered much greater difficulty in mobilizing the free, rural populace: Stamp taxes and import duties rarely affected them, and small holders in New York, New Jersey, and the Carolinas, angered by gentry attempts to render their land title less secure or to keep them in tenancy, rebelled against gentlemen who were active in the Sons of Liberty.

Mobilization of the rural populace required constant attention from their rulers. The Boston Committee of Correspondence sent a steady stream of information to local committees, both in Massachusetts and elsewhere. The British closing of the Port of
Boston constituted a great propaganda victory for patriot Whig leaders. Groups from the other colonies sent aid to Boston, thereby expressing solidarity and learning the reasons for rebellion against Britain. Meanwhile, the Continental Association of 1775, which mandated first non-importation of British goods and then non-exportation of American commodities to Britain, affected every inhabitant. The British incursions at Lexington and Concord horrified literate citizens throughout the colonies. Whig leaders interpreted the incursions as attacks upon the property of American farmers and artisans, who—finally—listened.21

Patriots nonetheless mobilized a minority of the free populace: Only about three-tenths became and remained active patriots by providing financial support or sending one of their sons or fathers to fight. Those whom Whig gentlemen had antagonized joined the Loyalists, as did those who admired their Loyalist gentry neighbors, and together they numbered around a fifth of the free populace. Indians and slaves joined British armies when they could, thereby increasing the suffering of patriot families and creating a strong problem of internal control for weak Revolutionary authorities. The rest hunkered down into neutrality and hoped to avoid the violence that swirled around them.22

Both active patriots and neutrals expected political compensation for their suffering. Civilians expected officials, at a minimum, to protect their lives and property from armies and militias, but none could guarantee protection. Patriot military officials, while frustrated by the low levels of financial and manpower support given them by the states, nonetheless knew that they had to restrain their men and their armies if they were to have any hope of retaining the people’s loyalty. Generals George Washington and Nathanael Greene repeatedly decried plunder and tried to limit requisitions to what the Army needed, but they faced an impossible task. Hungry men took whatever they needed; sergeants, lieutenants, and captains sometimes took men on plundering expeditions. Generals
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rarely punished either plunderers or deserters, although they made examples of a tiny number of them. Nor did the British behave any better. British regulars, Hessians, and Loyalist irregulars engaged in as much—if not a bit more—violence as the patriots, with even greater requisitions, plunder, and destruction.

In a 1779 letter to British General Henry Clinton, Scots Major Patrick Ferguson devised a “Plan for bringing the Army under strict discipline with regard to marauding.” Soldiers must have “some latitude . . . with regard to Poultry, Pigs, Fruits, Roots,” since taking food was “necessary for the comfort, refreshment, & encouragement of the Troops in the field.” Officers should keep as much of the “small stock” they took from farmers as needed to feed them and their men, and they should take cattle at the rate the Continentals paid. But “the plundering of houses, destruction of fixtures, wanton carnage of cattle, and other outrages must stop,” if in no other way, than by executing “two or three villains.” He made an exception for houses of Whig leaders, which, officers’ orders, could be plundered and the “just booty” distributed among the men. The system would benefit farmers, who would “only lose their small stock, forage, garden stuff, and fire wood,” “unavoidable” when the army marched. But “at present most of the houses are thoroughly & indiscriminately plundered, the beds cut up, the furniture & windows broke to pieces, the men rob’d of their watches, shoe buckles, and money, whilst their wives & daughters have their pockets and cloths torn from their bodies” while their fathers and husbands watch, unable to protest without getting a beating or being branded a “traitor and rebel.”23

As the wartime violence from both sides stretched civilian patience thin, continued loyalty had to be earned and re-earned. Whig leaders—pushed by the need for military manpower and the demands of people from below for more democratic institutions—began to espouse an ideology of “popular sovereignty.” They meant merely that ordinary folk retained the right to vote for their betters,
but ordinary folk, pressed by battles and by the confiscation of their crops and animals, demanded greater democracy in return for their continued loyalty. They quickly came to believe that they had earned the right to rule by their own service in Army and militia and the service of their fathers, sons, and brothers, and by the suffering and property destruction they had endured.

Yeomen and artisans had long petitioned justices of the peace and members of the assemblies. Before the war, most petitions, couched in deferential language, had asked for the construction of public facilities or roads, the formation of new churches, towns, or counties, and similar local needs. But, during the war years, they began to petition local and state officials in a new way. They petitioned, even instructed, their officials and representatives on public policy: taxation, land distribution, home manufacturing, the militia, freedom of religion, price controls, and monopolies. Like the Virginia frontier petitioners, who in 1779 urged a more egalitarian land policy, petitioners often couched their demands in a new republican language. Virginia’s plan, the Virginia petitioners insisted, was “subversive to the fundamental and distinguishing Principles of a Republic.” In contrast, their plan, based upon “the true Policy of a Republic,” allowed “the Poor and Needy to raise their Families to be reputable and useful Members of Society.”

Local officials, seeking to keep their offices and their heads, did everything they could to protect their constituents. They complained to military authorities about plunder and requisitions; they gave pensions to war widows; they tried to prevent armies from marching through their farms and villages; and they allowed Army deserters to live peaceably with their families. Voters, who sought representatives more like themselves, elected many more men of small means—yeoman farmers, small-scale artisans, petty shopkeepers—to state legislatures. Before the war, at most two-fifths, and usually no more than one-fifth, of members of colonial assemblies were men of moderate means; by the early to mid-1780s, such
men had become numerical majorities in the lower houses of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, New York, and New Jersey and almost one-third of the gentry-led lower houses of Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina.25

In an extraordinary way, state legislatures gave local citizens the right to select men to serve in the mobilized militia or the Continental Army. Although at first thousands volunteered, once the length and dangers of the war became clear, men stopped enlisting, thereby forcing a system of drafts. States such as Virginia established a “class” system. When the Continental Congress sent a requisition to the states to provide men for the Army, or when states wanted to mobilize militia, the state would give each county or local subdivision a quota. The county lieutenant or other official then called the militia together to divide the entire body into a number of “classes” equal to the quota. The classes then met and chose one of their number to go into the Army or militia. They could negotiate among themselves and send the person most expendable; offer any inducement necessary to procure a volunteer; or pay someone from outside the class to serve as a substitute. The system was not only democratic but consensual, and it honored local desires and planter and artisan wishes to be left alone. The political impact in Virginia was clear: It heightened the authority of small holders at the expense of the poor, and it reduced the authority of gentlemen. Men of middling wealth often avoided service, especially if they had already been under arms, but sent their sons or local poor folk instead.26

Once the war had concluded, farmers and artisans faced a daunting task. Large parts of the country had been desolated. Farmers had lost livestock and had to rebuild herds; soldiers had torn down their fences and their horses had trampled their crops. In those places most devastated, it took a decade or more to recover from war damage, and the country’s per capita wealth, much lower than before the war, did not return to the pre-war level until the early nineteenth century. Steady deflation, caused by the retirement of war-era inflated
paper currency, compounded the problem and led to serious financial difficulties, especially for farmers, who now had to repay loans in deflated currency.

The military procurement policy points toward the kind of government small propertyholders wanted to establish after the war. Their betters set the terms of the debate in the 1780s and 1790s, and no small holder formulated a plan of government, but they probably sought a form of consensual local autonomy grounded in the right of small propertyholders to join together to make policy (to gain help rebuilding, set taxes, build roads, establish markets, run militias). They would have opposed any republic that formed the balanced, national political system Madison espoused—a system that reduced the power of local majorities, not to mention communities, to determine their fate. Nor would they have approved a representative democracy, for they wanted to exclude women, unfree men, and the poor and decide among themselves by consensus, rather than adhere to a majority that might leave a large, dissatisfied minority living in their midst. Such plebeian localism failed to gain a foothold anywhere in the 1780s, yet small farmers and artisans did win some signal victories, when state legislatures, particularly in states hard pressed by wartime violence, passed debtor relief legislation.27

Buttressed by new republican principles of popular sovereignty, the people-out-of-doors sought redress through violence when their betters suppressed plebeian localism. Such a rebellion took place in western Massachusetts in the mid-1780s. They had not suffered much violence during the war but had experienced the doleful consequences of the impressment of goods and the loss of sons, brothers, and husbands. After the Massachusetts General Court (the legislature) refused to pass debtor relief legislation, middling farmers throughout the western part of the state met in conventions to demand redress. When legal means failed, they closed the courts and intimidated local public officials, attempting to prevent the sale of farmer property for debt. The governor organized a militia and
defeated the rebels—but, in the next election, voters defeated many of the legislators who had supported the suppression.\textsuperscript{28}

Horrified by the demands and the success of farmers and artisans, men of wealth and prominence mounted a counterrevolution. They sought to instill order and restrain liberty, which they knew had run amuck. Seeking to eliminate plebeian democracy wherever it dwelt, they suppressed rebellions and conspired together to overthrow a Confederation government they considered extremely weak. Ideally, they wanted to restore the balanced forms of government of the colonial era, ruled by a respectable aristocracy of talents, only without a king at their head.

Their counterrevolution, however, had sharp limits. Although sympathetic to Alexander Hamilton’s proposal for a republican government that resembled the limited monarchy of Britain, the Constitutional Convention failed even to debate the proposal. The Constitution they wrote and had ratified nonetheless established a balanced government, with full national powers and a strong executive. They also limited the powers of the states, especially in diplomatic, military, and economic affairs such as coining money, while leaving them full autonomy in local affairs. During the 1790s, continued rural rebellions in the United States, together with radicalization of the French Revolution, turned the friends of order further toward a conservative version of republicanism, one that preserved their authority, suppressed political support for France, and kept farmers and artisans in their place.\textsuperscript{29}

The American counterrevolution was much less violent than those suffered by France or Russia after their revolutions. Perhaps seeking to prevent violence, the delegates to the Philadelphia Convention heard the demands of the people-out-of-doors. But why did they listen? The exile of the Loyalists probably played a role. American communities remained implacably hostile toward former Loyalists, even as they allowed some to return from exile. But few Loyalists, especially the wealthiest, regained their property. With little reason to
stay, at least 60,000 Loyalists left the country permanently—about 2.5 percent of the whole American population and proportionately five times as great as the number of émigrés who fled during the French Revolution. The émigrés represented a cross-section of the rural populace, but doubtless included numerous rich conservative intellectuals, enemies of republicanism and all the more of democracy, as well as more conservative, anti-democratic small holders. Thus, both the leadership and the foot soldiers for a Vendée or a White Terror had left the country. By the time the Philadelphia Convention met, the remaining gentlemen and lawyers shared republican ideals.30

While pressure from below for ever more radical actions drove violent counterrevolution in France and Russia, dispossessed and middling groups in the new United States posed little danger of overthrowing the government. Some bourgeois women wanted greater property rights and more political respect, but most apparently remained content with the protections of patriarchy. Slaves had great hope of emancipation in the near future, since hundreds of slave holders manumitted their slaves and northern states implemented gradual emancipation. But by 1800, emancipation fervor died out and bourgeois women lost whatever political influence they had gained by their patriotism during the Revolution.31

Only farmers persisted in violent rebellions against the new governments. During the 1790s, tax or land revolts broke out in Maine, New York, Pennsylvania, and the entire backcountry. Farmers especially resented the Federal whiskey and direct taxes (on land, houses, and slaves) passed by a Congress that ignored their pleas of poverty. Almost no one in frontier areas paid the tax on whiskey, for distilled corn represented a large part of their income. Farmers closed courts, intimidated state and federal officials (especially those trying to collect taxes), and blocked roads to prevent courts from sitting. They had long done similar things, but now they justified their rebellions with a new, increasingly democratic language of social entitlement.
Federal and state authorities managed to suppress these rebellions without shedding blood. By this time the hopes of women and (especially) slavers had been dashed, and, having secured firm control, the national ruling class could afford slowly to expand political rights of small holders.32

Left with few alternatives, farmers and artisans struggled to find a new way to influence public policy. Their betters had defeated their insurrections, and the Constitution and increasingly centralized state governments had prevented formation of any plebeian-dominated republic based upon local autonomy and consensus. In the towns, they joined Democratic-Republican societies, agitated peaceably in favor of democratic reforms, and supported the French Revolution. Others, in city and countryside, joined the new Jeffersonian Republican party. William Manning, a small-time Massachusetts farmer and tavern keeper, understood the changed circumstances of the 1790s. He had opposed the violence of the Massachusetts Regulation while supporting its political demands. Late in the decade, he composed a plan for “republicans, farmers, laborers, and mechanics” to influence government. The “few” had thus far won their struggle with the virtuous “many,” in part because they had organized themselves politically and kept the many in ignorance. Manning urged universal education, a monthly magazine for the many, and the formation of a multi-branched national organization of the many to oppose those of the few. He aimed, in large measure, to form what political theorists call “civil society.”33

Thomas Jefferson’s election in 1800 ended both the American counterrevolution and revolutionary agitation for plebeian control over the government and its policy. Farmers could influence policy through elections and petitions, through organizations and newspapers—but they had to give up any hope of local democratic control. They used this influence with some effect: Congress quickly rescinded both the Whiskey and Direct taxes, and President Jefferson procured the Louisiana territory, thereby assuring
that farmers and their progeny would have land (mostly taken from indigenous Indians) for generations to come.

Historians have long examined these pivotal events of the 1780s and 1790s. Yet they have rarely placed them in the context of the great violence of the American Revolutionary War. Here, I have argued that the violence and suffering of the war drove small holders, women, and slaves into demanding greater rights—into insisting that their rulers live up to their republican and democratic rhetoric. Continued violence after the war deepened plebeian demands. And it was the ruling class’s muted response to violence, its attachment to republicanism in the face of violence, its political responses to the demands of ordinary free men that ultimately not only reduced rural violence but produced a more democratic society, composed of nearly all white men.

An appreciation of the significance of the violence of the Revolutionary War ought to figure prominently on the agenda of historians of the Revolutionary era. Opportunities abound, especially in examining local and regional histories in peace and war. New studies of military participation, especially of the militia, would be welcome, especially if they traced the careers and politics of participants. One might focus on communities caught in the middle of the war, like Valley Forge or Morris Town, for in those places one can link pre-Revolutionary politics and social order, the wartime experience, and post-war reconstruction. The story of the Long Island refugees who stayed in Connecticut the entire war deserves to be retold, as does that of violence-free central Massachusetts. Other historians might examine anew the wartime economy, taking seriously (for almost the first time) financial records (probate inventories, store records, manufacturers’ records, court suits and the like) of the period. Still others could link political rhetoric to its immediate military context.

Those who complete this work might well consider the ironic conclusion of this essay: American democracy originated as much in memories of the furies of Revolutionary violence as in the politics
and ideas of the founding fathers, and democratic ideology grew as much out of the barrel of a gun as a pen in the study. That conclusion places renewed emphasis on the actions and ideologies of common soldiers, agrarian rebels, and anti-Federalists. It forces renewed examination of the politics of memory (personal and public) and of conflicts among classes, races, and ethnic groups over the fruits of the war. But it also puts the founders in a new (and surprisingly favorable) light: For all of their resistance to popular agitation, they concluded that only an increasingly democratic polity could keep the peace and sustain a just society. Like their plebeian followers, America’s rulers knew that democracy (defined, at a minimum, as the rights of property, petition, and voting) had to stop before reaching white women, much less Indians or those of African descent. Historians will thus have to confront the possibility that the founders could entertain a republican, even democratic solution to agrarian rebellion only if they kept blacks enslaved, removed Indians, and retained full control over married women’s property.34

The effort to link violence and democracy in the American Revolution ought to lead to renewed speculation about the nature of revolutions and comparisons of the American Revolution with those of England, the Netherlands, France, Haiti, Russia, China, and Cuba. Such comparisons raise difficult questions. If American democracy grew, in part, out of citizens’ interpretations and memories of the violence of the Revolutionary War, why did other revolutions end so differently? What led Robespierre, Lenin, and Mao down an authoritarian, rather than democratic path—and the Dutch and Cromwell toward a more republican polity? If Americans suppressed violence and rebellion, but retained republican institutions, what prevented French authorities from building republicanism, the Russians from empowering the Soviets, or the Chinese Communist party from devising democratic socialism? The answers, inevitably, will turn on analysis of the military power of opponents of revolution and the particular ideas of great revolutionary leaders. But they will also
require comparisons of ruling class ideologies and lead to fresh treatment of Dutch, English, Scots, French, Haitian, Russian, and Chinese cultures and ideas.

NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was presented to the University of Georgia faculty colloquium.


7. I have summarized the violence and disruption of the war in Allan Kulikoff, From British Peasants to Colonial American Farmers (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), epilogue, and am working on a manuscript for a book entitled “The Farmer’s Revolution.” These works contain full references for this section, and I have only identified quotes and listed the most relevant works. Other key works include Stephen Conway, The War of American Independence 1775–1783 (London: E. Arnold, 1995), chap. 7; and Barbara Clark Smith, “Food Rioters and the American Revolution,” William and Mary Quarterly 51 (1994): 3–38.


14. Mayer, Belonging to the Army, 25; Dann, Revolution Remembered, 80; Hufeland, Westchester County, 366.


in South Carolina (Orono, Maine: University of Maine Press, 1981); Wayne E. Lee, 
Crowds and Soldiers in Revolutionary North Carolina: The Culture of Violence in 
17. These remarks are based upon my reading of Mayer, Furies, and my forthcoming 
book, “The Farmers’ Revolution.” I will cite only the most pertinent sources and 
identify direct quotes. 
18. For an alternative story of revolutionary class relations, see Gary Kornblith and 
John Murrin, “The Making and Unmaking of the American Ruling Class,” in 
Young, ed., Beyond the American Revolution, 29–79. 
19. Edmund S. Morgan, Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in 
England and America (New York: Norton, 1988); Bruce C. Daniels, ed., Power 
and Status: Officeholding in Colonial America (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan 
University Press, 1986), and Town and County: Essays on the Structure of Local 
Government in the American Colonies (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University 
Press, 1978); Michael Zuckerman, Peaceable Kingdoms: New England Towns in 
20. Wood, Creation of the American Republic, chap. 1; Bernard Bailyn, The Ideologi-
cal Origins of the American Revolution (Enlarged ed. Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard 
21. Richard D. Brown, Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts: The Boston Commit-
tees of Correspondence and the Towns, 1772–1774 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard 
University Press, 1970); Edward Countryman, “‘Out of the Bounds of the Law’: 
Northern Land Rioters in the Eighteenth Century” in American Revolution, ed., 
Young, 39–69; and Dirk Hoerder, “Boston Leaders and Boston Crowds, 1765–
1776,” ibid, 233–71. 
22. Paul H. Smith, “The American Loyalists: Notes on Their Organization and Numer-
ical Strength,” William and Mary Quarterly 25 (1968), 268–69; patriots based on 
an estimate of 200,000 served and 50,000 patriot families without men of military 
age. 
Ferguson, 1779–1780,” in Howard Peckham, ed., Sources of American Indepen-
dence: Selected Manuscripts from the Collections of the William L. Clements Li-
brary (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 336–41, quotes on 336–37, 
339, 341, 346–47. 
24. Ruth Bogin, “Petitioning and the New Moral Economy of Post-Revolutionary 
America,” William and Mary Quarterly 45 (1988), 391–425, quotes on 405. 
25. Jackson Turner Main, “Government by the People: The American Revolution and 
the Democratization of the Legislatures,” William and Mary Quarterly 23 (1966), 
27. Jackson Turner Main, Political Parties before the Constitution (Chapel Hill: Uni-
29. Larry E. Tise, The American Counterrevolution: A Retreat from Liberty, 1783–
1800 (Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1998), argues strenuously for coun-
terrevolution here, but it emphasizes ideology rather than the political substance. 
For the convention, see Young, “Framers of the Constitution,” 7–18. 
University Press, 1959, 1964), 1: 188–89; Wallace Brown, The King’s Friends: 
The Composition and Motives of the American Loyalist Claimants (Providence, 
Farmer During the Revolution: Rebel or Loyalist” Agricultural History 42 (1968): 
327–38.


34. This, of course, is the conclusion of Edmund Morgan’s *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975).