

POLITICAL ECONOMY

IN THE CAROLINAS

AMERICA'S REVOLUTIONARY MIND: A MORAL HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION AND THE DECLARATION THAT DEFINED IT

C. Bradley Thompson

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The United States faces its sesquicentennial in a half dozen years. Whether the nation marks its 250th birthday with joyous celebration or joyless commiseration depends in large part on how people view the American Revolution. Significant portions of the populace, led by the New York Times and its supporters in the media and academia, refuse to view July 4, 1776, as the proper date of the American founding. They argue that the United States already has observed its 400th birthday: a somber occasion tied to the arrival in 1619 of the first African slaves in colonial America. While these critics of traditional American history are likely to downplay the significance of July 4, 2026, others look forward to that date and its commemoration of a milestone anniversary. C. Bradley Thompson's recent book, *America's Revolutionary Mind*, offers prospective celebrants plenty of evidence to support their cause.

More than just a retelling of the circumstances that led thirteen American colonies to declare independence from the British Crown and band together in a new political union, Thompson's text could reorient us in our consideration of those circumstances. As the book's subtitle indicates, Thompson tells a *moral* history of the American Revolution, as defined in the Declaration that we remember and honor each Independence Day.

There is no shortage of books and articles on

the American Revolution. But Thompson, a professor of political philosophy at Clemson University, claims to be presenting something new. He argues that no author has offered a “major reinterpretation” of its “intellectual causes and consequences” in fifty years. With *America’s Revolutionary Mind*, he aims to do just that.

From the outset, Thompson distinguishes his argument from that of the *New York Times*’ slavery-obsessed 1619 Project. The contrast becomes apparent in Thompson’s opening line: “The American Revolution is the most important event in American history.” Why? “It announced the birth of a new nation, defined the noblest ideas and aspirations of the American people, created written constitutions and republican governments, and reformed laws and remodeled institutions.”

As we approach the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the revolution’s “noblest symbol,” it’s worth focusing on a “transformative event” that created a first-of-its-kind society. Thompson explains why. “Our present-day beliefs in equality, freedom, rights, justice, the rule of law, and constitutionalism were born during the Revolutionary era.” Given the era’s lasting importance, Thompson notes a curious academic omission: “Previous generations of scholars have neglected almost entirely what many leading eighteenth-century Americans considered the generative mainspring of the Revolution, namely, its moral causes.” Thompson intends to fill that gap.

Note that Thompson’s definition of the American Revolution extends beyond the military conflict that started in 1775 with the Battles of Lexington and Concord. For

Thompson, the revolution started in people’s minds long before the famous shot heard ’round the world. Much of the volume focuses on the way in which revolutionary principles suffused American society as early as the 1760s. Once armed conflict commenced, revolutionary ideas already had taken hold in significant ways throughout the thirteen colonies. The Declaration of Independence reflected what Americans already were thinking about government’s proper role.

“There has probably never been another time in our history when the life of the American mind was so alive, so penetrating, and so innovative as it was during the Revolutionary period,” Thompson argues. The Declaration offers an “ideological road map” helping readers chart the revolutionaries’ course from loyal subjects of Great Britain to citizens of free and independent states. Exposition of the road map constitutes the bulk of Thompson’s work. Chapter titles include “Declaring the Laws of Nature,” “Self-Evident Truths,” “Equality,” and the Declaration’s famous Jeffersonian phrase “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

Fans of American history will recognize many of the book’s key historical players. Madison is there, along with Hamilton, Washington, Adams, and Jefferson. But one of Thompson’s points of emphasis is the pervasiveness of American revolutionary principles. That’s why readers also find the words of lesser-known figures. The Reverend Dan Foster of Windsor, Connecticut, earns Thompson’s praise as author of “one of the most penetrating and remarkable pamphlets written during the Revolutionary period.” In a 1774 essay, “Foster cut to the core in

identifying the nature and purpose of rights, particularly the fundamental right—the right to life—and its implied corollary—the right to property.”

Thompson introduces us to a little-known Maryland lawyer, Daniel Dulaney, one of the most forceful speakers on the principle of the consent of the governed. More than a decade before Jefferson’s famous Declaration, Dulaney opined in 1765 against the idea that Parliament, across the ocean in London, could tax American colonists: “As a matter of general principle, he countered, it is a ‘flagrant injustice’ to ‘give property not belonging to the giver, and without the consent of the owner.’”

And while seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke might be best known today for his influence on well-known American founders, Thompson detects Locke’s presence “in the writings of many New England ministers and in the petitions of hard-scrabble and largely uneducated farmers living on the western frontier.”

For those intent on downplaying the Revolution and emphasizing instead America’s history of slavery, a full chapter of *America’s Revolutionary Mind* explores the relationship between the Declaration’s principles and slave ownership. “The great story of the American Revolution is not that the founding generation failed to end slavery, but rather that it set in motion forces that would lead to the eventual abolition of America’s ‘peculiar institution,’” Thompson writes. “The proper historical question to ask is, what effect did the logic of America’s revolutionary ideals have on the institution of slavery?”

One of the Declaration’s key elements

constituted “the most important step” in abolishing American slavery, in Thompson’s estimation: “The Americans’ public declaration that all men are created equal and that each and every man is entitled by right to freedom represented the moment of America’s great moral awakening—the moment when the institution of slavery was put on notice and its abolition became a moral and political necessity.” Slavery had existed worldwide for millennia, and in America for a century and a half, but now “the Declaration’s moral principles established for the first time in American history a benchmark by which to judge and condemn a long-practiced social evil.” That means even those who see slavery as the defining issue in American history ought to view the Revolution, and especially its defining document, as a new beginning worthy of celebration. The Declaration’s principles deserve continued praise and devotion.

“We can accept the Declaration’s freedom principles as true, or we can adopt very different moral principles,” Thompson concludes. “I hope that this book will inspire its readers to think anew about this fundamental choice.” That choice will help determine how we approach Independence Day 250 years after the fermentation of ideas that helped push Americans toward declaring political independence and sharing their principles of freedom with the world.