



A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783

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In this highly acclaimed book, Charles Royster explores the mental processes and emotional crises that Americans faced in their first national war. He ranges imaginatively outside the traditional techniques of analytical historical exposition to build his portrait of how individuals and a populace at large faced the Revolution and its implications.

A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783 Details

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Tim says

It is worth reading for an understanding of the Continental army, its relation to the country, and its ultimate influence on the debate over a strong national government. The writing style is a bit rough; somewhat repetitive and at times not elegant. (mentioned in *Washington's Crossing; America Goes to War*)

Lauren Albert says

A surprisingly negative book. Certainly a different angle than any I've read before. Royster writes about difficulties with recruitment (demands for bounties, refusal to commit to over a year of service, etc.), desertion (a 20-25% average apparently) and lack of discipline. From his description, the problem was a kind of libertarianism plus an intense distrust of standing armies. Peoples' actions didn't live up to their ideals but they thought ideals were enough. That is Royster's view anyway, "Americans tendency to believe that conflicts were decided in the hearts of the participants and that events merely confirmed the foreordained triumph of good over evil..." 148

Derrick Lapp says

One of THE essential books for any student of the American Revolution (and perhaps any scholar of exceptionally well written history) is Charles Royster's A Revolutionary People at War. In it, Royster gives the reader a sense of the patriotic mentalité and the development of the American national character during the eight year period of the War for Independence. Based upon the premise that the "prevailing sentiment" of most Americans was generally favorable toward independence, Royster asks the critical question, "what was the relationship between the ideals espoused during the revolution and the actions of Americans?" (p. viii) His conclusion is that while the ideals preached by revolutionaries were lofty, their actual conduct failed to measure up, and in fact proved to be "flawed and often gravely deficient." (p. ix) This disconnect is best illustrated in the study of the Continental Army and the experiences of those revolutionaries who joined the army and those who did not.

As Royster shows, many Americans chose to partake of the benefits of independence well in advance of the actual winning of that independence, often profiting at the expense of the Continental Army. He makes the case that the private did have a choice; army pay was not very enticing and certainly not a sure bet, if it was otherwise then there would have been little difficulty in recruiting. There were options for men who enlisted in the ranks, and it was a serious challenge for the army to convince soldiers to enlist for longer terms (three years or for the duration of the war), but there were men who did sign up for those lengthy terms, which does support Royster's assertion that factors other than pure economics were at play for the lower class who typically filled the privates ranks. In light of this, we might agree with the enthusiasm of Colonel Jean Baptist Ternant, whose response to those soldiers "who exclaimed when called upon by name, 'for the war!' was to "respectfully" bow, and "raising his hat," say "you, Sir, are a gentleman I perceive, I am happy to

make an acquaintance with you.” (p.223)

Anyone serious about understanding the American Revolution and the War for Independence will, likewise, be happy to make an acquaintance with A Revolutionary People at War.

Susan Barsy says

This is one of the most memorable books I read in graduate school. It remains relevant to assessing the prospects of the many popular 'revolutions' bloodying the world today.

The American colonists' early military efforts against the British were relatively inchoate, but changed and developed in the course of the long war in which they found themselves engaged. The frustration and outrage that had led to the Revolution's outbreak were not enough to fuel an initially rag-tag rebellion that spread across a vast geographical area and ended up lasting 8 miserable years. To beat the mighty British, Americans needed to accept and exploit a kind of centralized and hierarchical power and governance. The Revolution was no Tea Party!

Colonial soldiers initially willing to serve began to desert: they needed to be paid, and to feed their families. The American commander-in-chief, George Washington, needed better discipline and arms--and more MONEY--in order to wage a successful fight. These needs drove the Continental Congress and all the war's participants to change, and to come together as a people and a government, in a way that the colonists hadn't managed up to that time.

This book is brilliantly researched, written, and conceived. I highly recommend it to anyone interested in revolutionary conflict or the period of the American Founding.

Sean Chick says

A classic work of new military history. Ignore reviewers who proclaim this work as a rehash of the founding mythology. This book challenges the myth that the people won the war by showing just how lacking many of the people were in their commitment to victory. The army won the war (and France!) but the people wrote the myth we live by today. If I have a gripe it is that Royster, like many other historians, has ignored the fact that many American soldiers did defect to the British. Nevertheless, he shows that ideology was very important to the officers and this partially rescued the Revolution from turning into a junta. So why only 3 stars? Because Royster writes like an opium addict. His prose can be moving, but it is mostly opaque and disjointed. For a better book with the same themes check out Martin and Lender's A Respectable Army.

Robert Speziale says

The author, to his credit uses nothing but primary sources to paint a historically accurate picture of Revolutionary era America, but in the process sacrifices what could be a lively narrative to instead burden the reader with numerous hypotheses and opinions. A tedious read at times.

Dan Gorman says

Intricately written account of the American Revolutionary War from the "new military history" perspective of the soldiers. Charles Royster details how Americans saw the war as an opportunity to purge society of corruption and ascertain God's love of the Thirteen Colonies. The duration of the war, the need for recruits, the acts of vandalism, impressment, burglary, and seizure of goods to which soldiers were prone, and the civilians' displeasure with generals' cautious, not dramatic, tactics undermined support for the army. Many soldiers wanted to do one year and get out. Civilians early in the war feared that a permanent standing army would be corrupt; by 1778, many civilians thought certain kinds of undesirable people could be soldiers, but they were separate from the true republican spirit. By the war's end, some officers thought so highly of themselves, and felt they had been paid so little, that they considered open rebellion against Gen. Washington and the Congress. A majority of Americans were inclined to believe that common people, not a small class of elite officers, were the source of republicanism, but Royster shows how Americans' belief in "the people" did not always mean support for the Continental Army.

Adam says

Snippet of the book that proves that the spirit of American Revolution is still relevant in today's society. If you are fed up with our society, read this book to understand that the struggles of today are no different than the struggles that started in 1775.:

"The character of independence still matters as much as the achievement of it. Unless the winning of the war proved the virtuous strength of the whole people, independence might soon be lost through the revolutionaries' inability to sustain it. Or, if the United States survived, it would become like other countries whose populace lapsed in virtue – a nation managed by its corruption, with no hope for the blessed future once promised to America."

"...one did not ask, "Was I born an American" or even, "Do I choose to be an American?" but rather, "Am I worthy to be an American?"

Kevin says

A very comprehensive book on the revolutionary war.

Jan says

Charles Royster's *A Revolutionary People at War* documents the ideological, structural, and psychological changes experienced by the Continental Army between 1775 and 1783. Royster argues that what drove those changes was the conflict between revolutionary ideals, and the realities that forced different groups of revolutionaries to make compromises that undermined those ideals. Further, he argues that by "creating,

recruiting, and fighting in an army” (p. viii). Americans defined and refined a shared national character.

According to Royster, Americans believed that benevolence, disinterest, and virtue were central to the national character (p. 23). Benevolence meant “unselfish love,” “active concern for others,” and “eager work for the welfare of all” (p. 22). Perhaps foreshadowing the tension between revolutionary ideals and reality, Royster quotes preacher Nathaniel Whitaker exhorting soldiers to enter the field “with benevolent, tender, compassionate sentiments” and do “his best to kill enemies” because the result will be “the happiness of all mankind” (ibid.). According to Royster, “[t]he fullest beauty of the revolutionaries’ benevolence lay in its freedom from any taint of personal profit” (ibid.). Disinterest, or lack of selfish motives, protected the revolutionaries from corruption. Virtue, according to Royster, had pride of place as “characteristically American” in the minds of the revolutionaries. It is virtue - consciously choosing restraint and sacrifice for the welfare of the community - that Royster returns to again and again as he describes the triumphs and failures of Revolutionaries in general, and the Continental Army in particular.

According to Royster, because Americans believed they innately embodied these characteristics, they were worthy of the ideals for which they were fighting: freedom, liberty, self-government. That innate worth would be proven by their victory over the corrupt, enslaving British. Royster writes that the revolutionaries believed that victory would come because a virtuous and courageous people would naturally prevail over their enemies. Hence, victory did not require the discipline, training, hierarchy, and commitment of a standing army. Revolutionaries warned that “the rise of a standing army implicated the people in the corruption of the government” and indicated that citizens were “too selfish to sacrifice property, time or lives by personal military service” (p. 35). Yet the reality of the war forced the revolutionaries to make compromises.

Royster’s book is a long, repetitive, garbled description of those contradictions and compromises, including: the disciplined hierarchy inherent to a functioning, skillful, competent army conflicts with ideals of liberty and equality; asking citizens to give up control of their money in taxes is a test of freedom, voluntarily sacrificing their money to support the army is a test of virtue; officers insisting on recognition of their superior social status, sense of honor, and ability to lead men goes against notions of egalitarianism and equality; centralized administrative authority is an anathema to personal freedom, yet necessary for efficiently financing, supplying, and prosecuting a war.

The greatest weakness of Royster’s book is that he never defines who, exactly, made up the “revolutionaries.” At times, he conflates Revolutionaries with Americans in general. Sometimes, the revolutionaries are the Army officers; other times they are the Army regulars. Sometimes the revolutionaries are the members of the Continental Congress who sat in judgment of the actions of state governments and the public. Royster’s exposition of the tensions between revolutionary ideals and the realities of the war would have been much more compelling had he clearly defined categories of revolutionaries and their conflicting agendas. Knowing which group made what compromises and why would have made his arguments much easier to follow and digest. Instead, the reader is faced with a mish-mash of differing interpretations of revolutionary ideals, and what constitutes virtue in various phases of the war and across different constituencies: the Continental Congress, the state governments, the militias, the Continental Army officers, the Continental Army regulars, women, preachers, foreigners, bureaucrats, deserters, farmers, and taxpayers.

The conflict between ideals and compromises continued after the war into the beginning of the republic. Each constituency had to reconcile its compromises with the ideals that powered the revolution. Who had upheld and embodied those ideals? Who had demonstrated personal courage and worthiness for the rewards of freedom, liberty and happiness? Was the American character preserved and strengthened? According to

Royster, some Continental Army officers believed “that they alone embodied the true revolutionary spirit that civilians had betrayed” (p. 341). Yet the public would not grant them any superiority, social distinction, or merit pay, and insisted on an alternative interpretation of how independence had been won. It was civilians who embodied benevolence, disinterest and virtue by sacrificing their comforts and upholding a “vision of a free, prosperous, cultured, and devout America” (p. 367) in the face of the greed, crime, and corruption of the Army.

Royster’s book is an intellectual and psychological history of revolutionary Americans. For this book to make any sense at all, students need to be familiar with the actual events of 1775-1783. Royster’s deconstruction of the revolutionaries’ emotional and mental state is sometimes enlightening, but mostly confusing. His exposition of the tension between the revolutionary ideals and the compromises necessitated by reality is interesting. Yet that exposition would be much more engaging and memorable if Royster had structured his book in terms of categories of revolutionaries, and the conflicts among their agendas.

Seth says

From beginning to end, Charles Royster’s *A Revolutionary People at War* is an analysis of Americans and their revolutionary ideals in relation to the war to defeat the British army and secure independence from 1775 to 1783. This comparative study takes an in-depth look at what those ideals were and how they applied to waging a war as colonists against their mother country. Important to this struggle was how freedom and liberty could be maintained without succumbing to the evils of a standing army. The revolutionary zeal of Americans in 1775 and both their fear and hesitancy to allow a standing army even during wartime is the central theme. The revolutionary citizens were much more in favor of volunteer militias, which in reality were support pieces to the Continental Army. It was important from their point of view for there to exist civil supremacy over the military.

The rage militaire of 1775 sparked the Revolution, but did not have the steam to last more than a year into the war. Although most people understood that a national army was necessary to defeat the British, they didn’t want an army commanded by a dictator that might turn against them after the war was won nor did they want to be slaves of the army by having to support it with taxes. Americans expected to win the war because they had faith in the virtue of their philosophy pitted against tyranny and oppression. This outlook led to a lack of desire to join the army, support it and a nonchalant style of soldiering to those who did join the fight. Despite a love of liberty, there was a significant gap between the revolutionary’s ideals and their conduct, which was narrowest and blurred in the Continental Army.

Commander in Chief George Washington’s balance of militiamen and Continental Army regulars is briefly covered, but unfortunately the author spends more time on the general public’s negative opinion of the army. The war could have been won years earlier had more men joined the cause simultaneously. Instead, enlistments expired after one or three years, soldiers deserted and state governments struggled to fill draft quotas. Soldiers also went unpaid and understandably had to leave the army to rejoin their starving families at home. These are just a few of the many issues the Continental Army faced off the battlefield.

A highlight of the book is the coverage provided to Washington’s Fabian strategy to keep the army intact at the expense of the cities and fortified positions. This concept is key to understanding the Revolution because public opinion and support was influential and inseparable to the battles fought between the two armies. Although Philadelphia and other cities fell to the enemy and Congress had to migrate to a new location, the Continental Army stood intact in order to not only fight the British elsewhere, but also to bolster the public’s confidence in the struggle for independence.

There isn’t much about the battles and fighting in the book, which is a major omission when writing about a

war. Royster arbitrarily includes a lot of information and anecdotal stories that often detract from the main story, which although is generally linear in time frame, seems to jump from one main point to another. Although the book follows the conflict in a linear fashion, it is more a blend of topical coverage of main points concerning everywhere but on the battlefield. This style, while appropriate for the author's thesis, can at times become confusing to a reader whose comprehension of the American Revolution does not include a thorough understanding of the war. As a result, the book is best read by those who have a solid background of the conflict and can easily conceptualize key figures and events without explanation and preface. Royster assumes much from the reader, which is unfortunate because this approach alienates most readers and thus places his book on a different level than historical texts that seek to reach a wide audience.

Nate Hill says

A structurally sound history of the American people in Revolution that maybe focuses too much on the Continental Army as an optic.
