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Democracy and Nobility

Abstract

Americans love revolutions. Our national identity began with a revolution, and a revolutionary war that lasted for eight years; and we cheer on other people's revolutions, as though we find satisfaction in multiplying our own. "I hold that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing & as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical," wrote Thomas Jefferson. "No country should be long without one." An excited James Garfield, in his maiden speech in the House of Representatives in 1864, asked whether his colleagues "forget that the Union had its origin in revolution." Ralph Waldo Emerson thought of revolution as the authentic instinct of humanity. "Wherever a man comes, there comes revolution," he said in his Harvard Divinity School address of 1838. "The old is for slaves." [*excerpt*]

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Democracy and Nobility

Was the Civil War a second American Revolution?

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Americans love revolutions. Our national identity began with a revolution, and a revolutionary war that lasted for eight years; and we cheer on other people's revolutions, as though we find satisfaction in multiplying our own. "I hold that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing & as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical," wrote Thomas Jefferson. "No country should be long without one." An excited James Garfield, in his maiden speech in the House of Representatives in 1864, asked whether his colleagues "forget that the Union had its origin in revolution." Ralph Waldo Emerson thought of revolution as the authentic instinct of humanity. "Wherever a man comes, there comes revolution," he said in his Harvard Divinity School address of 1838. "The old is for slaves."



LINCOLN'S DRIVE THROUGH RICHMOND

DENNIS MALONE CARTER (1866)

But sometimes our enthusiasm for revolutions blinds us to what *is*, and what is *not*, genuinely revolutionary. The English geologist and traveler George Featherstonhaugh took the temperature of American revolutionary fervor and dismissed it as mere patriotic puff, designed only to "stimulate that national vanity and self-sufficiency which are often so conspicuous in young countries, and to cherish in his fellow-citizens that inflated feeling of superiority over other nations." So let us be clear about what a revolution *is*: A revolution is an overturning, a reversal of polarity, a radical discontinuity with what has gone before. It means, as the sociologist Jeff Goodwin wrote, "not only mass mobilization and regime change, but also more or less rapid and fundamental social, economic and/or cultural change, during or soon after the struggle for state power."

Stacked against that definition, our founding revolution, and the revolutions that succeeded it, may not be so revolutionary after all. At first, the American Revolution presents us with a whopping set of discontinuities: The king of England disappears and is replaced by a notion of sovereignty residing in the people; democratic governments emerge in the new American states and coalesce in an unprecedented piece of formal statecraft, the Constitution; the property of prominent American Tories is confiscated; law-codes must be rewritten, and a major debate takes place over whether English common law should still retain authority or be superseded by legislative statute. But much of this revolutionary reshaping happened simply by elevating the revolutionaries' already-in-place experiments in self-government to permanent status. "We began our Revolution, already possessed of government, and, comparatively, of civil liberty," said Daniel Webster. "Our ancestors had from the first been accustomed in a great measure to govern themselves" and

“had little else to do than to throw off the paramount authority of the parent state. Enough was still left, both of law and of organization, to conduct society in its accustomed course, and to unite men together for a common object.”

In 1843, when one of the last survivors of Lexington and Concord was interviewed by an overanxious antiquarian about his reasons for revolution, Captain Levi Preston of Danvers replied simply, “Young man, what we meant in going for those Redcoats was this: We always had governed ourselves and we always meant to. They didn’t mean we should.” In other words, our revolution was a revolution *against* a revolution, and in defense of an already-existing (albeit de facto) democratic order. The real revolution, we might say, was the attempt of the king of England to meddle in those arrangements.

This ambivalence about revolutions has never been more of a problem than when we speak of the American Civil War—as we often do—as a “second” American Revolution, and especially when we are situated near the end of the sesquicentennial of the Civil War. James Garfield said in 1864, “Our situation affords a singular parallel to that of the people of Great Britain in their great revolution of the seventeenth century.” Thaddeus Stevens hoped that Union forces would “free every slave—slay every traitor—burn every rebel mansion,” and make the war “a radical revolution.” And nearer our own time, Progressive historians of the 1920s and 1930s warmed to the notion of the Civil War as a revolution in which (according to Charles Beard, who first applied “second American Revolution” to the Civil War) “an industrial and commercial nation following in the footsteps of Great Britain” was transformed by “the power of capital, both absolute and as compared to land.”

Certainly there exists quite a long list of discontinuities with the American past that the Civil War opened up in American life—in the technology of war, in law and politics, in social relations and economics, and culminating in the abolition of slavery. But do these discontinuities amount to a *revolution*? Are they really even discontinuities?

The most obvious of these discontinuities in the Civil War have to do with the war itself, or rather the technology of war, since the received wisdom in military history for the past half-century has been that the seemingly endless casualty lists of Civil War battlefields were the product of unimaginative officers attempting to use the outdated tactics of Napoleon against the decimating wonder of the newly invented rifled musket and rifled artillery. And this technology really was remarkable in many ways. Unlike the trusty old British “Brown Bess” musket of the 18th century (which was useless at ranges greater than 80 yards), the Civil War-era rifle musket could hit an 11-inch bull’s-eye at 350 yards and could penetrate 6 inches of pine board at 500 yards.

But the rifle musket was not exactly a novelty by the time the American Civil War broke out. It received its first practical tests in North Africa in 1846, in the Crimean War of 1853-56, and in the North Italian War of 1859, and it had attracted quite enough use and attention for two American officers—George Willard and Cadmus Wilcox, both of whom fought at Gettysburg—to write handbooks on its use.

And for all the improvements in range and accuracy created by the rifle musket, it was still a black-powder, paper-cartridge muzzle-loader which required a cumbersome sequence of nine separate steps (known as “load in nine times”) to load. Although the optimum firing-rate was three rounds per minute, the practical reality under battlefield conditions was closer to one round every four to five minutes. Moreover, its fabled improvements in accuracy were also fatally limited: The rifling in the barrel which gave its bullets a self-

correcting spin also slowed its velocity significantly from that of the old Brown Bess—from 1,500 to 1,115 feet-per-second—and allowed the bullet to drop as much as 14 feet over 300 yards. This, in turn, required the installation of back sights on the various brands of rifle muskets, which forced the shooter to raise the rifle upwards before firing. In effect, the bullet was not so much fired as it was dropped (and this dropping is echoed in numerous Civil War descriptions of combat in which bullets are said to have “dropped in showers”). So, whatever was gained in terms of pinpoint targeting had to be paid for by continuous mental adjustments for the movement of targets—and the actual environment of combat was not conducive to careful mental adjustments. “What precision of aim or direction can be expected,” asked one British officer, when “one man is priming; another coming to the present; a third taking, what is called, aim; a fourth ramming down his cartridge,” and all the while “the whole body are closely enveloped in smoke, and the enemy totally invisible?”

The answer, of course, was *not much*. After the battle of Stone’s River, Union major general William S. Rosecrans worked out a general estimate of how many shots needed to be fired to inflict one hit on the enemy, and came up with the astounding calculation that 20,000 rounds of artillery fired during that battle managed to hit exactly 728 men; even more amazing, his troops had fired off 2 million rifle cartridges and inflicted 13,832 hits on rebel infantry. In practical terms, this was still the sort of combat where men could stand upright on the battlefield with a fairly healthy margin of safety; the staggering length of the casualty lists was the result not of modernized weapons, but of the inexperience of both volunteer officers and soldiers in charging home with the bayonet and the consequent bogging-down of lines of battle in motionless exchanges of fire. The real revolution in weapons technology would occur not in the Civil War, but with the adoption of breech-loading rifles as standard infantry arms in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. In that respect, far from being revolutionary, the weapons of the Civil War made it the last of the Napoleonic Wars rather than a revolutionary harbinger of the Western Front.

It has been argued that the Civil War was a revolution in warfare thanks to railroad transportation and the electrical telegraph. But once again, the military application of neither the railroad nor the telegraph was an innovation of the American Civil War. Both were put to their first practical test by the British Army in the Crimean War, and in 1859 Napoleon III took the railroads one step further, using them for troop transportation into northern Italy against the Austrians. French railroads moved 76,000 men in just 10 days, and in the run-up to the battles at Magenta and Solferino, it took some of Napoleon III’s regiments only five days to reach their concentration point in northern Italy from Paris.

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