

Name : _____

Critical Reading Assignment: How revolutionary was the American revolution?

The broad outline of the Revolutionary War is familiar to most of us. The American Revolution, also called the War of Independence, took place between 1775 and 1783. It was a fight waged by the 13 British colonies against their mother country, England. At the time, England was the most powerful country in the world. The war, rather surprisingly, was won by the colonies who named themselves the United States of America. With the signing of the Versailles Peace Treaty in 1783, the United States gained what it had been fighting for, its independence.

However, historians have had conflicting views on how much the revolution actually changed. One group has argued that the Revolution was not very revolutionary. These historians see the Revolution as **conservative**: that is, while even while throwing off British rule, the American leaders tried to conserve or hold onto many of the old ways. These historians argue that while the colonists may have gotten **political** independence from England, there was no significant **social** or **economic revolution**.

A second group of historians view the American Revolution as **radical**, producing significant changes above and beyond independence. Amidst all of this disagreement, one thing seems clear: the debate over the American Revolution of 1776 continues into the 21st century.

Directions: Read the following two sources and annotate them using the “Attack the Text” strategy. The first is from a historian named Gordon Wood, who argues that the revolution was a radical event that fundamentally transformed history. The second is from a historian named Howard Zinn, who references a number of historians in explaining why he believes the Revolution to largely conservative that did not change much about the nature of society. Once you’re done with the critical reading, answer the questions at the end of the assignment.

Reading Passage #1

Gordon Wood, *the Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 1991

| 3. Summarize main ideas | 1. Number paragraphs, 2. Mark text with a purpose | 4. Annotate |
|---|--|-------------|
| <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> | <p>We Americans like to think of our revolution as not being radical; indeed, most of the time we consider it downright conservative. It certainly does not appear to resemble the revolutions of other nations in which people were killed, property was destroyed, and everything was turned upside down... We cannot quite conceive¹ of revolutionaries in powdered hair and knee breeches.</p> <p>They made speeches, not bombs... They did not kill one another; they did not devour themselves. The American Revolution does not seem to have the same kinds of causes – the social wrongs, the class conflict, the impoverishment², the grossly inequitable distributions of wealth³ – that presumably lie behind other revolutions. There were no peasant uprisings, no burning of castles, no storming of prisons.</p> | |

¹ conceive: think, imagine

² Impoverishment: poverty

³ grossly inequitable distributions of wealth: having a big gap between rich and poor, where the rich hold most of the wealth

The social conditions that generically⁴ are supposed to lie behind all revolutions – poverty, and economic deprivation – were not present in colonial America. American colonists were not oppressed and had no crushing imperial chains to throw off. In fact, the colonists knew they were freer, more equal, more prosperous, and less burdened with feudal and monarchical restraints than any other part of mankind in the 18th century.

... If we measure the radicalism of revolutions by the degree of social misery or economic deprivation suffered, or by the number of people killed or manor houses burned, then this emphasis on the conservatism of the American Revolutions becomes true enough. But if we measure the radicalism by the amount of social change that actually took place – by transformations in the relationships that bound people to each other – then the American Revolution was not conservative at all; on the contrary, it was as radical and as revolutionary as any in history.

...By the time the Revolution had run its course in the early 19th century, American society had been transformed. One class did not overthrow another; the poor did not supplant⁵ the rich. But social relationships – the way people were connected one to another – were changed, and decisively so. It was in fact a new society unlike any that had ever existed anywhere in the world.

In 1760 America was only a collection of colonies huddled along a narrow strip of the Atlantic coast – economically underdeveloped outposts existing on the very edges of the civilized world. The less than two million monarchical subjects who lived in these colonies still took for granted that society was and ought to be a hierarchy of ranks and degrees of dependency and that most people were bound together by personal ties of one sort or another.

Yet scarcely fifty years later these insignificant borderland provinces had become a giant, almost continent-wide republic of nearly ten million egalitarian⁶-minded bustling citizens who not only had thrust themselves into the vanguard of history but had fundamentally altered their society and their social relationships. Far from remaining monarchical, hierarchy-ridden subjects on the margin of civilization, Americans had become almost overnight, the most liberal, the most democratic, the most commercially minded, and the most modern people in the world.

And this astonishing transformation took place without industrialization, without urbanization, without railroads, without the aid of any of the great forces we usually invoke to explain

⁴ generically: usually

⁵ supplant: replace, overthrow

⁶ egalitarian: referring to equality, to the idea that people deserve equal rights and opportunities

“modernization.” It was the Revolution, more than any other single event, that made America into the most liberal, democratic, and modern nation in the world.

To focus, as we are today apt to do, on what the Revolution did not accomplish – highlighting and lamenting⁷ its failure to abolish slavery and change fundamentally the lot of women – is to miss the great significance of what it did accomplish; indeed, the Revolution was what made possible the anti-slavery and women’s rights movements of the 19th century and in fact all our current egalitarian thinking.

The Revolution not only radically changed the personal and social relationships of people, including the position of women, but also destroyed aristocracy as it had been understood in the Western world for several millennia. The Revolution brought respectability and even dominance to ordinary people long held in contempt and gave dignity to their menial labor in a manner unprecedented in history and to a degree not equaled elsewhere in the world. The Revolution did not just eliminate monarchy and create republics; it actually reconstituted what Americans meant by public or state power and brought about an entirely new kind of popular politics and a new kind of democratic officeholder.

... In short, the Revolution was the most radical and most far-reaching event in American history.

⁷ lamenting: feeling sorrow/sadness about

Reading Passage #2
Howard Zinn, A People's History of the United States, 1980

3. Summarize main ideas

1. Number the paragraphs, 2. Mark text with a purpose

4. Annotate

[Seizing] The huge landholdings of the Loyalists⁸ had been one of the great incentives⁹ to Revolution. The Loyalist holders of great estates, especially those who were absentees, had their land confiscated¹⁰ and distributed to the revolutionaries. In New York, the number of freeholding small farmers increased after the Revolution, and there were fewer tenant farmers, who had created so much trouble in the pre-Revolution years.

Although the number of independent farmers grew, according to Rowland Berthoff and John Murrin, “the class structure did not change radically.” The ruling group went through personnel changes as “the rising merchant families of Boston, New York or Philadelphia . . . slipped quite credibly into the social status – and sometimes the very houses of those who failed in business or suffered confiscation and exile for loyalty to the crown.”

Edmund Morgan sums up the class nature of the Revolution this way: “The fact that the lower ranks were involved in the contest should not obscure¹¹ the fact that the contest itself was generally a struggle for office and power between members of an upper class: the new against the established.” Looking at the situation after the Revolution, Richard Morris comments: “Everywhere one finds inequality.” He finds “the people” of “We the people of the United States” (a phrase coined by the very rich Governor Morris) did not mean Indians or blacks or women or white servants. In fact, there were more indentured servants than ever, and the Revolution “did nothing to end and little to ameliorate¹² white bondage.”

Carl Degler says (Out of our Past): “No new social class came to power through the door of the American revolution. The men who engineered the revolt were largely members of the colonial ruling class.” George Washington was the richest man in America. John Hancock was a prosperous Boston merchant. Benjamin Franklin was a wealthy printer. And so on.

⁸ Loyalists: colonists who had remained loyal to the King

⁹ incentives: motivations, reasons for

¹⁰ confiscated: taken by force

¹¹ obscure: cover up, hide

¹² ameliorate: lessen the impact of

It seems that the rebellion against British rule allowed a certain group of the colonial elite to replace those loyal to England, give some benefits to small landowners, and leave poor white working people and tenant farmers in very much their old situation.

What did the Revolution mean to the Native Americans, the Indians? They had been ignored by the fine words of the Declaration, had not been considered equal, certainly not in choosing those who would govern the American territories in which they lived, nor in being able to pursue happiness as they had pursued it for centuries before the white Europeans arrived. Now, with the British out of the way, the Americans could begin the inexorable¹³ process of pushing the Indians out of their lands, killing them if they resisted. In short, as Francis Jennings puts it, the white Americans were fighting against British imperial control in the East, and for their own imperialism¹⁴ in the West.

The situation of black slaves as a result of the American Revolution was more complex. Thousands of blacks fought with the British. Five thousand were with the Revolutionaries, most of them from the North, but there were also free blacks from Virginia and Maryland. The lower South was reluctant to arm blacks. Amid the urgency and chaos of war, thousands took their freedom – leaving on British ships at the end of the war to settle in England, Nova Scotia, the West Indies, or Africa. Many others stayed in America as free blacks, evading their masters.

In the northern states, the combination of blacks in the military, the lack of powerful economic need for slaves, and the rhetoric for Revolution led to the end of slavery – but very slowly. As late as 1810, thirty thousand blacks, one-fourth of the black population of the North, remained slaves. In 1840 there were still a thousand slaves in the North. In the upper South, there were more free Negroes than before, leading to more control legislation. In the lower South, slavery expanded with the growth of rice and cotton plantations.

The inferior position of blacks, the exclusion of Indians from the new society, the establishment of supremacy for the rich and powerful in the new nation – all this was already settled in the colonies by the time of the Revolution. With the English out of the way, it could now be put on paper, solidified, regularized, made legitimate, by the Constitution of the United States, drafted at a convention of Revolutionary leaders of Philadelphia.

¹³ inexorable: unstoppable, inevitable

¹⁴ imperialism: empire building

The Constitution, the end result of the revolution, illustrates the complexity of the American system: that it serves the interests of a wealthy elite, but also does enough for small property owners, for middle-income mechanics and farmers, to build a broad base of support. The slightly prosperous people who make up this base of support are buffers¹⁵ against the blacks, the Indians, the very poor whites. They enable the elite to keep control with a minimum of force, a maximum of law – all made palatable¹⁶ by the fanfare of patriotism and unity.

Were the Founding Fathers wise and just men trying to achieve a good balance? In fact, they did not want a balance, except one which kept things as they were, a balance among the dominant forces at that time. They certainly did not want an equal balance between slaves and masters, propertyless and property holders, Indians and white. [not even counting Indians and slaves], many as half the people were not even considered by the Founding Fathers... They were not mentioned in the Declaration of Independence, they were absent in the Constitution, they were invisible in the new political democracy. They were the women of early America.

THINK AND SEARCH: What are some of the reasons that Gordon Wood believes the American Revolution was a radical event?

THINK AND SEARCH: What are some of the reasons that Howard Zinn believes the American Revolution was a conservative event?

¹⁵ buffers: barriers, protectors

¹⁶ palatable: able to be swallowed, acceptable