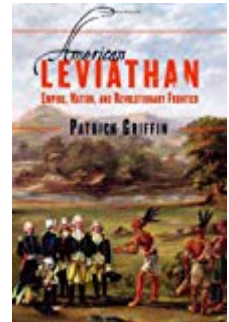


**Patrick Griffin.** *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier.*  
New York: Hill & Wang, 2007. x + 368 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8090-9515-5.



**Reviewed by** Peter C. Messer

**Published on** H-Law (September, 2007)

Patrick Griffin's *American Leviathan* offers an important contribution to our understanding of the nation and the empire created by the American Revolution. Griffin argues that Americans developed a distinctly Hobbesian view of the state as a result of the turbulent process of westward expansion between the end of the French and Indian War (1763) and the Treaty of Greenville (1795). In between those years, various idealistic schemes to establish an orderly empire, create republican communities, secure an unlimited market in land, and establish economic independence all collapsed, to be replaced by a pragmatic vision of a nation founded on the state imposing order on a chaotic world. This process began in the 1760s when British imperial policy, seeking to isolate the trans-Appalachian West from the settled eastern colonies, clashed with the interests of elite land speculators and landless colonists hoping to exploit the territories acquired after the French and Indian War. These clashing views produced the Proclamation Line of 1763, as the imperial government sought to restrain the colonists, and then Lord Dunmore's War in 1775 as colonial governments and settlers vied with each other for

control of western lands. The result of this chaos was the collapse of order on the frontier as the British government's efforts to restrain settlement proved fruitless and cost it legitimacy in the eyes of the settlers and the rivalries among colonial governments prevented them from establishing orderly communities. The Revolution compounded the confusion as the government of the United States showed no interest in fighting a war on the frontier, while the British government encouraged attacks by its Indian allies on the frontier communities. In the years following independence, continuing disputes among states, federal ineptitude and taxation, and the long-standing hostilities between frontier settlers and their Indian neighbors perpetuated the chaos of the Revolution. Peace, or order, was restored when the settlers and the federal government entered into a Hobbesian compact following Anthony Wayne's defeat of a confederation of Ohio Valley Indians in 1794; the United States would provide the security and stability the settlers needed to survive and prosper, and the settlers would unite with each other and support the authority of the state. The result was a nation and empire founded on the

principle of white settlers expanding to the west, with their physical and economic security guaranteed by the federal government, all at the expense of native peoples.

Griffin's book speaks to several historiographies: the role of "the people" in the American Revolution, the racialized foundations of national identity, the role of the frontier in American history, and the transatlantic dimensions of the Revolution. The recent publication of Gary Nash's *The Unknown Revolution* (2005) makes Griffin's contribution to the first of these discussions particularly timely. Griffin wants to complicate what he sees as an overly simplistic view of the role of the people in the Revolution that tends to either subsume them within an elite-driven ideological consensus, or celebrate them as forgotten founders betrayed by conspiratorial elites. Griffin acknowledges that elites and non-elites on the frontier came to share important assumptions about politics and government as a result of the Revolution, but rejects the standard ideological emphasis on the role of republican or liberal theorists in this process. Instead, he argues that the consensus that emerged on the frontier rested on shared interests in physical safety, economic opportunity, and racial solidarity. The resulting state more closely resembled Thomas Hobbes's pragmatic concerns with order and security, than either the Commonwealthmen's idealist republic or John Locke's optimistic liberalism.

Griffin's interpretation of the creation of this consensus shares with Nash the argument that the attitudes and needs of the common people were the driving forces in the Revolution and the political settlement it produced. Griffin stresses that the struggle to achieve physical and economic security on the frontier politicized common settlers and gave them an acute sense of their interests in relation to both the contending governments and local elites. He departs from what he sees as the standard narrative of a people's revolution, however, when discussing the re-establish-

ment of elite rule in the West in the 1790s. Griffin contends that this development reflected the knowing compromises entered into by the common settlers with the elite in which the former willingly sacrificed some of their interests in order to achieve physical and economic security. Non-elite settlers, for example, agreed that land in the West would be surveyed and sold at auction, effectively denying the right of squatters to claim land they had occupied and improved. This decision, Griffin suggests, was the price that the settlers willingly paid in order to receive the protection and economic opportunity provided by the state and the presence of the elites. Thus, the relatively conservative tone of Revolutionary settlement in the American West reflected the desires of politically and economically savvy settlers, and not the machinations of a conspiratorial elite.

One element of the compromise among the classes represents Griffin's contribution to another important historiographic conversation, that concerning the racialization of national identity. He argues that one shortcoming of the interpretation of the Revolution as a people's revolution is the degree to which modern historians have either rationalized or ignored the unsavory actions of the people, in this case, their undeniably racist views of Indians. Griffin's view of the Revolution in the West, however, places these views and the actions they produced at the center of the Revolution and its consequences. He builds on works, such as Gregory Knouff's *A Soldier's Revolution* (2004), by arguing that Indian-hating became the foundation of a racialized national identity that offered membership in the community to all men who had white skin. Common people and elites united around the idea of their shared whiteness and the commitment of the government to promote the interests of whites at the expense of native peoples. For Griffin, in other words, the politicization of the people during the Revolution was accompanied by the spread and acceptance of a

racialized national identity that overcame and muted class differences.

Griffin's work also speaks to the long-standing debate about the significance of the frontier in American history, turning Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis on its head. Like Turner, Griffin sees the West as the place where we can best see and understand the development of the qualities and traits that defined the development of the United States as a culture and an empire. Unlike Turner, he sees the West illustrating a darker side of American identity and philosophies of empire. If the process of settling the West democratized politics, encouraged individual freedom, and promoted the market economy it did so hand in hand with the spread of racism and the violent displacement of native peoples. The national myth that comes out of Griffin's study of the West is, as he suggests, more complicated and troubling than Turner's or even Nash's, but is, consequently, more useful to students of American history at all levels of expertise.

Finally, Griffin reminds readers of the possibilities and limits of a transatlantic view of the American Revolution. He stresses the important role that Ireland played in shaping British attitudes toward North America and the peoples who lived there. He also emphasizes the role of Scottish philosophy--notably the idea that all human societies pass through progressive stages of "improvement," beginning as clans of hunter-gathers and eventually maturing into commercial empires--in shaping British policies, and the colonial reaction to them. In the process, much as he resurrects a Turnerian view of the frontier, Griffin breathes new life into American exceptionalism. The problems created by managing the myriad conflicts on the frontier in British North America and in the United States ultimately illustrated the limitations of previous experience in Ireland and philosophies devised in Edinburgh, Glasgow, London, or Paris. The realization of these differences, however, reminds the reader not of the superior

virtue of the United States, but of the peculiar problems, particularly relating to race and class in political discourse, created by its exceptional frontier experience.

For all its merits, the book does some things better than others. Griffin, for example, could do more to bring the experience of cultural transformation among Native Americans into his account. While these groups appear in the book as active historical agents the narrative does not bring out the ways in which their attitudes about race and politics were evolving in tandem with those of the Euro-American population. In his defense, some of this discussion, particularly the contributions of Richard White's *The Middle Ground* (1991) and James Merrell's *Into the American Woods* (1999), appears in the notes, but it would have added an interesting element to this book if Griffin had more fully integrated changing Indian culture into his narrative. No book, however, can do everything, and *American Leviathan* makes an important contribution to scholarship on the American Revolution, the eighteenth-century West, and philosophies of empire, that should be read and appreciated by scholars in all these fields.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-law>

**Citation:** Peter C. Messer. Review of Griffin, Patrick. *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. September, 2007.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13579>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.