



Gordon S. Wood. *The American Revolution: A History*. New York: The Modern Library, 2002. xxv + 190 pgs. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-679-64057-8.



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Fashioning a New Revolution

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Now that Founder Chic, the latest fad in the history of the early republic, has re-popularized such retro icons as George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson, fashion-conscious readers may soon be clamoring for a stylish re-telling of the American Revolution.[1] If so, Ray Raphael's and Gordon Wood's new books will be all the rage. *A People's History of the American Revolution* and *The American Revolution: A History* are both written for broad audiences, and both concern the struggle for American independence. Beyond that, similarities rapidly cease. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how two *prêt-à-porter* histories of the American Revolution could differ more—if you'll forgive the term—radically than these.

More than two decades have passed since the publication of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*.^[2] Spawning a teaching edition, wall charts, even an audio CD, Zinn's radical history, now in its twenty-fifth printing, has influenced our historical memory more than most books may reasonably aspire. By telling the stories of people whom American democracy has ex-

ploited or forgotten, Zinn shattered many of our nation's most cherished and hard-dying myths. As the hero of the movie "Good Will Hunting" proclaimed, "That book will knock you on your a-."

Hoping to build upon the enduring success of Zinn's landmark book, The New Press has recently launched a "People's History Series," slated to cover such wide-ranging topics as the Renaissance, the settlement of the New World, the U.S. Civil War, the Industrial Revolution, World War II, and the Cold War. Inaugurating the series is Ray Raphael's *A People's History of the American Revolution*. Raphael is a prolific author whose previous nonfiction books—he has co-authored a mystery as well—span such eclectic subjects as the ecosystem of the Pacific northwest, the timber industry, marijuana production in northern California, rural development and human ecology, teachers and teaching, manhood and masculinity in America, and a nineteenth-century Indian agent and expedition leader named Redick McKee. Further, he stakes his claim to Revolutionary expertise with his most recent work, *The First American Revolution: Before Lexington and Concord*, published by the New Press on the heels of his

People's History.^[3]

Following in Zinn's footsteps, Raphael endeavors "to look into forgotten corners ... [to] find evidence that helps us deconstruct and reconstruct the American Revolution" (p. 8). Though the book-jacket praise for Raphael's *People's History* rightly acknowledges that it is "emphatically not a debunking work," the book introduces itself otherwise. Zinn's series preface speaks of "[t]urning history on its head" and "shak[ing] up readers' understanding of the past." Raphael's own introduction announces, "It is time to break from the mold" (p. 9). To this end, Raphael promises to focus not on "paper heroes," the privileged white men whom historians have long celebrated as Founders and Framers, but rather on the "[r]eal people" who "made and endured the American Revolution" (p. 1). In the wake of September 11, this approach holds particular allure, but readers who comb Raphael's pages for the courageous common men and women of 1776 may come away disappointed.

Each of the first six of Raphael's seven chapters concerns a select portion of the American population. Chapter 1, "Rank-and-File Rebels," explores the ways that "plain folk" contributed to the sociopolitical upheaval of the Revolution, both in urban centers and rural areas. Portions of this chapter are drawn from Raphael's *First American Revolution* and may bear special appeal for legal scholars. Here, as in the later book, Raphael narrates the tumultuous summer of 1774, during which the people of western Massachusetts wrested political authority from the royal government in a bloodless and subsequently forgotten coup. His conclusion that "moderate delegates to the Continental Congress [who] pushed for reconciliation in the fall of 1774 ... were a bit too late" ignores certain contingencies, such as Congress's approval of the inflammatory Suffolk Resolves or Parliament's rejection of Lord Chatham's Provisional Bill, the failure of which might have prevented or forestalled the war. But Raphael justifiably draws our attention to the people's revolution against the Crown-appointed judiciary, a revolution that, to its participants, may very well have seemed irreversible.

Chapter 2, "Fighting Men and Boys," views the military conflict "through the eyes of privates and petty officers" to see more clearly the hardships of war: hunger, want of adequate clothing and shelter, injury, disease, and death (p. 53). Here Raphael is attuned both the economic disparities that enabled some wealthy men to avoid military service as well as the masculine peer pressures that pushed some young men into it. Chapter 3,

"Women," moves beyond the elite ladies who first captured historians' attention in the early 1980s, exploring instead the lives of working-class farm laborers, price protesters, and camp followers. Raphael also dedicates several pages of this chapter to instances of rape and sexual assault inflicted by both the American and British armies, a topic seldom discussed in popular histories of the Revolution. In Chapter 4, "Loyalists and Pacifists," Raphael captures well the internecine essence of the Revolution: communities and families split apart as men and women supported or opposed the Patriot cause for a variety of complex, shifting, and seemingly counterintuitive reasons, ranging from ideology to economic interest to personal allegiance to sheer self-preservation. And, in defense of their own liberties, American Revolutionaries frequently quashed the rights of their perceived enemies, the same rights, ironically, that they later enshrined in the Bill of Rights, including the "[f]reedom of speech, trial by jury, the right of cross-examination, [and the] prohibition against bills of attainder" (p. 185).

Chapter 5, "Native Americans," concludes that the Revolution had a devastating impact even for those Indian nations not drawn into the heaviest fighting. The war caused wrenching conflict within communities, often along generational lines. Remapping the geopolitical landscape of North America, the war also isolated many Native American groups from their British allies, situating them instead as antagonists of the United States' soon-to-be-realized Manifest Destiny. Chapter 6, "African Americans," reveals the willingness of British and American leaders alike to "play the 'slave card'" (p. 246), that is, to entice slaves to runaway or to exploit planters' fears of slave insurrections for political or military purposes. In each of these chapters, Raphael amasses a remarkable array of informative, rarely read, primary source material. General readers may balk at Raphael's tendency to present these quotations (which he has not modernized), as well as much of his own argument, in lengthy, bulleted, small-font paragraphs, but those who stave off the temptation to skim will be rewarded for their efforts with rich, eye-witness accounts of the Revolution.

Raphael's *People's History* thus offers an important corrective to roseate Shot-Heard-'Round-the-World histories of the American Revolution. But such histories, of course, no longer dominate the scholarly literature. Raphael's claim that historians are *beginning* "to replace, or at least supplement, the traditional picture of the Revolution with an elaborate mosaic of new scenes and different characters" (p. 8) misses the boat by nearly thirty

years. Indeed, his stated intention to “shift the lens” of Revolutionary history is given the lie by his extensive reliance on the work—much of it now decades old—of such historians as Gary Nash, Edward Countryman, Alfred Young, Pauline Maier, Charles Royster, Mary Beth Norton, Linda Kerber, Colin Calloway, James Merrell, Sylvia Frey, Woody Holton, and even, as explained more fully below, Gordon Wood. The problem is not that American historians still write filiopietistic books about the Founders, as Raphael would have us believe, but rather that their hard-labored research into the lives of working-class men and women, soldiers, slaves, and Indians has not yet fully reshaped our collective consciousness of the Revolutionary period. (Nor, arguably, could it be expected to do so when pop-culture visions of the Revolution continue to reframe the war to suit the tastes of the modern American public; for example, the 2000 would-be blockbuster epic, “The Patriot,” torturously depicted a South Carolina planter living harmoniously with his free black workforce until chased off by evil Redcoats.) If by masquerading as anti-establishment forces, however, the “People’s History Series” authors succeed in introducing the work of America’s leading scholars to readers who would not otherwise bother to engage with the past, by all means let them shoot arrows at the ivory tower.

Slighting historians, unfortunately, is not Raphael’s most egregious mistake. *A People’s History*, as the name implies, is a history of people, not of ideas or events. There is no encompassing narrative of the Revolution here; very little to answer, “what?” and almost nothing to answer, “why?” The only discernible story line is that the war exacted a terrible toll and that ordinary people did whatever they could to survive. These lessons have, indeed, been overshadowed by the Revolution’s legacies of liberty and democracy, and they are vital for a nation now winding down one armed conflict and perhaps seeking to engage in another. But Raphael’s tale of the endurance of common folk, which one might expect to climax in moments of bravery, fortitude, and hope, rings only of despair. Soldiers mutiny, wives demand that their husbands stay home rather than join the fight, slaves run away to the British army only to be resold in the West Indies—all without any sense that the war may have had worthy aims or redeeming consequences. The result, a history of the Revolution without good guys, without bad guys, with only long-suffering hardship, apparently happens by design. Concluding his chapter on African Americans, Raphael asks, “[I]s not our modern vision skewed ... as we rewrite our texts to include the ‘contributions’ which African Americans made to the Revolu-

tionary cause?” (p. 298). Perhaps it is, but Raphael’s alternative approach, to record only the impact of people’s actions without commenting on their social value, reads as if someone held a magnet to the author’s moral compass.

For example, in his final chapter, “The Body of the People,” which functions as much as an introduction to his philosophy of people’s history as a conclusion to the book, Raphael briefly discusses the economic turmoil wrought by the Revolution. Inflation, price gouging, and food scarcity, he argues, compounded a cycle of economic self-interest. “[C]ommon people with common sense concluded that charity must start at home. The net effect of so many people looking out for themselves was economic collapse. Ordinary Americans, not just wealthy speculators,” Raphael observes with no apparent sense of irony or disappointment, “made this happen” (p. 303). Such a conclusion does not honor the agency of everyday folk, as Raphael might have it, so much as it raps the knuckles of the Invisible Hand. But again, this is a book about people, not ideas, and the author does not pursue his findings’ profound implications for Smithean liberalism.

In Raphael’s defense, his book raises a number of questions about the nature of history in general, and of popular history in particular: Should history celebrate its actors? Should history provide moral instruction or convey a useful message? If not, what purpose should history serve? Lay readers may not know that they care about such questions until they confront Raphael’s disconcerting book.

Gordon S. Wood, the Alva O. Way University Professor at Brown University, approaches the Revolution in a more traditional way. The author of two prize-winning books, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*, and *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*,^[3] Wood, too, has profoundly influenced American history (Matt Damon’s grumblings in “Good Will Hunting” notwithstanding). His latest study is a volume in the Modern Library Chronicles, a series that aspires to publish “authoritative, lively, brief ... and accessible books”—on topics ranging from ancient Athens to modern Japan—“that bring history within the reach of the nonspecialist.”^[4]

Wood has little patience for histories of the Revolution such as Raphael’s. In his preface to *The American Revolution*, Wood lambastes those scholars for whom “it has become fashionable to deny that anything substantially progressive came out of the Revolution” (p. xxiv). By contrast, Wood argues that the Revolution and

the Critical Period produced “a rambunctious middling democracy” characterized by broadened representation and interest-driven party politics, a system that neither the Patriots of 1776 nor the Federalists of 1787 fully anticipated (p. 166).

Appealing in its brevity, *The American Revolution* is divided into seven parts: “Origins,” “American Resistance,” “Revolution,” “Constitution-making and War,” “Republicanism,” “Republican Society,” and “The Federal Constitution.” Taken together, these chapters tell a story that Wood’s previous books have helped make standard: Political tensions erupted after the Seven Years’ War when King George III’s ministers ended decades of “salutary neglect” in favor of revenue-raising schemes such as the Sugar and Stamp Acts. Well versed in liberal and republican thought, American Patriots protested taxation without representation, and launched nonimportation campaigns; after Parliament passed the stringent Coercive Acts in response to the destruction of tea in Boston, they convened a Continental Congress in hopes of securing redress for their grievances. The outbreak of hostilities in the spring and summer of 1775 escalated the imperial crisis, severely dampening prospects for reconciliation, and Thomas Paine’s publication of *Common Sense* six months later readied the American people for a total breach from England. After the Declaration of Independence, local political leaders, hoping to realize their neoclassical visions for a virtuous and learned society, founded new state governments on principles of republicanism. Years later, Congress’s inability to regulate trade, raise taxes, or curb the political abuses of the several state legislatures convinced many Americans of the need for a stronger central government, and in 1787 a convention of delegates gathered in Philadelphia to amend the Articles of Confederation. Under the resulting federal Constitution, ratified after most Anti-Federalists agreed to lend their support in exchange for consideration of a Bill of Rights, republicanism soon yielded to the egalitarian democracy we know today.[5]

If this reads like textbook history, that’s because it is. In *The American Revolution*, Wood mostly rehashes his chapters on the period from *The Great Republic*, by Bernard Bailyn et al.[6] He augments his narrative with a chronological outline and several maps of major military campaigns, and, in lieu of notes, he has appended a bibliography as broad and up-to-date as popular audiences should require. Yet whereas Raphael presents characters without a story, Wood presents a story without a rise or fall. Driven as it is by major people, events, and ideas, *The American Revolution* has the potential to ex-

press the genuine drama and contingency of the period, but this is a potential that Wood curiously and regrettably negates. He repeatedly employs such teleological expressions as “only a matter of time,” “irresistibly,” and “inevitably,” suggesting that once the Revolutionary ball got rolling, nothing could be done to stop it.

The American Revolution, however, does concisely convey two important themes from Wood’s previous works, themes that—one hopes—will broaden general readers’ appreciation for the period. Legal and constitutional historians familiar with Wood’s *Creation of the American Republic* will recognize his concern with the formation of state constitutions. It was “[t]he states,” Wood argues, who in 1776-77 “were to test the Revolutionary hopes” (p. 66). After decades of wrangling with royal governors, state constitution writers drastically scaled back executive authority and instituted checks and balances to prevent that branch of government from encroaching on the other two. Further, they democratized their state legislatures “by creating equal electoral districts, requiring annual elections, enlarging the suffrage, imposing residential requirements for both the electors and the elected, and granting constituents the right to instruct their representatives” (p. 69). Many local leaders, however, still believed “the people were apt to be licentious or giddy,” and so most states adopted a bicameral legislature whose upper house would attract a natural aristocracy to “revise and correct the well-intentioned but often careless measures of the people” (pp. 69-70).

The giddy and licentious people, in turn, requited the emergence of a natural aristocracy by feeling no great veneration for it, and this is Wood’s second significant observation. In *Radicalism*, Wood posits that the Revolution swept away a culture of monarchical deference and ushered in its place one of democratic egalitarianism. Though not the focal point of *The American Revolution*, this argument is diffused throughout the book. An “unplanned popularization of politics,” Wood argues, resulted from the pre-Revolutionary resistance movement. “Ordinary people were no longer willing to trust only wealthy and learned gentlemen to represent them in government” (p. 51). Citing widespread opposition to the Society of the Cincinnati, legal reforms such as the abolition of entail and primogeniture, the increasing assertiveness of American women in defense of their rights, and a burgeoning antislavery movement, Wood claims that republican equality—that is, equality of opportunity—“became a rallying cry for people in the aspiring middling ranks who were now more openly resentful than before of those who had presumed to be their social superiors” (pp.

120-129).

Wood's argument concerning the erosion of hierarchical deference has had its critics. Michael Zuckerman, for example, has questioned whether deference ever truly took hold in the New World.[7] And Ray Raphael opines that "Wood's 'idea of equality' did little good for the young nation's disenfranchised and dispossessed populations (pp. 306-09). Yet Raphael's *People's History* contains much anecdotal evidence to support Wood's claim. Shoemaker George Robert Twelves Hewes, Raphael tells us, "no longer had to yield ground to his betters," especially not to the despised customs official John Malcom (p. 24). Baron von Steuben struggled to command American enlisted men, who followed only those orders that conformed to their own best judgment (Raphael, p. 94). Abigail Adams insisted that husband John and his fellow lawmakers "Remember the Ladies" (Raphael, p. 115). And an anonymous African American upbraided a Philadelphia "gentlewoman" who demanded that he step off the sidewalk while she passed, but he was inspired less by the promise of democracy than by the promise of Dunmore's black regiment (Raphael, pp. 254-255). Though deference has been a challenging term to define, though the causes of its erosion have been difficult to trace, and though the benefits of that erosion were unevenly distributed, Wood's paradigm, as these examples suggest, remains generally persuasive.

Unfortunately, but perhaps inevitably given its conciseness, *The American Revolution* presents a less nuanced version of that paradigm than does *Radicalism*. Here, Wood summarily discusses the Revolution's effects on women, Native Americans, free and enslaved African Americans, and Loyalists. Equally problematic, Wood downplays the Revolution's civil-war strife. Virtually ignoring internal discord between Whigs and Tories, saying little to nothing about the abridgment of Loyalists' rights, Wood speaks of eighteenth-century Americans as if they were all of one mind, concluding, somewhat peremptorily, that democracy "became the civic faith of the United States to which all Americans must unquestionably adhere" (p. 166). In short, Wood overlooks much of the war's conflict, suggesting instead that, to borrow a phrase Raphael uses to describe the sort of Revolutionary myths that his *People's History* seeks to debunk, the United States "was conceived in an epiphany of republican glory" (p. 5).

A People's History and *The American Revolution* thus mirror each other, each inverting the other's strengths and weaknesses. Raphael powerfully conveys the suf-

fering and affliction wrought by the Revolution, but he presents this information in a fragmented, almost despondent fashion. Wood, by contrast, offers a useful and informative narrative of the Revolution and the Constitution, but in celebrating their legacies of democracy and egalitarianism, he overlooks the many human costs of war. In consequence, neither of these books will likely become the last word on the subject. Until a popular history is written that tells a complete story of the American Revolution, a story that recognizes and fully articulates the ironic and painful ways in which liberty and equality in the United States have been bound up in a history of inequity and oppression, the American public would be best served to read both Raphael and Wood. Perhaps nothing could be more ultra-chic than that.

Notes

[1]. For a survey of Founder Chic and its detractors in *la haute couture* academia, see Sean Wilentz, "America Made Easy," *The New Republic*, 2 June 2001; Andrew Burstein, "The Politics of Memory: Taking the Measure of the Ever More Popular Demand for Historical Greatness," *Washington Post Book World*, 14 October 2001; and Jeffrey Pasley, "Federalist Chic, John Adams Superstar," *Common-Place* 2 (January 2002), <www.common-place.org/publick/200202.shtml>.

[2]. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980); Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States, 1492–Present* (New York: Perennial Classics/HarperCollins, 2001).

[3]. Ray Raphael, *The First American Revolution: Before Lexington and Concord* (New York: The New Press, 2002).

[4]. Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1969); Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

[5]. "The Modern Library Chronicles" <<http://www.randomhouse.com/modernlibrary/chronicles.html>>.

[6]. For an excellent survey of the historiography of republicanism, see Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History* 79 (1992): 11-38.

[7]. Bernard Bailyn et al., *The Great Republic: A History of the American People* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977);

4th ed., Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1992).

[8]. Michael Zuckerman, "Tocqueville, Turner, and

Turds: Four Stories of Manners in Early America," *Journal of American History* 85 (June 1998): 13-42.

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