H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Charles Royster. *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army & American Character, 1775-1783.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xi + 452 pp. $17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4606-3.

Reviewed by Joseph R. Fischer (United States Army Special Operations Command)
Published on H-War (February, 1997)

Across the winter of 1782-1783, the Continental Army huddled in its huts at Newburgh, New York. For all intents and purposes, the war was over. All that remained was for the diplomats to agree on the details. An army of farmers, artisans, and mechanics had achieved victory in its struggle against Great Britain. The Continental Army's growing prowess as well the international nature of the conflict had finally exhausted Britain's will to continue. There would be no victory parade for Washington's army. Officers and men would wait in vain for pay and allowances from the Continental Congress. In the end, Washington would send his men home on furlough, knowing that they would never return to Newburgh. In victory, his army disintegrated because the nation that had summoned it into being had turned its back on its offspring.

Charles Royster's *A Revolutionary People at War* continues to rank as the definitive work on the Continental Army's relationship with the American people. The people believed the war to be a test of character more than military prowess. Liberty was not a product of force of arms but rather of *purity of heart*. If this was the case, then how could Washington's army be permitted to disappear under such disheartening circumstances? Royster argues that the final days of the army should not have come as any surprise. Eight long years of war had tested the mettle of both the army and the people. Neither group shared a high opinion of the other. The army believed that it had carried the burdens of the war, risking death in both battle and camp. The first hazard was expected. The second came from the nation's failure to keep the army properly supplied and quartered. It was a failure of will, not of means. The army starved while the nation prospered. Americans sidestepped paying the necessary taxes, relying on loans and badly inflated paper money to finance the war. They objected to and obstructed army requests for wagons and teams, complaining bitterly to their state governments when the army's needs required shared sacrifice. In some cases, Americans traded with the enemy if a profit could be made.

The American people were no kinder in their opinion of the army. They came to see its ranks as being made up of the rougher elements of American society officered by a near aristocratic officer corps. The arrival of the army in an area meant that a local farmer could count on his fences being used for firewood and his livestock sacrificed to supplement the army's rations.

The process of distancing which separated the army from the people did not come about over night. At the beginning of the war, a *rage militaire* brought large numbers of prospective recruits to the army. These were men who thought the war would be short and their sacrifices transitory. The long years of war that followed emptied the army of these summer soldiers. What increasingly remained was an army of regulars with all the connotations the word carried. The people feared this army because it alone threatened the continued existence of the republic once the British threat was vanquished.

At the start of the war, Americans talked of their struggle as being historically linked to that of their ancestors. Liberty was God's will and they his willing soldiers. Generations yet unborn would look back and recognize that the freedom of their bountiful land had been purchased with the blood of patriots. There was an arrogance to all of this. Americans believed that they were God's elect because they were somehow more benevolent, disinterested, and virtuous than any other people. The problem, as Royster notes, is that the war which followed called these assumptions into question.

The Americans began the war with a rather naive belief in their military skills. They thought they were endowed with native courage and claimed the skills of a few frontiersmen with rifles as being somehow indicative of all American soldiers. There was no need for a professional military modeled after that of England or France. A professional standing army was, after all, a means of oppression not only because of the overt pressures it could exert against a government but also because of the ability it had to corrupt democratic institu-

tions through the pressures pensioners, dependents, and others with financial interests in the military, could bring to bear. The problem for Americans, however, was that the reality of the battlefield quickly forced Washington to create just such an army.

The army that emerged from Valley Forge in the spring of 1778 was markedly different philosophically from that which emerged in the opening years of the war. However much soldiers saw their duty as a temporary burden imposed upon them by the war, they began to take pride in their developing professionalism while at the same time growing increasingly frustrated with the American people. However grand the rhetoric of revolution, the reality of sporadic and almost always inadequate support by colonial governments wore on soldiers. A few elements of the army fell into mutiny. Rather than target the army's commissary and quartermaster departments for the failure of Continental Army logistics, these mutinies were aimed at the Continental Congress and against state legislative bodies. They were an indication that the ties that bound the army to the people were coming undone.

When the war finally ended, the army and the American people differed in their perception of how victory had been achieved. From the army's perspective, it was clear that they had won America's independence in spite of the true summer soldiers, the American people. The public's perception was very different. The revolution's success owed itself to the virtuous efforts of the American people. God's will had been done.

The Newburgh Conspiracy represented the final break between the army and the people. The actions of a few officers and the tacit support of many suggested that the army was buying none of the idea that the American public possessed a concept of virtue worthy of the name. Fortunately for the nation, Washington knew better that, however hypocritical the American public and their leaders, the survival of the new nation depended on popular approval. His actions to diffuse the conspiracy and his acquiescence in the disbanding of the army proved critical to the nation's future. The army more so than the people transformed the words of the Founding Fathers into reality, but their efforts would be shoved aside in the creation of a national myth. The American people claimed that their virtue had borne the yoke of war and was therefore responsible for the victory. They were the true veterans of the war for freedom. The *rage militaire* (sometimes referred to by others as the Spirit of 1776) became a national heritage, one that would be handed down to future generations.

Originally published in 1979, *A Revolutionary People at War* remains the best social history of the Continental Army's relationship to the American people. Although there are few changes from the first printing, few were needed. His research is well grounded in primary documents from most of the nation's archival holdings in colonial America. The thesis Royster presents is amply backed by the evidence he offers. Although never stated, Royster's focus is on the Clauswitzian trinity of state, army and people. It is a clearly written examination of the ties that bound these elements together and the frictions that worked to defeat their common goal. More importantly, Royster forces us to examine the benefits inherent in the *public virtue* explanation for the war's final outcome even though the professionalization of the Continental Army provides a more factual explanation of events. Charles Royster's *A Revolutionary People at War* is well researched as well as masterfully written and stands as a classic text on the American Revolution.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Joseph R. Fischer. Review of Royster, Charles, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army & American Character, 1775-1783*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. February, 1997.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=847

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.