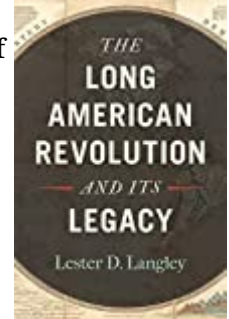


**Lester D. Langley.** *The Long American Revolution and Its Legacy*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019. 312 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8203-5576-4.



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The proper chronology for understanding and teaching the American Revolution, or the first half of US history generally, is being contested. Historians prefer to begin their narrative at different points, depending on the themes they wish to emphasize moving through the history. Indeed, recent scholars have argued that the Revolution ought not to be the focal point of teaching this nation's history at all, but rather the year 1619 and the advent of African slavery in North America. *The Long Argument* makes its own unique contribution to this debate by beginning with the North American imperial crisis in the 1750s and moving all the way through the Great War and the Progressive movement of the 1920s. Such a chronology, Lester D. Langley argues, demonstrates that America is “an *old* republic but a *young* nation” (p. 6). The Revolution is best understood not as a flash-bang event but a struggle between the ideals of equality espoused during the Revolution and the country's “embedded prejudices” that have precluded their fulfillment. Moreover, Langley uses this chronology to argue that the Revolution did

not birth one nation but three: the Confederacy in 1861, the United States in the Great War, and even Canada during the same decades.

This book contains an introduction, eight chapters, and an epilogue that span this 132-year period. As the book moves quickly through the many notable events, the author strikes a skillful balance between social and political history. For example, when discussing the meaning of 1776, he notes that to John Adams it was about a strong executive and republicanism while to Thomas Jefferson it was about democracy, and to ordinary women and enslaved persons it was an opportunity to assert themselves. The book traces this internal struggle of Revolutionary principles all the way until the Great War, when America achieved its ideal of nationhood via white supremacy, economic inequities, and male dominance disguised by “rhetoric of liberation, nation building, and moral improvement” (p. 211).

A great strength of the work is its international and comparative perspective. Langley does an

excellent job of contrasting the various revolutions. For example, he provides expert analysis in comparing the role of race and people of color in both the American and Spanish revolutions. Simon Bolivar was willing to mobilize the enslaved and give them a subordinate place in the new republic, while George Washington and the United States were not. Such a contrast illuminates two distinct trajectories in terms of race in these countries. Langley not only compares the various revolutions but even documents their interdependence. He highlights how ideas and movements in the French Revolution were operative in the Haitian Revolution and how those ideas in turn affected the minds of southern plantation owners and enslaved people in the North American South and even influenced Jefferson's decision to buy the Louisiana territory. This broad perspective is operative throughout the book and places it squarely within the burgeoning historical trend to understand the American Revolution beyond a parochial sense and place it rather in a continental or Atlantic context.

This international perspective does, perhaps by design, eclipse much scholarship on other important topics, like histories of religion, the military conflict, and slave revolts. While religion does appear briefly at some points, it is of minor importance to the telling of this narrative. For instance, there is little discussion of the role Quakerism played in the abolitionist movement and even less of the role of Mormons in the chapter on westward expansion. The book also glosses over many military conflicts and slave revolts to tell more about their ideological importance or legacies rather than the details of what happened. Less than a page is devoted to Nat Turner's revolt, and few military battles in any of the three wars covered in this book are mentioned, let alone detailed.

Langley provides an excellent bibliographical essay and historical time line that will be much appreciated by seasoned scholars and graduate students preparing for their comprehensive exams.

The sixteen-page bibliographic essay is more than a litany of relevant scholarship; it is a masterful and balanced account of different schools and eras of historiography. Impressively, Langley shows as much mastery over works that did not influence his interpretations as those that did. Combined with the time line, these appendages provide excellent tools for researching, understanding, and teaching the Long American Revolution.

The book begins and ends with personal reflections and how they relate to the themes spelled out in the *Long American Revolution*. Such anecdotes put flesh and bones on the ideas delineated in the book. Langley's own parents embodied the "promise and opportunity" that many found in America, as well as the oppressive "racial priorities" felt by others. (p. 1). In the epilogue, he uses the anecdotes of three women he encountered while traveling between Chicago and Mexico City to demonstrate how alive and relevant the "contested legacy of the American Revolution" remains (p. 218).

This book provides expert analysis and unique contributions to survey histories of the American Revolution. It does the important work of incorporating recent trends and emphases on social and Atlantic history. The broad time line for understanding the trajectory of the country is likely to have significant influence on how we understand the American Revolution.

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

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