

The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution:A Book Critique

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The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution

_____ *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, by Bernard Bailyn, analyzes the American colonists' rationale on independence, colonial leadership, and power from the years leading up to the Revolutionary War through the ratification of the Constitution. The main argument presented in the book is that the Revolution was not a spontaneous happening, but rather an ideological revolution that ended in conflict. Bailyn began the book by quoting John Adams, "What do we mean by the Revolution? The war? That was no part of the Revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it. The Revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected, from 1760 to 1765, in the course of fifteen years before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington." (Bailyn 1) Bailyn set out to analyze the colonist's logic through the use of primary sources when possible, "[The leaders of the American Revolution] wrote easily and amply, and turned out in the space of scarcely a decade and a half and from a small number of presses a rich literature of theory, argument, opinion, and polemic." (Bailyn 1) This book analyzed historical documents from the late 17th century to the end of the 18th century. A significant amount of the primary sources analyzed came from New England as Bailyn did rely heavily upon the Harvard University library for information, however, Bailyn certainly did not neglect writings from throughout the thirteen colonies. *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* analyzed both the Revolutionary and Loyalist positions on the issues that the colonists faced leading up to the Revolutionary War, including freedom of religion, parliamentary representation, and the legitimacy of British rule in the colonies.

Bernard Bailyn was an established Historian. According to the New York Times, Bailyn was a professor at Harvard University for over half a century. He was also an established author of historical literature, writing or editing over twenty books. His work didn't go unnoticed, as he won two Pulitzer Prizes, the Bancroft Prize, and even the National Humanities Medal, presented to him by President Barack Obama in 2011. *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* has now been in print for over 50 years due to its profound impact on the study of early American political thought. Bailyn originally did not intend to write a whole book on the subject, however. Years before the first edition of the book was published, the Editor-In-Chief of the John Harvard Library asked Bailyn to compile a small collection of Revolutionary-era pamphlets that would shine a light upon colonial thought. Bailyn soon came to realize that the large collection of primary sources at his disposal could provide a comprehensive look into the birth of American political theory, "[I sought] to trace back into the early eighteenth century-and back into the European sources, wherever possible-the specific attitudes, conceptions, formulations, even in certain cases particular phrases, which together form the ideology of the American Revolution." (Bailyn XXIV) Bailyn certainly shined an objective light upon Revolutionary thought, but placed the largest emphasis upon the thoughts of those who wanted

to separate from England. In *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, the Revolutionary era is portrayed as a sort of American Enlightenment, especially due to the colonists' frequent usage of Enlightenment literature, "It is not simply that the great *virtuosi* of the American Enlightenment [cited Enlightenment texts, but also everyone who claimed a broad awareness quoted even secular Enlightenment thinkers]." (Bailyn 27) The American Revolution wasn't portrayed as merely a quarrel between the colonists and the British due to a tax on tea, but rather a decades-long ideological awakening that ultimately ended in war and the formation of the United States of America. The ideology formed during the years leading up to the war carried over into the Constitution and the formation of our constitutional republic.

The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution has a lot of knowledge to offer regarding the Revolutionary War and why America has such a distinctive political system. One of the biggest takeaways from *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* was that "The theory of politics that emerges from the political literature of the pre-Revolutionary years rests on the belief that what lie behind every political scene, the ultimate explanation of every political controversy, was the disposition of power." (Bailyn 55) The colonists had a keen understanding of just how dangerous power could be if left unchecked-i.e. the British government under George III-and sought to create a small government full of checks and balances. This is evident in the Articles of Confederation, and later the Constitution. The colonists' dread of power is also evident in the antifederalist writings. The antifederalists absolutely refused to accept a Constitution without a Bill of Rights, "The whole system, the 'Federal Farmer' insisted-and with him almost every other antifederalist-should be 'bottomed' on a Bill of Rights that declared the people's 'unalienable and fundamental rights' in such a way as to set limits to the power of government and to serve as an alarm when legislators and rulers overreached their proper bounds." (Bailyn 350) Bailyn placed a large emphasis upon the colonists' fear of unchecked power, and how that very fear can still be observed in the contemporary government of the United States of America. The Constitution still has the Bill of Rights in place to safeguard individual freedoms against a power-hungry government. The three branches of government operate with checks and balances in place that limit the power of each branch in order to protect the people. American political culture still echoes the fears of the Founding Fathers that Bailyn highlighted.

The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution was not written during the time period which it analyzes. This actually benefits both the book and reader as Bailyn was able to piece together primary sources spanning roughly a century worth of American history from the decades leading up to through the decades following the American Revolution. The only downside of this, though, is that not every piece of evidence used in this book likely came from a primary source. Information coming from secondary sources might not be quite as accurate as primary evidence, but the sheer range of information that this book holds confers a plethora of knowledge upon the reader that few other books can rival.

Something that has really stuck with me after reading this book was the colonists' take on tyranny. The colonists adopted a policy of civil disobedience early on, "When tyranny is abroad, 'submission,' Andrew Elliot wrote quite simply in 1765, 'is a crime.'" (Bailyn 93) This quote deftly defines the American way of thought-if the government tramples upon one's civil liberties, complacency is not the solution. This proactive approach was the driving force behind the civil rights movement of the 1960's and many others. This quote is a call to action to all Americans. It tells us all to stand up for what is right, even if it is unpopular. It is something by which every American should live, and won't be a quote I soon forget.

The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution is a rather comprehensive study of Revolutionary thought, meaning that certain portions of the text might not be as useful or interesting as others. The two most meaningful chapters of the book are chapter 3-"Power and Liberty:A Theory of Politics"-and the postscript, which is named "Fulfillment:A Commentary on The Constitution." Both of these chapters provide the best glimpse into just how the Founding Fathers aimed to govern the people whilst protecting their liberties. While the other portions of the book are certainly useful, these two chapters can be most closely connected to present-day American politics.

After reading such a thought-provoking book, I was left with a few questions pertaining to the Constitution. Why is it that the Founding Fathers decided to take such a big gamble in creating a government the likes of which history had never seen before? Did they expect success, or did they merely hope for the best when they wrote the Constitution? The United States government framework was truly unique at the time, which leaves me wondering just how much faith the Founding Fathers actually had in its potential to succeed. Unfortunately, it seems as though many of the writings of the less-than-famous Founding Fathers have been lost to history, and the complete picture may never be seen again.

This book certainly reinforced my beliefs regarding the Founding Fathers and their viewpoints on power. During my time taking AP United States Government, I learned that the Founding Fathers sought to give only the bare minimum amount of power to our government through the Constitution. This belief was confirmed throughout the text, "Power, it was said over and over again, has 'an encroaching nature';...if at first it meets with no control [it] creeps by degrees and quick subdues the whole.'" (Bailyn 56) *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* emphasized both the Founding Fathers' fear of power and how it was then applied to our Constitution through a set of checks and balances and a Bill of Rights that the government was not to violate. The Founding Fathers did not take risks that they did not have to, and this can be seen in the various complexities of the Constitution, from the Bill of Rights to article two and beyond.

Throughout the book, I picked up on just how much of a struggle the American Revolution was. I certainly feel more connected to the individuals who fought to protect the freedoms of every American, freedoms that I can proudly say I have over two centuries later. I feel more connected now to John Adams, who once said "You will never know, how much it cost

the present Generation, to preserve your Freedom! I hope you will make a good use of it.”(Adams) I can certainly say that I will not take my freedom for granted again after studying the American Revolution.

The Revolutionary War was the beginning of American history. If the war had ended differently, the American way of life would likely be quite different than it is in the present day. The way of life for many people around the world who worked hard for their freedom after being inspired by the American Revolution likely wouldn’t be the same, either. *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* should most definitely be a required reading for high school students. It explains why American government works the way that it does, and why Americans have certain protected freedoms. It makes the reader pause and consider the significance of the American Revolution, a period in history often overlooked because it is “boring” or “too old.” While the book certainly isn’t for everyone, it is a historically significant piece that should be taught in schools.

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