A Second Look

R. R. Palmer's *The Age of the Democratic Revolution:*
The View from America After Thirty Years

William Pencak

*Pennsylvania State University, Ogontz*

When volume one of Robert R. Palmer's *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* appeared thirty years ago, historians went beyond praising Palmer's "meticulous scholarship, pungent clarity, and emphatic conviction," to quote J. Salwyn Schapiro in *Saturday Review.* They also recognized his enlistment in the worldwide, centuries-old battle for the democracy whose beginnings he so ably traced. "The book . . . will re-emphasize the strength and vitality of the roots that supported the growth of democracy in the Old and New Worlds," Geoffrey Bruun wrote in *The New York Times.* Crane Brinton added that "it is a stimulating and provocative book in explicit defense of a position—a moral, political, if not quite religious position—which is the relatively unexamined position of the great majority of Americans."1 Responding to my questionnaire on the durability of Palmer's contribution, Richard R. Johnson of the University of Washington noted that Palmer's work was published "in a time of NATO and the formation of the EEC . . . when such perspectives were in the air." "It thereby reduced the continental insularity of U.S. historians about their Revolution and gave them something to brag about in regards to showing the way to the rest of mankind."2

Written during the 1950s, when Cold War tensions were at a peak and statesmen could not stress too much the importance of western solidarity, Palmer's book had a double-edged influence, since members of the American historical profession were then waging a historiographical war over the nature of the American Revolution. The provocative conservative interpretations of Clinton Rossiter and Robert E. Brown challenged the Progressive paradigm of Charles Beard and J. Franklin Jameson which had held sway for some thirty years, and at the time was still being ably supported by Elisha P. Douglass among others. Rossiter and Brown, sometimes termed consensus historians, argued two main points. First, they disagreed with the Progressives that class conflict or even the presence of classes in a European sense played a significant role in early American history. Second, they insisted that therefore the American Revolution was conservative in that it preserved the basic tenor of life of the pre-revolutionary era. Thus, as Palmer noted,
Rossiter and Brown could follow in the tradition of Europeans such as Friedrich Gentz and his American translator John Quincy Adams, and deny the similarity between the American Revolution and the more violent ones which followed. Only illegitimately, consensus history maintained, could the French, Russian, and Third World Revolutions claim descent from the American (1: 9-11; 187-188).3

Palmer participated in both the contemporary and historiographical struggles. One of the reasons his work was so attractive is that in both cases he reached a balanced position which considered the merits of both sides and in some respects synthesized them. While agreeing with conservatives that he felt "a certain lack of cordiality" with Marxist revolutions, it was not necessary "to dismiss all revolutions as dangerous and delusive, or even make of conservatism a kind of basic political philosophy." Palmer thus appealed to a liberal intelligentsia which had felt itself stifled during the conservative fifties and was anxious to reassert its place in American life:

Opposition to one revolution is no reason for rejecting all revolutions. . . . The value of conservatism depends on the value of what is to be conserved. . . . Revolution must be appraised according to its ethical content or feasibility of its aims, and in terms of probable alternatives and real choices at the moment, and that the true matter for moral judgment, or for political decision, is not between the old and the new, or the conservative and the revolutionary, but the actual welfare of human beings as estimated by a reasonable calculation of possibilities in particular situations. (1: 9-10)

The ancien regimes of the late eighteenth century, Palmer concluded in volume two of his magnum opus, definitely justified revolution:

If a sense of inequality or injustice persists too long untreated, it will produce social disorganization. In a general breakdown, if a constructive doctrine and program are at hand, such as were furnished in the eighteenth century by the European Enlightenment, if the capacities of leaders and followers are adequate to the purpose, and if they are strong enough to prevail over their adversaries, then a revolution may not only occur and survive, but open the way toward a better society. The conditions are hard to meet, but the stakes are high, for the alternative may be worse (2: 575).

As for the United States, Palmer insisted "there was a real revolution in America" (1: 186) in three ways, none of which conformed to the Progressive or Marxist analysis then current. Interestingly, in an early formulation of his thesis which appeared in The Political Science Quarterly in 1954—shortly before the publication of Brown's book and shortly after Rossiter's—Palmer had emphasized "class analysis" where "a bourgeois phase soon followed the aristocratic protest,
and the sub-bourgeois or working classes were often heard from also." By 1959, while still talking of a "struggle between democratic and aristocratic forces" (1: 202), Palmer qualified any class analysis, at least for America, by emphasizing that "it is not possible to explain the division between patriot and loyalist by other or supposedly more fundamental divisions. . . . Economic and class motivations are unclear," he said (1: 200).

Nevertheless, as Alfred F. Young of Northern Illinois University has noted, Palmer's "magisterial" work "balanced" the two schools and "provided unexpected sustenance to the ailing [J. Franklin] Jameson thesis" that the American Revolution indeed changed American society. It is true, Young explains, that some of Palmer's argument "fell in with the thrust of neo-Whig scholarship." The Revolution "was conservative because the colonies had never known oppression, excepting always for slavery—because as human institutions go Americans had always been free" (1: 282), Palmer wrote. But "the rest" of his thesis, argues Young, "did not."

How did Palmer find the American Revolution radical? Young stresses that it engendered a major internal war against the loyalists, "those Americans who, as the country developed, most admired the aristocratic society of England and Europe" (1: 235). Unlike in France, they did not return home. Their absence eliminated some of the most conservative inhabitants of the new nation and placed elitist values permanently on the defensive. In one of his more controversial theories, Palmer insisted that the extent of the internal revolution within America could be measured by the number of loyalist émigrés (24 per thousand population as opposed to 5 per thousand in France) and the confiscation of loyalist property. "Revolutionary France, ten times as large as revolutionary America, confiscated only twelve times as much property" (1: 188).

Second, the American Revolution "was revolutionary because it showed how certain abstract doctrines, such as the rights of man and the sovereignty of the people, could be 'reduced to practice,' as [John] Adams put it, by assemblages of fairly level-headed gentlemen exercising constituent power in the name of the people" (1: 233). To be sure, Palmer admitted that when "the Americans constituted their new states, [they] tended to reconstitute much of what they already had." Still, while "the rights claimed by Americans were the old rights of Englishmen . . . the form now became universal . . . more concrete, less speculative and metaphysical, more positive and merely legal, . . . embodied in or annexed to constitutions, in the foundations of the state itself" (1: 233-234).
Third, the Revolution was genuine because even in those cases where it was conservative, “colonial Americans had long been radical by the general standards of Western Civilization” (1: 235). The timing and nature of the French Revolution would at the very least have been different had an American Revolution not preceded it. Not only had aiding the Americans produced a French fiscal crisis, but their Revolution “inspired the sense of a new era. It added a new content to the conception of progress. It gave a whole new dimension to ideas of liberty and equality made familiar by the Enlightenment. It got people into the habit of thinking more concretely about political questions, and made them more readily critical of their own governments and societies” (1: 282).

Updating his thesis some nine years later in his article “The Revolution” in The Comparative Approach to American History edited by C. Vann Woodward, Palmer incorporated recent research to extend his notion of a non-Marxist yet significant revolution. The Americans not only “set up new governments according to new principles,” but these were “to a large extent operated by new men, of a kind who could not have achieved prominence had the colonies remained British.” Citing Jackson Turner Main’s 1966 article “‘Government By the People’: The American Revolution and the Democratization of the Legislatures,” Palmer explained how “the ‘wealthy’ lost their predominance in the legislatures” as merchants and lawyers lost seats, farmers gained them, and unrepresented backcountry regions sent more delegates. Thus, “the revolt in America meets the external criteria of a true revolution, and of revolution in a democratic direction, since it was a former upper or ‘aristocratic’ class that was displaced.”

Main himself, now at the University of Colorado, remembers “reading and greatly appreciating” Palmer’s work. “It confirmed what I had read, at least on the U.S. side, or been taught. . . . I was already teaching the American Revolution as a democratic movement and was glad to have some support.”

How well has Palmer’s work held up over time? To what extent has recent scholarship supported, denied, or rendered it irrelevant? I asked this question to a sample of historians with respect to Palmer’s treatment of the American Revolution. Aside from a few scholars who had never read Palmer, most offered interesting and yet different opinions concerning the durability of his work. Partly because of Palmer’s complex and balanced judgments, they even disagreed sometimes on where to place him along the historiographical spectrum. Nor did they express unanimity on where the scholarly consensus on the American Revolution was heading. Leading historians’ comments on Palmer, therefore, not only provide
insight into the value of his contribution, but reveal some of the major issues yet to be resolved among Revolutionary historians.

For convenience, I will group the scholars’ responses into six categories:
1. How important was Palmer’s notion of “the people as constituent power” for future scholarship?
2. What does the emergence of the people in that capacity say about the radicalism of the Revolution? Does it confirm it or does it make too much of the theoretical incorporation of “the people” into constitutions and the conventions which framed them?
3. How important were the colonial legislatures in bringing about the Revolution? To what extent were they comparable to the “constituted bodies” in eighteenth century Europe?
4. How comparable are the American and French Revolutions under the rubric of “The Age of the Democratic Revolution?”
5. What aspects of Palmer’s work are dated, still relevant, or useful even now in providing starting points for further scholarship?
6. Finally, I asked the historians whether they assigned Palmer’s work to their classes and/or used it as a basis for lectures?

1. Palmer’s notion of “the people as constituent power” received the most unanimous scholarly praise. Princeton University’s John Murrin writes that this section of Palmer’s work “is still one of the very best and most succinct statements I know of that beautifully summarizes what was truly radical about the Revolution.” Jack P. Greene of Johns Hopkins University adds that “the most important contribution of Palmer’s book . . . was his appreciation of the inventiveness of the American Revolutionaries with respect to the institutionalization of the idea of the people as constituent power.” John Frantz of Penn State University notes that the idea was not entirely new with Palmer, but Palmer interpreted the constitutional conventions “in a different context as proceeding from the people and as doing the people’s business.”

Several scholars stress how the idea inspired their own and other historians’ research. It was “very, very important for me as I began to see my way past the limitations of consensus history of the 1950s-early 60s and stake out some territory as a social historian,” writes Gary Nash of UCLA. He singles out Palmer and Merrill Jensen as significant influences on his influential book, The Urban Crucible. The University of Chicago’s Edward Cook agrees. Palmer’s “synthesis” helped to “clear out some of the old issues (such as “what classes made or favored the Revolu-
tion”) and to make way for consideration of new factors of social experience and social theory.” Edward Countryman of Southern Methodist University remarks that “to actually trot out a list of people who have expanded on this one way or another would be quite a chore.”

Nash, Countryman, and Cook also believe Palmer’s work had a considerable impact on studies by Edmund S. Morgan, Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood. Wood agrees: he cites Palmer’s “amazing” ability to transcend the historiography of the 1950s—“a restrictive Marxism for the French and a Robert Brown ‘middle class democracy’ already present in colonial America.” Wood continues that “with the present historiography of both revolutions, Palmer today could make a much better case for his Atlantic revolutions—only it would probably be entitled the ‘age of republican revolutions.’ ” Peter Onuf (University of Virginia) also claims too have been “strongly influenced” by Palmer’s ability to “bridge the conventional gap between the history of political thought and political history.” “The people as constituent power” provided a constitutional mechanism whereby abstract notions of liberty and equality could be implemented. Onuf believes that Palmer’s “history of popular sovereignty in practice also may have helped set the stage for the mobilization studies in recent Revolutionary historiography.” Indeed, by stressing that constitution-making, especially the United States Constitution, “created a national arena for political controversy,” Palmer was able to interpret the Jeffersonians’ grass-roots political organizing in the 1790s as the culmination of a process begun by the Constitution rather than as a continuation of the Anti-Federalist reaction against a national government (1: 232).

2. Gordon Wood endorses Palmer’s argument that “the people as constituent power” demonstrates the radicalism of the American Revolution. “As long as one does not get hung up on degrees of violence as a measure of revolution, one can make a case that the American Revolution was socially more radical than the French; that is, by 1820 or so more was changed in the society in America than in France.”

Wood stresses this point in his new book The Radicalism of the American Revolution. He explains how the classical republic of virtuous, well-ordered liberty favored by the Founding Fathers (both Federalist and Jeffersonian, despite their differences) gave way to the romantic, democratic individualism of the early nineteenth century. Americans revolutionized their society through a great burst of geographical and commercial expansion. One can also perceive the beginnings of the abolition movement, the extension of the franchise, the development of party
politics, the transformation of women into guardians of morality, and the beginnings of systematic education for patriotism and social control as other revolutionary changes which followed logically from revolutionary ideas. If not as coherently as in the Code of Napoleon, Americans institutionalized a variety of egalitarian and nationalist reforms which made the world of Andrew Jackson very different from that of George Washington.

While not denying the importance of the notion of "the people as constituent power," three other historians, two of whom prefer to remain anonymous, insist that the idea does not necessarily imply that the Revolution was radical. One finds that Palmer emphasizes the "rational, legal, constitutional" side of the American Revolution, especially in contrast with the French. Another is disturbed by Palmer's neglect of "what we would now call Ethnohistory and African-American History," in addition to the lack of "consideration of revolution in the Caribbean." Paul Gilje (University of Oklahoma) praises Palmer's achievement in stressing that the American was a "real revolution," "a painful conflict" that "saw a great loss of life, property, and a large number of refugees" (1: 189). However, Gilje believes that Palmer "fails to understand the full radical nature of the American Revolution as articulated by much of the scholarship of the last thirty years." Gilje continues:

Palmer wrote with the heavy breath of consensus history constantly at his back and the inquisitive eyes of 1950s conservatism peering over his shoulders. At times you almost get the idea that Palmer wanted to push his thesis further and harder. But in the end he lapses into the limited assertion that the Revolution "was a political movement, concerned with liberty and power" (1: 213). Gilje hastens to add, however, "that I am not faulting him for this; I am merely pointing out a shortcoming evident in 1989." In fact, Palmer's assertion in 1968 that the Revolution was revolutionary by expanding middle-class political participation indicates that he was open to thinking along Gilje's lines. On the other hand, in a 1960 article in the Bulletin de la Societe de l'Histoire moderne, Palmer responded strongly to European critics who charged that he "neglect[ed] the economic and social structure," especially the effect of "the population crisis" in France:

Social and economic structures cannot be clearly separated from politics. If the means of production and the forms of income influence governments, the possession of political authority, military power, office and jurisdiction may also determine social classes and economic institutions. The problems of public life may be viewed from a religious perspective in the sixteenth century, from an economic viewpoint in the twentieth, and from a political vantage in the
eighteenth century. It seems to me that, on the whole, politics carried the day during the eighteenth century. If Gilje and two anonymous colleagues claim that Palmer underestimated the Revolution’s radicalism, Richard Johnson, by contrast, believes that “the recent rather conservative interpretations of the American Revolution (playing down its social aspects, radical change, democratic nature, etc.), coupled with what seems to be a bicentennial deploring of the excesses of the French Revolution . . . would seem to be pulling apart Palmer’s attempt to set them all in the same framework.” What this difference of opinion reveals is that historians of the American Revolution are still divided as to whether it was radical or conservative, political or social, and which current interpretations represent the general thrust of scholarship. Palmer’s tendency to be placed in opposite camps and either praised or criticized thereby mirrors division in the contemporary historiography rather than reflects deficiencies in his work. Much of the debate boils down to the issue of who are “the people,” Edward Countryman notes (for instance, the Constitution’s framers or the Anti-federalists) citing Edmund S. Morgan’s work on “the people” as an interpretive fiction.

Such difference of emphasis and opinion on Palmer’s work shows that even though historians learn from the past, they too are doomed to repeat it. Contemporary writing on the Revolution seems to be recapitulating the debate Palmer found in the 1950s. On the one hand “New Left” historians such as Jesse Lemisch, Alfred Young, Gary Nash, Edward Countryman and Steven Rosswurm have investigated the dynamic role of the “lower sort” in pushing their “betters” into a far more radical revolution than they had any desire to make. Harry Stout, Nathan Hatch, Patricia Bonomi, and Charles Royster have shown how democratic ideas implicit in “New Light” evangelical Christianity endowed the Revolution with a millennial fervor even though most of its leaders were deists, future Unitarians, or traditional believers. And although they were frequently loyalists, the part played by blacks and Indians in the struggle, according to Graham Hodges, Richard White, and Gregory Dowd, is far more important than historians have hitherto suspected.

In eighteenth century America internal social upheaval took the religious form of the Great Awakening and the rise of the Baptists, the emergence of the crowd as a persistent force in urban politics, and rebellions such as those of the North and South Carolina Regulators, Green Mountain Boys, Daniel Shays, and the Whiskey Rebels of 1794. Yet the continuity of leadership committed to both the
Revolution and to keeping it within bounds ought to be astonishing, and here a comparative perspective is especially enlightening. Whether taken from New Whigs or Old, classical antiquity, the Bible, their own colonial experience, or traditional English liberty, a revolutionary ideology stressing the need for virtuous citizens to dedicate themselves to a disinterested love of country guided the Revolution's leadership from start to finish. To be sure, balancing this Commonwealth ideal with the desire for personal aggrandizement was not always easy, but a prosperous commerce—which took the form of agricultural exports for Jeffersonians and urban trade and manufacture for Federalists—supported rather than contradicted the fulfillment of the United States's promise as the world's republican example. Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, Pauline Maier, and J. G. A. Pocock, despite important differences among them, have emphasized the importance of ideas and their implementation in policies and institutions as the cement which unified regions and classes which were intermittently at each other's throats. Historians who stress republican ideology, and their numbers are legion, implicitly praise the Founding Fathers who dedicated themselves to its propagation, rather than regarding it as the means of dominating the lower orders for the betterment of the upper class.

Debate over the American Revolution mirrors the argument over American society and its political system which continues to this day: how democratic is it? Palmer's comparison of the American legislative assemblies to the European constituted bodies is most apt. Both represented an entrenched status quo confronted by centralizing power from above and social turmoil from below. Beginning in the 1740s, Americans endured a series of interlocking crises: religious upheaval, urban unrest, frontier rebellion, fiscal instability, and war which left the "constituted bodies" or colonial legislatures caught in the middle between crown and people. Palmer takes due account of the process of revolutionary mobilization which displaced them. He thereby explains how social unrest took the political form of loyalism on the one hand, democratization on the other. Both of these phenomena have become major topics of study since *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* was published. Palmer thus unites the opposites. His elucidation of the process by which the constituted bodies became the constituent people explains both the diversity and power of the forces churning against these bodies in late eighteenth century America, and yet accounts for continuities in ideology and leadership which controlled and contained the unrest.

3. If Palmer's comparison of the colonial legislatures to the "constituted bodies" of
eighteenth century Europe is not equally controversial, that is because both Palmer and his successors recognize important differences as well as similarities. Arguing that "increasingly there was a kind of native American aristocracy," and that "without the rise of such a colonial aristocracy there would have been no successful movement against England," Palmer located this American upper class in the assemblies and, even more so, the councils of the colonies (1: 194). As in Europe, the "old regime" bodies proved inadequate for carrying out reforms with the required ruthlessness. Instead we find:

Revolutionary government as a step toward constitutional government, committees of public safety, representatives on missions to carry revolution to the local authorities, paper money, false paper money, price controls, oaths, detention, confiscation, aversion to "moderatism," and Jacobins who wind up as sober guardians of the law—how much it all suggests what was to happen in France a few years later (1: 199)!

John Murrin is Palmer's strongest supporter on this point. Based on his own work that the colonies were becoming increasingly Anglicized in the eighteenth century, he writes:

While it might be something of an exaggeration to equate colonial assemblies too closely with Europe's constituted bodies, they were becoming measurably more elitist throughout the eighteenth century, and across the entire belt of colonies from New York through Maryland, they were drifting out of touch with their own constituents. Representation hardly grew at all. It never came close to keeping pace with population growth after 1700. Not one of these five assemblies ever repudiated the Empire in 1775-76. The job had to be done by extra-legal bodies that knew they were challenging the assembly as well as the crown.

Jack P. Greene also believes "Palmer's equation of the assemblies with European corporate bodies . . . [is] useful." Much of Greene's work has analyzed the increasing power and sense of corporate identity of the colonial assemblies, and the political stability that accompanied their rise. However, he qualifies his endorsement:

It is true that assemblies thought of themselves as corporate units and sometimes acted—in reference to critics—as if they had the same sorts of property rights and privileges enjoyed by European estates and other corporate bodies on the continent. But they were always much too subject to popular pressures ever to make such a comparison very useful. Hence, I see the alleged radicalization of those bodies as much less revolutionary than Palmer or some other scholars have supposed.
Among other scholars, Richard Johnson has written a Palmer-inspired article which compares the privileges and pretensions of colonial assemblies and the British Parliament entitled "Parliamentary Egotism: The Clash of Legislatures in the Making of the American Revolution." Robert Middlekauff, on the contrary, denies the usefulness of the analogy: "the councils lost power to the lower houses of the assemblies, a development that sets the American experience off from the European."

Once again the scholars themselves disagree not only concerning Palmer's theory but also over the nature of colonial reality. In this instance, the reason for the dispute may be that there were thirteen colonial assemblies which enjoyed different relationships with both their constituents and with British authority, and that these changed over time. "Part of the problem is which legislatures," observes Edward Countryman. "It seems fairly clear that they did not behave as one." In New England, large assemblies represented fairly homogeneous populations and thus could dispose of loyalist political elites like New Hampshire's Wentworths and Massachusetts's Hutchinsons and Olivers with little problem. The small assemblies of the Middle Colonies did not represent their ethnically and religiously diverse populations, especially frontier newcomers, and thus had to be replaced through a more traumatic internal revolt. Southern assemblies represented the tidewater and older regions well, and either reconciled (Virginia) or suppressed (the Carolinas) backcountry discontent successfully. Thirteen colonies transformed themselves into thirteen states where reforms varied according to the respective natures of the colonial assemblies and the forces working upon them.

4. Historians also reach no consensus on Palmer's theory that the French and American Revolutions can usefully be viewed as two key elements in an "Age of Democratic Revolution" with important similarities between them. Palmer did not oversimplify: "Of course... for many revolutionary developments in Europe, America offered no parallel at all." Yet declarations of rights, written constitutions, separation of powers, expanded representation, equality of rights, and separation of church and state "soon became common": "The astonishing thing is that any parallel in political behavior or ideology could exist at all."

Yet some scholars deny any important similarities. John Schutz of the University of Southern California states that "for most American historians R. R. Palmer's book does not exist in their thought patterns on the Revolution. They would grant that there was a sympathetic base of ideas in France and elsewhere in Europe, but they would approach the explanation of sympathy from the strategic needs of both
countries to fight Great Britain.” Greene agrees:

France and America have never struck me as comparable units of analysis. France was an old society and an old nation that, however varied internally, had a political and cultural center; there was no America before the mid-1770’s, no cultural center before the late nineteenth century, and given the nature of the new federal government, no political center before the twentieth century. Hence, there was no American identity. The revolutions can be compared, but the vast differences in the contexts in which they occurred need to be given major prominence.

Jackson T. Main also rejects major similarities, although he finds more novelty in France than in America:

We were revolting against the British government, not against our own (except perhaps in New Hampshire and Georgia) which was very different from the French, and our constitutions grew out of our own experience, what we had been doing or hindered from practicing, with a few exceptions, whereas the French were trying something quite new—revolutionary—and stumbled around more than we did. We didn’t overthrow or restrict a state church or aristocracy; nor was there the major displacement of personnel in the top leadership: differences, yes, but not like the French.

Main offers the intriguing suggestion that “our ‘revolution’ was really half-way between the Creole victory in Spanish America and the French, if you think of France after Napoleon.”

Other historians find Palmer’s comparison more convincing. Alfred Young remarks that Palmer “was one of the last scholars doing comparative history of revolutions to include the American Revolution in the category of revolutions.” Richard Beeman and Edward Cook both regard, in Cook’s words, “the broad theme of the democratic age” as “of especially enduring value.” John Frantz writes that “although other scholars compared revolutions, Palmer did so in greater detail and more profoundly.” Richard Johnson explains Palmer’s influence:

My feeling is that Palmer’s work had a considerable impact by reason of (and remains valuable for) both its transatlantic and pan-European perspectives, i.e. its postulation (though not perhaps proof) of an age of revolution in which one revolution influenced another—an international “contagion of liberty.” In particular, I think it gave European historians a new insight into the influence of the American Revolution... upon that of France.

Indeed, Frenchman Jacques Godechot soon took up Palmer’s idea. The two scholars collaborated to defend the two revolutions’ connectedness against scholars such as Georges Lefebvre and Alfred Cobban, who found themselves in rare
agreement; both insisted that the French Revolution was *sui generis.* Richard B. Morris, however, followed Palmer and borrowed from him in *The Emerging Nations and the American Revolution.* Recently, Patrice Higonnet in *Sister Republics* has again emphasized further similarities and differences between the two revolutions. To be sure, Higonnet stresses the revolutionary age as one of individualism rather than equality as did Palmer (who followed De Tocqueville). Unlike Palmer, who argued for “radical” French and American revolutions, Higonnet believes they led to the “realization in politics of [the different] pre-Revolutionary social and cultural circumstances” in each nation. Thus, the American Revolution succeeded and led to federalism and diversity, the French intensified statism and basically failed. Still, his approach is clearly indebted to Palmer.

Gordon Wood is one of Palmer’s most enthusiastic supporters regarding the concept of comparable revolutions. “Once French Revolutionary historiography has been stripped of its stultifying Marxian categories, especially its obsession with the bourgeoisie, then comparison between the French and American Revolutions becomes much easier and more rewarding.” Wood is also the only historian I polled who assigns his classes Palmer’s chapter on the impact of the state constitutions on Europe rather than the one on constitution-making and the people as constituent power in the United States. Wood writes: “It captures the international excitement the American Revolution generated better than any other thing I know of.”

If historians are divided on the usefulness of “the Age of the Democratic Revolution” as a general concept to link the American and French Revolutions, even scholars who agree that the American Revolution was “radical” find one of his main measuring sticks inapplicable. While John Murrin and Richard Johnson note that Palmer’s estimates of loyalist émigrés and property losses are generally accurate, even Johnson doubts that “Palmer’s stress on the number/displacement of the loyalists has really influenced overall assessments of the nature of the American Revolution.” Others are more critical: Wood points out that many loyalists had been born in Britain, and unlike the French émigrés, who were forced to go to a foreign country, they could find it easier to return home or migrate to other colonies. Richard Beeman and an anonymous scholar agree. Jack Greene elaborates: “Palmer’s conclusions . . . [also] never seemed to take adequately into account the extravagant disparity in the number of executions for crimes against the state in France and America.” Greene suggests that this is a problem scholars could still investigate: “to do genuine comparative analysis of the extent of internal warfare (how many people were involved for how long)” and to put together “various
elements” to construct “a persuasive index of comparative violence.” Still, Palmer had a point that we ignored the loyalists because they were no longer among us. Their ineffectiveness was a function of British military policy and their scattered location, not of lack of numbers.

5. Greene is not the only scholar who thinks Palmer’s work still points the way for further research. Robert Middlekauff is intrigued by Palmer’s remarks, following William N. Chambers’ *Political Parties is a New Nation: The American Experience*, on similarities and differences between the United States of the 1790s and the emerging nations of the Third World. Richard Johnson feels more attention needs to be given to the comparison of the assemblies and “constituted bodies” in Europe, and Richard Beeman thinks that Palmer “remains the best starting point” in the field of comparative revolutions given “weak” competition.

When I asked Palmer himself to respond to this essay and to add any further thoughts, his principal observation was that American historians have not paid much attention to his chapters in the second volume on the United States in the 1790s. He stressed two points. First, just as the counter-revolution began in America before 1789 (with the loyalists) it continued there after 1789 with the Federalists. The triumph of democratic and egalitarian principles was by no means assured. Of course, Palmer recognized significant differences between the Americans and European revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries:

> It is hard to see how Jefferson, who so much disliked cities with their moneyed men and their mobs, could have been so sympathetic to the French Revolution had he seen it in an altogether realistic light. The same is true of American democrats generally. But Hamilton and the Federalists were if anything even more mistaken. They imagined that men like themselves in Europe were as hostile to the Revolution as they were. Or rather, in their own self-definition, they failed to identify with the European urban middle classes, which they really resembled, and they preferred to associate themselves with the British and European aristocracies, which they hardly resembled at all (2: 525).

Nevertheless, in America as in Europe, there was a life or death “contest between different views on right and justice, on the form of the good society.” By “aspiring to be aristocrats,” the Federalists “made themselves into legitimate targets for democrats” (2: 525).

Second, Palmer also thinks more attention should be given to the impact of European events on American partisan politics in the 1790s. Emphasizing that objections to Hamilton’s financial program in 1790 did not lead to party organizations, he considers 1792 a turning point in America as in France. He concludes that
"the division into Federalists and Republicans was itself the consequence of war and revolution in Europe" (2: 526-527, 545). Citing the research of his then-student Gary Nash, Palmer also took special interest in how the arrival in America of European literature debating the nature of revolution itself stirred up contention in American attitudes and influenced party development. Nash discovered that only in 1795 did the American clergy begin to denounce revolution: a major reason, Palmer suggests, is that British domination of the sea during the war between England and France which began in 1793 guaranteed that counter-revolutionary propaganda and suffering émigrés would be far more likely to reach the United States than pro-French information. Palmer argues that even when Americans turned against the European revolution, largely as a result of such partial information, they did not renounce their own. Instead, they now viewed “democracy as a matter of concern to the world as a whole, . . . a thing of the future, [and], that while it was blocked in other countries the United States should be its refuge and its example.” Palmer concludes by citing the point made by German historian Otto Vössler in 1929: “the American mission, like the Statue of Liberty, was the gift of the French Republic” (2: 546).24

Two other passages in volume two, although not mentioned by Palmer in his letter to me, are especially interesting. One is his discussion of similarities and differences between the United States and the emerging nations of the twentieth century. Palmer finds important dissimilarities: the Americans were never really colonial peoples, but transplanted Europeans. They never suffered much under imperial rule. Unlike the developing nations of today, the United States was not poor. On the other hand:

The United States faced some typical problems of a new nation. It had to create a viable government, avoid domination by foreign powers, and prevent its territory from falling to pieces. It had to follow up its revolution by developing a new principle of legitimacy or authority. The leadership had somehow to enlist the interest of the whole people in a new enterprise, and build up their loyalty to a new regime. It was necessary also to develop roads, communications, public opinion, and group spirit or national identity. There was the general problem of economic development, and hence of access to foreign capital and the technical skills of older and more civilized countries; or at least, decisions had to be made on whether or not such development was desirable (2: 519).

Shortly before I wrote this essay, I had coincidentally delivered a paper suggesting that the manner in which Alexander Hamilton’s economic program of 1790 handled the infant United States’s debts and development problems might be relevant to devel-
oping countries and their creditors during the Third World debt crisis of the late 1980s and early 1990s. By raising taxes to pay the interest on the debt at full value, Hamilton could invest the principal in productive economic ventures through the Bank of the United States and avoid paying it off in full. Palmer also has a fine eye for the paradox that the United States was confronted with two models for modernization, one politically conservative yet economically revolutionary (England), one politically radical yet comparatively backward economically (France) and that its political parties declared their allegiance to one model or the other. What could be more reminiscent of the pro-Communist and capitalist factions in Third World countries following World War II (2: 520-1)?

A final insight in volume two which struck me as profound is Palmer's view of the intense party rivalry in the 1790s:

The paradox, therefore, is that the ideological differences aroused in the United States, which became very heated, and the actual dangers of subservience to foreign powers, which were very real, may have contributed, by creating national parties to debate national issues and elect candidates to public office in an atmosphere of public involvement, to the solidarity of the union, the maintenance of the Constitution, and the survival of the republic (2: 522).

If Palmer's second volume is not as historiographically significant for the Federalist Era as volume one is for the Revolution, it is because historians have generally been more concerned with the mechanisms of party formation and the specifics of ideological debate than they have with the comparative question Palmer raises. Scholars such as Joyce Appleby and Forrest McDonald are still debating whether Jefferson's vision of an American prosperity founded on agricultural exports was more realistic than Hamilton's insistence that a nation dependent on England for commerce and manufactures could never rest easy. If the ideological debates of two centuries ago still define the historiographical field, then Palmer is surely correct that the 1790s indeed saw fundamental divisions between those who favored a commercial society ruled by a strong, elitist government, and supporters of an agrarian society in which the state was less active and leaders reflected the will of the agrarian white male “majority.” Palmer's analysis of the Federalists as a bourgeoisie with aristocratic pretensions can go a long way toward reconciling the debate over whether they were “aristocrats” and how they differed from the Jeffersonians, whose Southern leaders seem like aristocrats with democratic pretensions.

6. When Linda K. Kerber prepared her essay on “The Revolutionary Generation: Ideology, Politics, and Culture in the Early Republic” for the American Historical
Association's The New American History series in 1990, Palmer's name appeared twice. He undermined the idea of “American exceptionalism” to champion a transatlantic revolution based on enlightenment ideals and stressed the institutionalization of “the people” in constitutional law to govern their putative governors. Kerber did not question the importance of Palmer's contribution, but proceeded to show how subsequent historians emphasized social tensions and more homegrown English political ideas as well.

As I see it, the great virtue of Palmer's work is that it takes the middle ground between both currently fashionable schools of revolutionary interpretation: ideology/republicanism and “from the bottom up” popular mobilization. The former explains overall mentality but not how specific political events were triggered—the who? what? how? and where? The latter demonstrates a great deal of social turbulence but fails to explain the ability of conservative forces to contain it successfully. That historians of both schools find Palmer seminal in inspiring their thinking suggests that he indeed serves as a bridge between them. As Alfred Young says, “the case for the radicalism of the American Revolution is in my judgment far stronger now than scholarship allowed Palmer to see. And the case for the conservatism is also stronger.” Future historians are reading Palmer, or at least learning about him. More than thirty years after its publication, parts of The Age of the Democratic Revolution are being assigned at Brown, UCLA, Penn State, Princeton, Johns Hopkins, and presumably elsewhere. With two exceptions, every scholar who mentioned the point stated that Palmer strongly influenced his or her thinking about the Revolution and was useful for preparing classes. For a historian of eighteenth century France to receive such recognition for his pioneering interpretation of the American Revolution is quite a tribute. Gary Nash, a former Palmer student, sums it up: “Few are the historians who have attempted to work with such sweep since he laid down his pen. Comparativists are rare birds, and he was one of the best.”
Notes


2. Citations to historians' opinions of Palmer's work are in letters they sent the author of this paper in response to a questionnaire between April and June, 1989 and in November 1992. I wish to thank them all for their responses, and also several scholars who prefer anonymity. Alfred F. Young's comments are from his manuscript work in progress, "American Historians Confront the "Transforming Hand of Revolution," forthcoming in Ronald Hoffman and Peter Albert, eds. "The Transforming Hand of Revolution": Reconsidering the American Revolution as a Social Movement (University of Virginia Press).


See also two collections edited by Alfred F. Young: *The American Revolution* (DeKalb, Ill., 1976) and *Beyond the American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, Ill., 1993).


15. The most extensive studies of the loyalists are by Robert M. Calhoon, *The Loyalist Perception and Other Essays* (Columbia, 1989); for democratization see notes 10-12 above.


25. “Alexander Hamilton’s Economic Program as


29. By Wood, Nash, Frantz, and Greene, respectively.