

## BOOK REVIEW

*B*enjamin H. Irvin. *Clothed in Robes of Sovereignty: The Continental Congress and the People Out of Doors* (Oxford University Press, 2011). Pp. 392. Illustrations, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$34.95

Benjamin Irvin provides a compelling analysis of the Continental Congress's struggle to establish sovereign authority during the American Revolution. In attempting to garner respect for a quasi-national government, Irvin argues, Congress attempted to appeal to a national identity through the construction of new symbols, rituals, holidays, and public ceremonies. In order for them to work, however, these "invented traditions" needed the acceptance of the "people out of doors," without whom the Congress and this new nation could never exist, at least cohesively (5). The "people out of doors," particularly Philadelphians, Irvin posits, did not willingly accept all of Congress's creations, but instead confirmed, debated, rejected, and tailored the symbols and fêtes of Congress to fit their own views of the new nation.

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Together, Irvin contends, Congress and the “people out of doors” fashioned “a revolution in America’s national identity” (10).

Members of the Continental Congress attempted to shape a national identity using their own cultural lexicon and in their own self-perceived image. The goals were twofold: to encourage within the people allegiance to the nation, while at the same time bolstering the authority of a gentry class to govern the nascent republic. The behavioral practices Congress demanded, the images it designed, and the fêtes it approved, “employed material wealth and polite sociability” in order to establish the gentry’s “prerogative to rule” (24). For example, Irvin argues that Congress’s enactment of the Continental Association in 1774, which was an attempt to govern the manners of the people by proscribing luxurious consumption and popular diversions, was also part of a concerted effort to establish the core of a republican ethos that garnered loyalty to the American cause and its new government. The association, according to Irvin, “bore the power to promote a collective, even a national, consciousness.” But this “consciousness,” Irvin argues, was also “borne of an impulse to preserve Anglo-American social hierarchy” by hardening “distinctions of class, race, and gender.” Restrictions on the consumption of tea, for example, targeted women in an effort to promote “masculine virtue” in the face of “effeminate luxury” (32, 34, 36).

Congress attempted to affirm this circumscribed identity through a host of symbols and rituals. Congress commissioned Benjamin Franklin to print a currency with symbols encouraging “righteousness, industry, and fortitude” (77). Heraldic depictions of royal authority were replaced with images such as a hand-threshing grain and mottos like “Mind Your Business,” which, Irvin claims, aimed to reform human behavior (86). Like the association and currency, some of the public celebrations promoted by Congress, such as Independence Day festivities, days of fasting and thanksgiving, and funerals for deceased members of Congress, were all imbued with a similar “patriotic sentiment” (8).

Not every public display of sovereignty drew on such austerity. In an excellent section on congressional diplomacy, Irvin shows how republican ideals competed with the exigency of establishing the United States on the world stage as a sovereign power and gaining wartime assistance from European allies. Diplomacy mandated pomp, ceremony, lavish dinners, and even seemingly royal gesticulations. Nothing seemed further from the republicanism of the association or the symbols on Franklin’s Continental bills than

a congressionally planned parade with French ambassador Conrad-Alexander Gerard riding toward the State House in the United States' coach-and-six accompanied by a retinue of local officials. Even more telling, once inside the State House, Gerard met a literally elevated President of Congress, Henry Laurens, who sat in an ornate mahogany armchair set up on a platform in imitation of monarchical authority. According to Irvin, "having seen the king of England on his throne," many congressmen, especially southern delegates, "would not relinquish the monarchical conceit that national glory resided in the exalted body of a supreme ruler" (175).

For all the planning and public fêtes, however, Congress's efforts failed on several levels. By the end of the book, Irvin deems the once-buoyant and vibrant Congress "impoverished and ineffectual" (268). It could scarcely form even spasmodic internal unity and was challenged externally on multiple fronts. As early as 1775, the "people out of doors" threatened to raze Congress's drinking hole, the City Tavern, because of rumors circulating Philadelphia of a lavish congressionally sanctioned ball to welcome Martha Washington. Philadelphians, especially the laboring people, who had suffered under the association, were angered by the apparent hypocrisy of Congress. Similarly, Congress's use of a socially circumscribed identity was contested by ardent loyalists, who turned Congress's constructions of gender, class, and race on their head. Moreover, when inflation racked the fledgling United States, Continental bills, with all of their symbols of republicanism, were discredited. Loyalists refused to deal in them and even ardent patriots scorned their worthlessness by, in one instance, fashioning them into gaudy necklaces for dogs they paraded through the streets. Likewise, angry soldiers mutinied and Continental officers threatened national harmony with the creation of the Society of the Cincinnati. Not only did Congress have to shield itself from loyalists and angry patriots, but also the states, equally wary of threats to their sovereign authority, challenged the omnipotence of Congress. Besieged on all sides, Congress became peevish and introverted, commanding "little of the public's esteem" (268).

Irvin provides a forceful depiction of the inability of Congress to formulate national unity. Yet, this downward trajectory in congressional authority as tied to national sentiment ultimately brings into question statements made in the book's introduction, such as the argument that Congress and the "people out of doors" created a "revolution in America's national identity." Surely, something changed when subjects became citizens, but it is unclear in

this book if an American identity actually emerged and if it did, for whom? Irvin smartly maneuvers through the heterogeneity of the “people out of doors” by demonstrating that “the people” were not just a conglomerate whole, but deeply separated by diverging loyalties, interests, social standings, race, and gender. While Irvin shows that these distinctions hindered the full acceptance of Congress’s vision for the nation, it is not quite clear if or how an alternative identity emerged. Moreover, it is equally unclear if powerful biases influenced by region, section, ethnicity, or religion played as important a role in identity formation and the allure of a national government as they had in the colonial past. An exploration of such prejudices is crucial when contemplating a “national sentiment” in early America, especially considering the tenuousness of that sentiment in the face of these differences during the first half of the nineteenth century. As John Adams irritably asked Benjamin Rush in the winter of 1813, “Are we one Nation, or 18?” (John Adams to Benjamin Rush, February 23, 1813, in *Old Family Letters*, ed. Alexander Biddle [Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1892], 447).

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