ESSAY REVIEW
Up From Civic Virtue


Revolutionary Statesman: Charles Carroll and the War. By THOMAS O'BRIEN HANLEY. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1983. x, 448p. Frontispiece, documentary notes, index. $15.95.)


In an incisive review essay written more than a decade ago, Stanley N. Katz assessed a spate of new works that he correctly predicted would represent a paradigm shift in our understanding of the intellectual origins of revolutionary America. These studies, focusing on late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century constitutional thought, revealed a political world obsessed with instituting mixed government, the separation of powers, and a balanced constitution in order to control power and preserve individual liberty. A traditional morality emphasizing the need for citizens' political participation and disinterested concern for the commonweal underlay this constitutional theory. The entire constellation of ideas, it was argued, was drawn from a larger intellectual tradition, that of republicanism or civic humanism, which traced its roots back to Plato, Aristotle, Polybius, and especially Machiavelli and James Harrington. What previous historians had assumed to be the staples of Anglo-American political thought for understanding the American Revolution—contract, the state of nature, doctrine of consent, theory of natural rights, and the right of revolution—were now labeled myths or dismissed as inconsequential.¹

The major casualty of this republican revisionism was John Locke, the standard-bearer of liberal individualism. At Katz wrote, "Locke et praeterea nihil, it now appears, will no longer do as a motto for the study of eighteenth-century Anglo-American political thought."² Subsequent works by John Dunn, Gary Wills, J.G.A. Pocock, and Norman Fiering have further discredited Locke's influence, denying, respectively, his impact on the origins

² Ibid., 474.
of the American Revolution, his importance for Thomas Jefferson's formulation of the Declaration of Independence, and his preeminence in eighteenth-century constitutional thought and moral philosophy.¹

In the past ten years some historians, reacting strongly against reading Locke out of Anglo-American intellectual history, have systematically attempted to re-establish the importance of liberal individualism for understanding the political upheavals of this period. In a masterful article in 1982, Isaac Kramnick convincingly challenged the republican school by demonstrating that eighteenth-century English radicals' campaign for parliamentary and franchise reform owed a large debt to Locke's political ideas.² Similarly, recent religious, political, and literary studies of colonial America have revealed the importance of Locke's A Letter on Toleration (1689) and On the Reasonableness of Christianity (1695) in constructing Virginia's "Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom" (1786), the centrality of his Two Treatises of Government (1689-90) in forming Jefferson's ideas about the Declaration of Independence, and the potency of his antipatriarchal Some Thoughts concerning Education (1693) in shaping the dispute between Great Britain and the colonies.³ And while F.W. Anderson does not mention Locke in describing the


contractual nature of New England soldiers' term of service, it is apparent that by the Great War for the Empire, Lockean principles had permeated the colonists' understanding of military duty.  

The reaffirmation of Locke's influence is only one part of a larger, more direct challenge to the republican synthesis of early America. In an insightful and comprehensive survey of recent work by, among others, Rhys Isaac, Gary Nash, Eric Foner, and Joyce Appleby, Robert E. Shalhope contends that prerevolutionary America contained several ideologies which conflicted with some tenets of classical republicanism and harmonized with others. The net effect of these new studies is to revise our thinking about the ideological origins of the American Revolution and political conflicts during the Revolutionary War. Yet, as Shalhope notes, these scholars differ among themselves on several points. In particular, Isaac, Nash, and Foner find that the lower orders comprised a premodern social order, emphasizing communalistic and egalitarian values, while Appleby portrays the middle and lower classes as the vanguard of modernization, embodying the individualistic, materialistic ethos of liberal America.  

Within this context, J.R. Pole's lucid and wide-ranging *Gift of Government: Political Responsibility from the English Restoration to American Independence* reinforces Appleby's perspective and enlarges our understanding of liberalism as a contributing factor in the breakup of the first British Empire. Characteristically, Pole employs a comparative framework to discuss the parallel development of political accountability in England and America. He begins by setting out the obligations of government in the seventeenth century. For the Stuarts and the Puritans, the fundamental duties of the state were to maintain religion and to protect personal property and security. Because political power was considered a gift of God, kings and governors owed the people the gift of good government. Parliament and colonial assemblies, Pole claims, did not figure prominently in the political calculus of the seventeenth century. The people's role in politics was also minimal, limited until the 1740s to the people's duty to obey their rulers.  

In the century following the Restoration, on both sides of the Atlantic, the obligation of rulers and the political role of the people changed completely. As a result of the secularization of society—which Pole believes "was itself a product of a broader transmutation, which can better be called diversification" (p. 11)—government lost its religious function and was recast into the utilitarian role of promoting the happiness of the people. Increasingly, the happiness of the people revolved around the idea of interests, specifically the


economic and social interests of merchants, fishermen, shipwrights, and farmers. These interests, a result of the diversification of secular aims, "were themselves...subtly transmuted into justifications for government itself" (p. 27).

Most importantly, the colonists also justified the imperial connection on pragmatic considerations of American self-interest. For Pole, this is the key to understanding the revolutionary crisis. After 1763, when Parliament repeatedly failed to rule in the colonists' interests Americans advocated resistance in the language of the Revolution of 1688, quoting John Locke and invoking a contract theory of government. Pole notes that colonial spokesmen like James Otis and John Dickinson did not advance a constitutional argument in protesting British measures; both believed Parliament sovereign. Rather, they based their arguments on utility and contract: a government that failed to provide or promote the conditions of America's happiness violated its trust and forfeited any legitimate claim to its citizens' allegiance. For Pole, then, the revolutionary crisis was not only a debate over sovereignty; what "gave life and urgency to the argument was that it was also a crisis about legitimacy. The legitimacy of the institutions of government was coming more and more to be valued in the light of their effectiveness in representing the multiplying interests of the community; in short, in promoting their happiness" (p. 86). By this standard the competitive clash of interests between Britain and her colonies becomes inevitable.

Many implications followed from the principle that the government's legitimacy, its moral authority, rested on its ability to satisfy the people. The most important assumption was that the people had the right to scrutinize their rulers. And in his concluding chapters, Pole traces the slow and checkered development of two related ideas, that the people should have access to the records of legislative proceedings and that representatives have an obligation to report to their constituents. Thus, as early as 1641 John Pym's two-hour speech in the House of Commons was published and disseminated among the London populace, yet as late as 1793 the debates of the United States Senate were conducted in secrecy. But before 1760, Pole notes, secrecy was the rule in British and American assemblies. In fact, both claimed to be representative bodies "but at the same time rejected all ideas of democracy and recognized no obligation to provide public information about debates or divisions in the legislature" (p. 89). The modern principles of accountability and public access to legislative deliberation emerged only in the last four decades of the eighteenth century with the transformation in the concept of representation (though it should be kept in mind that during this period the debates of neither the Continental Congress nor the Constitutional Convention were made public).

Almost by the nature of the genre—The Gift of Government constitutes an expansion of the Richard B. Russell lectures Pole delivered at the University of
Georgia—the study has its weaknesses. Some readers will doubtlessly be ir-
ritated, and ultimately unpersuaded, by Pole's heavy reliance on Massachusetts
sources, especially ministers' sermons, as if America were the Bay Colony writ
large. He also seriously underestimates seventeenth-century colonists' active
involvement in politics and (ironically, in light of his previous work) their
strong belief in representative institutions. Thus, whether one looks at political
behavior—Massachusetts freemen demanding codification of provincial laws,
Marylanders insisting on a bicameral legislature, or "governmentish" Penn-
sylvanians claiming the Assembly's right to initiate legislation—or at political
theory—Commonwealth writings or Locke's *Second Treatise*—it is clear that
Pole is wrong to claim there was no popular presence in government until the
1740s. Finally he is exasperatingly vague about the forces responsible for the
transition from the religious function of government to the more utilitarian
one of promoting the happiness of the people. His reference to "the spirit of
benevolence" (p.25) simply will not support the intellectual weight he places
on it.

But the strengths of the book far outweigh its weaknesses. Pole offers witty,
epigrammatic sentences, such as "Natural rights are the divine rights of the
common man," throughout the text, and he knows how to grab the reader's
attention with eye-opening anecdotes such as the time two women in the
Commons gallery urinated on the MP's below! Pole also demonstrates an
admirable ability to illuminate long-standing scholarly debates with an off-
hand remark. For example he cuts the Gordian knot between Jack P. Greene
and Bernard Bailyn on the question of whether it was the rise of the Assembly
or Commonwealth ideology that most influenced the coming of the American
Revolution. 8 He finds that the House of Commons on which colonial assem-
bles modeled themselves was "the heroic House of Pym and Hampden, de-
fying a tyrannical monarch in the name of liberty, property, and the Puritan
religion" (p. 65). In other words, the colonists emulated a House of Commons
that used the language of the Commonwealthmen. Moreover, the breadth of
the work—both the long time-frame and complex subject matter—combined
with the author's erudition make this book an intellectual delight to read.

This is also an important book. It contributes in several ways to our un-
derstanding of the revolutionary crisis. First, it reinforces the recent redis-
covery that several ideologies coexisted in colonial America. Second, it em-
phasizes the need to begin with Lockean liberal ideology with its stress on
utility, economic self-interest, and a contract theory of government in recon-
structing the intellectual origins of the American Revolution. It was this un-

8 Jack P. Greene, "Political Mimesis A Consideration of the Historical and Cultural Roots
of Legislative Behavior in the British Colonies in the Eighteenth Century," with a reply by
derstanding of imperial measures that triggered colonial protests after 1763. Most importantly, on political and constitutional issues, liberalism worked in tandem, not in conflict, with classical republicanism. While the colonists' adherence to liberal principles sensitized them to British threats to American interests, belief in Commonwealth ideology intensified the crisis and eventually drove the colonists into war by explaining British actions in terms of a conspiratorial plot to enslave them. Finally, the two ideologies, whether relying on Algernon Sidney or John Locke, reinforced each other because both advocated revolution against acts of arbitrary rule. But if liberalism and republican ideology worked together to precipitate the revolutionary crisis, after 1775 (and in New York and Pennsylvania before 1775), their very divergent perspectives on human nature, social and economic organization, requirements of political leadership, and especially the concept of the common good led to conflict between rulers and ruled.

There is much to be said for accepting a model of ideological pluralism. Starting from the premise that several ideologies existed in revolutionary America makes it possible, for example, to solve one of the central interpretive problems neo-Progressive historians have posed about conservative revolutionaries: why did they join the Revolution? Most scholars from Merrill Jensen to Edward Countryman have argued that conservative revolutionaries used the Revolution to pursue their own economic gain or reactionary political interests. But neither of these motives can adequately explain the complex and contradictory nature of conservatives' careers. Helpful on this point are two new biographies of second-echelon Whigs. Despite their filiopietistic tone, numbing detail, and in the case of the Clymer biography, outrageous price, Thomas O'Brien Hanley's *Revolutionary Statesman: Charles Carroll and the War* and a direct reprint of Jerry Grundfest's unrevised 1973 Columbia dissertation, *George Clymer, Philadelphia Revolutionary, 1739-1813*, present data that reveal the problems of previous interpretations of conservative revolutionaries.

Simply put, Carroll and Clymer were radicals while opposing British imperial measures and conservatives when faced with political change. Steeped in classical republicanism and Commonwealth ideology, they militantly supported Independence because they believed that the British ministry intended to enslave the colonists; after 1775, however, in the maelstrom of revolutionary politics, the same world view predisposed both revolutionaries to resist any movement toward more direct popular rule. Although Carroll and Clymer came from different backgrounds, they both opposed Parliament's earliest...

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efforts to tax the colonies. Of Irish descent, Carroll had been educated in France and England, and was extremely wealthy—John Adams thought him the richest man in America—but his Roman Catholic faith barred him from participating in Maryland politics. Nevertheless, he sympathized with colonial protests against the Stamp Act and Townshend Duties. In 1774, as a result of the popularity of his “First Citizen” letters (1773) which attacked the Governor’s prerogative power to set officials’ fees, he was rewarded with election to the Maryland Convention as a delegate from Anne Arundel County. Clymer, descended from an English immigrant, was orphaned as a youngster and never received a formal education. Eventually, though, he inherited his uncle’s wealth and became a well-to-do Philadelphia merchant, allied to the Proprietary party. When the revolutionary crisis began, Clymer opposed the Stamp Act, signed Philadelphia’s non-importation agreement, led the “Philadelphia Tea Party,” and as a member of Philadelphia’s Committee of Observation and Inspection (the Sixty-Six) opposed John Dickinson’s conservative policies. After 1774, Carroll and Clymer became increasingly involved in revolutionary activities. Both soon advocated separating from Great Britain, both signed the Declaration of Independence (Carroll’s timely intervention shored up the faltering resolve of Maryland’s congressional delegation), and both served in their respective state legislatures and on various committees in the Continental Congress. In short, they were the workhorses of the revolution; they not only wrote state constitutions and bills of rights, but, in the case of Carroll, journeyed to Canada to oversee military operations or, like Clymer, mobilized men for the army, procured arms and ammunition, and supervised the construction of fortifications.

The same constellation of ideas that propelled Carroll and Clymer headlong into revolution, however, insured that neither would welcome demands for increased popular participation in government. Each man had his own personal reason for not trusting to the wisdom of the people: Carroll never forgot that throughout the eighteenth century Maryland’s popularly elected Assembly discriminated against Roman Catholics, while Clymer had no faith in the western Pennsylvania frontiersmen who refused to obey the directives of the Continental Congress. But the root of Carroll’s and Clymer’s conspicuous distrust of the people lay in their adherence to republican ideology with its emphasis on the uncontrollability of power, the corruptible nature of man, and its remedies for controlling both: mixed government, balanced separation of powers, and property qualifications for voting and holding office. It was republican ideology, sanctioned by a century of colonial political practices, that underpinned Carroll’s, Clymer’s, and other republican Whigs’ beliefs in limited popular rule and its corollary, an elite concept of representation, one which, Pole notes, “stood aloof from the people but often in a state of defiance against the crown or its agents” (p. 141).
It was in fact the clash between republican and liberal conceptions of the public good that often generated passionate conflicts during the revolutionary era. Republicans demanded self-sacrifice and public-spirited dedication to the commonwealth that transcended private interests. As Benjamin Rush intoned, "Every man in a republic is public property. His time and talents—his youth—his manhood—his old age—nay more, life, all belong to his country."\(^\text{10}\) After 1775, when Americans' civic virtue declined precipitously, as evidenced by their increasing reluctance to volunteer for military service or sell food to the army at reasonable prices, it was those republican Whigs most closely associated with the war who bitterly reviled their compatriots in anti-democratic language. But the source of republican Whig rhetoric was not patrician contempt for plebian presumption, though in some it was undoubtedly a factor, but rather disgust at blatant assertions of individual private rights at a time when the public good—enlisting an army, feeding soldiers, and defeating the British—demanded the subordination of the self to the cause. It was his dedication to the republican ideal that hardened Clymer to frontier individualism. During his mission to the west he was particularly struck by the fact that "here are no private or public associations for the public good, every Man standing single. 'Tis so even in death. At Pittsburgh, the deceased is hedged around with a little paling, keeping his neighbors at a distance."\(^\text{11}\)

Clymer did not need to leave Philadelphia to find evidence of the same tendencies he deplored in Pittsburgh. "Every Man standing single" was the essence of liberal individualism and it thrived throughout America. For at the heart of liberal ideology was the notion of private interests, epitomized by one South Carolina Gazette writer's defense of "my Property, my liberty, my life, and the life of my Posterity."\(^\text{12}\) When liberal notions of the public good joined with Lockean ideas of the consent of the governed and a contract theory of government, political radicalism often resulted. Certainly, many popular leaders reflected this strain of thought. Maryland's Rezin Hammond, for example, who led the opposition to the state constitution's property requirement for voting, reminded his followers that "every man that bore arms in defense of his country had a right to vote, and if they were not allowed no vote they had no right to bear arms."\(^\text{13}\) This was liberalism—but "liberalism from

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\(^{11}\) Quoted in Grundfest, *George Clymer*, 141.


\(^{13}\) Quoted in Hanley, *Revolutionary Statesman*, 172.
the bottom up." These observations suggest the need for more intensive research into the ideological conflicts of the revolutionary era. Attempting to sort out the social, economic, and political effects of these ideologies of the men who fought the Revolution and constructed the new nation should be the new agenda for historians of late eighteenth-century America.

*The Nathanael Greene Papers*  

E. WAYNE CARP

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14 Comment by John M. Murrin of Princeton University at the March 2, 1984 seminar of The Philadelphia Center for Early American Studies.