



The University of Sydney

Department of History

*The Revolution in American Life: Memory, History, and Nation-Making in the United States from 1776 to Today*

Call for Papers for an Edited Collection

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In his much-anticipated inaugural address in January 2009, President Barack H. Obama invoked the country's founding moment – the American Revolution - no fewer than four separate times in charting a proposed path through the difficult years to come. Significantly, in conjuring a memory of the Revolution to legitimate his agenda, Obama followed in the footsteps of his predecessor. In January 2005, George W. Bush invoked the American Revolution in an effort to shore up support for the so-called War on Terror. Bush referred several times to the ideals of the “founding moment,” and spoke of the founders' hope for ‘freedom’ that it was now America's duty to spread back around the globe. Like Obama, he ended with a history lesson. When the Liberty Bell rang at the reading of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, Bush said a witness noted that “it rang as if it meant something.” He paused. “In our time,” Bush intoned, “it means something still.”

Obama and Bush knew what buttons to push. Presidents, of course, try to manipulate the emotions of their listeners by appealing to what they imagine those in their audience find compelling. And surveys consistently reveal that if most Americans remember anything about their past, it is “something” about the American Revolution. Defined roughly as the period between 1763 and 1800, the era of the American Revolution has come to provide a rich seam of memorable events that can be mined to invoke, impart, and inspire. Whether it be iconic images of the Boston Tea Party or the signing of the Declaration of Independence, or inspiring stories such as Paul Revere's Ride, the American victory at Yorktown, or Washington's tearful Farewell Address, or knowledge of the “sacred” texts that lie enshrined under bomb-proof glass in a vault at the National Archives – the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights - most Americans today do indeed seem to remember something about their Revolution.

The American Revolution, then, is today arguably the central event in American history and is ineradicably tied to the nation's sense of identity and purpose. It is, in effect, at the heart of the nation. But has it always been this way? Though the current deluge and huge popularity of biographies of the Founding Fathers would suggest a timeless fascination with the American Revolution, we would like to historicise this apparent obsession with the founding moment and think about the multiple ways in which the American Revolution has been remembered, forgotten, and contested from the Founding Era through to today.

To do this, we'd like to begin to identify just how, why, and when Americans - and others - have remembered, invoked, used, and abused the American Revolution and the Founding era. In doing so, we want to move beyond Michael Kammen's pioneering work on the subject and map out a social, cultural, and political history of the ways in which diverse groups of Americans have

thought about their Revolutionary past and how this has shaped their nation and the world in which we now live.

Accordingly, we are looking for expressions of interest from scholars working in this field for an edited collection (or indeed, a series of edited collections) on the Revolution in American life from the 1770s to today. We are also keen to develop links with interested scholars for the purpose of future collaborations in the form of funded workshops and Conference panels over the next year or two. As the possible topics below suggest, we envision this project as an international, interdisciplinary collaborative endeavour.

If you are interested in contributing, please send a 250-500 word abstract of your current research topic and an indication of the kind of paper you might offer to an edited collection, along with a brief vita, to: michael.mcdonnell@usyd.edu.au; clare.corbould@usyd.edu.au

The deadline for abstracts is July 4, 2009.

Possible topics might include, but are not limited to, papers that speak to the following main concerns:

- the historicisation of memory itself - how have Americans remembered their past? How have different Americans remembered their past? Do race, gender, class, religion or regional differences matter? How has this changed over time? How have these changes affected the way that Americans remember their founding moment?
- Individual versus collective memory – what is the relationship between individual and collective memories? At what point do individual memories become co-opted or replaced by a collective memory? How do different memories and remembrances of the past combine or conflict to create a collective memory?
- The multiplicity of memory – what place did/does the American Revolution have in the minds of Americans at any given moment? What memories have competed with the Revolution? Does/did the Revolution have a primary place in the remembering of the past?
- Representations of the past versus the reception of those representations – how and why have different groups represented the Revolution? How have they tried to communicate those representations? What roles have monuments, art, film, the stage or museums played in these representations? How successful have these different kinds of representations been? Why do some representations come to dominate?
- Remembering and forgetting – what are the visible signs of remembrance? What do silences, omissions and gaps in memories tell us about the place of the Revolution in American memories? How have different groups remembered an alternative, dissenting past? Have these replaced a memory of the Revolution?
- Myth and history and the “founding moment” – to what extent is the memory of the Revolution dominated by the idea of it being a “founding moment”? To what extent is the memory of the Revolution wedded to the creation of a nation? Has this obscured or enriched our view of the Revolutionary period as an historical event? Have historians been complicit in this mythmaking?
- The American Revolution Abroad - in what ways have other nations or peoples remembered the Revolution? What role have other nations' founding memories played in their history? What role have the memories of other nations played in American memories of the past?