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THREE BRITISH REVOLUTIONS:
1641, 1688, 1776
EDITED BY J.G.A. POCOCK

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS - PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY
1980
We come at last to consider a truly British revolution: one which even involves a revolt against being British. In 1641 and 1688 the kingdom of Great Britain did not exist, and the events in Scotland which preceded one English Revolution in 1637 and followed another in 1689 took place in what was still, though it was ceasing to be, an autonomous political culture; while the unsuccessful last stands of the Old Irish and Old English aristocracies in 1641 and 1689 occurred in an Ireland whose political development had not yet reached the point where so sophisticated a term as “revolution” in its modern sense would be appropriate. John Pym and John Adams may have been revolutionaries; Sir Phelim O’Neill and Swearing Dick Talbot were not. But in the high eighteenth century, provincial variants of Whig political culture had established themselves in Lowland Scotland, among the Anglo-Irish, in New England, in Pennsylvania, and in Virginia; there was a kingdom of Great Britain and, briefly, there was an Atlantic British political world—rather vaguely termed an empire—which reached from the North Sea to the headwaters of the Ohio. But within this greater Britain there
occurred a revolution which must be thought of as the outcome of its common development, but which resulted in the detachment of its English-speaking sector on the mainland of North America, to become a distinct nation and a highly distinctive political culture. The first revolution to occur within a "British" political system resulted in its partial disruption and the pursuit by one of its components of an independent history; and the same is true of the second, otherwise known as the Irish Revolution of 1912–22.

Since, when we talk of "Britain," we mean an English domination of associated insular and Atlantic cultures, there is a profoundly important sense in which the American Revolution can only be understood by placing it in the sequence provided by this symposium: as one of a series of crises occasioned by the growth and change of English political institutions. To Americans, its significance must be national; an American personality had taken shape in an American environment, and the Revolution is the crisis of its independence. This, obviously, is beyond refutation. But in the "British" context, we have to see it, first as a crisis in the history of the Anglo-Scottish consortium set up in 1707, second as a crisis in the history of that central and most English of its governing institutions, the King-in-Parliament. In 1641 and in 1688, crises occurred in the relations between the English Crown and English propertied society, from which the King-in-Parliament emerged reinforced, if profoundly transformed; the ability of England to create and consolidate "Britain" and to pursue an Atlantic empire was one of the byproducts of 1688. But in 1776, or rather between 1764 and 1801, the capacity of Parliament for provincial government—and in lesser degree, the way in which it currently governed English society—were severely challenged. In the American colonies there occurred the revolution against Parliament which I have chosen for my title; the authority of Parliament was successfully overthrown, its appropriateness as a form of government was denied to the satisfaction of Americans, and there emerged a new political society, a transformed version of a quasi-republican alternative to parliamentary monarchy which had been latent in the English tradition since the revolutions of the seventeenth century. In Britain proper, however, the authority of Parliament was shown to be so deeply rooted in the conditions of society that its overthrow was unthinkable anywhere to the right of Thomas Paine; the revolt of America did very little to shake it, and after fifty harsh years of industrialization and war it proved capable of enlarging and later democratizing its own electoral base. To complete the post-American picture of the now sunned North Atlantic, we must add the Anglo-Irish relationship as a case intermediate between independence and parliamentary union; the former was only marginally attempted, but the latter did not take root.

In a context of British history, therefore, the origins of the American Revolution present two characteristics: the inability of Whig parliamentary government to extend itself to colonies of settlement, and the existence within the parliamentary tradition of a republican alternative which could be used to deny Parliament its legitimacy and—to suggest that other modes of government were possible. It is not hard to see why the colonial elites could not develop into parliamentary county gentry, but I must leave to others the description of what manner of political beings they did become; it should be emphasized, however, that for a long time they did think of themselves as parliamentary gentrys, and only in revolutionary trauma admitted that they must be something else. The importance of the alternative ideology—the republican, commonwealth, or country tradition—is that it provided Americans with a radical but rather shallow explanation of why they could no longer be parliamentary Englishmen, and a rather profound understanding of what else they might become. But in tracing history in terms of contemporary self-understanding—which is what the history of ideology really amounts to—one is not playing a barren game of pitting one cause
against another cause, or one factor against another factor; one is exploring the contemporary perception of possibilities and impossibilities, and the limitations of that perception. It can also be shown, I believe, that ideology offers a commentary on the growth and change of the parliamentary institution, which assists us in understanding the limitations of parliamentary reality: the reasons why governing America, but not governing Ireland, confronted Parliament with challenges it preferred not to meet.

II

When James Harrington—who insisted that domestic and provincial government were different in kind—surveyed in the late 1650s the imminent failure of the first English revolution he felt quite sure of two things. The first was that the government of Charles I had collapsed because there was no longer a feudal aristocracy to support it; the second was that the government of Charles II—if restored, as seemed increasingly likely—would not have the support of any viable hereditary or entrenched aristocracy, because such could exist only in a feudal form. There was a good deal to be said for the first of these perceptions, but a good deal less for the second; Harrington had failed altogether to predict that spectacular reconstitution of a governing aristocracy which followed the decline of the Tudor magnate class whose crisis has been charted by Professor Stone. In 1642 the House of Lords could do little to arrest the drift toward civil war; in 1688 those peers who happened to be in London could come together of themselves to exert a measurable influence on the situation precipitated by the flight of James II. The Restoration of 1660—which may be said to have begun with the solid determination in Richard Cromwell’s Parliament to bring back the House of Lords—had marked the recovery of parliamentary and political aristocracy. The creation of peers by Charles II had furthered, though it had not caused, the growth of a class of habitual politicians who frequented the Court, the Town, and to some extent the City, knew each other well if they hated each other heartily, and maintained that inner world of high politics whose existence continues to fascinate English neo-conservative historians to the point where they are reluctant to acknowledge the political reality of anything else. It is the presence and efficacy of this coterie which marks the real difference between 1641 and 1688; but though the word “Court” was in use in both eras, the decline of the old palace-centered political world of courtiers and councillors was irredeemable. The new Court was attendant upon Parliament as much as upon the King; and it was made up of men who understood the simpler arts of parliamentary management, of acting as a “screen or bank” between King and Commons, at any rate better than their predecessors had done, and who found in the House of Lords a very tolerable political club.

In the reign of Charles II it was already understood that there existed a class of parliamentary managers and magnates—moving steadily into the hereditary peerage but never identical with it—whose strength consisted in their closeness to executive authority and in (what was not quite the same thing) their command of political patronage, influence, and what its enemies termed corruption. One need not deny the importance of economic change—of the strict settlement, the mortgage, and improved techniques of estate management—in permitting a class of great landowners to survive and engross its estates if one emphasizes that the governing aristocracy of late Stuart and Hanoverian England was a parliamentary aristocracy; and though we may debate the control and efficacy of patronage as a technique of government, we need not doubt its reality as an issue and a value. Whig England, it may be said, held as a self-evident truth that every political man was entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of influence. One might even question, in tracing the growth of this governing order,
the importance of 1688 itself, considered as an isolated episode. Too many reluctant Tories, cursing their King and themselves with equal fervor, went along with that amazing and undesired upheaval to give it the immediate character of a shift in social power. The stress might fall rather upon two of the Revolution’s admitted consequences: the “financial revolution” of the mid-1690s and, twenty years later, the Septennial Act, which formed the keystone of what J. H. Plumb has termed “the growth of oligarchy.” In the first of these were created the great institutions of public credit—the Bank of England, the National Debt, and, less auspiciously, the South Sea Company—which brought the postrevolutionary regime the political stability, founded on a large class of investors, and the financial resources necessary to wage war in Europe, to absorb a Scotland ardently desirous of commercial opportunity, and to pursue empire in the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and India. In the second—after two decades of Country and Tory rebellion against war, high taxes, and government by patronage and finance—the parliamentary aristocracy and gentry deliberately moved to reduce the competitiveness of politics even if this meant confirming the supremacy of influence and patronage. Long parliamentary terms and uncontested elections opened the way to the England of Walpole and Newcastle, the Scotland of the Dukes of Argyll.

This was the Britain, at once oligarchic and imperial, against which the American Revolution was directed; and it is important for us to realize that its personality was a deeply divided one. The function of parliamentary oligarchy was to maintain unity between government and landed society, that unity of the political nation without which there could be no government; but among the necessary means of doing this was the maintenance of a unity between government, commerce, and finance which was dynamic in its pursuit of mercantile, naval, and military empire and a specific role in the European power system.

Every perceptive observer of eighteenth-century reality recognized this harnessing of the static and the dynamic; the political nation desired stability more than empire, but pursued empire as a byproduct of its means of maintaining stability. Out of this there was in due time to emerge a kind of fixed law of modern British politics, that empire is to be yielded when it threatens the normal conduct of political competition—an experience unknown to Americans until very recently. But to eighteenth-century minds there was another and more immediate necessary consequence: the necessity of a sovereign Parliament. Whether one looked at the need to maintain the unity of government and society, or at the need to pursue the policies of war and empire, it was clear that executive and legislature must be linked by the same ties as those that bound the governing oligarchy to the nation which it both ruled and represented; and, whether symbolically or practically, the two most obviously necessary modes of this unity were legislative supremacy and a politics of influence. The latter did as much as the former to root executive in legislature and government in society.

This was the system to which the not altogether narrow political nation of the age of oligarchy was to find itself committed; but it was at once the strength and the weakness of opposition ideology that it altogether denied this system’s validity. Here we encounter that quasi-republican alternative which I mentioned earlier, and to understand its origins and character we must return to the first English Revolution. As early as 1642 it had been argued on behalf of the traditional constitution that King, Lords, and Commons corresponded to the monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy of a theoretical republican balance, and more vaguely to the executive, judicial, and legislative powers; and that between them there existed an equilibrium in which each was restrained by the other two from the excess which led to degeneration. After 1649 it was contended that a hereditary King and Lords had proved harmful to
the balance, and Harrington’s *Oceana* is a blueprint for a balanced republic with no hereditary element; but the theory had originally been advanced on behalf of the traditional constitution, and continued to figure in its justification in 1660 and in 1688. Balance presupposed the independence of each of the three constituent parts, and it could be asserted that hereditary tenure effectively guaranteed the independence of a nonelected aristocracy, so long as these did not hold the Commons in dependence, which in a post-feudal society they no longer did. There were only two features of the eighteenth-century constitution which were really incompatible with the paradigm of balance, and of these one was generally recognized, but the other hardly at all. What was not well understood was that the independence of executive and legislature from one another would not ultimately mesh with the indisputable fact that the legislative authority was that of King-in-Parliament, executive in legislature, and must ultimately collide with the principle of the sovereignty of Parliament. The King’s ministers were not attacked for sitting in Parliament, but they were attacked for allegedly filling Parliament with the recipients of government patronage. For what was universally acknowledged was that if the members of the legislature became dependent upon patronage, the legislature would cease to be independent and the balance of the constitution would become corrupt. Corruption on an eighteenth-century tongue—where it was an exceedingly common term—meant not only venality, but disturbance of the political conditions necessary to human virtue and freedom. The only self-evident truth mentioned in Paine’s *Common Sense* is that the King exercises despotic authority because he has monopolized parliamentary patronage. To us it may seem that this would not have been self-evident even if it had been true, but to Paine’s contemporaries it was a necessary and inescapable consequence.

The remarkable fact here—another of the profound cleavages in the Whig mind—is that though the conscious practice of the age was founded upon the necessity of influencing no less than upon the independence of property, its moral theory was almost unanimous in declaring that the two were incompatible and that corruption was fatal to virtue. The most sophisticated thinkers of the century—Montesquieu, Hume, Adam Smith, Alexander Hamilton—were those who conceded that though patronage and the commercial society on which it rested must destroy virtue, the conditions of human life were such that virtue could never be fully realized, that it was dangerous to pretend otherwise, and that alternative social values must be found. This was perhaps the most fundamental problem in eighteenth-century political and moral philosophy, but here is not the place to pursue it; what matters more immediately is that we have found the ideological fault-line—the successor to Professor Stone’s seismic rift—along which British and American political beliefs and practices were to break apart.

There was a quasi-republican critique of parliamentary government which declared that corruption must be ended and the independence of the component parts of the balance restored. This commonwealth or Country ideology—there are various names for it—was on both shores of the Atlantic considerably better articulated than was the defense of existing practice, but in the American colonies it came to have an importance far greater than it ever possessed in Britain where it originated. In England, and to a far lesser extent in Scotland, two groups normally excluded from the citadels of power—Tory gentlemen and Old Whig urban radicals, Bolingbroke at one extreme and Catherine Macaulay at another—perfected the critique of Whig oligarchy and patronage in the hope of mobilizing independent country members against whatever ministry they were attacking. But such attempts almost invariably failed, with the last years of Queen Anne as the only serious exception; and they failed not just because the country gentry were as keen in the pursuit of influence as the next man, but be-
cause they had an understanding of their role in the parliamentary system a good deal more satisfying than any they found in the commonwealth and Country ideology. The front benches were there to provide the King with ministers, the back benches to act as the grand jury of the nation; and there they sat, far better Tories than Bolingbroke could ever be, solidly supporting the ministry of the day because in the last analysis it was the King's ministry, until there arose one of those very rare occasions on which they could support it no more. The commonwealth or Country ideology, of vast importance in the history of thought, was therefore of very little importance in the history of English practice; and I say that as one who considers the life of the mind quite as important as the life of politics. But in the American colonies, where political experience and practice were of a different kind—where the intimate union of executive with legislature, of monarchy with aristocracy and gentry, of government with society, could not be duplicated in microcosm—it was another matter. The balance provincial, as Harrington had said, was not the balance domestic; and an ideology that presented parliamentary practice as normally corrupt looked very different when it was a question first of hearing, then of repudiating, the authority of Parliament itself.

III

There is no need to retell here the story of the 1760s and 1770s from the American point of view. A galaxy of distinguished historians have explained how the colonists found Parliament claiming to legislate for them in ways which they found unacceptable, and came as a result, after many crises and reversals of feeling, to discover and proclaim that they were no longer subjects of the King, even in Parliament; and these historians have rightly moved on to consider the social structure and historical experience of the peoples who made this claim, and how it was that they came—as Edmund Burke, an Irishman, was one of the first to observe—to constitute a distinctive nation which must be governed in its own way. History is normally written in terms of national development, and a history of divergence is written in terms of the development of divergent nationalities. But the value of considering the American Revolution as a British revolution is that it obliges us to consider it in terms of a divergence of political styles within what had been a common tradition, and so to ask how it happened that the divergent nationalities acquired the political styles that they did. When Burke spoke in 1775 no one knew for sure that there would be an independent America or how it would be governed, and the form of government it ultimately acquired was certainly not the simple product of its autonomous experience. I have suggested so far that the parliamentary institution could not take root under colonial conditions, and that the ideology of parliamentary opposition was sufficiently radical in its criticism of the way in which the institution had developed to provide conceptual means of first repudiating and then replacing it. But the implication seems plain that we must return to the history of the parliamentary institution itself and reexamine its failure to deal with provincial government; a possible question is whether this failure may have arisen from the circumstance that the institution itself was in a state of crisis.

The early part of the reign of George III was certainly one of confusion and abnormality in the politics of oligarchy. There had been, before the King's accession, the wartime ministry of the elder Pitt, himself a figure dynamic and demagogic enough to cause discomfort to the Old Corps of Whigs, which had brought unexpected global victories and an unlimited prospect of empire on the North American continent. From the Stamp Act to the Quebec Act, the legislation to which the colonies objected was designed to rationalize this empire and make it governable; and both
the great contemporary historian David Hume and the
great modern historian Sir Lewis Namier—neither of
them English—made it their charge against Pitt, later Earl
of Chatham, that he had saddled Britain with unlimited
empire and then collapsed into irresponsibility at the height
of the crisis generated by its acquisition. Hume indeed
thought that the empire should never have been acquired
at all, and I have no idea what Namier thought on that
subject. But the implication is plain at least that empire
was contingent and not necessary to the purposes of British
government. Pitt had not conquered the St. Lawrence and
the Ohio to open the way to Daniel Boone and George
Rogers Clark; an empire of settlement was of less interest
than controlling the riverine aspects of a system of Atlantic
commerce. Americans were indeed beginning to say that
the empire of settlement would be theirs and would some
day transfer the seat of government from Britain across the
Atlantic; and deep in such expressions of manifest destiny,
the dim outlines of what might have become a struggle for
British independence can be sighted. Chatham once
declared in the Lords that the day Parliament ceased to
be supreme over America, he would advise every gentle-
man to sell his lands and emigrate to that country; the
greater partner, he said, must ever control the less. More
immediately, England was the ruling partner and the roots
of Parliament were in English landed and commercial
society. It was this which was to render conciliation with
the colonies ultimately impossible.

A further cause of disruption in the normal conduct of
parliamentary politics had been the ministerial initiative
taken, soon after his accession, by the young George III and
his friend Lord Bute. The meaning of this has been inten-
sively debated, but it seems clear that the King had no
intention of overthrowing the oligarchical order and no
means of doing so; and though his private as well as his
public rhetoric is somewhat flavored by the language of
Tory opposition, it was to prove important that he had
certainly no intention of coming forward as that “patriot
king” which was Bolingbroke’s final contribution to the
ideology of separated powers. But in driving Pitt and
then Newcastle from office, the King and Lord Bute over-
played their hand sufficiently to provoke both Whig and
radical—not to mention Tory—opposition. Radical dis-
pleasure erupted in London and took the form of the
Wilkinson movement; and the circumstance that George’s
chief adviser for a year or two was a Scot, and a Stuart
into the bargain, produced a wave of venomous anti-
Scottish chauvinism, such as lay always at the roots of
eighteenth-century opposition, and regrettably reappears in
the writings of both Adams and Jefferson years later.
Radical opposition—which was necessarily popular in the
sense that it was outside the intimate proceedings of oli-
garchical politics—automatically took the form of an outcry
against corruption, and the King, who had set out with
some vague idea of reducing the aristocracy’s control over
patronage, found himself tagged as its chief upholder. It
was much easier to denounce the influence of the Crown
when the Crown proposed to exert that influence with the
aid of advisers whom neither radicals nor aristocrats liked.

When Bute left the scene, George III punctiliously sought
his ministers within the established world of English poli-
tics; but his own activities, coupled with those of the oppo-
sition in the streets of London, Boston, and Philadelphia,
were bringing the oligarchy into a state of disarray from
which it did not fully recover. Chatham’s retreat into
psychic instability was an accident of personality; but Sir
Lewis Namier’s detestation of Edmund Burke—which ran
very deep indeed—was in part the effect of his belief that
Burke’s rhetoric escalated into a moral and constitutional
issue the perfectly natural desire of a Whig faction to return
to power. The point, however, about the Rockingham
Whigs—a rather inarticulate group whom Burke served in
the role of hyperarticulate genius—is that they simply did
not know what to do with power when they had it; and
when in due course the King found in Lord North a minister who could hold Parliament together, he was merely filling a vacuum left by the ineffectiveness of Whig politicians. Though it may not show up in their day-to-day maneuverings within the world of high politics, these were caught between two fires. They could not run with the London, country, and American radicals whose denunciations of corruption were increasingly turned against aristocracy as well as Crown; and this deprived them of one of their normal rhetorical means of attacking a ministry they did not like. They would never have made very good leaders of a Country movement, and in the era of Jack Wilkes and Sam Adams—insofar as they knew about the latter—they did not even want to try. The case for Burke’s *Thoughts on the Present Discontents*, if there is one, is that he was looking for an alternative rhetoric to that of the commonwealth ideology; to his formidable critic Catherine Macaulay, however, it seemed that he was merely watering down the language of the radical tradition.

A simple dialectic would suggest as the outcome of this situation a wave of reform originating with leaders out of doors;¹⁵ but in Britain this did not happen, whereas in the American colonies it did. The two phenomena are of course discontinuous: only externally and rhetorically were the American radicals a Country movement originating in the context of British politics, and they made it their aim not to reform Parliament, but to repudiate its authority. But it is of vast importance in the setting of American history that they found the only ideological means of doing this to entail the assertion that the parliamentary institution itself was corrupt—not just accidentally, but inherently—and must be replaced by drawing upon the quasi-republican alternatives supplied by the opposition tradition. And one cannot consider the political culture of the Founding Fathers without discovering that the language of commonwealth ideology, however inadequate as a rhetorical tool in parliamentary Britain, offered superlative intel-

lectual equipment for debating the problems of eighteenth-century politics and society, and for founding institutions which have endured. The Nixon Administration was immolated on altars originally built by the Old Whigs; and the knives were still sharp.

In the context of British history, however, to which the view of 1776 as a British revolution commits us, we have to ask not only why there was a revolution against Parliament in the American colonies, but what this means in terms of the history of Parliament itself. Is there, for instance, any deep relationship between the attempts to legislate for the colonies in the 1760s and the ministerial upheavals which followed the intervention of Bute and George III? It seems plausible to suggest that there was not—that more or less any ministry might have started legislating for America with no sense of doing anything out of the ordinary—but we continue to find the thought enticing that more stable ministries might have proved less stubborn and might have desisted before the crisis became irremediable. There persist, both in American and in British thinking, various forms of nostalgia (the reasons for their existence are themselves historically interesting) which continue to suggest that the severance of America from Britain might, and almost should, have been avoided. I cannot imagine that these feelings run very deep, and my main reason here is a firm conviction that parliamentary institutions and a continental empire of settlement were, in no long run, incompatible. But a subsidiary theme of this nostalgia on the American side is the will to believe that the loss of America was a terrible shock to the British nations and marked a profound crisis in the stability of their governing institutions. It seems important to explain, in conclusion, some reasons for thinking that this was not the case at all; that the loss of America was an effect of the instability of eighteenth-century politics, much more than of their instability or of the fact that they were beginning to
change, and was accepted in a way which did their stability no harm at all.

IV

If there was a moment at which an American Revolution became inevitable, it was the moment at which it became unalterable that the colonies thought of themselves as (to use a phrase of the time) "perfect states," which must—democratically or otherwise—generate legislative governments with all the attributes of sovereignty. Perhaps this did not happen until 1776, when they declared themselves "states" and set about just such a pursuit of sovereignty in formally revolutionary terms; but a powerful cause in precipitating this Revolution was the discovery that sovereignty was indeed legislative and was therefore unsharable. The British had always been perfectly clear that this was the case, and that Parliament must legislate for the colonies if it had any claim to govern them at all; but we all know that the ideological history of the Revolution consists largely of the extraordinary difficulty with which Americans brought themselves to acknowledge this self-evident truth. Because they began with believing themselves to be British, living under a free constitution, they supposed themselves to enjoy the civil rights, the constitutional liberties, the political virtues, and the natural freedoms that went with it; and so indeed they did, until they began trying to plead these things against the supremacy of Parliament, when they discovered how far away Parliament really was and how little they understood that institution or those whose lives were intimately bound up with it. The British, except insofar—and it was to a considerable extent—as their thinking was confused by the commonwealth ideology of separated powers, had a very clear understanding that liberty depended upon the supremacy of Parliament, upon its legislative sovereignty (perhaps sym-

bolic rather than actual), and upon the continuation of a government of influence and patronage. The great American discovery was to be that the commonwealth ideology provided many of the conceptual bases for a new and successful form of government, but this came about only after it had helped render a revolution inevitable by delaying their recognition of the revolutionary nature of what they were asking. Perhaps this is why one of the first to call for revolutionary independence was Thomas Paine—an Englishman in some ways closer to Puritan and Cromwellian than to Whig or even Old Whig ways of thought.

When the Americans and some of their supporters argued that the King should offer his protection to a number of legislatures virtually equal with one another, Lord North observed that the argument was that of a 'Tory'. When Jefferson, in *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, virtually invited George III to assume the role of Bolingbroke's "patriot king," who dealt with Parliament independently of the channels provided by ministers, their connections, and their influences, he invited him to deal in this way with an indefinite number of parliaments at the same time. We know that George never had the intention of acting as a patriot king, and it seems in the highest degree unlikely that Jefferson thought he was going to; the strategy of the *Summary View* is surely to offer the King a role in order to denounce him for refusing it. But the reason why George could never be a patriot king is also the reason why a plurality of legislatures was an impossibility under eighteenth-century conditions. He never thought of moving outside the established patterns of oligarchical politics because he knew, without having to think about it, that the only way to govern Britain was for him to find ministers who could sustain his government in Parliament (his errors, which were many, did no more than raise a few questions about the monarch's personal role in finding and maintaining ministries) and that this could not be done unless there was a consistent and exacting symbiosis between King.
ministers, and the two houses; one in which influence, patronage, and touchy personal relationships required constant attention; one which certainly could not be sustained with more than one truly sovereign legislature at a time. This was why the Parliament of Scotland had been absorbed in 1707; and Josiah Tucker, the most astute of conservative English observers of the American crisis, drew the conclusion that a separate Irish Parliament had become intolerable. There was no middle way between legislative union and legislative independence; Ireland must be drawn into union, America must become independent. Tucker's advice for Ireland was not taken till twenty years and a bloodbath later; but that is about the norm for Irish history.

There were conservative as well as radical reasons why Englishmen should welcome American independence, and the former of these were very like the reasons for supporting American subjugation. Our thinking on these matters is often confused by the memory of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British Commonwealth, in which independent legislatures under the same Crown proved to be perfectly feasible; but what needs stressing about that by now somewhat unreal association is that it came into being at a time when electoral politics, both British and colonial, had become more democratic and less dependent on the exercise of influence by the Crown. Under the conditions of the age of oligarchy nothing of the kind was feasible. Since we know that English radicals in the age of the American Revolution were demanding a wider franchise and a reduction of influence, we vaguely feel that they were demanding both what might have rendered the Revolution unnecessary and what Americans were demanding for themselves. But such thinking is not very exact. In April 1777, Edmund Burke wrote to his constituents at Bristol:

But if the colonies (to bring the general matter home to us) could see that in Great Britain the mass of the people are melted into its government, and that every dispute with the ministry must of necessity be always a quarrel with the nation, they can stand no longer in the equal and friendly relations of fellow-citizens to the subjects of this kingdom. 22

Burke was talking about what he hoped would not happen; he was attempting both a tortuous justification of the Rockingham's withdrawal from Parliament and a protest against the wartime state of mind. But there is a deeper meaning to his words. Since the summer of the preceding year the Americans had in fact been engaged in a quarrel with the British nation—they had declared as much in a public document now dated July 4, 1776—and a reason for this state of affairs was that, even in the age of oligarchy, there was a real sense in which the mass of the people was melted into its government. Those out of office might have a quarrel with the ministry, but they must support the sovereignty of its Parliament; those excluded from the franchise might have a quarrel with the oligarchy, but it was in Parliament that they must seek representation. The parliamentary institution had taken root in the nation, and influence was for the present among the means implanting it there. These conditions had not been established in America, and nobody had ever thought of ways of implanting them.

This was why no British politician—certainly not Burke—had ever envisaged a solution of the colonial problem which did not involve the ultimate sovereignty of Parliament; Burke had only said that Parliament should refrain from exercising it. This was why Burke and his friends found themselves totally powerless in politics; the political nation was supporting its Parliament as usual. And this was why neither the war against the Americans, nor the peace which consented to their independence, was so overwhelmingly unpopular as to threaten the stability of institutions; you might almost say that the sovereignty of
Parliament was the end to be sustained, and that subjecting an empire or letting it go were but two ways of doing it. If—to borrow language from leaders of the historical profession—Plumb's "growth of oligarchy" was the remedy found in the eighteenth century for the problems occasioned by Stone's "crisis of the aristocracy" in the seventeenth, it might seem that the loss of an empire was a high price to pay for institutional stability. But the empire was surrendered, and the stability of institutions maintained. There is this to be said for the old and misleading adage about the British empire being "acquired in a fit of absence of mind"; the British are more interested in maintaining than in expanding themselves (and will always let their overseas loyalists go when it suits them). By way of contrast, let us think for one moment about the Northwest Ordinance, about Jefferson's "empire of liberty," about Clay and Monroe, Jackson and Polk; and we shall realize the paradox that the new republic, born of the revolt against empire, had a commitment to empire—and to empire of settlement—built into its structure in a way that the parent system never had. The American Revolution was, among other things, the greatest revolt of white settlers since the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, which it did not otherwise resemble; for the Romans allowed themselves to become absorbed by their own empire, and the British never made that mistake.

It may seem that I am giving somewhat too conservative an interpretation of the radical tensions of mid-Georgian England; but the immediate future lay with conservatism. The attempts at parliamentary reform made in the 1780s had essentially failed before the French Revolution and the great reaction against it; and it can be argued that one reason for their failure was that the Commonwealth ideology, on which their rhetoric was still founded, was by now visibly out of touch with reality. According to conventional reforming wisdom, corruption had destroyed the balance of the constitution, and its principles must be restored by a return to its uncorrupt democratic component. But the nation had just passed through a painful and inglorious war to maintain its parliamentary institutions as it understood them, and neither radical, nor Tory, nor American arguments could stand against that. The election of 1784 marked the end of the old style of opposition, as the political system turned decisively toward a minister—the younger Pitt—who could hold power, and who looked as if he could conduct reforms, on terms which held the parliamentary institution together. Burke managed to be on the losing side as usual, but his ideology had the future before it. There could be no return to first principles, he said, within a prescriptive system. It is not without significance that he had first enunciated his hatred of doctrinaire politics in order to castigate ministers for opening up the problem of colonial legislation when there existed no answer to it.

But across the Atlantic, the republic born of the great revolution against Parliament was engaged in the return to first principles because there was nowhere else to go. On discovering that parliamentary government had never included them, they had turned to the quasi-republican alternative which the parliamentary tradition had brought them, and were now studying the Commonwealth ideology in all its intellectual richness in the attempt to get themselves a form of government. This is not the place to speak of the extraordinary ingenuity with which they transformed their intellectual legacy as they thought suited them best. But we can understand the depth and bitterness with which Hamilton was accused of wanting to restore the British form of government, if we reflect that the repudiation of Parliament entailed the idea that it was founded upon executive corruption. Since Hamilton wanted a strong executive, with a base in public credit and a supply of political patronage, he must be plotting to restore the monarchy and hereditary aristocracy; these truths were, very nearly, self-evident. But Hamilton's spirit went marching on, past this particular
misunderstanding, and the final paradox of this episode in British history remains to be noted. In the course of the nineteenth century, parliamentary monarchy democratized and reformed itself, in ways which may well have entailed a restatement of the principle of oligarchy but did involve the elimination of most of the classic and familiar forms of patronage, influence, and corruption. Democratic federalism grew into the greatest empire of patronage and influence the world has known, and remains to this day dedicated to the principle that politics cannot work unless politicians do things for their friends and their friends know where to find them. New democrat is but old Whig writ large; and the Federal Constitution, that great triumph of the eighteenth-century political art, seems to have perpetuated the eighteenth-century world it was designed to deal with. Far more than Trollope's Duke of Omnium, Richard Nixon was a figure of the Old Whig political imagination. Far from his being an anomaly within the American political tradition, the only aspect of his downfall that would have surprised a Founding Father is that his was the only presidency to end in removal for causes shown in the space of two hundred years. But do not our governing assumptions determine realities? America may have guaranteed the survival of the forms of corruption it was created to resist.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 8

4. See Chapter 1, n. 65.
9. The revolutionary Paine was here only stating as a fact what the conservative Hume had predicted as a probability; see his essay, "Whether the British Government inclines more to Absolute Monarchy or to a Republic" (Essays Moral, Political and Literary, 1741).
12. The term "Commonwealth" suggests urban Old Whigs, the term "Country" Tory landowners; the ideology is much the same whoever expresses it.
13. In the Speech on Conciliation with America (1775).
arbitrary Scotch faction, with a Muse and a Mansfield at their head for a ministry..."


21. A Series of Answers to Certain Popular Objections against Separating from the Rebellious Colonies and Discarding them Entirely (Gloucester, 1776), pp. 57-58. The point is repeatedly made in Tucker's works.


9

PARLIAMENT, EMPIRE, AND PARLIAMENTARY LAW, 1776

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Taken together, several of the other essays in this volume raise again a venerable but still fascinating question: why did the Americans exult over the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89 and bitterly reject the results of that Revolution less than a hundred years later? It was the Glorious Revolution, in John Murrin's words, that established a "permanent role for Parliament in the governance of the realm"; yet few historians would disagree with J.G.A. Pocock's conclusion that a powerful cause of the American Revolution was the discovery that "sovereignty was legislative and therefore unsharable. ... Parliament must legislate for the colonies if it had any claim to govern them at all."

The question is not just an American or Anglo-American one; rather, it belongs in the larger field of imperial history. Of all parts of the British empire, the Americans were loudest in their praises of the Glorious Revolution; yet only in America and only in 1776 did colonists find the parliamentary position that emerged from it so unacceptable that they launched a full-scale rebellion against it. In other times, and in other parts of the empire, parliamentary authority was generally accepted.