

Colonial Age Conflicts

“Salutary Neglect”: **The American Colonies in the First Half of the 18th Century**, Volume II of **Conceived in Liberty**, by Murray N. Rothbard, *New Rochelle, N. Y.: Arlington House, 1975. 277 pp. index. \$12.95.*

IN THIS SECOND VOLUME of *Conceived in Liberty*, a multi-volume narrative and interpretive history of early America, Murray N. Rothbard, the noted libertarian economist and historian, really begins to warm up to his subject. The second volume is only about half the length of the first, it covers roughly from 1710 to 1763, but is, if anything, an even better piece of work, and I thought the first volume excellent.

Why? Because without allowing the narrative to suffer—as he has promised in the preface to each volume—Rothbard manages to extend even further his range of analysis and interpretation. To some extent, of course, he is able to do this because of the foundation which he laid in volume one.*

Like Caesar's Gaul, the book is divided into three parts. The first part, of about a hundred pages, discusses each of the colonies as they developed throughout this period. In Massachusetts, in the wake of the Salem witchcraft trials, we see the rise of a degree of religious liberalism, centering around Harvard College, while Connecticut moved toward a Presbyterian orthodoxy. Relying on Charles S. Grant's study of a New England frontier town, Rothbard sees fewer class differences, or other tensions, between the east and the frontier than did some earlier writers. He devotes some space to land monopoly in the vast estates in New York, and to the early problems with black slavery there. In New Jersey, a spirited protest finally foiled the proprietors' "great counterrevolutionary attempt to impose feudal overlordship."

Of particular interest are the sections on Pennsylvania dealing with the settlers such as the Ulster Scots and the Germans, and with Quaker relations with the Indians, which stood in such contrast to the actions of most white settlers. It is refreshing to see Rothbard's critique of Benjamin Franklin: "A man whose historical reputation is perhaps the most overinflated in the entire colonial period." It is not only the way in which Franklin always tried to play both sides of the fence, even turning against those who had aided him, but also his centralized statism, imperialism, and inflationism. To jump ahead a bit, here was a man who could brag in 1780, just prior to the hyperinflation of the American Revolution, about what a great thing it was to print money and manage the currency. I recommend to anyone that he read a few of Franklin's letters. One gets the feeling they were written more for posterity than for the persons to whom they were addressed.

In Virginia we find the trappings of democracy with power in the hands of a planter oligarchy. There were in those years a number of rebellions by the blacks held in bondage. The proprietary struggles in the Carolinas and the shift toward royal government are detailed along with the gradual emergence of power in the colonial assemblies. Finally, there is Georgia, which Rothbard finds not so much a "humanitarian" venture as one designed for "the advancement of the interests of the British ruling classes (that is, the imperial bureaucracy and the merchants and manufacturers subsidized and privileged by the state)." Thus settlement of Georgia was a part of a mercantilist plan in which the settlers also were to serve as a buffer against the Indians, Spanish, and French.

Some general themes are brought together in part two. In a hard-hitting chapter on colonial experiences with paper money and inflation, Rothbard traces their history through these years, combining those developments with some insights of free market economic analysis which he has

drawn from his previous work. Creditor and debtor were not fixed categories, he shows, and cannot be equated with rich and poor. Often it was the wealthy speculator, especially in land, who hoped to profit from the paper money inflation. Given our present inflation and government intervention into economics, this chapter makes relevant reading, especially for those who believe that the Founding Fathers were all advocates of hard money and *laissez faire*.

Others among these themes are religious trends, particularly the Great Awakening and the growth of deism; communication of ideas such as the postal service and freedom of the press; the Quaker efforts to abolish slavery; the beginnings of a fight for American bishops; and the important growth of libertarian thought in England and Europe and its transmission to the New World.

In the era of paper inflation, some states, such as Virginia for example, held out against it for many years. That all Americans were not beguiled by inflation is seen in the writings of Dr. William Douglass, whose *Discourse Concerning the Currencies of the British Plantations in America*, published in 1740, is neatly summarized by Rothbard.

How little times have changed is seen in Rothbard's discussion of the postal service. Colonial governments moved to smash private postal service and proceeded to set up inefficient and expensive monopolies. In the nineteenth century the Congress took away the right of private companies to carry first-class mail and then subsidized its own carriers. To some extent this was to protect the political patronage of the post office, a prime asset for years. But given our recent knowledge of the way in which government agencies, especially the C.I.A., have opened the mails of American citizens, even of congressmen, Rothbard's comment on the reason for the colonial governmental postal monopolies takes on an eerie prescience:

The purpose of this postal monopoly was quite simple: to enable governmental officials to read the letters of private citi-

zens in order to discover and suppress "treason" and "sedition."

Perhaps we had better reconsider our notion that the abuse of power that we have come to associate with the "imperial presidency" is either an aberration or a new development in America. Likewise, in the area of freedom of the press, Rothbard demonstrates that the victory in the trial of John Peter Zenger was a high point after which there was a "backsliding" in later years.

In the face of a growing liberalization of American religion, he sees the Great Awakening as a step backward, and not at all progressive as maintained by Marxist and neo-Marxist historians. It was "a profoundly reactionary and demagogic appeal of the masses against the liberalism, cosmopolitanism, intellectualism, and sobriety of the religion of the day. In short, this was a cry of mystical religious fundamentalism against the trappings of civilization that had begun to emerge in America." One progressive and libertarian aspect of the Great Awakening, however, was the fragmentation of many of the Protestant groups. Rothbard particularly likes the Baptists: "Their 'creed' was individualism not only in religion, but also in political philosophy, to the point of anarchism." Deism made great strides among the educated classes. Another libertarian group were the Quakers, who under the leadership of John Woolman, mounted a sustained attack on the institution of slavery. A final source of religious tension was the effort to extend and centralize the Anglican church in America. As in the mother country, it was clearly understood that religion offered an excellent means by which to consolidate British power and control.

In his chapter on the Growth of Libertarian Thought, Rothbard shows that while counterrevolution triumphed in England after the revolution, at the same time the writings of English libertarians such as Algernon Sidney, John Locke, and John Trenchard, and Thomas Gordon began to take

on a new meaning and applicability in the American colonies. Some are quoted at length, especially Trenchard and Gordon's *Cato's Letters*, as those writings greatly influenced Americans such as the great Unitarian minister, Jonathan Mayhew. Rothbard calls attention to the pioneering work of Caroline Robbins in this area whose study, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman*, is greatly helpful to anyone who wishes to examine the heritage of libertarian thought.

The third part of the book deals with relations between England and the colonies. The struggle between the "royal governor and the council *versus* the elected assembly" resulted by the 1750's in a victory for the assembly aided greatly by their power over the purse. Rothbard cites Bernard Bailyn's view that a crucial difference between the colonies and England was that in the latter the crown had the wealth to effectively subvert the parliament and thus control it.

This leads to a discussion of British mercantilist legislation during this period. It was Edmund Burke who coined the term "salutary neglect," which Rothbard has taken as his title. Rothbard credits Robert Walpole, or more particularly his choice of Thomas Holles Pelham, Duke of Newcastle, as secretary of state for the southern department which governed American affairs, for this policy. Despite the disaster of paper inflation, which the British government sought to curb, the neglect of an excessive mercantilism allowed the American colonies to experience an extraordinary economic growth in those years.

In the last sections of the book Rothbard traces the struggle between France and England culminating in the Great War for Empire fought on a global scale. He shows a considerable sympathy for the French position. Benefitting from liberal trade policies and greatly outnumbered in North America, they had little reason to push a war for empire. The real problem was with England and her colonies. In each of these there was a war party intent on pressing for

foreign adventurism and empire. One example of this rising jingoism was the War for Jenkin's Ear in the 1730's and, as it gained force in the 1740's and Walpole fell from power, King George's War. At the same time in America this was reflected in the imperial expansionist schemes of mercantilists such as William Shirley, the Governor of Massachusetts. A military expedition against Canada meant great profits in war contracts for those business interests close to the government.

As this final confrontation with France shaped up, American mercantilist nabobs such as Benjamin Franklin and George Washington—yes, Washington—with interests in western land speculation were indignant that the average American refused to be herded, or cowed, very easily into a war. The Americans simply didn't like conscription despite all the "patriotic gore" that was dragged out. As Rothbard notes:

. . . The liberty-loving people of Virginia showed no disposition whatever to give up their lives for the sacred cause of grabbing the Ohio land from the French. . . . Washington complained long and loud of the laziness and indifference of the militia officers. . . . "If we talk of obliging men to serve their country," [he] lamented, "we are sure to hear a fellow mumble over the words *liberty* and *property* a thousand times." *Liberty* and *property* were indeed increasingly becoming the watchwords of the era, and the Colonial application was being made not only to the distant French but especially to "their" governments at home.

Franklin's Albany Plan for Union—read centralized and more powerful government—was part and parcel, as Rothbard tells us, of the effort to extend the war effort. There is some good material on the opposition to the war, and a touching account of the Anglo-American treatment of the Acadians. In the end, by 1760, the stubborn but outnumbered French were beaten. Rothbard recounts the repeated efforts of Americans

to trade with the French in the midst of this imperial war. Under pressure from John Wilkes and other Whigs, the war party of William Pitt concluded a peace that was less advantageous than they would have liked, yet England was now supreme in North America.

Thus Rothbard has magnificently set the stage for his forthcoming volumes on the years before the Revolution, the American Revolution itself, and the years leading up to the Constitution. He has sketched out a struggle between power and liberty still far from resolved. In England the imperial party now sought to discard "salutary neglect," while in America a group of nabobs, unhappy with the desire of most Americans to be left alone with a weak government, dreamed of their own mercantilist "rising empire." Rothbard has given us a firm basis upon which to comprehend the background of that impending struggle; the American Revolution. We can only hope, with the bicentennial upon us, that he will very soon give us the next parts to his story of liberty.

Reviewed by WILLIAM MARINA

*The reader may wish to consult my review of volume one in the Fall, 1975, issue of *Modern Age*.

Nemesis of Democracy

Law, Legislation and Liberty, Vol. I, Rules and Order, by Friedrich A. von Hayek, *Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973. 184 pp. \$7.95.*

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