

“A Revolution Not Made But Prevented”

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WAS THE AMERICAN War of Independence a revolution? In the view of Edmund Burke and of the Whigs generally, it was not the sort of political and social overturn that the word “revolution” has come to signify nowadays. Rather, it paralleled that alteration of government in Britain which accompanied the accession of William and Mary to the throne, and which is styled, somewhat confusingly, “The Glorious Revolution of 1688.”

The most learned editor of Burke’s works, E. J. Payne, summarizes Burke’s account of the events of 1688–89 as “a revolution not made but prevented.” Let us see how that theory may be applicable to North American events nine decades later.

We need first to examine definitions of that ambiguous word “revolution.” The signification of the word was altered greatly by the catastrophic events of the French Revolution, commencing only two years after the Constitutional Convention of the United States. Before the French explosion of 1789–99, “revolution” commonly was employed to describe a round of periodic or recurrent changes or events — that is, the process of coming full cycle; or the act of rolling back or moving back, a return to a point previously occupied.

Not until the French radicals utterly overturned the old political and social order in their country did the word

“revolution” acquire its present general meaning of a truly radical change in social and governmental institutions, a tremendous convulsion in society, producing huge alterations that might never be undone. Thus when the eighteenth-century Whigs praised the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688, which established their party’s domination, they did not mean that William and Mary, the Act of Settlement, and the Declaration of Rights had produced a radically new English political and social order. On the contrary, they argued that the English Revolution had restored tried and true constitutional practices, preservative of immemorial ways. It was James II, they contended, who had been perverting the English constitution; his overthrow had been a return, a rolling-back, to old constitutional order; the Revolution of 1688, in short, had been a healthy reaction, not a bold innovation.

The Whigs, Burke among them, here were employing that word “revolution” in its older sense. This shift in usage tends to confuse discussion today. If we employ the word “revolution” in its common signification near the end of the twentieth century, what occurred in 1688–89 was no true revolution. In the Whig interpretation of history, at least, the overturn of James II was a revolution not made, but prevented (according to the later definition of “revolution”).

But what of the events in North America from 1775 to 1781? Was the War of Independence no revolution?

That war, with the events immediately preceding and following it, constituted a series of movements which produced separation from Britain and the establishment of a different political order in most of British North America. Yet the Republic of the United States was an order new only in some aspects, founded upon a century and a half of colonial experience and upon institutions, customs, and beliefs mainly of British origin. The American Revolution did not result promptly in the creation of a new social order, nor did the leaders in that series of movements intend that the new nation should break with the conventions, the moral convictions, and the major institutions (except monarchy) out of which America had arisen. As John C. Calhoun expressed this three-quarters of a century later, "The revolution, as it is called, produced no other changes than those which were necessarily caused by the declaration of independence."

To apprehend how the leading Americans of the last quarter of the eighteenth century thought of their own revolution, it is valuable to turn to the arguments of Edmund Burke, which exercised so strong an influence in America—an influence more telling, indeed, after the adoption of the Constitution than earlier. (Until my own generation, Burke's Speech on Conciliation with the American Colonies was studied closely in most American high schools.)

In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, as earlier, Burke strongly approves the Revolution of 1688. "The Revolution was made to preserve our *antient* indisputable laws and liberties, and that *antient* constitution of government which is our only security for law and liberty," Burke declares.

The very idea of the fabrication of a new government is enough to fill us with disgust and horror. We wished at the period of the Revolution, and do now wish, to derive all we possess as an

inheritance from our forefathers. Upon that body and stock of inheritance we have taken care not to inoculate any cyon alien to the nature of the original plant. All the reformations we have hitherto made, have proceeded upon the principle of reference to antiquity; and I hope, nay I am persuaded, that all those which possibly may be made hereafter, will be carefully formed upon analogical precedent, authority, and example.

The Whig apology for the expulsion of James II, then—here so succinctly expressed by Burke—was that James had begun to alter for the worse the old constitution of England: James was an innovator. As Burke writes elsewhere in the *Reflections*, "To have made a revolution is a measure which, *prima fronte*, requires an apology." A very similar apology, we shall see, was made by the American leaders in their quarrel with king and Parliament, and for their act of separation. The Whig magnates had prevented James II from working a revolution; the American Patriots had prevented George III from working a revolution (a revolution, that is, in the twentieth-century sense of the word). If the events of 1688 and 1776 were revolutions at all, they were counter-revolutions, intended to restore the old constitutions of government. So, at any rate, runs the Whig interpretation of history.

One will perceive that already, by 1790, Burke and the Old Whigs were involved in difficulty by this troublous word "revolution." For the same word was coming to signify two very different phenomena. On the one hand, it meant a healthy return to old ways; on the other hand, it meant (with reference to what was happening in France) a violent destruction of the old order. The English Revolution and the French Revolution were contrary impulses—although for a brief while, with the summoning of the long-dormant Three Estates, it had appeared that the French movement too might be in part a turning back to old political ways.

In America, the dominant Federalists—and soon not the Federalists only—were similarly perplexed by the word. Here they stood, the victors of the American Revolution, Washington and Hamilton and Adams and Madison and Morris and all that breed; and they were aghast at the revolution running its course in France. They had fought to secure the “chartered rights of Englishmen” in America, those of the Bill of Rights of 1689; and now they were horrified by the consequences of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, borrowed in part from that very Declaration of Independence to which they had subscribed. The same revulsion soon spread to many of the Jeffersonian faction—to such early egalitarians as Randolph of Roanoke, Republican leader of the House of Representatives. It spread in England to the New Whigs, so that even Charles James Fox, by 1794, would declare, “I can hardly frame to myself the conditions of a people, in which I would not rather desire that they should continue, than fly to arms, and seek redress through the unknown miseries of a revolution.” In short, Whig revolution meant recovery of what was being lost; Jacobin revolution meant destruction of the fabric of society. The confounding of those two quite inconsonant interpretations of the word “revolution” troubles us still.

The Whig interpretation of history has been most seriously criticized, and perhaps confuted, by such recent historians as Sir Herbert Butterfield. No longer do most historians believe that James II could have worked fundamental constitutional alterations, nor that he intended to; and James was more tolerant than were his adversaries. What ruined him with the English people, indeed, was his Declaration for Liberty of Conscience, indulging Catholics and Dissenters; and what impelled William of Orange to supplant James was William’s dread of a popular rising that might overthrow the monarchy altogether and establish another Commonwealth. William, too, preferred preventing a revolution to making one. For a convincing brief study of

the period, I commend Maurice Ashley’s *The Glorious Revolution of 1688*, published in 1966. Ashley doubts whether the overturn of 1688 did indeed constitute a “Glorious Revolution”; but he concludes that the event “undoubtedly contributed to the evolution of parliamentary democracy in England and of a balanced constitution in the United States of America.”

However that may be, Edmund Burke repeatedly and emphatically approved what had occurred in 1688 and 1689. The Whig interpretation was the creed of his party: it was the premise of his *Thoughts on the Present Discontents* and of his American speeches. It would not do for Burke, so eminent in Whig councils, to be found wanting in zeal for the Glorious Revolution that had dethroned a Papist. For Irish Tories had been among his ancestors; his mother and sister were Catholics (although that fact appears not to have been widely known); Burke was the agent at Westminster for the Irish Catholic interest; early in his career he had been accused by the old Duke of Newcastle of being “a Jesuit in disguise,” and a caricaturist had represented him in a Jesuit soutane. “Remember, remember the fifth of November”: Burke had been compelled to draw his sword to defend himself during the Gordon Riots. It was prudent for Burke to subscribe conspicuously to the Whig doctrines of 1688 and 1689.

Certainly Burke in part founded his vehement denunciation of the French Revolution upon his approbation of the English Revolution—of that “revolution” which had been a return, in Whig doctrine, to established political modes of yesteryear. Upon the same ground, Burke had attacked mordantly the American policies of George III, advocating a “salutary neglect” of the American colonies because it was to Britain’s interest, as to the colonies’ interest, that the old autonomy of the colonies should be preserved. It was King George, with his stubborn insistence upon taxing the Americans directly, who was the innovator, the revolutionary (in the French

sense of the word), in Burke's argument; Burke, with the Rockingham Whigs, sought to achieve compromise and conciliation.

But it does not follow that Burke approved what came to be called the American Revolution. The notion that Burke rightly supported the American Revolution but inconsistently opposed the French Revolution is a vulgar error often refuted—by Woodrow Wilson, for one, in his article “Edmund Burke and the French Revolution,” in the September 1901 issue of *The Century Magazine*. Burke advocated redress of American grievances, or at least tacit acceptance of certain American claims of prescriptive right; he never countenanced ambitions for total separation from the authority of Crown in Parliament. Burke's stand is ably summed up by Ross Hoffman in his *Edmund Burke, New York Agent* (1956):

Burke had no natural sympathy for America except as a part of the British Empire, and if, when the war came, he did not wish success to British arms, neither did he desire the Americans to triumph. Peace and Anglo-American reconciliation within the empire were his objects. After Americans won their independence, he seems to have lost all interest in their country.

During the decade before the shot heard round the world, Burke seemed a champion of the claims of Americans. That sympathy, nevertheless, was incidental to his championing of the rights of Englishmen. It was for English liberties that the Rockingham Whigs were earnestly concerned. If the king should succeed in dragooning Americans, might he not then turn to dragooning Englishmen? It was the belief of the Whigs that George III intended to resurrect royal prerogatives of Stuart and Tudor times; that he would make himself a despot. That peril the Whigs—and Burke in particular, with fierce invective—considerably exaggerated; but it is easy to be wise by hindsight. George III was a more formidable adversary than ever James II had been. Where James had been timid

and indecisive, George was courageous and tenacious; and often George was clever, if obdurate, in his aspiration to rule as a Patriot King. At the end, Burke came to understand that in the heat of partisan passion he had reviled his king unjustly; and in his *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796) he called George “a mild and benevolent sovereign.”

Yet neither to the American Patriots nor to Burke, in 1774 and 1775, had George III seemed either mild or benevolent. Upon the assumption that King George meant to root up the liberties of Englishmen — to trample upon the British constitution — the dominant faction of Whigs in America determined to raise armies and risk hanging. They declared that they were resisting pernicious innovations and defending ancient rights: that they were true-born Englishmen, up in arms to maintain what Burke called “the chartered rights” of their nation. They appealed to the Declaration of Rights of 1689; they offered for their violent resistance to royal authority the very apology offered by the Whigs of 1688. In the older sense of that uneasy word “revolution,” they were endeavoring to prevent, rather than to make, a revolution. Or such was the case they made until a French alliance became indispensable.

II

THE THESIS THAT the Patriots intended no radical break with the past — that they thought of themselves as conservators rather than as innovators — scarcely is peculiar to your servant. It is now dominant among leading historians of American politics. It is most succinctly stated by Daniel Boorstin in his slim volume *The Genius of American Politics* (1953):

The most obvious peculiarity of our American Revolution is that, in the modern European sense of the word, it was hardly a revolution at all. The Daughters of the American Revolution, who have been understandably sen-

sitive on this subject, have always insisted in their literature that the American Revolution was no revolution but merely a colonial rebellion. The more I have looked into the subject, the more convinced I have become of the wisdom of their naiveté. "The social condition and the Constitution of the Americans are democratic," de Tocqueville observed about a hundred years ago. "But they have not had a democratic revolution." This fact is surely one of the more important of our history.

The attainment of America's independence, Boorstin makes clear in his writings, was not the work of what Burke called "theoretic dogma." What most moved the Americans of that time was their own colonial experience: they were defending their right to go on living in the future much as they had lived in the past; they were not marching to Zion. To quote Boorstin directly again:

The American Revolution was in a very special way conceived as both a vindication of the British past and an affirmation of an American future. The British past was contained in ancient and living institutions rather than in doctrines; and the American future was never to be contained in a theory.

This point is made with equal force by Clinton Rossiter in his *Seedtime of the Republic: The Origin of the American Tradition of Political Liberty* (1953). In the course of his discussion of Richard Bland, Rossiter remarks that

Throughout the colonial period and right down to the last months before the Declaration of Independence, politically conscious Americans looked upon the British Constitution rather than natural law as the bulwark of their cherished liberties. Practical political thinking in eighteenth-century America was dominated by two assumptions: that the British Constitution was the best and happiest of all possible forms of government, and that the colonists,

descendants of freeborn Englishmen, enjoyed the blessings of this constitution to the fullest extent consistent with a wilderness environment.

Men like Bland — and those, too, like Patrick Henry, more radical than Bland — regarded themselves as the defenders of a venerable constitution, not as marchers in the dawn of a Brave New World. As Rossiter continues in his chapter on the Rights of Man: "Virginians made excellent practical use of this distinction. When their last royal Governor, Lord Dunmore, proclaimed them to be in rebellion, they retorted immediately in print that he was the rebel and they the saviors of the constitution." It was the case of James II and arbitrary power all over again.

Or turn to H. Trevor Colbourn's study *The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (1963). He writes:

In insisting upon rights which their history showed were deeply embedded in antiquity, American Revolutionaries argued that their stand was essentially conservative; it was the corrupted mother country which was pursuing a radical course of action, pressing innovations and encroachments upon her long-suffering colonies. Independence was in large measure the product of the historical concepts of the men who made it, men who furnished intellectual as well as political leadership to a new nation.

Here we have for authority the famous sentences of Patrick Henry in 1775: "I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience. I know of no way of judging the future but by the past." The appeal of even the more passionate leaders of the American rising against royal innovation was to precedent and old usage, not to utopian visions.

The men who made the American Revolution, in fine, had little intention of making a revolution in the French sense (so soon to follow) of a reconstitution of society. Until little choice remained to

them, they were anything but enthusiasts even for separation from Britain. This is brought out in an interesting conversation between Burke and Benjamin Franklin, on the eve of Franklin's departure from London for America; Burke relates this in his *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791).

In this discourse Dr. Franklin lamented, and with apparent sincerity, the separation which he feared as inevitable between Great Britain and her colonies. He certainly spoke of it as an event which gave him the greatest concern. America, he said, would never again see such happy days as she had passed under the protection of England. He observed, that ours was the only instance of a great empire, in which the most distant parts and members had been as well governed as the metropolis and its vicinage: but that the Americans were going to lose the means which secured to them this rare and precious advantage. The question with them was not whether they were to remain as they had been before the troubles, for better, he allowed, they could not hope to be; but whether they were to give up so happy a situation without a struggle? Mr. Burke had several other conversations with him about that time, in none of which, soured and exasperated as his mind certainly was, did he discover any other wish in favour of America than for a security to its *ancient* condition. Mr. Burke's conversation with other Americans was large indeed, and his inquiries extensive and diligent. Trusting to the result of all these means of information, but trusting much more in the public presumptive indications I have just referred to, and to the reiterated, solemn declarations of their assemblies, he always firmly believed that they were purely on the defensive in that rebellion. He considered the Americans as standing at that time, and in that controversy, in the same relation to England, as England did to King James

the Second, in 1688. He believed, that they had taken up arms from one motive only; that is, our attempting to tax them without their consent; to tax them for the purposes of maintaining civil and military establishments. If this attempt of ours could have been practically established, he thought, with them, that their assemblies would become totally useless; that, under the system of policy which was then pursued, the Americans could have no sort of security for their laws or liberties, or for any part of them; and that the very circumstance of *our* freedom would have augmented the weight of *their* slavery.

Such were the language and the convictions of the American Patriots, as Rossiter puts it, "right down to the last months before the Declaration of Independence." Then what account do we make of the highly theoretical and abstract language of the first part of the Declaration of Independence, with its appeal to "the laws of Nature and of Nature's God," to self-evident truths, to a right to abolish any form of government? Why is Parliament not even mentioned in the Declaration? What has become of the English constitution, the rights of Englishmen, the citing of English precedents, the references to James II and the Glorious Revolution?

These startling inclusions and omissions are discussed penetratingly by Carl Becker in *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas*, first published in 1922. Indeed the language of much of the Declaration is the language of the French Enlightenment, and, more immediately, the language of the Thomas Jefferson of 1776, rather than the tone and temper of the typical member of the Continental Congress:

Not without reason was Jefferson most at home in Paris. By the qualities of his mind and temperament he really belonged to the philosophical school, to the Encyclopaedists, those generous souls who loved mankind by virtue of

not knowing too much about men, who worshipped reason with unreasoning faith, who made a study of Nature while cultivating a studied aversion for "enthusiasm," and strong religious emotion. Like them, Jefferson, in his earlier years especially, impresses one as being a radical by profession. We often feel that he defends certain practices and ideas, that he denounces certain customs or institutions, not so much from independent reflection or deep-seated conviction on the particular matter in hand as because in general these are the things that a philosopher and a man of virtue ought naturally to defend or denounce. It belonged to the eighteenth-century philosopher, as a matter of course, to apostrophize Nature, to defend Liberty, to denounce Tyranny, perchance to shed tears at the thought of a virtuous action.

The Francophile Jefferson, in other words, was atypical of the men, steeped in Blackstone and constitutional history, who sat in the Continental Congress. Yet the Congress accepted Jefferson's Declaration, unprotestingly. Why?

Because aid from France had become an urgent necessity for the Patriot cause. The phrases of the Declaration, congenial to the *philosophes*, were calculated to wake strong sympathy in France's climate of opinion; and, as Becker emphasizes, those phrases achieved with high success precisely that result. It would have been not merely pointless, but counterproductive, to appeal for French assistance on the ground of the ancient rights of Englishmen; the French did not wish Englishmen well.

Here we turn again to the quotable Daniel Boorstin (who differs somewhat with Becker). It is not to the Declaration we should look, Boorstin suggests, if we seek to understand the motives of the men who accomplished the American Revolution: not, at least, to the Declaration's first two paragraphs. "People have grasped at 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,' forgetting that it was two-thirds borrowed

and, altogether, only part of a preamble," Boorstin writes. "We have repeated that 'all men are created equal' without daring to discover what it meant and without realizing that probably to none of the men who spoke it did it mean what we would like it to mean." Really, he tells us, the Revolution was all about no taxation without representation. "It is my view that the major issue of the American Revolution was the true constitution of the British Empire, which is a pretty technical legal problem."

Amen to that. Burke declared, looking upon the ghastly spectacle of the French Revolution, that nothing is more consummately wicked than the heart of an abstract metaphysician who aspires to govern a nation by utopian designs, regardless of prudence, historical experience, convention, custom, the complexities of political compromise, and long-received principles of morality. The men who made the American Revolution were not revolutionaries of the metaphysical sort. They had practical grievances; they sought practical redress; not obtaining it, they settled upon separation from the Crown in Parliament as a hard necessity. That act was meant not as a repudiation of their past, but as a means for preventing the destruction of their pattern of politics by King George's presumed intended revolution of arbitrary power, after which, in Burke's phrase, "the Americans could have no sort of security for their laws or liberties." That is not the cast of mind which is encountered among the revolutionaries of the twentieth century.

III

THE CAREFUL STUDY of history is of high value — among other reasons because it may instruct us, sometimes, concerning ways to deal with our present discontents. I do not mean simply that history repeats itself, or repeats itself with variations — although there is something in that, and particularly in the history of revolutions on the French model, which devour their

own children. (Here I commend Crane Brinton's *The Anatomy of Revolution* and D. W. Brogan's *The Price of Revolution*.) I am suggesting, rather, that deficiency in historical perspective leads to the ruinous blunders of ideologues, whom Burckhardt calls "the terrible simplifiers," while sound historical knowledge may diminish the force of Hegel's aphorism that "we learn from history that we learn nothing from history."

The history of this slippery word "revolution" is a case in point. Political terms have historical origins. If one is ignorant of those historical origins — if even powerful statesmen are ignorant of them — great errors become possible. It is as if one were to confound the word "law" as a term of jurisprudence with the word "law" as a term of natural science. If one assumes that the word "revolution" signifies always the same phenomenon, regardless of historical background, one may make miscalculations with grave consequences — perhaps fatal consequences.

The American Revolution, or War of Independence, was a preventive movement, intended to preserve an old constitutional structure for the most part. Its limited objectives attained, order was restored. It arose from causes intimately bound up with the colonial experience and the British constitution, and little connected with the causes of the French Revolution. In intention, at least, it was a "revolution" in the meaning of that term generally accepted during the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century.

The French Revolution was a very different phenomenon, as was its successor, the Russian Revolution. These were philosophical revolutions — or, as we say nowadays with greater precision, ideological revolutions: catastrophic upheavals in the later signification of the term "revolution." Their objectives were unlimited, in the sense of being utopian; their consequences were quite the contrary of what their original authors had hoped for. To apprehend the French Revolution, we still do well to turn to the

analyses by Tocqueville and by Taine; for the Bolshevik Revolution, we have the recent books by Solzhenitsyn, Shafarevich, and others. "To begin with unlimited liberty," says Fyodor Dostoevski, "is to end with unlimited despotism." Or, as Burke put it, to be possessed liberty must be limited.

A considerable element of the population of these United States has tended to fancy, almost from the inception of the Republic, that all revolutions everywhere somehow are emulATORY of the American War of Independence and ought to lead to similar democratic institutions. Revolutionary ideologues in many lands have played upon this American naiveté, successfully enough, from Havana to Saigon. This widespread American illusion, or confusion about the word "revolution," has led not merely to sentimentality in policy regarding virulent Marxist or nationalistic movements in their earlier stages, but also to unfounded expectations that some magic overnight "democratic reforms" — free elections especially — can suffice to restrain what Burke called "an armed doctrine." How many Americans forget, or never knew, that in time of civil war Abraham Lincoln found it necessary to suspend writs of *habeas corpus*?

Knowledge of history is no perfect safeguard against such blunders. It did not save Woodrow Wilson, who had read a great deal of history, from miscalculations about the consequences of "self-determination" in central Europe. It did not save his advisor Herbert Hoover, who knew some history, from fancying that an improbable "restoration of the Habsburg tyranny" in central Europe was a more imminent menace than live and kicking Bolshevism or the recrudescence of German ambitions. Nevertheless, knowledge of history generally and knowledge of the historical origin of political terms are some insurance against ideological infatuation or sentimental sloganizing.

The crying need of our age is to avert revolutions, not to multiply them. Recent revolutions have reduced half the world to servitude of body and mind, and to ex-

treme poverty, in Ethiopia and Chad, in Cambodia and Timor, and in fifty other lands. What we call the American Revolution had fortunate consequences because, in some sense, it was a revolution not made, but prevented. Folk who fancy the phrase "permanent revolution" are advocating, if unwittingly, permanent misery. The first step toward recovery

from this confusion is to apprehend that the word "revolution" has a variety of meanings; that not all revolutions are cut from the same cloth; that politics cannot be divorced from history; and that "revolution," in its common twentieth-century signification, is no highroad to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.