

David Ramsay
**The Advantages & Disadvantages
of the American Revolution**
and
Its Influence on the Minds & Morals of the Citizens

The History of the American Revolution
1789___SELECTIONS

From South Carolina, David Ramsay served as a surgeon in the Continental Army and after the war was elected as a delegate to the Continental Congress under the Articles of Confederation. In 1789 he published *The History of the American Revolution* as the new nation was instituting its first government under the new Constitution. In an appendix, Ramsay offered an analysis of the positive and negative effects of the Revolution on its victors, the ingenious self-discovered Americans. While praising the abilities, virtues, and “vast expansion of the human mind”

nurtured by the Revolution—which he elucidated with a historian’s eye to detail—he also warned Americans to rid themselves of the “great vices” engendered by the war. If they did not, they jeopardized the freedom they had fought for.

The American Revolution, on the one hand, brought forth great vices, but on the other hand it called forth many virtues, and gave occasion for the display of abilities which, but for that event, would have been lost to the world. When the war began, the Americans were a mass of husbandmen [farmers], merchants, mechanics, and fishermen, but the necessities of the country gave a spring to the active powers of the inhabitants and set them on thinking, speaking and acting in a line far beyond that to which they had been accustomed. The difference between nations is not so much owing to nature as to education and circumstances. While the Americans were guided by the leading strings of the Mother Country, they had no scope nor encouragement for exertion. All the departments of government were established and executed for them, but not by them. In the years 1775 and 1776, the country, being suddenly thrown into a situation that needed the abilities of all its sons, these generally took their places, each according to the bent of his inclination. As they severally pursued their objects with ardor, a vast expansion of the human mind speedily followed. This displayed itself in a variety of ways.

a vast expansion of the human mind

. . . Those who from indolence or dissipation had been of little service to the community in time of peace were found equally unserviceable in war. A few young men were exceptions to this general rule. Some of these, who had indulged in youthful follies, broke off from their vicious courses and on the pressing call of their country became useful servants of the public. But the great bulk of those who were the active instruments of carrying on the Revolution were self-made industrious men. These, who by their own exertions had established or laid a foundation for establishing personal independence, were most generally trusted and most successfully employed in establishing that of their country. In these times of action, classical education¹ was found of less service than good natural parts [personal qualities], guided by common sense and sound judgment.

Several names could be mentioned of individuals who, without the knowledge of any other language than their mother tongue, wrote not only accurately but elegantly on public business. It seemed as if the war not only required but created talents. Men whose minds were warmed with the love of liberty and whose abilities were improved by daily exercise and sharpened with a laudable ambition to serve their



distressed country, spoke, wrote, and acted with an energy far surpassing all expectations which could be reasonably founded on their previous acquirements [accomplishments].

The Americans knew but little of one another previous to the Revolution. Trade and business had brought the inhabitants of their seaports acquainted with each other, but the bulk of the people in the interior country were unacquainted with their fellow citizens. A continental army, and Congress composed of men from all the States, by freely mixing together, were assimilated into one mass. Individuals of both, mingling with the citizens, disseminated principles of union among them. Local prejudices abated. By frequent collision, asperities [rough edges] were worn off and a foundation was laid for the establishment of a nation out of discordant materials. Intermarriages between men and women of different States were much more common than before the war, and became an additional cement to the union. Unreasonable jealousies [distrust/suspicious] had existed between the inhabitants of the eastern and of the southern States, but on becoming better acquainted with each other, these in a great measure subsided. A wiser policy prevailed. Men of liberal² minds led the way in discouraging local distinctions, and the great body of the people, as soon as reason got the better of prejudice, found that their best interests would be most effectually promoted by such practices and sentiments as were favorable to union.

Religious bigotry had broken in upon the peace of various sects before the American war. This was kept up by partial establishments³ and by a dread that the Church of England, through the power of the Mother Country, would be made to triumph over all other denominations. These apprehensions were done away by the Revolution. The different sects, having nothing to fear from each other, dismissed all religious controversy. A proposal for introducing [Anglican] bishops into America before the war had kindled a flame among the dissenters [non-Anglicans], but the Revolution was no sooner accomplished than a scheme for that purpose was perfected with the consent and approbation [approval] of all those sects who had previously opposed it. Pulpits which had formerly been shut to worthy men, because their heads had not been consecrated by the imposition of the hands of a Bishop or of a Presbytery, have since the establishment of independence been reciprocally opened to each other whensoever the public convenience required it. The world will soon see the result of an experiment in politics, and be able to determine whether the happiness of society is increased by religious establishments⁴ or diminished by the want of them.

² I.e., wide-ranging and encompassing, not narrow or restricted to one's particular circumstances.

³ I.e., semi-official churches in some colonies.

⁴ *Religious establishment*: an official religion in a state or nation, established by the political authority and for which clergy may be paid with public funds, attendance may be required at the denomination's churches, etc. The First Amendment to the Constitution bans the federal government from establishing an official national religion.

Though schools and colleges were generally shut up during the war, yet many of the arts and sciences were promoted by it. The geography of the United States before the Revolution was but little known, but the marches of armies and the operations of war gave birth to many geographical inquiries and discoveries, which otherwise would not have been made. A passionate fondness for studies of this kind and the growing importance of the country excited one of its sons, the Rev. Mr. Morse,⁵ to travel through every State of the Union and amass a fund of topographical knowledge far exceeding anything heretofore communicated to the public. The necessities of the States led to the study of tactics, fortification, gunnery, and a variety of other arts connected with war, and diffused a knowledge of them among a peaceable people who would otherwise have had no inducement to study them.

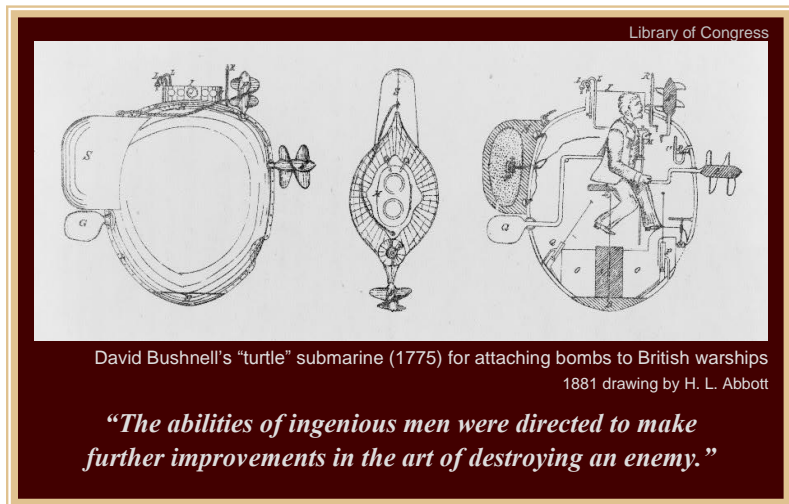
The abilities of ingenious men were directed to make further improvements in the art of destroying an enemy. Among these, David Bushnell of Connecticut invented a machine for submarine navigation, which was found to answer the purpose of rowing horizontally at any given depth under water and of rising or sinking at pleasure. To this was attached a

magazine of powder, and the whole was contrived in such a manner as to make it practicable to blow up vessels by machinery under them. Mr. Bushnell also contrived sundry [various] other curious machines for the annoyance of British shipping, but from accident they only succeeded in part. He destroyed one vessel in charge of Commodore Symonds and a second one near the shore of Long Island.⁶

Surgery was one of the arts [skills] which was promoted by the war. From the want [lack] of hospitals and other aids, the medical men of America had few opportunities of perfecting themselves in this art, the thorough knowledge of which can only be acquired by practice and observation. The melancholy events of battles gave the American students an opportunity of seeing and learning more in one day than they could have acquired in years of peace. It was in the hospitals of the United States that Dr. [Benjamin] Rush first discovered the method of curing the lockjaw by bark and wine, added to other invigorating remedies which has since been adopted with success in Europe as well as in the United States.

The science of government has been more generally diffused among the Americans by means of the Revolution. The policy of Great Britain in throwing them out of her protection induced a necessity of establishing independent [state] constitutions. This led to reading and reasoning on the subject. The many errors that were at first committed by unexperienced statesmen have been a practical comment on the folly of unbalanced constitutions and injudicious laws. The discussions concerning the new [federal] constitution gave birth to much reasoning on the subject of government, and particularly to a series of letters⁷ signed Publius but really the work of Alexander Hamilton, in which much political knowledge and wisdom were displayed, and which will long remain a monument of the strength and acuteness of the human understanding in investigating truth.

When Great Britain first began her encroachments on the Colonies, there were few natives of America who had distinguished themselves as speakers or writers, but the controversy between the two countries multiplied their number.



⁵ Rev. Jedediah Morse (1761-1826), father of Samuel Morse, and author of geography textbooks *Geography Made Easy* (1784), *American Geography* (1789), and *The American Gazetteer* (1797).

⁶ Bushnell's development of floating or towed mines was responsible for damaging these ships. Two attempts to destroy ships with the "Turtle" submarine were unsuccessful.

⁷ The Federalist Papers, 1787-88: eighty-five essays by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, in support of the proposed constitution.



The Stamp Act, which was to have taken place in 1765, employed the pens and tongues of many of the colonists, and by repeated exercise improved their ability to serve their country. The taxes imposed in 1767 called forth the pen of John Dickinson, who in a series of letters signed a Pennsylvania Farmer, may be said to have sown the seeds of the Revolution.⁸ Being universally read by the colonists, they universally enlightened them on the dangerous consequences likely to result from their being taxed by the Parliament of Great Britain.

In establishing American independence, the pen and the press had merit equal to that of the sword. As the war was the people's war, and was carried on without funds, the exertions of the army would have been insufficient to effect the Revolution unless the great body of the people had been prepared for it and also kept in a constant disposition to oppose Great Britain.⁹ To rouse and unite the inhabitants and to persuade them to patience for several years under present sufferings, with the hope of obtaining remote advantages for their posterity, was a work of difficulty. This was effected in a great measure by the tongues and pens of the well informed citizens, and on it depended the success of military operations.

To enumerate the names of all those who were successful laborers in this arduous business is impossible. The following list contains in nearly alphabetical order the names of the most distinguished writers in favor of the rights of America.¹⁰

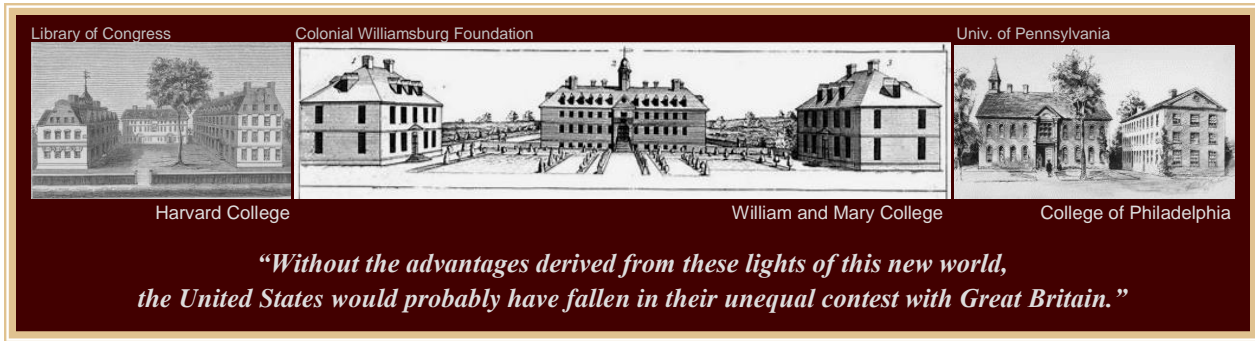
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|---|--|
| John Adams and Samuel Adams of Boston | Jonathan Hyman of Connecticut |
| [Richard] Bland of Virginia | Governor [William] Livingston of New Jersey |
| John Dickinson of Pennsylvania | Dr. [Jonathan] Mayhew and James Otis of Boston |
| Daniel Dulany of Annapolis [Maryland] | Thomas Paine, Dr. [Benjamin] Rush, Charles |
| William Henry Drayton of South Carolina | Thompson, and James Wilson of Philadelphia |
| Dr. Franklin of Philadelphia; ¹¹ | William Tennant of South Carolina |
| John Jay and Alexander Hamilton of New York | Josiah Quincy and Dr. [Joseph] Warren of Boston. |
| Thomas Jefferson and Arthur Lee of Virginia | |

⁸ See Letters I and II of *Letters from a Farmer in Philadelphia*, 1787, in this primary source collection (CRISIS #4).

⁹ Many of the fighting men in the war were in state militias, not in the Continental Army that was funded and supplied (sporadically) by the Continental Congress.

¹⁰ Formatting added. [Works by many of these men appear in this primary source collection. See the chronological list of texts at the home page.]

¹¹ Ramsay uses the title as an honorific; Franklin did not have a medical or academic degree.



These and many others labored in enlightening their countrymen on the subject of their political interests and in animating them to a proper line of conduct in defense of their liberties.

To these individuals may be added the great body of the clergy, especially in New England. The printers of newspapers had also much merit in the same way, particularly Eedes and Gill of Boston, Holt of New York, Bradford of Philadelphia, and Timothy of South Carolina.

The early attention which had been paid to literature¹² in New England was also eminently conducive to the success of the Americans in resisting Great Britain. The University of Cambridge [Harvard] was founded as early as 1636 and Yale College in 1700. It has been computed that in the year the Boston Port Act was passed [1774] there were in the four eastern Colonies upwards of two thousand graduates of their colleges dispersed through their several towns, who by their knowledge and abilities were able to influence and direct the great body of the people to a proper line of conduct for opposing the encroachments of Great Britain on their liberties. The colleges to the southward of New England, except that of William and Mary in Virginia, were but of modern date, but they had been of a standing sufficiently long to have trained for public service a considerable number of the youth of the country. The College of New Jersey [Princeton], which was incorporated about 28 years before the Revolution, had in that time educated upwards of 300 persons who with a few exceptions were active and useful friends of independence.

From the influence which knowledge had in securing and preserving the liberties of America, the present generation may trace the wise policy of their fathers in erecting schools and colleges. They may also learn that it is their duty to found more, and support all such institutions. Without the advantages derived from these lights of this new world, the United States would probably have fallen in their unequal contest with Great Britain. Union, which was essential to the success of their resistance, could scarcely have taken place in the measures adopted by an ignorant multitude. Much less could wisdom in council, unity in system, or perseverance in the prosecution of a long and self-denying war, be expected from an uninformed people. It is a well known fact that persons unfriendly to the Revolution were always most numerous in those parts of the United States which had either never been illuminated or but faintly warmed by the rays of science. The uninformed and the misinformed constituted a great proportion of those Americans who preferred the leading strings of the Parent State, though encroaching on their liberties, to a government of their own countrymen and fellow citizens.

As literature had in the first instance favored the Revolution, so in its turn the Revolution promoted literature. The study of eloquence and of the belles lettres¹³ was more successfully prosecuted in America after the disputes between Great Britain and her Colonies began to be serious than it ever had been before. The various orations, addresses, letters, dissertations, and other literary performances which the war made necessary called forth abilities where they were and excited the rising generation to study arts, which brought with them their own reward. . . . Francis Hopkinson rendered essential service to his country by turning the artillery of wit and ridicule on the enemy.¹⁴ Philip Freneau¹⁵ labored successfully in the same way.

¹² Here meaning all written works, not just fiction

¹³ *Belles lettres*: literature, poetry, drama, etc. (French: "beautiful writings").

¹⁴ See, in this primary source collection, Francis Hopkinson's *A Pretty Story Written in the Year of Our Lord 2774, 1774* (CRISIS #9) and *The New Roof, 1787* (CONSTITUTION #3).

Ramsay reviews the literary contributions of John Trumbull,¹⁶ David Humphreys,¹⁷ Joel Barlow,¹⁸ and Timothy Dwight,¹⁹ the major writers in the Yale-affiliated group known as the “Connecticut Wits” or “Hartford Wits.” He then lists the colleges and universities founded during or after the Revolution, especially in Pennsylvania, and extols the numerous societies created to alleviate social ills and to promote learning, innovation, agriculture, and manufactures.

To overset an established government unhinges many of those principles which bind individuals to each other. A long time and much prudence will be necessary to reproduce a spirit of union and that reverence for government without which society is a rope of sand. The right of the people to resist their rulers when invading their liberties forms the cornerstone of the American republics. This principle, though just in itself, is not favorable to the tranquility of present establishments. The maxims and measures which in the years 1774 and 1775 were successfully inculcated and adopted by American patriots for oversetting the established government, will answer a similar purpose when recurrence is had to them by factious demagogues for disturbing the freest governments that were ever devised.²⁰

War never fails to injure the morals of the people engaged in it. The American war, in particular, had an unhappy influence of this kind. Being begun without funds or regular establishments,²¹ it could not be carried on without violating private rights, and in its progress it involved a necessity for breaking solemn promises and plighted²² public faith. The failure of national justice, which was in some degree unavoidable, increased the difficulties of performing private engagements²³ and weakened that sensibility to the obligations of public and private honor which is a security for the punctual performance of contracts.²⁴

In consequence of the war, the institutions of religion have been deranged, the public worship of the Deity suspended, and a great number of the inhabitants deprived of the

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ordinary means of obtaining that religious knowledge which tames the fierceness and softens the rudeness of human passions and manners. Many of the temples dedicated to the service of the most High were destroyed, and these from a deficiency of ability and inclination are not yet rebuilt. The clergy were left to suffer without proper support. The depreciation of the paper currency was particularly injurious to them. It reduced their salaries to a pittance, so insufficient for their maintenance that several of them were obliged to lay down their profession and engage in other pursuits. Public preaching, of which many of the inhabitants were thus deprived, seldom fails of rendering essential service to society by civilizing the multitude and forming them to union. No class of citizens have contributed more to the Revolution than the clergy, and none have hitherto suffered more in consequence of it. From the diminution of their number and the penury to which they have been subjected, civil government has lost many of the advantages it formerly derived from the public instructions of that useful order of men.

On the whole, the literary, political, and military talents of the citizens of the United States have been improved by the Revolution, but their moral character is inferior to what it formerly was. So great is the change for the worse that the friends of public order are fondly called upon to exert their utmost abilities in extirpating the vicious principles and habits which have taken deep root during the late convulsions.

¹⁵ See Philip Freneau's poem *The British Prison Ship*, 1781, Cantos II-IV, in this primary source collection (WAR #6).

¹⁶ John Trumbull's mock epic poem *M'Fingal [McFingal]*, 1775, satirized Patriot-Loyalist antagonisms.

¹⁷ David Humphreys, American colonel and poet, wrote numerous witty and patriotic poems during the Revolution.

¹⁸ Joel Barlow's *The Vision of Columbus*, 1787, is a nine-section epic poem in which an angel presents to Christopher Columbus, imprisoned in Spain after his third voyage, the glorious future of the continent he had "discovered."

¹⁹ Timothy Dwight's epic poem *The Conquest of Canaan*, 1785, presented the revolution in Connecticut as a biblical allegory.

²⁰ Referring to Shays's Rebellion in Massachusetts (1786).

²¹ Here meaning long-established political and military organization.

²² *Plighted*: risked, threatened the maintenance of.

²³ I.e., private business arrangements that require legal contracts and functioning courts.

²⁴ Public order and governmental stability were compromised in wartime as the states abandoned their colonial governments and—haphazardly and with varying levels of success—created their own state governments. As a result, many persons suffered civil and economic hardships, especially in rural areas where local power entities held sway.