

Mercy Otis Warren

A Survey of the Situation of America
on the
Conclusion of the War with Britain

Ch. 30 of *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*

completed by 1791; published 1805 SELECTIONS

Long involved in revolutionary discourse as a Boston poet, playwright, and intellectual, Mercy Otis Warren is most known for her satirical dramas published anonymously before and during the Revolution. Yet her most reflective and telling work for our time is her three-volume history of the Revolution, published in 1805 under her name. In these selections from the next-to-last chapter, completed by 1791, Warren looked back on the fragile and vulnerable victor, depicting the new nation “as a child just learning to walk” and as “a young heir who had prematurely become possessed of a rich inheritance.” Her analysis of Americans’ strengths and weaknesses as nationbuilders—“untrodden ground which they were now to explore”—conveyed the fervent hope that the unprecedented opportunity created by her revolutionary generation would not be lost by the next.



Mercy Otis Warren (Mrs. James Warren)
oil portrait by John Singleton Copley, ca. 1763

America has fought for the boon of liberty. She has successfully and honorably obtained it: she has now a rank among the nations. It was now the duty of the wise and patriotic characters who had by inconceivable labor and exertion obtained the prize to guard on every side that it might not be sported away by the folly of the people or the intrigue or deception of their rulers. They had to watch at all points that her dignity was not endangered nor her independence renounced by too servilely copying either the fashionable vices or the political errors of those countries where the inhabitants are become unfit for any character but that of master and slave.¹

Thus, after the dissolution of the American army, the withdrawing of the French troops, the retirement of General Washington, and the retreat of the fleets and armies of the king of Great Britain, a solemnity and stillness appeared which was like the general pause of nature before the concussion of an earthquake. The state of men’s minds seemed for a short time to be palsied [trembling/disabled] by the retrospect of dangers encountered to break off the fetters and the hazards surmounted to sweep away the claims and cut the leading strings in which they had been held by the crown of Britain.²

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But though the connection was now dissolved and the gordian knot³ of union between Great

Britain and America cut in sunder, though the independence of the United States was by the treaty clearly established on the broad basis of liberty, yet the Americans felt themselves in such a state of infancy that as a child just learning to walk, they were afraid of their own movements. Their debts were unpaid, their governments unsettled, and the people out of breath by their long struggle for the freedom and

¹ I.e., European nations with monarchs and ruling elites.

² I.e., Americans seemed to be paralyzed for a time by the full realization of the dangers they had faced in breaking free from Britain.

³ *Gordian knot*: in Greek legend, an intricate knot broken by one swordstroke of Alexander the Great, thereby identifying him as the future ruler of Asia.

independence of their country. They were become poor from the loss of trade, the neglect of their usual occupations, and the drains from every quarter for the support of a long and expensive war.

From the versatility of human affairs and the encroaching spirit of man, it was yet uncertain when and how the states would be tranquilized and the union consolidated under wise, energetic, and free modes of government; or whether such, if established, would be administered agreeable to laws founded on the beautiful theory of republicanism,⁴ depicted in the closets of philosophers and idolized in the imagination of most of the inhabitants of America.

It is indeed true that from a general attention to early education, the people of the United States were better informed in many branches of literature than the common classes of men in most other countries. Yet many of them had but a superficial knowledge of mankind. They were ignorant of the intrigues of courts,⁵ and though convinced of the necessity of government, did not fully understand its nature or origin. They had generally supposed there was little to do but to shake off the yoke of foreign domination and annihilate the name of *king*. . . .

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. . . few had yet formed any adequate ideas and fewer indeed were sensible that though the name of *liberty* delights the ear and tickles the fond pride of man, it is a jewel much oftener the plaything of his imagination than a possession of real stability. It may be acquired today in all the triumph of independent feelings, but perhaps tomorrow the world may be convinced that mankind know not how to make a proper use of the prize, generally bartered in a short time as a useless bauble to the first officious master that will take the burden from the mind by laying another on the shoulders of tenfold weight. . . .

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fixed on such a stable basis as to become the admiration of the world. Future generations will then look back with gratitude on the era which wafted their ancestors from the European shores. They will never forget the energetic struggles of their fathers to secure the natural rights of men. These are improved in society and strengthened by civil compacts. These have been established in the United States by a race of independent spirits who have freed their posterity from the feudal vassalage of hereditary lords. It is to be hoped that the grim shades of despotic kings will never hover in the clouds of the American hemisphere to bedizen [adorn gaudily] the heads of the sons of Columbia [U.S.] by imaginary ideas of the splendid beams of royalty. . . .

It is a more agreeable anticipation to every humane mind to contemplate the glory, the happiness, the freedom, and peace which may for ages to come pervade this newborn nation, emancipated by the uncommon vigor, valor, fortitude, and patriotism of her soldiers and statesmen. They seemed to have been remarkably directed by the finger of Divine Providence and led on from step to step beyond their own expectations to exhibit to the view of distant nations, millions freed from the bondage of a foreign yoke by that spirit of freedom, virtue, and perseverance which they had generally displayed from their first emigrations to the wilderness to the present day. . . .

. . . [The United States] have struggled with astonishing success for the rights of mankind and have emancipated themselves from the shackles of foreign power. America has indeed obtained incalculable advantages by the revolution; but in the innumerable list of evils attendant on a state of war, she, as well

⁴ Elective representative government.

⁵ I.e., the political maneuverings common among government officials in European monarchies.

as Great Britain, has lost her thousands of brave soldiers, veteran officers, hardy seamen, and meritorious citizens that perished in the field, or in captivity, in prison-ships, and in the wilderness, since the beginning of the conflict. She has lost an immense property by the conflagration of her cities, and the waste of wealth by various other means. She has in a great measure lost her simplicity of manners and those ideas of mediocrity⁶ which are generally the parent of content — the Americans are already in too many instances hankering after the sudden accumulation of wealth and the proud distinctions of fortune and title. They have too far lost that general sense of moral obligation, formerly felt by all classes in America. The people have not indeed generally lost their veneration for religion, but it is to be regretted that in the unlicensed liberality of opinion there have been some instances where the fundamental principles of truth have been obscured. . . .

. . . the situation of America appeared similar to that of a young heir who had prematurely become possessed of a rich inheritance, while his inexperience and his new felt independence had intoxicated him so far as to render him incapable of weighing the intrinsic value of his estate, and had left him without discretion or judgment to improve it to the best advantage of his family.

Thus, after the conclusion of peace and the acknowledgment of the independence of the United States by Great Britain, the situation of America appeared similar to that of a young heir who had prematurely become possessed of a rich inheritance, while his inexperience and his new felt independence had intoxicated him so far as to render him incapable of weighing the intrinsic value of his estate, and had left him without discretion or judgment to improve it to the best advantage of his family.

The inhabitants of the United States had much to experiment in the new rank they had taken, and the untrodden ground which they were now to explore, replete with difficulties not yet digested or apprehended by the most sagacious statesmen. They had obtained their independence by a long and perilous struggle against a powerful nation. We now view them just emancipated from a foreign yoke, the blessings of peace restored upon honorable terms, with the liberty of forming their own governments, enacting their own laws, choosing their own magistrates, and adopting manners the most favorable to freedom and happiness. Yet it is possible that their virtue is not sufficiently steadfast to avail themselves of those superior advantages. . . .

If the conduct of the United States should stand upon record as a striking example of the truth of this observation, it must be remembered that this is not a trait peculiar to the character of America — it is the story of man. Past ages bear testimony to its authenticity, and future events will convince the unbelieving.

⁶—*simplicity of manners*: unostentatious modes of behavior and social conduct, in contrast to the intricacies of elite European “manners.”
—*ideas of mediocrity*: concepts of restraint in material consumption and class consciousness; a middle ground between poverty and luxury.