A KIND OF REVOLUTION

The American victory over the British army was made possible by the existence of an already-armed people. Just about every white male had a gun, and could shoot. The Revolutionary leadership distrusted the mobs of poor. But they knew the Revolution had no appeal to slaves and Indians. They would have to woo the armed white population.

This was not easy. Yes, mechanics and sailors, some others, were incensed against the British. But general enthusiasm for the war was not strong. While much of the white male population went into military service at one time or another during the war, only a small fraction stayed. John Shy, in his study of the Revolutionary army (A People Numerous and Armed), says they “grew weary of being bullied by local committees of safety, by corrupt deputy assistant commissaries of supply, and by bands of ragged strangers with guns in their hands calling themselves soldiers of the Revolution.” Shy estimates that perhaps a fifth of the population was actively treasonous. John Adams had estimated a third opposed, a third in support, a third neutral.

Alexander Hamilton, an aide of George Washington and an up-and-coming member of the new elite, wrote from his headquarters: “... our countrymen have all the folly of the ass and all the passiveness of the sheep.... They are determined not to be free.... If we are saved, France and Spain must save us.”

Slavery got in the way in the South. South Carolina, insecure since the slave uprising in Stono in 1739, could hardly fight against the British; her militia had to be used to keep slaves under control.

The men who first joined the colonial militia were generally “hallmarks of respectability or at least of full citizenship” in their communities, Shy says. Excluded from the militia were friendly Indians, free Negroes, white servants, and free white men who had no stable home.
But desperation led to the recruiting of the less respectable whites. Massachusetts and Virginia provided for drafting “strollers” (vagrants) into the militia. In fact, the military became a place of promise for the poor, who might rise in rank, acquire some money, change their social status.

Here was the traditional device by which those in charge of any social order mobilize and discipline a recalcitrant population—offering the adventure and rewards of military service to get poor people to fight for a cause they may not see clearly as their own. A wounded American lieutenant at Bunker Hill, interviewed by Peter Oliver, a story (who admittedly might have been looking for such a response), told how he had joined the rebel forces:

I was a Shoemaker, & got my living by my Labor. When this Rebellion came on, I saw some of my Neighbors got into Commission, who were no better than myself. I was very ambitious, & did not like to see those Men above me. I was asked to enlist, as a private Soldier . . . I offered to enlist upon having a Lieutenants Commission; which was granted. I imagined my self now in a way of Promotion: if I was killed in Battle, there would be an end of me, but if my Captain was killed, I should rise in Rank, & should still have a Chance to rise higher. These Sir! were the only Motives of my entering into the Service; for as to the Dispute between Great Britain & the Colonies, I know nothing of it . . .

John Shy investigated the subsequent experience of that Bunker Hill lieutenant. He was William Scott, of Peterborough, New Hampshire, and after a year as prisoner of the British he escaped, made his way back to the American army, fought in battles in New York, was captured again by the British, and escaped again by swimming the Hudson River one night with his sword tied around his neck and his watch pinned to his hat. He returned to New Hampshire, recruited a company of his own, including his two eldest sons, and fought in various battles, until his health gave way. He watched his eldest son die of camp fever after six years of service. He had sold his farm in Peterborough for a note that, with inflation, became worthless. After the war, he came to public attention when he rescued eight people from drowning after their boat turned over in New York harbor. He then got a job surveying western lands with the army, but caught a fever and died in 1796.

Scott was one of many Revolutionary fighters, usually of lower military ranks, from poor and obscure backgrounds. Shy’s study of the Peterborough contingent shows that the prominent and substantial citizens of the town had served only briefly in the war. Other American towns show the same pattern. As Shy puts it: “Revolutionary America may have been a middle-class society, happier and more prosperous than any other in its time, but it contained a large and growing number of fairly poor people, and many of them did much of the actual fighting and suffering between 1775 and 1783: A very old story.”

The military conflict itself, by dominating everything in its time, diminished other issues, made people choose sides in the one contest that was publicly important, forced people onto the side of the Revolution whose interest in Independence was not at all obvious. Ruling elites seem to have learned through the generations—consciously or not—that war makes them more secure against internal trouble.

The force of military preparation had a way of pushing neutral people into line. In Connecticut, for instance, a law was passed requiring military service of all males between sixteen and sixty, omitting certain government officials, ministers, Yale students and faculty, Negroes, Indians, and mulattos. Someone called to duty could provide a substitute or get out of it by paying 5 pounds. When eighteen men failed to show up for military duty they were jailed and, in order to be released, had to pledge to fight in the war. Shy says: “The mechanism of their political conversion was the militia.” What looks like the democratization of the military forces in modern times shows up as something different: a way of forcing large numbers of reluctant people to associate themselves with the national cause, and by the end of the process belie in it.

Here, in the war for liberty, was conscription, as usual, cognizant of wealth. With the impressment riots against the British still remembered, impressment of seamen by the American navy was taking place by 1779. A Pennsylvania official said: “We cannot help observing how similar this Conduct is to that of the British Officers during our Subjection to Great Britain and are persuaded it will have the same unhappy effects viz. an estrangement of the Affections of the People from . . . Authority . . . which by an easy Progression will proceed to open Opposition . . . and bloodshed.”

Watching the new, tight discipline of Washington’s army, a chaplain in Concord, Massachusetts, wrote: “New lords, new laws. The strictest government is taking place and great distinction is made between officers & men. Everyone is made to know his place & keep it, or be immediately tied up, and receive not one but 30 or 40 lashes.”

The Americans lost the first battles of the war: Bunker Hill, Brooklyn Heights, Harlem Heights, the Deep South; they won small battles at Trenton and Princeton, and then in a turning point, a big battle at
Saratoga, New York, in 1777. Washington's frozen army hung on at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, while Benjamin Franklin negotiated an alliance with the French monarchy, which was anxious for revenge on England. The war turned to the South, where the British won victory after victory, until the Americans, aided by a large French army, with the French navy blocking off the British from supplies and reinforcements, won the final victory of the war at Yorktown, Virginia, in 1781.

Through all this, the suppressed conflicts between rich and poor among the Americans kept reappearing. In the midst of the war, in Philadelphia, which Eric Foner describes as "a time of immense profits for some colonists and terrible hardships for others," the inflation (prices rose in one month that year by 45 percent) led to agitation and calls for action. One Philadelphia newspaper carried a reminder that in Europe “the People have always done themselves justice when the scarcity of bread has arisen from the avarice of forestallers. They have broken open magazines—appropriated stores to their own use without paying for them—and in some instances have hung up the culprits who created their distress.”

In May of 1779, the First Company of Philadelphia Artillery petitioned the Assembly about the troubles of “the middling and poor” and threatened violence against “those who are avariciously intent upon amassing wealth by the destruction of the more virtuous part of the community.” That same month, there was a mass meeting, an extralegal gathering, which called for price reductions and initiated a investigation of Robert Morris, a rich Philadelphian who was accused of holding food from the market. In October came the “Fort Wilson riot,” in which a militia group marched into the city and to the house of James Wilson, a wealthy lawyer and Revolutionary official who had opposed price controls and the democratic constitution adopted in Pennsylvania in 1776. The militia were driven away by a “silk stocking brigade” of well-off Philadelphia citizens.

It seemed that the majority of white colonists, who had a bit of land, or no property at all, were still better off than slaves or indentured servants or Indians, and could be wooed into the coalition of the Revolution. But when the sacrifices of war became more bitter, the privileges and safety of the rich became harder to accept. About 10 percent of the white population (an estimate of Jackson Main in *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America*), large landholders and merchants, held 1,000 pounds or more in personal property and 1,000 pounds in land, at the least, and these men owned nearly half the wealth of the country and held as slaves one-seventh of the country's people.

The Continental Congress, which governed the colonies through the war, was dominated by rich men, linked together in factions and compacts by business and family connections. These links connected North and South, East and West. For instance, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia was connected with the Adamses of Massachusetts and the Shifflers of Pennsylvania. Delegates from middle and southern colonies were connected with Robert Morris of Pennsylvania through commerce and land speculation. Morris was superintendent of finance, and his assistant was Gouverneur Morris.

Morris's plan was to give more assurance to those who had loaned money to the Continental Congress, and gain the support of officers by voting half-pay for life for those who stuck to the end. This ignored the common soldier, who was not getting paid, who was suffering in the cold, dying of sickness, watching the civilian profiteers get rich. On New Year's Day, 1781, the Pennsylvania troops near Morristown, New Jersey, perhaps emboldened by rum, dispersed their officers, killed one captain, wounded others, and were marching, fully armed, with cannon, toward the Continental Congress at Philadelphia.

George Washington handled it cautiously. Informed of these developments by General Anthony Wayne, he told Wayne not to use force. He was worried that the rebellion might spread to his own troops. He suggested Wayne get a list of the soldiers' grievances, and said Congress should not flee Philadelphia, because then the way would be open for the soldiers to be joined by Philadelphia citizens. He sent Knox rushing to New England on his horse to get three months' pay for the soldiers, while he prepared a thousand men to march on the mutineers, as a last resort. Peace was negotiated, in which one-half the men were discharged; the other half got furloughs.

Shortly after this, a smaller mutiny took place in the New Jersey Line, involving two hundred men who defied their officers and started out for the state capital at Trenton. Now Washington was ready. Six hundred men, who themselves had been well fed and clothed, marched on the mutineers and surrounded and disarmed them. Three ringleaders were put on trial immediately, in the field. One was pardoned, and two were shot by firing squads made up of their friends, who wept as they pulled the triggers. It was "an example," Washington said.

Two years later, there was another mutiny in the Pennsylvania line. The war was over and the army had disbanded, but eighty soldiers, demanding their pay, invaded the Continental Congress headquarters in Philadelphia and forced the members to flee across the river to Princeton—"ignominiously turned out of doors," as one
historian sorrowfully wrote (John Fiske, The Critical Period), “by a handful of drunken mutineers.”

What soldiers in the Revolution could do only rarely, rebel against their authorities, civilians could do much more easily. Ronald Hoffman says: “The Revolution plunged the states of Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and, to a much lesser degree, Virginia into divisive civil conflicts that persisted during the entire period of struggle.” The southern lower classes resisted being mobilized for the revolution. They saw themselves under the rule of a political elite, win or lose against the British.

In Maryland, for instance, by the new constitution of 1776, to run for governor one had to own 5,000 pounds of property; to run for state senator, 1,000 pounds. Thus, 90 percent of the population were excluded from holding office. And so, as Hoffman says, “small slave holders, non-slaveholding planters, tenants, renters and casual day laborers posed a serious problem of social control for the Whig elite.”

With black slaves 25 percent of the population (and in some counties 50 percent), fear of slave revolts grew. George Washington had turned down the requests of blacks, seeking freedom, to fight in the Revolutionary army. So when the British military commander in Virginia, Lord Dunmore, promised freedom to Virginia slaves who joined his forces, this created consternation. A report from one Maryland county worried about poor whites encouraging slave runaways:

> The insolence of the Negroes in this county is come to such a height, that we are under a necessity of disarming them which we affected on Saturday last. We took about eighty guns, some bayonets, swords, etc. The malicious and imprudent speeches of some among the lower classes of whites have induced them to believe that their freedom depended on the success of the King’s troops. We cannot therefore be too vigilant nor too rigorous with those who promote and encourage this disposition in our slaves.

Even more unsettling was white rioting in Maryland against leading families, supporting the Revolution, who were suspected of hoarding needed commodities. The class hatred of some of these disloyal people was expressed by one man who said “it was better for the people to lay down their arms and pay the duties and taxes laid upon them by King and Parliament than to be brought into slavery and to be commanded and ordered about as they were.” A wealthy Maryland landowner, Charles Carroll, took note of the surly mood all around him:

> There is a mean low dirty envy which creeps thro all ranks and cannot suffer a man a superiority of fortune, of merit, or of understanding in fellow citizens—either of these are sure to entail a general ill will and dislike upon the owners.

Despite this, Maryland authorities retained control. They made concessions, taxing land and slaves more heavily, letting debtors pay in paper money. It was a sacrifice by the upper class to maintain power, and it worked.

In the lower South, however, in the Carolinas and Georgia, according to Hoffman, “vast regions were left without the slightest apparition of authority.” The general mood was to take no part in a war that seemed to have nothing for them. “Authoritative personages on both sides demanded that common people supply material, reduce consumption, leave their families, and even risk their lives. Forced to make hard decisions, many flailed out in frustration or evaded and defied first one side, then the other. . . .”

Washington’s military commander in the lower South, Nathanael Greene, dealt with disloyalty by a policy of concessions to some, brutality to others. In a letter to Thomas Jefferson he described a raid by his troops on Loyalists. “They made a dreadful carnage of them, upwards of one hundred were killed and most of the rest cut to pieces. It has had a very happy effect on those disaffected persons of which there were too many in this country.” Greene told one of his generals “to strike terror into our enemies and give spirit to our friends.” On the other hand, he advised the governor of Georgia “to open a door for the disaffected of your state to come in. . . .”

In general, throughout the states, concessions were kept to a minimum. The new constitutions that were drawn up in all states from 1776 to 1780 were not much different from the old ones. Although property qualifications for voting and holding office were lowered in some instances, in Massachusetts they were increased. Only Pennsylvania abolished them totally. The new bills of rights had modifying provisions. North Carolina, providing for religious freedom, added “that nothing herein contained shall be construed to exempt preachers of treasonable or seditious discourses, from legal trial and punishment.” Maryland, New York, Georgia, and Massachusetts took similar cautions.

The American Revolution is sometimes said to have brought about the separation of church and state. The northern states made such declarations, but after 1776 they adopted taxes that forced everyone to support Christian teachings. William G. McLoughlin, quoting Supreme Court
Justice David Brewer in 1892 that "this is a Christian nation," says of the separation of church and state in the Revolution that it "was neither conceived of nor carried out... Far from being left to itself, religion was imbedded into every aspect and institution of American life."

One would look, in examining the Revolution's effect on class relations, at what happened to land confiscated from fleeing Loyalists. It was distributed in such a way as to give a double opportunity to the Revolutionary leaders: to enrich themselves and their friends, and to parcel out some land to small farmers to create a broad base of support for the new government. Indeed, this became characteristic of the new nation: finding itself possessed of enormous wealth, it could create the richest ruling class in history, and still have enough for the middle classes to act as a buffer between the rich and the dispossessed.

The huge landholdings of the Loyalists had been one of the great incentives to Revolution. Lord Fairfax in Virginia had more than 5 million acres encompassing twenty-one counties. Lord Baltimore's income from his Maryland holdings exceeded 30,000 pounds a year. After the Revolution, Lord Fairfax was protected; he was a friend of George Washington. But other Loyalist holders of great estates, especially those who were absentee, had their land confiscated. In New York, the number of freeholding small farmers increased after the Revolution, and there were fewer tenant farmers, who had created so much trouble in the pre-Revolution years.

Although the numbers of independent farmers grew, according to Rowland Berthoff and John Murri, "the class structure did not change radically." The ruling class went through personnel changes as the "rising merchant families of Boston, New York or Philadelphia... slipped quite credibly into the social status—and sometimes the very houses of those who failed in business or suffered confiscation and exile for loyalty to the crown."

Edmund Morgan sums up the class nature of the Revolution this way: "The fact that the lower ranks were involved in the contest should not obscure the fact that the contest itself was generally a struggle for office and power between members of an upper class: the new against the established." Looking at the situation after the Revolution, Richard Morris comments: "Everywhere one finds inequality." He finds "the people" of "We the people of the United States" (a phrase coined by the very rich Gouverneur Morris) did not mean Indians or blacks or women or white servants. In fact, there were more indentured servants than ever, and the Revolution "did nothing to end and little to ameliorate white bondage."

Carl Degler says (Out of Our Past): "No new social class came to power through the door of the American revolution. The men who engineered the revolt were largely members of the colonial ruling class." George Washington was the richest man in America. John Hancock was a prosperous Boston merchant, Benjamin Franklin was a wealthy printer. And so on.

On the other hand, town mechanics, laborers, and seamen, as well as small farmers, were swept into "the people" by the rhetoric of the Revolution, by the camaraderie of military service, by the distribution of some land. Thus was created a substantial body of support, a national consensus, something that, even with the exclusion of ignored and oppressed people, could be called "America."

Staugton Lynd's close study of Dutchess County, New York, in the Revolutionary period corroborates this. There were tenant risings in 1766 against the huge feudal estates in New York. The Rensselaerwyck holding was a million acres. Tenants, claiming some of this land for themselves, unable to get satisfaction in the courts, turned to violence. In Poughkeepsie, 1,700 armed tenants had closed the courts and broken open the jails. But the uprising was crushed.

During the Revolution, there was a struggle in Dutchess County over the disposition of confiscated Loyalist lands, but it was mainly between different elite groups. One of these, the Poughkeepsie anti-Federalists (opponents of the Constitution), included men on the make, newcomers in land and business. They made promises to the tenants to gain their support, exploiting their grievances to build their own political careers and maintain their own fortunes.

During the Revolution, to mobilize soldiers, the tenants were promised land. A prominent landowner of Dutchess County wrote in 1777 that a promise to make tenants freeholders "would instantly bring you at least six thousand able farmers into the field." But the farmers who enlisted in the Revolution and expected to get something out of it found that, as privates in the army, they received $6.66 a month, while a colonel received $75 a month. They watched local government contractors like Melancton Smith and Matthew Paterson become rich, while the pay they received in continental currency became worthless with inflation.

All this led tenants to become a threatening force in the midst of the war. Many stopped paying rent. The legislature, worried, passed a bill to confiscate Loyalist land and add four hundred new freeholders to the 1,800 already in the county. This meant a strong new voting bloc for the faction of the rich that would become anti-Federalists in 1788. Once the
new landholders were brought into the privileged circle of the Revolution and seemed politically under control, their leaders, Melancton Smith and others, at first opposed to adoption of the Constitution, switched to support, and with New York ratifying, adoption was ensured. The new freeholders found that they had stopped being tenants, but were now mortgagees, paying back loans from banks instead of rent to landlords.

It seems that the rebellion against British rule allowed a certain group of the colonial elite to replace those loyal to England, give some benefits to small landholders, and leave poor white working people and tenant farmers in very much their old situation.

What did the Revolution mean to the Native Americans, the Indians? They had been ignored by the fine words of the Declaration, had not been considered equal, certainly not in choosing those who would govern the American territories in which they lived, nor in being able to pursue happiness as they had pursued it for centuries before the white Europeans arrived. Now, with the British out of the way, the Americans could begin the inexorable process of pushing the Indians off their lands, killing them if they resisted. In short, as Francis Jennings puts it, the white Americans were fighting against British imperial control in the East, and for their own imperialism in the West.

Before the Revolution, the Indians had been subdued by force in Virginia and in New England. Elsewhere, they had worked out modes of coexistence with the colonies. But around 1750, with the colonial population growing fast, the pressure to move westward onto new land set the stage for conflict with the Indians. Land agents from the East began appearing in the Ohio River valley, on the territory of a confederation of tribes called the Covenant Chain, for which the Iroquois were spokesmen. In New York, through intricate swindling, 800,000 acres of Mohawk land were taken, ending the period of Mohawk-New York friendship. Chief Hendrick of the Mohawks is recorded speaking his bitterness to Governor George Clinton and the provincial council of New York in 1753:

Brother when we came here to relate our Grievances about our Lands, we expected to have something done for us, and we have told you that the Covenant Chain of our Forefathers was like to be broken, and brother you tell us that we shall be redressed at Albany, but we know them so well, we will not trust to them, for they [the Albany merchants] are no people but Devils so... as soon as we come home we will send up a Belt of Wampum to our Brothers the other 5 Nations to acquaint them the Covenant Chain is broken between you and us. So brother you are not to expect to hear of me any more, and Brother we desire to hear no more of you.

When the British fought the French for North America in the Seven Years’ War, the Indians fought on the side of the French. The French were traders but not occupiers of Indian lands, while the British clearly coveted their hunting grounds and living space. Someone reported the conversation of Shingas, chief of the Delaware Indians, with the British General Braddock, who sought his help against the French:

Shingas asked General Braddock, whether the Indians that were friends to the English might not be permitted to Live and Trade among the English and have Hunting Ground sufficient to Support themselves and Families... On which General Braddock said that No Savage Should Inherit the Land... On which Shingas and the other Chiefs answered That if they might not have Liberty to Live on the Land they would not Fight for it...

When that war ended in 1763, the French, ignoring their old allies, ceded to the British lands west of the Appalachians. The Indians therefore united to make war on the British western forts; this is called “Pontiac’s Conspiracy” by the British, but “a liberation war for independence” in the words used by Francis Jennings. Under orders from British General Jeffrey Amherst, the commander of Fort Pitts gave the attacking Indian chiefs, with whom he was negotiating, blankets from the smallpox hospital. It was a pioneering effort at what is now called biological warfare. An epidemic soon spread among the Indians.

Despite this, and the burning of villages, the British could not destroy the will of the Indians, who continued guerrilla war. A peace was made, with the British agreeing to establish a line at the Appalachians, beyond which settlements would not encroach on Indian territory. This was the Royal Proclamation of 1763, and it angered Americans (the original Virginia charter said its land went westward to the ocean). It helps to explain why most of the Indians fought for England during the Revolution. With their French allies, then their English allies, gone, the Indians faced a new land-coveting nation—alone.

The Americans assumed now that the Indian land was theirs. But the expeditions they sent westward to establish this were overcome—which they recognized in the names they gave these battles: Harmar’s Humiliation and St. Clair’s Shame. And even when General Anthony Wayne defeated the Indians’ western confederation in 1798 at the Battle of Fallen Timbers, he had to recognize their power. In the Treaty of
Grenville, it was agreed that in return for certain cessions of land the United States would give up claims to the Indian lands north of the Ohio, east of the Mississippi, and south of the Great Lakes, but that if the Indians decided to sell these lands they would offer them first to the United States.

Jennings, putting the Indian into the center of the American Revolution—after all, it was Indian land that everyone was fighting over—sees the Revolution as a “multiplicity of variously oppressed and exploited peoples who preyed upon each other.” With the eastern elite controlling the lands on the seaboard, the poor, seeking land, were forced to go West, there becoming a useful bulwark for the rich because, as Jennings says, “the first target of the Indian’s hatchet was the frontiersman’s skull.”

The situation of black slaves as a result of the American Revolution was more complex. Thousands of blacks fought with the British. Five thousand were with the Revolutionaries, most of them from the North, but there were also free blacks from Virginia and Maryland. The lower South was reluctant to arm blacks. Amid the urgency and chaos of war, thousands took their freedom—leaving on British ships at the end of the war to settle in England, Nova Scotia, the West Indies, or Africa. Many others stayed in America as free blacks, evading their masters.

In the northern states, the combination of blacks in the military, the lack of powerful economic need for slaves, and the rhetoric of Revolution led to the end of slavery—but very slowly. As late as 1810, thirty thousand blacks, one-fourth of the black population of the North, remained slaves. In 1840 there were still a thousand slaves in the North. In the upper South, there were more free Negroes than before, leading to more control legislation. In the lower South, slavery expanded with the growth of rice and cotton plantations.

What the Revolution did was to create space and opportunity for blacks to begin making demands of white society. Sometimes these demands came from the new, small black elites in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Richmond, Savannah, sometimes from articulate and bold slaves. Pointing to the Declaration of Independence, blacks petitioned Congress and the state legislatures to abolish slavery, to give blacks equal rights. In Boston, blacks asked for city money, which whites were getting, to educate their children. In Norfolk, they asked to be allowed to testify in court. Nashville blacks asserted that free Negroes “ought to have the same opportunities of doing well that any Person . . . would have.” Peter Mathews, a free Negro butcher in Charleston, joined other free black artisans and tradesmen in petitioning the legislature to repeal discriminatory laws against blacks. In 1780, seven blacks in Dartmouth, Massachusetts, petitioned the legislature for the right to vote, linking taxation to representation:

... we apprehend ourselves to be aggrieved, in that while we are not allowed the privilege of freemen of the State having no vote or influence in the election of those that tax us yet many of our colour (as is well known) have cheerfully entered the field of battle in the defense of the common cause and that (as we conceive) against a similar exertion of power (in regard to taxation) too well known to need a recital in this place...

A black man, Benjamin Banneker, who taught himself mathematics and astronomy, predicted accurately a solar eclipse, and was appointed to plan the new city of Washington, wrote to Thomas Jefferson:

I suppose it is a truth too well attested to you, to need a proof here, that we are a race of beings, who have long labored under the abuse and censure of the world; that we have long been looked upon with an eye of contemn, and that we have long been considered rather as brutes than human, and scarcely capable of mental endowments. ... I apprehend you will embrace every opportunity to eradicate that train of absurd and false ideas and opinions, which so generally prevails with respect to us; and that your sentiments are concurrent with mine, which are, that one universal Father hath given being to us all; and that he hath not only made us all of one flesh, but that he hath also, without partiality, afforded us all the same sensations and endued us all with the same faculties.

Banneker asked Jefferson “to wean yourselves from those narrow prejudices which you have imbibed.”

Jefferson tried his best, as an enlightened, thoughtful individual might. But the structure of American society, the power of the cotton plantation, the slave trade, the politics of unity between northern and southern elites, and the long culture of race prejudice in the colonies, as well as his own weaknesses—that combination of practical need and ideological fixation—kept Jefferson a slaveowner throughout his life.

The inferior position of blacks, the exclusion of Indians from the new society, the establishment of supremacy for the rich and powerful in the new nation—all this was already settled in the colonies by the time of the Revolution. With the English out of the way, it could now be put on paper, solidified, regularized, made legitimate, by the Constitution of the United States, drafted at a convention of Revolutionary leaders in Philadelphia.
To many Americans over the years, the Constitution drawn up in 1787 has seemed a work of genius put together by wise, humane men who created a legal framework for democracy and equality. This view is stated, a bit extravagantly, by the historian George Bancroft, writing in the early nineteenth century:

The Constitution establishes nothing that interferes with equality and individuality. It knows nothing of differences by descent, or opinions, of favored classes, or legalized religion, or the political power of property. It leaves the individual alongside of the individual. ... As the sea is made up of drops, American society is composed of separate, free, and constantly moving atoms, ever in reciprocal action ... so that the institutions and laws of the country rise out of the masses of individual thought which, like the waters of the ocean, are rolling evermore.

Another view of the Constitution was put forward early in the twentieth century by the historian Charles Beard (arousing anger and indignation, including a denunciatory editorial in the New York Times). He wrote in his book *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*:

Inasmuch as the primary object of a government, beyond the mere repression of physical violence, is the making of the rules which determine the property relations of members of society, the dominant classes whose rights are thus to be determined must perforce obtain from the government such rules as are consonant with the larger interests necessary to the continuance of their economic processes, or they must themselves control the organs of government.

In short, Beard said, the rich must, in their own interest, either control the government directly or control the laws by which government operates.

Beard applied this general idea to the Constitution, by studying the economic backgrounds and political ideas of the fifty-five men who gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 to draw up the Constitution. He found that a majority of them were lawyers by profession, that most of them were men of wealth, in land, slaves, manufacturing, or shipping, that half of them had money loaned out at interest, and that forty of the fifty-five held government bonds, according to the records of the Treasury Department.

Thus, Beard found that most of the makers of the Constitution had some direct economic interest in establishing a strong federal govern-
I have been greatly abused, have been obliged to do more than my part in the war; been loaded with class rates, town rates, province rates, Continental rates and all rates. . . been pulled and hauled by sheriffs, constables and collectors, and had my cattle sold for less than they were worth. . . .

. . . The great men are going to get all we have and I think it is time for us to rise and put a stop to it, and have no more courts, nor sheriffs, nor collectors nor lawyers. . . .

The chairman of that meeting used his gavel to cut short the applause. He and others wanted to redress their grievances, but peacefully, by petition to the General Court (the legislature) in Boston.

However, before the scheduled meeting of the General Court, there were going to be court proceedings in Hampshire County, in the towns of Northampton and Springfield, to seize the cattle of farmers who hadn’t paid their debts, to take away their land, now full of grain and ready for harvest. And so, veterans of the Continental army, also aggrieved because they had been treated poorly on discharge—given certificates for future redemption instead of immediate cash—began to organize the farmers into squads and companies. One of these veterans was Luke Day, who arrived the morning of court with a fifte-and-drum corps, still angry with the memory of being locked up in debtors’ prison in the heat of the previous summer.

The sheriff looked to the local militia to defend the court against these armed farmers. But most of the militia was with Luke Day. The sheriff did manage to gather five hundred men, and the judges put on their black silk robes, waiting for the sheriff to protect their trip to the courthouse. But there at the courthouse steps, Luke Day stood with a petition, asserting the people’s constitutional right to protest the unconstitutional acts of the General Court, asking the judges to adjourn until the General Court could act on behalf of the farmers. Standing with Luke Day were fifteen hundred armed farmers. The judges adjourned.

Shortly after, at courthouses in Worcester and Athol, farmers with guns prevented the courts from meeting to take away their property, and the militia were too sympathetic to the farmers, or too outnumbered, to act. In Concord, a fifty-year-old veteran of two wars, Job Shattuck, led a caravan of carts, wagons, horses, and oxen onto the town green, while a message was sent to the judges:

The voice of the People of this county is such that the court shall not enter this courthouse until such time as the People shall have redress of the grievances they labor under at the present.

A county convention then suggested the judges adjourn, which they did.

At Great Barrington, a militia of a thousand faced a square crowded with armed men and boys. But the militia was split in its opinion. When the chief justice suggested the militia divide, those in favor of the court’s sitting to go on the right side of the road, and those against on the left, two hundred of the militia went to the right, eight hundred to the left, and the judges adjourned. Then the crowd went to the home of the chief justice, who agreed to sign a pledge that the court would not sit until the Massachusetts General Court met. The crowd went back to the square, broke open the county jail, and set free the debtors. The chief justice, a country doctor, said: “I have never heard anybody point out a better way to have their grievances redressed than the people have taken.”

The governor and the political leaders of Massachusetts became alarmed. Samuel Adams, once looked on as a radical leader in Boston, now insisted people act within the law. He said “British emissaries” were stirring up the farmers. People in the town of Greenwich responded: You in Boston have the money, and we don’t. And didn’t you act illegally yourselves in the Revolution? The insurgents were now being called Regulators. Their emblem was a sprig of hemlock.

The problem went beyond Massachusetts. In Rhode Island, the debtors had taken over the legislature and were issuing paper money. In New Hampshire, several hundred men, in September of 1786, surrounded the legislature in Exeter, asking that taxes be returned and paper money issued; they dispersed only when military action was threatened.

Daniel Shays entered the scene in western Massachusetts. A poor farm hand when the revolution broke out, he joined the Continental army, fought at Lexington, Bunker Hill, and Saratoga, and was wounded in action. In 1780, not being paid, he resigned from the army, went home, and soon found himself in court for nonpayment of debts. He also saw what was happening to others: a sick woman, unable to pay, had her bed taken from under her.

What brought Shays fully into the situation was that on September 19, the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts met in Worcester and indicted eleven leaders of the rebellion, including three of his friends, as “disorderly, riotous and seditious persons” who “unlawfully and by force of arms” prevented “the execution of justice and the laws of the commonwealth.” The Supreme Judicial Court planned to meet again in Springfield a week later, and there was talk of Luke Day’s being indicted.

Shays organized seven hundred armed farmers, most of them veterans of the war, and led them to Springfield. There they found a general
with nine hundred soldiers and a cannon. Shays asked the general for permission to parade, which the general granted, so Shays and his men moved through the square, drums banging and fifes blowing. As they marched, their ranks grew. Some of the militia joined, and reinforcements began coming in from the countryside. The judges postponed hearings for a day, then adjourned the court.

Now the General Court, meeting in Boston, was told by Governor James Bowdoin to “vindicate the insulted dignity of government.” The recent rebels against England, secure in office, were calling for law and order. Sam Adams helped draw up a Riot Act, and a resolution suspending habeas corpus, to allow the authorities to keep people in jail without trial. At the same time, the legislature moved to make some concessions to the angry farmers, saying certain old taxes could now be paid in goods instead of money.

This didn’t help. In Worcester, 160 insurgents appeared at the courthouse. The sheriff read the Riot Act. The insurgents said they would disperse only if the judges did. The sheriff shouted something about hanging. Someone came up behind him and put a sprig of hemlock in his hat. The judges left.

Confrontations between farmers and militia now multiplied. The winter snows began to interfere with the trips of farmers to the courthouses. When Shays began marching a thousand men into Boston, a blizzard forced them back, and one of his men froze to death.

An army came into the field, led by General Benjamin Lincoln, on money raised by Boston merchants. In an artillery duel, three rebels were killed. One soldier stepped in front of his own artillery piece and lost both arms. The winter grew worse. The rebels were outnumbered and on the run. Shays took refuge in Vermont, and his followers began to surrender. There were a few more deaths in battle, and then sporadic, disorganized, desperate acts of violence against authority: the burning of barns, the slaughter of a general’s horses. One government soldier was killed in an eerie night-time collision of two sleighs.

Captured rebels were put on trial in Northampton and six were sentenced to death. A note was left at the door of the high sheriff of Pittsfield:

I understand that there is a number of my countrymen condemned to die because they fought for justice. I pray have a care that you assist not in the execution of so horrid a crime, for by all that is above, he that condemns and he that executes shall share alike. . . . Prepare for death with speed, for your life or mine is short. When the woods are covered with leaves, I shall return and pay you a short visit.

Thirty-three more rebels were put on trial and six more condemned to death. Arguments took place over whether the hangings should go forward. General Lincoln urged mercy and a Commission of Clemency, but Samuel Adams said: “In monarchy the crime of treason may admit of being pardoned or lightly punished, but the man who dares rebel against the laws of a republic ought to suffer death.” Several hangings followed; some of the condemned were pardoned. Shays, in Vermont, was pardoned in 1788 and returned to Massachusetts, where he died, poor and obscure, in 1825.

It was Thomas Jefferson, in France as ambassador at the time of Shays’ Rebellion, who spoke of such uprisings as healthy for society. In a letter to a friend he wrote: “I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing. . . . It is a medicine necessary for the sound health of government. . . . God forbid that we should ever be twenty years without such a rebellion. . . . The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure.”

But Jefferson was far from the scene. The political and economic elite of the country were not so tolerant. They worried that the example might spread. A veteran of Washington’s army, General Henry Knox, founded an organization of army veterans, “The Order of the Cincinnati,” presumably (as one historian put it) “for the purpose of cherishing the heroic memories of the struggle in which they had taken part,” but also, it seemed, to watch out for radicalism in the new country. Knox wrote to Washington in late 1786 about Shays’ Rebellion, and in doing so expressed the thoughts of many of the wealthy and powerful leaders of the country:

The people who are the insurgents have never paid any, or but very little taxes. But they see the weakness of government; they feel at once their own poverty, compared with the opulent, and their own force, and they are determined to make use of the latter, in order to remedy the former. Their creed is: “That the property of the United States has been protected from the confiscations of Britain by the joint exertions of all, and therefore ought to be the common property of all. And he that attempts opposition to this creed is an enemy to equity and justice and ought to be swept from off the face of the earth.”

Alexander Hamilton, aide to Washington during the war, was one of the most forceful and astute leaders of the new aristocracy. He voiced his political philosophy:
All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and well-born, the other the mass of the people. The voice of the people has been said to be the voice of God; and however generally this maxim has been quoted and believed, it is not true in fact. The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right. Give therefore to the first class a distinct permanent share in the government. ... Can a democratic assembly who annually revolve in the mass of the people be supposed steadily to pursue the public good? Nothing but a permanent body can check the imprudence of democracy.

At the Constitutional Convention, Hamilton suggested a President and Senate chosen for life.

The Convention did not take his suggestion. But neither did it provide for popular elections, except in the case of the House of Representatives, where the qualifications were set by the state legislatures (which required property-holding for voting in almost all the states), and excluded women, Indians, slaves. The Constitution provided for Senators to be elected by the state legislators, for the President to be elected by electors chosen by the state legislators, and for the Supreme Court to be appointed by the President.

The problem of democracy in the post-Revolutionary society was not, however, the Constitutional limitations on voting. It lay deeper, beyond the Constitution, in the division of society into rich and poor. For if some people had great wealth and great influence; if they had the land, the money, the newspapers, the church, the educational system—how could voting, however broad, cut into such power? There was still another problem: wasn’t it the nature of representative government, even when most broadly based, to be conservative, to prevent tumultuous change?

It came time to ratify the Constitution, to submit to a vote in state conventions, with approval of nine of the thirteen required to ratify it. In New York, where debate over ratification was intense, a series of newspaper articles appeared, anonymously, and they tell us much about the nature of the Constitution. These articles, favoring adoption of the Constitution, were written by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay, and came to be known as the Federalist Papers (opponents of the Constitution became known as anti-Federalists).

In Federalist Paper #10, James Madison argued that representative government was needed to maintain peace in a society ridden by factional disputes. These disputes came from “the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society.” The problem, he said, was how to control the factional struggles that came from inequalities in wealth. Minority factions could be controlled, he said, by the principle that decisions would be by vote of the majority.

So the real problem, according to Madison, was a majority faction, and here the solution was offered by the Constitution, to have “an extensive republic,” that is, a large nation ranging over thirteen states, for then “it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other. ... The influence of factional leaders may kindle a flame within their particular States, but will be unable to spread a general conflagration through the other States.”

Madison’s argument can be seen as a sensible argument for having a government which can maintain peace and avoid continuous disorder. But is it the aim of government simply to maintain order, as a referee, between two equally matched fighters? Or is it that government has some special interest in maintaining a certain kind of order, a certain distribution of power and wealth, a distribution in which government officials are not neutral referees but participants? In that case, the disorder they might worry about is the disorder of popular rebellion against those monopolizing the society’s wealth. This interpretation makes sense when one looks at the economic interests, the social backgrounds, of the makers of the Constitution.

As part of his argument for a large republic to keep the peace, James Madison tells quite clearly, in Federalist #10, whose peace he wants to keep: “A rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project, will be less apt to pervade the whole body of the Union than a particular member of it.”

When economic interest is seen behind the political clauses of the Constitution, then the document becomes not simply the work of wise men trying to establish a decent and orderly society, but the work of certain groups trying to maintain their privileges, while giving just enough rights and liberties to enough of the people to ensure popular support.

In the new government, Madison would belong to one party (the Democrat-Republicans) along with Jefferson and Monroe. Hamilton would belong to the rival party (the Federalists) along with Washington and Adams. But both agreed—one a slaveholder from Virginia, the other a merchant from New York—on the aims of this new government they were establishing. They were anticipating the long-fundamental agreement of the two political parties in the American system. Hamilton wrote elsewhere in the Federalist Papers that the new Union would be
able “to repress domestic faction and insurrection.” He referred directly to Shays’ Rebellion: “The tempestuous situation from which Massachusetts has scarcely emerged evinces that dangers of this kind are not merely speculative.”

It was either Madison or Hamilton (the authorship of the individual papers is not always known) who in Federalist Paper #63 argued the necessity of a “well-constructed Senate” as “sometimes necessary as a defence to the people against their own temporary errors and delusions” because “there are particular moments in public affairs when the people, stimulated by some irregular passion, or some illicit advantage, or misled by the artful misrepresentations of interested men, may call for measures which they themselves will afterwards be the most ready to lament and condemn.” And: “In these critical moments, how salutary will be the interference of some temperate and respectable body of citizens in order to check the misguided career, and to suspend the blow meditated by the people against themselves, until reason, justice, and truth can regain their authority over the public mind?”

The Constitution was a compromise between slaveholding interests of the South and moneyed interests of the North. For the purpose of uniting the thirteen states into one great market for commerce, the northern delegates wanted laws regulating interstate commerce, and urged that such laws require only a majority of Congress to pass. The South agreed to this, in return for allowing the trade in slaves to continue for twenty years before being outlawed.

Charles Beard warned us that governments—including the government of the United States—are not neutral, that they represent the dominant economic interests, and that their constitutions are intended to serve these interests. One of his critics (Robert E. Brown, Charles Beard and the Constitution) raises an interesting point. Granted that the Constitution omitted the phrase “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” which appeared in the Declaration of Independence, and substituted “life, liberty, or property”—well, why shouldn’t the Constitution protect property? As Brown says about Revolutionary America, “practically everybody was interested in the protection of property” because so many Americans owned property.

However, this is misleading. True, there were many property owners. But some people had much more than others. A few people had great amounts of property; many people had small amounts; others had none. Jackson Main found that one-third of the population in the Revolutionary period were small farmers, while only 3 percent of the population had truly large holdings and could be considered wealthy.

Still, one-third was a considerable number of people who felt they had something at stake in the stability of a new government. This was a larger base of support for government than anywhere in the world at the end of the eighteenth century. In addition, the city mechanics had an important interest in a government which would protect their work from foreign competition. As Staughton Lynd puts it: “How is it that the city workingmen all over America overwhelmingly and enthusiastically supported the United States Constitution?”

This was especially true in New York. When the ninth and tenth states had ratified the Constitution, four thousand New York City mechanics marched with floats and banners to celebrate. Bakers, blacksmiths, brewers, ship joiners and shipwrights, cooper, cartmen and tailors, all marched. What Lynd found was that these mechanics, while opposing elite rule in the colonies, were nationalist. Mechanics comprised perhaps half the New York population. Some were wealthy, some were poor, but all were better off than the ordinary laborer, the apprentice, the journeyman, and their prosperity required a government that would protect them against the British hats and shoes and other goods that were pouring into the colonies after the Revolution. As a result, the mechanics often supported wealthy conservatives at the ballot box.

The Constitution, then, illustrates the complexity of the American system: that it serves the interests of a wealthy elite, but also does enough for small property owners, for middle-income mechanics and farmers, to build a broad base of support. The slightly prosperous people who make up this base of support are buffers against the blacks, the Indians, the very poor whites. They enable the elite to keep control with a minimum of coercion, a maximum of law—all made palatable by the fanfare of patriotism and unity.

The Constitution became even more acceptable to the public at large after the first Congress, responding to criticism, passed a series of amendments known as the Bill of Rights. These amendments seemed to make the new government a guardian of people’s liberties: to speak, to publish, to worship, to petition, to assemble, to be tried fairly, to be secure at home against official intrusion. It was, therefore, perfectly designed to build popular backing for the new government. What was not made clear—it was a time when the language of freedom was new and its reality untested—was the shakiness of anyone’s liberty when entrusted to a government of the rich and powerful.

Indeed, the same problem existed for the other provisions of the Constitution, like the clause forbidding states to “impair the obligation of contract,” or that giving Congress the power to tax the people and to
appropriate money. They all sound benign and neutral until one asks: Tax who, for what? Appropriate what, for whom? To protect everyone's contracts seems like an act of fairness, of equal treatment, until one considers that contracts made between rich and poor, between employer and employee, landlord and tenant, creditor and debtor, generally favor the more powerful of the two parties. Thus, to protect these contracts is to put the great power of the government, its laws, courts, sheriffs, police, on the side of the privileged—and to do it not, as in premodern times, as an exercise of brute force against the weak but as a matter of law.

The First Amendment of the Bill of Rights shows that quality of interest hiding behind innocence. Passed in 1791 by Congress, it provided that "Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." Yet, seven years after the First Amendment became part of the Constitution, Congress passed a law very clearly abridging the freedom of speech.

This was the Sedition Act of 1798, passed under John Adams's administration, at a time when Irishmen and Frenchmen in the United States were looked on as dangerous revolutionaries because of the recent French Revolution and the Irish rebellions. The Sedition Act made it a crime to say or write anything "false, scandalous and malicious" against the government, Congress, or the President, with intent to defame them, bring them into disrepute, or excite popular hatreds against them.

This act seemed to directly violate the First Amendment. Yet, it was enforced. Ten Americans were put in prison for utterances against the government, and every member of the Supreme Court in 1798-1800, sitting as an appellate judge, held it constitutional.

There was a legal basis for this, one known to legal experts, but not to the ordinary American, who would read the First Amendment and feel confident that he or she was protected in the exercise of free speech. That basis has been explained by historian Bernard Levy. Levy points out that it was generally understood (not in the population, but in higher circles) that, despite the First Amendment, the British common law of "seditious libel" still ruled in America. This meant that while the government could not exercise "prior restraint"—that is, prevent an utterance or publication in advance—it could legally punish the speaker or writer afterward. Thus, Congress has a convenient legal basis for the laws it has enacted since that time, making certain kinds of speech a crime. And, since punishment after the fact is an excellent deterrent to the exercise of free expression, the claim of "no prior restraint" itself is destroyed. This leaves the First Amendment much less than the stone wall of protection it seems at first glance.

"Are the economic provisions in the Constitution enforced just as weakly? We have an instructive example almost immediately in Washington's first administration, when Congress's power to tax and appropriate money was immediately put to use by the Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton.

Hamilton, believing that government must ally itself with the richest elements of society to make itself strong, proposed to Congress a series of laws, which it enacted, expressing this philosophy. A Bank of the United States was set up as a partnership between the government and certain banking interests. A tariff was passed to help the manufacturers. It was agreed to pay bondholders—most of the war bonds were now concentrated in a small group of wealthy people—the full value of their bonds. Tax laws were passed to raise money for this bond redemption.

One of these tax laws was the Whiskey Tax, which especially hurt small farmers who raised grain that they converted into whiskey and then sold. In 1794 the farmers of western Pennsylvania took up arms and rebelled against the collection of this tax. Secretary of the Treasury Hamilton led the troops to put them down. We see then, in the first years of the Constitution, that some of its provisions—even those paradored most flamboyantly (like the First Amendment)—might be treated lightly. Others (like the power to tax) would be powerfully enforced.

Still, the mythology around the Founding Fathers persists. To say, as one historian (Bernard Bailyn) has done recently, that "the destruction of privilege and the creation of a political system that demanded of its leaders the responsible and humane use of power were their highest aspirations" is to ignore what really happened in the America of these Founding Fathers.

Bailyn says:

"Everyone knew the basic prescription for a wise and just government. It was so to balance the contending powers in society that no one power could overwhelm the others and, unchecked, destroy the liberties that belonged to all. The problem was how to arrange the institutions of government so that this balance could be achieved.

Were the Founding Fathers wise and just men trying to achieve a good balance? In fact, they did not want a balance, except one which kept things as they were, a balance among the dominant forces at that time. They certainly did not want an equal balance between slaves and masters, propertyless and property holders, Indians and white."
Chapter Five

Half a Revolution

Joseph Clarke's Letter about the Rebellion in Springfield
(August 30, 1774)

Joseph Plumb Martin, A Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Dangers
and Sufferings of a Revolutionary Soldier (1830)

Samuel Dewees Recounts the Suppression of Insubordination in the
Continental Army after the Mutinies of 1781 (1844)

Henry Knox, Letter to George Washington (October 23, 1786)

“Publius” (James Madison), Federalist No. 10 (November 23, 1787)

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During the Revolution, mutinies in the Continental Army, and after the war, farmers' uprisings in Massachusetts and other states, were evidence of the continued existence of class anger in the new nation. The Founding Fathers were conscious of that, and worried about future rebellions. The Constitution they framed was designed to control that rebellious spirit and maintain "law and order."

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Here is one striking example of the class anger and spirit of popular rebellion at the time, from a letter that Joseph Clarke, the adopted child of Joseph Hawley, a well-known Massachusetts politician, sent to an unknown friend.
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We arrived in town about noon this day and found all the people gathered before us. A committee from the body of the county had just waited upon the court to demand a satisfactory answer, that is, whether they meant to hold their commissions and exercise their authority according to the new act of parliament for altering the constitution of the province, which being answered in the negative, it was put to vote after the Sd [said] message and answer were read to the people assembled before the meeting house, whether they were willing the Court should sit; it passed in the negative.

Then the people paraded before Mr. Parson’s [Landlord Parsons], from thence marched back again to the meeting-house and demanded the appearance of the judges. The judges came according to their desire, and amidst the crowd in a sandy, sultry place, exposed to the sun as far as they were able in such circumstance give a reasonable, and, to the major part, a satisfactory answer to such questions as were asked.

It was also demanded of them that they should make a declaration in writing, signed by all the justices and lawyers in the County, renouncing in the most express terms any commission which should be given out to them or either of them under the new arrangement, which was immediately complied with and executed accordingly.

The people then reassembled before Mr. Parson’s house. . . . [Major] Catlin falling into a personal quarrel, at length gained the attention of the people. They considered him as an object worthy of their malice, as he was an officer of the court. He was treated with candor and too mildly to make any complaint. His boasted heroism failed him in the day of trial, and vanished like a puff [of] smoke. He and O[liver] Warner, who came to his assistance in the quarrel, made such declarations as were requested of them, and then were dismissed, unhurt, and in peace. Your uncle may say what he pleases with regard to their abuse of him, but I was an eye witness to the whole, and you I believe will be satisfied that no abuse was intended when I tell you what easy terms they requested and were satisfied with, namely, only a declaration that he would not hold any office under the new act of parliament.

Col. [John] Worthington was next brought upon the board. The sight of him flashed lightening from their eyes. Their spirits were already raised and the sight of this object gave them additional force. He had not refused his new office of counselor. For that reason especially he was very obnoxious. But the people kept their tempers. He attempted to harangue them in mitigation of his conduct, but he was soon obliged to desist. The people were not to be dallied with. Nothing would satisfy them but a renunciation in writing of his office as Counselor and a recantation of his address to Gov. [Thomas] Gage, which last was likewise signed by Jonas[athan] Bliss and Caleb Strong. . . .

Jonathan Bliss next came upon the floor, he was very humble and the people were very credulous. He asked their pardon for all he had said or done which was contrary to their opinions; and as he depended for his support upon the people, he begged to stand well in their favor.

Mr. Moses Bliss was brought into the ring, but the accusation against him was not well supported, and he passed off in silence. The Sheriff was the next who was demanded; he accordingly appeared. He was charged with saying some imprudent things, but none of them were proved, and he departed. But he was humbled. Col. [Israel] Williams took the next turn. He went round the ring and vindicated himself from some accusations thrown upon him and denied some things that were laid to his charge.

He declared in my hearing that “altho’ he had heretofore differed from the people in opinion with regard to the mode of obtaining redress, he would, hereafter, heartily acquiesce in any measures, that they should take for that purpose, and join with them in the common cause. He considered his interest as embarked in the same bottom with theirs, and hoped to leave it in peace to his Children.”

Capt. [James] Merrick of Munson was next treated with for uttering imprudent expressions. I thought they would have tarred and feathered him, and I thought he almost deserved it. He was very stubborn, as long as he dare be, but at length he made some concessions. But not till after they had carted him. No man received the least injury, but the strictest order of justice were observed. The people to their honor behaved with the greatest order and regularity, a few individuals excepted, and avoided, as much as possible, confusion.

The people of each town being drawn into separate companies marched with staves and musick. The trumpets sounding, drums beating, fifes playing and Colours flying, struck the passions of the soul into a proper tone, and inspired martial courage into each.

...  

Joseph Plumb Martin here recalls the hardships soldiers experienced on the line and after they were discharged. Plumb Martin enlisted in the Continental Army in 1776, and served in New York and Connecticut during the American Revolution.
Joseph Plumb Martin, *A Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Dangers and Sufferings of a Revolutionary Soldier (1830)*

When those who engaged to serve during the war enlisted, they were promised a hundred acres of land, each, which was to be in their or the adjoining states. When the country had drained the last drop of service it could screw out of the poor soldiers, they were turned adrift like old worn-out horses, and nothing said about land to pasture them upon. Congress did, indeed, appropriate lands under the denomination of “Soldier’s Lands,” in Ohio state, or some state, or a future state, but no care was taken that the soldiers should get them. No agents were appointed to see that the poor fellows ever got possession of their lands; no one ever took the least care about it, except a pack of speculators, who were driving about the country like so many evil spirits, endeavoring to pluck the last feather from the soldiers. The soldiers were ignorant of the ways and means to obtain their bounty lands, and there was no one appointed to inform them. The truth was, none cared for them; the country was served, and faithfully served, and that was all that was deemed necessary. It was, soldiers, look to yourselves; we want no more of you. I hope I shall one day find land enough to lay my bones in. If I chance to die in a civilized country, none will deny me that. A dead body never begs a grave;—thanks for that.

They were likewise promised the following articles of clothing per year. One uniform coat, a woolen and a linen waistcoat, four shirts, four pair of shoes, four pair of stockings, a pair of woolen and a pair of linen overalls, a hat or a leather cap, a stock for the neck, a hunting shirt, a pair of shoe buckles, and a blanket. Ample clothing says the reader; and ample clothing says I. But what did we ever realize of all this ample store—why, perhaps a coat (we generally did get that) and one or two shirts, the same of shoes and stockings, and, indeed, the same may be said of every other article of clothing—a few dribbled out in a regiment, two or three times a year, never getting a whole suit at a time, and all of the poorest quality, and blankets of thin baize [woollen], thin enough to have straws shot through without discommoding the threads. How often have I had to lie whole stormy, cold nights in a wood, or a bleak hill, with such blankets and other clothing like them, with nothing but the canopy of the heavens to cover me. All this too in the heart of winter, when a New England farmer, if his cattle had been in my situation, would not have slept a wink from the sheer anxiety for them. And if I stepped into a house to warm me, when passing, wet to the skin and almost dead with cold, hunger, and fatigue, what scornful looks and hard words have I experienced.

Almost every one has heard of the soldiers of the Revolution being tracked by the blood of their feet on the frozen ground. This is literally true, and the thousandth part of their sufferings has not, nor ever will be told. That the country was young and poor, at that time, I am willing to allow, but young people are generally modest, especially females. Now, I think the country (although of the feminine gender, for we say “she” and “her” of it) showed but little modesty at the time alluded to, for she appeared to think her soldiers had no private parts. For on our march from the Valley Forge, through the Jerseys, and at the boasted Battle of Monmouth, a fourth part of the troops had not a scrap of anything but their ragged shirt flaps to cover their nakedness, and were obliged to remain so long after. I had picked up a few articles of light clothing during the past winter, while among the Pennsylvanian farmers, or I should have been in the same predicament. “Rub and go” was always the Revolutionary soldier’s motto.

As to provision of victuals, I have said a great deal already, but ten times as much might be said and not get to the end of the chapter. When we engaged in the service we were promised the following articles for a ration: one pound of good and wholesome fresh or salt beef, or three quarters of a pound of good salt pork, a pound of good flour, soft or hard bread, a quart of salt to every hundred pounds of fresh beef, a quart of vinegar to a hundred rations, a quart [a quart of a pint] of rum, brandy, or whiskey per day; some little soap and candles, I have forgot how much, for I had so little of these two articles that I never knew the quantity. And as to the article of vinegar, I do not recollect of ever having any except a spoonful at the famous rice and vinegar Thanksgiving in Pennsylvania, in the year 1777. But we never received what was allowed us. Oftentimes have I gone one, two, three, and even four days without a morsel, unless the fields or forests might chance to afford enough to prevent absolute starvation. Often, when I have picked the last grain from the bones of my scanty morsel, have I eaten the very bones, as much of them as possibly could be eaten, and then have had to perform some hard and fatiguing duty, when my stomach has been as craving as it was before I had eaten anything at all.

If we had got our full allowance regularly, what was it? A bare pound of fresh beef and a bare pound of bread or flour. The beef, when it had gone through all its divisions and subdivisions, would not be much over three quarters of a pound, and that nearly or quite half bones. The beef that we got in the army was, generally, not many degrees above carrion; it was much like the old Negro’s rabbit; it had not much fat upon it and very little lean. When we drew flour, which was much of the time we were in the field or on marches, it was of small value, being eaten half-cooked, besides a deal of it being unavoidably wasted in the cookery.

When in the field, and often while in winter quarters, our usual mode of drawing our provisions, when we did draw any, was as follows: a return being made out for all the officers and men, for seven days, we drew four days of meat and
the whole seven days of flour. At the expiration of the four days, the other three days allowance of beef. Now, dear reader, pray consider a moment, how were five men in a mess, five hearty, hungry young men, to subsist four days on twenty pounds of fresh beef (and I might say twelve or fifteen pounds) without any vegetables or any other kind of sauce to eke it out. In the hottest season of the year it was the same. Though there was not much danger of our provisions putrefying, we had none on hand long enough for that, if it did, we obliged to eat it, or go without anything. When General Washington told Congress, “the soldiers eat every kind of horse fodder but hay” he might have gone a little farther and told them that they consider hog’s fodder and not a trifle of dog’s—when they could get it to eat.

We were, also, promised six dollars and two thirds a month, to be paid us monthly, and how did we fare in this particular? Why, as we did in every other. I received the dollars and two thirds, till (if I remember rightly) the month of August, 1777, when paying ceased. And what was six dollars and sixty-seven cents of this “Continental currency,” as it was called, worth? It was scarcely enough to procure a man a dinner. Government was ashamed to tantalize the soldiers any longer with such trash, and wisely gave it up of its own credit. I received one month’s pay, in specie [in kind] while on the march to Virginia, in the year 1781, and except that, I never received any pay worth the name while I belonged to the army. Had I been paid as I was promised to be at my engaging in the service, I needed not to have suffered as I did, nor would I have done it; there was enough in the country and money would have procured it if I had had it. It is provoking to think of it. The country was rigorous in exacting my compliance to my engagements to a punctilio, but equally careless in performing her contracts with me, and why so? One reason was because she had all the power in her own hands and I had none. Such things ought not to be.

The poor soldiers had hardships enough to endure without having to starve; the least that could be done was to give them something to eat. “The laborer is worthy of his meat” at least, and he ought to have it for his interest, if nothing more. How many times have I had to lie down like a dumb animal in the field, and hear “the pelting of the pitiless storm,” cruel enough in warm weather, but how much more so in the heart of winter. Could I have had the benefit of a little fire, it would have been deemed a luxury. But, when snow or rain would fall so heavy that it was impossible to keep a spark of fire alive, to have to weather out a long, wet, cold, tedious night in the depth of winter, with scarcely clothes enough to keep one from freezing instantly, how discouraging it must be, I leave to my reader to judge.

It is fatiguing, almost beyond belief, to those that never experienced it, to be obliged to march twenty-four or forty-eight hours (as very many times I have had to) and often more, night and day without rest or sleep, wishing and hoping that some wood or village I could see ahead might prove a short resting place. when, alas, I came to it, almost tired off my legs, it proved no resting place for me. How often have I envied the very swine their happiness, when I have heard them quarreling in their warm dry sties, when I was wet to the skin and wished in vain for that indulgence. And even in dry warm weather, I have been so beat out with long and tedious marching that I have fallen asleep and not been sensible of it till I have jostled against someone in the same situation; and when permitted to stop and have the superlative happiness to roll myself in my blanket and drop down on the ground in the bushes, briars, thorns, or thistles, and get an hour or two’s sleep, Oh how exhilarating... Many murmurs now at the apparent good fortune of the poor soldiers. Many I have myself seen, vile enough to say that they never deserved such favor from the country. The only wish I would bestow upon such hardhearted wretches is that they might be compelled to go through just such sufferings and privations as that army did, and then if they did not sing a different tune, I should miss my guess. But I really hope these people will not go beside themselves. Those men whom they wish to die on a dunghill, men, who, if they had not ventured their lives in battle and faced poverty, disease, and death for their country to gain and maintain that Independence and Liberty, in the sunny beams of which, they, like reptiles, are basking, would, many or the most of them, be this minute in as much need of help and succor as ever the most indigent soldier was before he experienced his country’s beneficence.

The soldiers consider it cruel to be thus vilified, and it is cruel as the grave to any man, when he knows his own rectitude of conduct, to have his hard services not only debased and underrated, but scandalized and vilified. But the Revolutionary soldiers are not the only people that endure obloquy; others, as meritorious and perhaps more deserving than they, are forced to submit to ungenerous treatment.

Class conflict inside the American Revolution came dramatically alive with mutinies in George Washington's army. In 1781, after enduring five years of war—casualties in the Revolution exceeded, in proportion to population, American casualties in World War II—more than a thousand soldiers in the Pennsylvania line at Morristown, New Jersey, mutinied. They had seen their officers paid handsomely, fed and clothed well, while the privates and sergeants were fed slop, marched in rags without shoes, paid in virtually worthless Continental currency, or not paid at all for months. They were abused, beaten, and whipped by their officers for the smallest breach of discipline. For many,
their deepest grievance was that they wanted out of the war, claiming their terms of enlistment had expired and that they were being kept in the army by force. They knew that in the spring of 1780, eleven deserters of the Connecticut line in Morristown were sentenced to death but at the last minute all but one had received a reprieve. (The one who did not was hanged for forging discharge papers for a hundred men.) General Washington, facing nearly two thousand mutineers, a substantial part of his army, assembled at Princeton, New Jersey, decided to make concessions. Many of the rebels were allowed to leave the army, and Washington asked state governors for money to deal with the grievances of the soldiers. The Pennsylvania line quieted down. But when another mutiny broke out in the New Jersey line, involving only a few hundred, Washington ordered harsh measures. He saw the possibility of “this dangerous spirit” spreading. Two of the most atrocious offenders were court-martialed on the spot, sentenced to be shot, and their fellow mutineers, some of them weeping as they did so, carried out the executions. In his novel *The Proud and the Free*, Howard Fast tells the story of the mutinies, drawing from the classic historical account by Carl Van Doren, *Mutiny in January*. Fast dramatizes the class conflict inside the Revolutionary Army, as one of his characters, the mutinous soldier Jack Maloney, recalls the words of Thomas Paine and the promise of freedom and says that he is willing to die for that freedom, but “not for that craven Congress in Philadelphia, not for the fine Pennsylvania ladies in their silks and satins, not for the property of every dirty lord and fat patron in New Jersey.” Here is the narrative of this bloody event by Samuel Dewees, a soldier on the Pennsylvania line.

Samuel Dewees Recounts the Suppression of Insubordination in the Continental Army after the Mutinies of 1781 (1844)

Whilst we lay at Lebanon, a circumstance transpired worthy of notice, and which I here record as a prelude to the horribly great tragic event, of which the individual now bearing a part was one of the number that was made to suffer the awful penalty annexed to their crimes, if crimes they may be said to have committed. A sergeant who was known by the appellation of Macaroney Jack, a very intelligent, active, neat and clever fellow, had committed some trivial offense. He had his wife with him in camp who always kept him very clean and neat in his appearance. She was washerwoman to a number of soldiers, myself among the number. She was a very well behaved and good conditioned woman.

The officers, for the purpose of making an impression upon him and to better his conduct, ordered him to be brought from the guard house; which done, he was tied up and the drummers ordered to give him a certain number of lashes upon his bare back. The intention of the officers was not to chastise him.

When he was tied up he looked around and addressed the soldiers, exclaiming at the same time, “Dear brother soldiers, won’t you help me?” This in the eyes of the officers savored of mutiny and they called out, “Take him down, take him down!” The order was instantly obeyed and he was taken back to the guardhouse again and handcuffed. At this time there were two deserters confined with him.

On the next or second day after this we were ordered on to York, Pennsylvania, where upon our arrival we encamped upon the common below the town. Upon our arrival, our three prisoners were confined in York jail. In a few days after we arrived at York, a soldier of the name of Jack Smith, and another soldier whose name I do not now remember, were engaged in playing long bullets. Whilst thus engaged, some of the officers were walking along the road where they were throwing the bullets. The bullets passing near to the officers, they used very harsh language to Smith and his comrade, who immediately retorted by using the same kind of indecorous language. A file of men was immediately dispatched with orders to take Smith and his comrade under guard and march them off to York jail.

In three or four days after these arrests were made, a sergeant of the name of Lilly, who was also a very fine fellow and an excellent scholar, so much so, that much of the regimental writing fell to his lot to do, and for which he received a remuneration in some way; this sergeant, having become intoxicated, had quarreled with one or more of his messmates, and upon some of the officers coming around to enquire what the matter was, found him out of his tent. The officers scolded him and bade him to go into his quarters. Lilly, having been much in favor and knowing his own abilities and the services rendered, was (although intoxicated) very much wounded, and could not bear to be thus harshly dealt with, and used language of an unbecoming kind to his superior officers. The officers immediately ordered him to be taken to York jail.

On the next day in the morning we beat up the troop. After roll call we were ordered to beat up the troop again. The whole line was again formed, and I think the orders were for every soldier to appear in line with his knapsack on his back. I suppose that at this time there were parts of three regiments, in all 800 or 1000 men laying at York, the whole of which was commanded by Colonel Butler. The whole body (sentinels, invalids, etc., excepted) when formed were marched to the distance of about half a mile from the camp, and there made to stand under arms. Twenty men were then ordered out of the line and formed into marching order and all the musicians placed at their head. After remaining a short time in a marching posture, the order of forward was given. We were then marched direct to the jail door. The prisoners six in number were then brought out and their sentence (which was death) was read to them.
At this time it was thought that none in the Line save the officers knew for what the provost guard was detached. But it appeared afterwards that previous to the firing which was the means of launching four out of the six into eternity, the matter of rescuing them was whispered among the soldiers; but they did not concert measures in time to prevent the awful catastrophe, which they mediated by an act of insubordination upon their part.

After the sentence of death was read to the condemned soldiers at the jail door, we then marched them out and down below town, playing the "dead march" in front of them. We continued our march full half a mile and halted on a piece of ground (common) adjoining a field of rye, which was then in blossom. This was sometime in the early part of June 1781. After a halt was made, the prisoners were ordered to kneel down with their backs to the rye-field fence. Their eyes were then bandaged or covered over with silk handkerchiefs. The officer in command then divided his force of twenty men into two platoons. The whole was then ordered to load their pieces. This done, ten were ordered to advance, and at the signal given by the officer (which was the wave of his pocket handkerchief) the first platoon of ten fired at one of the six. Macaroney Jack was the first shot at and was instantly killed. The first platoon was then ordered to retire and reload, and the second platoon of ten ordered to advance. When the signal was again given, Smith shared the same fate, but with an awfulness that would have made even devils to have shrunk back and stood appalled. His head was literally blown in fragments off his body. The second platoon then ordered to retire and reload, whilst the first was ordered to advance and at the same signal fired at the third man. The second platoon then advanced and fired to order, at Sergeant Lilly, whose brave and noble soul was instantly on the wing to the presence of that Supreme Judge who has pledged himself he will do that which is right. The arms of each had been tied above their elbows with the cords passing behind their backs. Being tied thus enabled them to have the use of their hands. I ventured near and noticed that Macaroney Jack had his hands clasped together in front of his breast, and had both of his thumbs shot off. The distance that the platoons stood from them at the time they fired could not have been more than ten feet. So near did they stand that the handkerchiefs covering the eyes of some of them that were shot were set on fire. The fence and even the heads of rye for some distance within the field were covered over with blood and brains. After four were shot, we musicians with a portion of the twenty men were ordered to march and were then conducted up to the main line of the army. After our arrival there, the whole Line was thrown into marching order and led to this horrid scene of bloody death. When the troops advanced near to the spot they displayed off into double file and were then marched very near to the dead bodies, as also to those still on their knees waiting the awful death that they had every reason to believe still awaited them. The order was for every man to look upon the bodies as he passed; and in order that the soldiers in the Line might behold them more distinctly in passing, they were ordered to countermarch after they had passed and then marched as close to them upon their return.

The two deserters that were still in a kneeling posture were reprimed, the bandages taken from their eyes, then untied, and restored to their respective companies.

A number of men were ordered out to dig a large grave. The bodies of the four dead soldiers were then wrapped up in their blankets and buried together therein. This last sad duty performed, the soldiers were all marched back to their quarters in camp.

My readers may imagine to what a pitch this sad scene was heightened in sorrow when I state that, on our way from the jail to the place of execution, those sentenced were crying, pleading, and praying aloud, women weeping and sobbing over the unhappy fate of the doomed to death, and the wife of Macaroney Jack screaming and almost distracted. On the way she attempted to run into the line, or provost guard, to where her husband was walking, but was hindered by an officer who felled her to the ground with his sword, he having struck her with the side of it.

The execution of these men by Colonel Butler and his officers was undoubtedly brought about by a love of liberty, the good of country, and the necessity of keeping proper subordination in the army, in order to ensure that good ultimately. Mutiny had shewn itself at many of the military posts within the United States. The conduct of the Pennsylvania and Jersey lines in the revolt at Morristown in Jersey had occurred but the year before, and fresh in the memory of all having knowledge of the operations of the army. Still, the destruction of these men seemed like a wanton destruction of human life. The soldiers at York were afraid to say or to do anything, for so trivial appeared the offenses of these men that were shot that they knew not what in the future was to be made to constitute a crime. I recollect for myself that for some considerable time after this, if I found myself meeting an officer when out of camp, I would avoid coming in contact with him if I possibly could do so by slipping a short distance to one side, not that I was afraid of an officer more than of a private, whilst I done my duty, but fearing lest they might construe my conduct in some way or other into an offense.

All disposition of mutiny was entirely put down by these steps of cruelty. There were no doubt many times during the Revolution that such executions were called for and highly necessary, and perhaps there was an evidence as well as a conviction before the minds of the officers composing the court martial in their case that we know not of, and that demanded the punishment of death. But, to state it in a word, it was a mournful day among the soldiers and hard and stony indeed
were the hearts that were not deeply affected in witnessing this distressing execution of their fellow-soldiers.

... ...

The victory over England did not bring domestic peace. The class conflict that had preceded the Revolution, and that continued during the war in the form of mutinies against Washington's army, continued after the war. In a number of the states, small farmers, many of them veterans of the war, felt oppressed by the taxes levied on them by the state governments. In Massachusetts, farmers, seeing land and livestock being taken away for nonpayment of taxes, organized by the thousands. They surrounded courthouses and would not let the selling off of their property continue. This was an armed revolt, taking its name from one of the leaders, Captain Daniel Shays, a veteran of the Revolutionary War. The rebellion was finally suppressed, but a number of rebels had been killed, and a few of the leaders hanged. This event caused deep worry among the Founding Fathers, who, soon after, meeting in Philadelphia to draw up a new constitution, saw the need for a central government strong enough to put down such uprisings. Massachusetts farmer Plough Jogger, speaking about his grievances to one of the illegal conventions where opposition to the legislature was organized, said, "I've labored hard all my days and fared hard. I have been greatly abused, have been obliged to do more than my part in the war; been loaded with class rates, town rates, province rates, Continental rates, and all rates ... been pulled and hauled by sheriffs, constables and collectors, and had my cattle sold for less than they were worth. I have been obliged to pay and nobody will pay me. I have lost a great deal from this man and that man and t'other man, and the great men are going to get all we have, and I think it is time for us to rise and put a stop to it, and have no more courts, nor sheriffs, nor collectors, nor lawyers, and I know that we are the biggest party, let them say what they will... We've come to relieve the distresses of the people. There will be no court until they have redress of their grievances."

After Shays' Rebellion, Henry Knox, the Revolutionary War artillery commander who became the first U.S. secretary of war, wrote to his former commander, George Washington, to warn him about the goals of the rebels: "[T]hey feel at once their own poverty compared with the opulent, and their own force, and they are determined to make use of the latter in order to remedy the former. Their creed is that that the property of the United States has been protected from the confiscations of Britain by the joint exertions of all, and therefore ought to be the common property of all." This is the full text of his letter.

Henry Knox, Letter to George Washington (October 23, 1786)

My dear sir.

I have long intended myself the pleasure of visiting you at Mount Vernon, and although, I have not given up that hope, and shall probably gratify it in the Course of next month, yet I cannot longer delay presenting myself to the remembrance of my truly respected and beloved general, whose friendship I shall ever esteem among the most valuable circumstances of my existence.

Conscious of affection, and I believing it to be reciprocal in your breast. I have had no apprehensions of my silence being misconstrued. I know the perplexity occasioned by your numerous correspondents and was unwilling to add to it. Besides which, I have lately been once far eastward of Boston, on private business and was no sooner returned here, than the commotions in Massachusetts hurried me back to Boston on a public account.

Our political machine constituted of thirteen independent sovereignties, have been perpetually operating against each other, and against the federal head, ever since the peace—The powers of Congress are utterly inadequate to preserve the balance between the respective States, and oblige them to do those things which are essential for their own welfare, and for the general good. The human mind in the local legislatures seem to be exerted, to prevent the federal constitution from having any beneficial effects. The machine works inversely to the public good in all its parts. Not only is State, against State, and all against the federal head, but the States within themselves possess the name only without having the essential concomitant of government, the power of preserving the peace; the protection of the liberty and property of the citizens.

On the very first impression of Faction and licentiousness the fine theoretic government of Massachusetts has given away and its laws arrested and trampled under foot. Men at a distance, who have admired our systems of government, unfounded in nature, are apt to accuse the rulers, and say that taxes have been assessed too high and collected too rigidly. This is a deception equal to any that has been hitherto entertained. It is indeed a fact, that high taxes are the ostensible cause of the commotions, but that they are the real cause is as far removed from truth as light from darkness. The people who are the insurgents have never paid any, or but very little taxes—But they see the weakness of government; They feel at once their own poverty, compared with the opulent, and their own force, and they are determined to make use of the latter, in order to remedy the former. Their creed is "That the property of the United States has been protected from the confiscations of Britain by the joint exertions of all, and therefore ought to be the common property of
all. And he that attempts opposition to this creed is an enemy to equity and justice, and ought to be swept off the face of the earth." In a word they are determined to annihilate all debts public and private and have agrarian Laws which are easily effected by the means of unfunded paper money which shall be a tender in all cases whatever.

The numbers of these people may amount in [M]assachusetts to about one fifth part of several populous counties, and to them may be collected, people of similar sentiments, from the States of Rhode Island, Connecticut and New Hampshire so as to constitute a body of 12 or 15,000 desperate and unprincipled men—They are chiefly of the Young and active part of the community, more easily collected than perhaps Kept together afterwards—But they will probably commit overt acts of treason which will compel them to embody for their own safety—one embodied they will be constrained to submit to discipline for the same reason. Having proceeded to this length for which they are now ripe, we shall have a formidable rebellion against reason, the principles of all government, and against the very name of liberty. This dreadful situation has alarmed every man of principle and property in New England—They start as from a dream, and ask what has been the Cause of our delusion? What is to afford us security against the violence of lawless men? Our government must be braced, changed, or altered to secure our lives and property. We imagined that the mildness of our government and the virtue of the people were so correspondent, that we were not as other nations requiring brutal force to support the laws—But we find that we are men, actual men, possessing all the turbulent passions belonging to that animal and that we must have a government proper and adequate for him—The people of Massachusetts for instance, are far advanced in this doctrine, and the men of reflection, and principle, are determined to endeavor to establish a government which shall have the power to protect them in their lawful pursuits, and which will be efficient in all cases of internal commotions or foreign invasions—They mean that liberty shall form the basis, a liberty resulting from the equal and firm administration of the laws. They wish for a general government of unity as they see that the local legislatures, must naturally and necessarily tend to retard general government.

We have arrived at that point of time in which we are forced to see our national humiliation, and that a progression in this line, cannot be productive of happiness either private or public—something is wanting and something must be done or we shall be involved in all the horror of faction and civil war without a prospect of its termination—Every tried friend to the liberties of his country is bound to reflect, and step forward to prevent the dreadful consequences which will result from a government of events—Unless this is done we shall be liable to be ruled by an Arbitrary and Capricious armed tyranny, whose word and will must be Law.

The [I]ndians on the frontiers are giving indiscusible evidence of their hostile dispositions. Congress anxiously desiring of averting the evils on the frontiers, have unanimously agreed to augment the troops now in service to a legionary Corps of 2,040 noncommissioned officers and privates—The additional are to be raised as follows

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<th>State</th>
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<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>180</td>
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<td>R[hode] Island</td>
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[Total] 1,340

This measure is important, and will tend to strengthening the principle of government as well as to defend the frontiers—I mention the idea of strengthening government confidentially but the State of Massachusetts requires the greatest assistance, and Congress are fully impressed with the importance [of] supporting her with great exertions.

... 

In 1787 and 1788, writing under the pseudonym "Publius," Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay wrote a series of articles in support of the ratification of the new Constitution in New York. In Federalist No. 10, penned by Madison, we see how his fear of majority "faction" fueled the desire for a strong central government. As the historian Charles Beard notes in his Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States, Madison's "wealth consisted principally of plantations and slaves." Using populist language in "appealing to the voters to ratify the Constitution," the authors of the Federalist Papers were "by the force of circumstances, compelled to convince large economic groups that safety and strength [would] lie in the adoption of the new system."

"Publius" (James Madison), Federalist No. 10 (November 23, 1787)

To the People of the State of New York:

AMONG the numerous advantages promised by a well constructed Union, none
deserves to be more accurately developed than its tendency to break and control the violence of faction. The friend of popular governments never finds himself so much alarmed for their character and fate, as when he contemplates their propensity to this dangerous vice. He will not fail, therefore, to set a due value on any plan which, without violating the principles to which he is attached, provides a proper cure for it. The instability, injustice, and confusion introduced into the public councils, have, in truth, been the mortal diseases under which popular governments have everywhere perished; as they continue to be the favorite and fruitful topics from which the adversaries to liberty derive their most specious declamations. The valuable improvements made by the American constitutions on the popular models, both ancient and modern, cannot certainly be too much admired; but it would be an unwarrantable partiality, to contend that they have as effectually obviated the danger on this side, as was wished and expected. Complaints are everywhere heard from our most considerate and virtuous citizens, equally the friends of public and private faith, and of public and personal liberty, that our governments are too unstable, that the public good is disregarded in the conflicts of rival parties, and that measures are too often decided, not according to the rules of justice and the rights of the minority, but by the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority. However anxiously we may wish that these complaints had no foundation, the evidence, of known facts will not permit us to deny that they are in some degree true. It will be found, indeed, on a candid review of our situation, that some of the distresses under which we labor have been erroneously charged on the operation of our governments; but it will be found, at the same time, that other causes will not alone account for many of our heaviest misfortunes; and, particularly, for that prevailing and increasing distrust of public engagements, and alarm for private rights, which are echoed from one end of the continent to the other. These must be chiefly, if not wholly, effects of the unsteadiness and injustice with which a factious spirit has tainted our public administrations.

By a faction, I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.

There are two methods of curing the mischief of faction: the one, by removing its causes; the other, by controlling its effects.

There are again two methods of removing the causes of faction: the one, by destroying the liberty which is essential to its existence; the other, by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests.

It could never be more truly said than of the first remedy, that it was worse than the disease. Liberty is to faction what air is to fire, an aliment without which it instantly expires. But it could not be less folly to abolish liberty, which is essential to political life, because it nourishes faction, than it would be to wish the annihilation of air, which is essential to animal life, because it imparts to fire its destructive agency.

The second expedient is as impracticable as the first would be unwise. As long as the reason of man continues [to be] fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed. As long as the connection subsists between his reason and his self-love, his opinions and his passions will have a reciprocal influence on each other; and the former will be objects to which the latter will attach themselves. The diversity in the faculties of men, from which the rights of property originate, is not less an insuperable obstacle to a uniformity of interests. The protection of these faculties is the first object of government. From the protection of different and unequal faculties of acquiring property, the possession of different degrees and kinds of property immediately results; and from the influence of these on the sentiments and views of the respective proprietors, ensues a division of the society into different interests and parties.

The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man; and we see them everywhere brought into different degrees of activity, according to the different circumstances of civil society. A zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points, as well of speculation as of practice; an attachment to different leaders ambitiously contending for pre-eminence and power; or to persons of other descriptions whose fortunes have been interesting to the human passions, have, in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good. So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities, that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts. But the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society. Those who are creditors, and those who are debtors, fall under a like discrimination. A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a moneyed interest, with many lesser interests, grow up of necessity in civilized nations, and divide them into different classes, actuated by different sentiments and views. The regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principal task of modern legislation, and involves the spirit of party and faction in the necessary and ordinary operations of the government.

No man is allowed to be a judge in his own cause, because his interest would certainly bias his judgment, and, not improbably, corrupt his integrity. With equal, nay with greater reason, a body of men are unfit to be both judges and par-
ties at the same time; yet what are many of the most important acts of legislation, but so many judicial determinations, not indeed concerning the rights of single persons, but concerning the rights of large bodies of citizens? And what are the different classes of legislators but advocates and parties to the causes which they determine? Is a law proposed concerning private debts? It is a question to which the creditors are parties on one side and the debtors on the other. Justice ought to hold the balance between them. Yet the parties are, and must be, themselves the judges; and the most numerous party, or, in other words, the most powerful faction must be expected to prevail. Shall domestic manufactures be encouraged, and in what degree, by restrictions on foreign manufactures? are questions which would be differently decided by the landed and the manufacturing classes, and probably by neither with a sole regard to justice and the public good. The apportionment of taxes on the various descriptions of property is an act which seems to require the most exact impartiality; yet there is, perhaps, no legislative act in which greater opportunity and temptation are given to a predominant party to trample on the rules of justice. Every shilling with which they overburden the inferior number, is a shilling saved to their own pockets.

It is in vain to say that enlightened statesmen will be able to adjust these clashing interests, and render them all subservient to the public good. Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm. Nor, in many cases, can such an adjustment be made at all without taking into view indirect and remote considerations, which will rarely prevail over the immediate interest which one party may find in disregarding the rights of another or the good of the whole.

The inference to which we are brought is, that the CAUSES of faction cannot be removed, and that relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its EFFECTS.

If a faction consists of less than a majority, relief is supplied by the republican principle, which enables the majority to defeat its sinister views by regular vote. It may clog the administration, it may convulse the society; but it will be unable to execute and mask its violence under the forms of the Constitution. When a majority is included in a faction, the form of popular government, on the other hand, enables it to sacrifice to its ruling passion or interest both the public good and the rights of other citizens. To secure the public good and private rights against the danger of such a faction, and at the same time to preserve the spirit and the form of popular government, is then the great object to which our inquiries are directed. Let me add that it is the great desideratum by which this form of government can be rescued from the opprobrium under which it has so long labored, and be recommended to the esteem and adoption of mankind.

By what means is this object attainable? Evidently by one of two only. Either the existence of the same passion or interest in a majority at the same time must be prevented, or the majority, having such coexistent passion or interest, must be rendered, by their number and local situation, unable to concert and carry into effect schemes of oppression. If the impulse and the opportunity be suffered to coincide, we well know that neither moral nor religious motives can be relied on as an adequate control. They are not found to be such on the injustice and violence of individuals, and lose their efficacy in proportion to the number combined together, that is, in proportion as their efficacy becomes needful.

From this view of the subject it may be concluded that a pure democracy, by which I mean a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person, can admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction. A common passion or interest will, in almost every case, be felt by a majority of the whole; a communication and concert result from the form of government itself; and there is nothing to check the inducements to sacrifice the weaker party or an obnoxious individual. Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompati- BLE with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths. Theoretic politicians, who have patronized this species of government, have erroneously supposed that by reducing mankind to a perfect equality in their political rights, they would, at the same time, be perfectly equalized and assimilated in their possessions, their opinions, and their passions.

A republic, by which I mean a government in which the scheme of representa- tion takes place, opens a different prospect, and promises the cure for which we are seeking. Let us examine the points in which it varies from pure democracy, and we shall comprehend both the nature of the cure and the efficacy which it must derive from the Union.

The two great points of difference between a democracy and a republic are: first, the delegation of the government, in the latter, to a small number of citizens elected by the rest; secondly, the greater number of citizens, and greater sphere of country, over which the latter may be extended.

The effect of the first difference is, on the one hand, to refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations. Under such a regulation, it may well happen that the public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves, convened for the purpose. On the other hand, the effect may be inverted. Men of factious tempers, of local prejudices, or of sinister designs, may, by intrigue, by corruption, or by other means, first obtain the suffrages, and then betray the interests, of the people. The
question arising is, whether small or extensive republics are more favorable to the election of proper guardians of the public weal; and it is clearly decided in favor of the latter by two obvious considerations:

In the first place, it is to be remarked that, however small the republic may be, the representatives must be raised to a certain number, in order to guard against the cabals of a few; and that, however large it may be, they must be limited to a certain number, in order to guard against the confusion of a multitude. Hence, the number of representatives in the two cases not being in proportion to that of the two constituents, and being proportionally greater in the small republic, it follows that, if the proportion of fit characters be not less in the large than in the small republic, the former will present a greater option, and consequently a greater probability of a fit choice.

In the next place, as each representative will be chosen by a greater number of citizens in the large than in the small republic, it will be more difficult for unworthy candidates to practice with success the vicious arts by which elections are too often carried; and the suffrages of the people being more free, will be more likely to centre in men who possess the most attractive merit and the most diffusive and established characters.

It must be confessed that in this, as in most other cases, there is a mean, on both sides of which inconveniences will be found to lie. By enlarging too much the number of electors, you render the representatives too little acquainted with all their local circumstances and lesser interests; as by reducing it too much, you render them unduly attached to these, and too little fit to comprehend and pursue great and national objects. The federal Constitution forms a happy combination in this respect; the great and aggregate interests being referred to the national, the local and particular to the State legislatures.

The other point of difference is, the greater number of citizens and extent of territory which may be brought within the compass of republican than of democratic government; and it is this circumstance principally which renders factional combinations less to be dreaded in the former than in the latter. The smaller the society, the fewer probably will be the distinct parties and interests composing it; the fewer the distinct parties and interests, the more frequently will a majority be found of the same party; and the smaller the number of individuals composing a majority, and the smaller the compass within which they are placed, the more easily will they concert and execute their plans of oppression. Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other. Besides, other impediments, it may be remarked that, where there is a consciousness of

unjust or dishonorable purposes, communication is always checked by distrust in proportion to the number whose concurrence is necessary.

Hence, it clearly appears, that the same advantage which a republic has over a democracy, in controlling the effects of faction, is enjoyed by a large over a small republic,—is enjoyed by the Union over the States composing it. Does the advantage consist in the substitution of representatives whose enlightened views and virtuous sentiments render them superior to local prejudices and schemes of injustice? It will not be denied that the representation of the Union will be most likely to possess these requisite endowments. Does it consist in the greater security afforded by a greater variety of parties, against the event of any one party being able to outnumber and oppress the rest? In an equal degree does the increased variety of parties comprised within the Union, increase this security. Does it, in fine, consist in the greater obstacles opposed to the concert and accomplishment of the secret wishes of an unjust and interested majority? Here, again, the extent of the Union gives it the most palpable advantage.

The influence of factional leaders may kindle a flame within their particular States, but will be unable to spread a general conflagration through the other States. A religious sect may degenerate into a political faction in a part of the Confederacy; but the variety of sects dispersed over the entire face of it must secure the national councils against any danger from that source. A rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project, will be less apt to pervade the whole body of the Union than a particular member of it; in the same proportion as such a malady is more likely to taint a particular county or district, than an entire State.

In the extent and proper structure of the Union, therefore, we behold a republican remedy for the diseases most incident to republican government. And according to the degree of pleasure and pride we feel in being republicans, ought to be our zeal in cherishing the spirit and supporting the character of Federalists.