

In the American colonies, the Stamp Act and the crisis that followed signaled a major shift in the relationship between the colonists and its ruling body in Parliament. During the period that followed this crisis, distrust of Parliament grew while a sentiment toward the King remained mostly reverent. As the colonies and England inched ever closer to war, feelings towards King George III also turned negative among many colonists. Robert Middlekauff spends much of chapters 8-13 of *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* outlining the series of events and reactions that led the American colonies and the mother country to war. These chapters make clear that the radical Whig ideology Middlekauff introduced early in the book remained a powerful driving force in the colonial mind, especially among the political and revolutionary leaders of the period. This Whig ideology was coupled with a Protestant ethical worldview that would push the colonists to revolution and form the basis of acts of resistance that led to it.

Radical Whig ideology was ingrained in colonial political spirit. Central to this ideology was the supremacy of representative government and, therefore, representation of the will of the people in government. Parliament had emerged as the representative body of government in England following the Glorious Revolution. The American colonies were never provided with representation in the Parliament, a reality which drove much of the upheaval in the revolutionary period as it was directly at odds with the Whig ideology. Middlekauff explains many colonists throughout the early 1770s believed in an “uncompromising conclusion that the violence of British encroachments upon colonial rights pointed to a plot to enslave America”.¹ As taxes levied and soldiers were sent to be quartered by Parliament, the colonists continued the forms of resistance that had led to the repeal of the Stamp Act. One particularly consequential act of resistance was the Massachusetts Circular Letter in response to the Townshend Acts, a letter that would lead to the dissolution of several colonial legislatures after each voiced support.² Either not recognizing colonial republican zeal, or actively challenging it, royal leaders in the colonies like Thomas Hutchinson stoked colonial fears of arbitrary, oppressive decisions from Parliament by asserting the sovereignty of Parliament in the colonies. In a speech in 1773, Hutchinson disseminated the official position, which is summarized as, “[colonists’ rights] were derived from the charter granted them by the Crown. From the founding on, the premise of their government was that they were subordinate to Parliament. They enjoyed some rights . . . [but] could not send representatives to Parliament,” nor could their assemblies pass laws that were in contradiction of Parliament.³ Parliamentary assaults to colonial liberty only increased leading up to the Revolution, beginning with the Tea Act of 1773. The Tea Act was the first action prior to the Intolerable Acts that “gave notice that Parliament would be what it liked in America . . . Parliament insisted on its supremacy once more”.⁴ Such an assertion could not be accepted within the Whig ideological framework -- colonists had no self-determination in a body that lacked any representative presence. The Continental Congress that met after the passage of the Intolerable Acts was a direct assertion of the Whig ideology that so many colonists espoused. A Continental Congress “proved capable of making decisions crucial to the future of the empire. It did in part at least because the values and interests its delegates represented overrode the disagreements that marked its origins”.⁵ Representative government on a national scale was beginning to emerge from these descendants of the Glorious Revolution.

Protestant ethic was another important factor behind colonial resistance and rejection of Parliamentary and royal oppression in the colonies. The key issues regarding this religious component of colonists’ fear of

¹ Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 222.

² Ibid, 175, 181-189.

³ Ibid, 225.

⁴ Ibid, 226.

⁵ Ibid, 240.

Parliament was “a sense that the Americans faced evil and corruption which would spread to their shores . . . The sources of this conviction lay deeply within the Protestant culture, especially the belief that most conflict involved questions of good and evil . . . Self-government, in this view, rested on virtue . . .”, virtue that was not possible for as long as America was controlled by a government that lacked righteousness.⁶ Colonists also participated in acts of resistance that harkened back to their Protestant, Puritan roots, such as fast days. These very protests had been employed during the Civil War in England and were “intended to arouse sensitivities to threats against liberty,” while they simultaneously “gratified Puritan Boston, where such days had a long and honorable tradition”.⁷ Indeed, the Puritan spirit would have been gratified elsewhere as the news of these demonstrations spread. Furthermore, like the 1st Continental Congress was a demonstration of representative national government beginning to take shape in the colonies, it too asserted the moral standards of a Protestant society. The Continental Association that remained after the congress encouraged adherence to Puritan virtues. These Puritan values were included in the resolves of the Association “to remind Americans that their virtue -- their commitment to the public interest -- underlay their political freedom”.⁸ Protestant ethics and values, as well as fears, had been central to the development of the American colonies and would remain so as they headed towards war.

The colonial identity that developed after the Glorious Revolution was ultimately what led Americans to their own Revolution. Radical Whig ideology dictated that the will of the people must be honored in a representative legislative body, which Parliament was not for the colonies. Protestant ethics led the colonists to see themselves engaged in a battle between good and evil that could only have one acceptable outcome; righteousness had to prevail. The intersectionality of these views set the colonists on a course to demand independence.

⁶ Middlekauff, *Glorious*, 244.

⁷ *Ibid*, 239.

⁸ *Ibid*, 255.

Works Cited:

Middlekauff, Robert. *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789*. Revised and expanded edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1982].