



WHAT WAS REVOLUTIONARY ABOUT THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION?

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“The birthday of a new world is at hand.”

That was what Thomas Paine, the fiery pamphleteer, wrote in 1776, as thirteen of Great Britain’s North American colonies rose in revolt against British rule and declared themselves a newly-independent nation.

The American Revolution was something the world had never seen—politically...economically...and diplomatically. Let’s look at all three.

First, the politics.

Revolutions themselves were not new, of course. Britain put itself through not one, but two revolutions in the 17th century. Other countries in Europe endured similar upheavals.

These rebellions shared one of two goals: replace the current monarch with another one or extort new protections and privileges from the existing regime.

In stark contrast, the Americans did not propose merely overthrowing a monarchy. They proposed ending the very *idea* of monarchy as a worthwhile form of government.

In America, the citizen—not the government or the king—would hold the keys to power. With this overturning of the old way of doing things, the rebels made the political systems of Europe look as antiquated and irrational as fully as Newton’s laws had made medieval physics look antiquated and irrational.

As it was with politics, so it was with economics.

Tearing up the old order meant more than just refusing to take political orders from kings, dukes and princes. It meant taking no *economic* orders from them, either. In a society of free and equal citizens, Americans would follow their own economic initiative. They would be as free economically as they were politically.

This small-government model meant the state was to interfere as little as possible in the citizen’s life. Americans founded the only country ever to be based on the principle of restraining the government. And that unleashed such dynamic economic growth, it took America from a fledgling state to a world power in just fifty years.

A child born in 1776 could live to see canal systems link waterways from New York to New

Orleans, see the electrical telegraph leap across unheard-of distances in communications, and the steamboat and railroad move passengers and freight at fractions of the cost imposed by horse and wagon.

The sheer novelty of the revolution's first two legs—the political and the economic—was so great that many Americans, such as Yale president Timothy Dwight, expressed a desire not merely to remake the North American continent, but the rest of the world as well. America, Dwight wrote in a popular poem of the time, was destined to “Hush the tumult of war, and give peace to the world.”

But the Founders rejected this view. Far from any desire to share America's redemptive culture, the Founders' tendency was to regard the rest of the world as a potential threat—eager to strangle the American experiment, either by the re-imposition of empire or by association with more unstable attempts at revolution, as in France.

The American position regarding foreign interventions was articulated by then-Secretary of State John Quincy Adams in 1821: “Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been . . . unfurled, there will [America's] heart, her benedictions, and her prayers be. . . . But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.”

Of course, the United States has not always lived by this attitude. America has allowed itself to be pulled into foreign adventures, of which the Founders would have disapproved. Nor has the United States always lived up to its best ideals. It has, at various times, seen unfettered commerce turn into monopoly and corruption. And we've had to deal with the terrible shame of slavery and its long aftermath.

Human beings are imperfect, and therefore any form of government they create will be, too. But the wonder of America, from its founding to this day, is not that it has stumbled; the wonder is that Americans have stumbled as infrequently as they have—and managed to make and keep America the strongest and freest country in the world.

That birthday Thomas Paine proclaimed is still very much worth celebrating. If it isn't celebrated, it will be lost. And that would be a tragedy—for America, and for the world.

I'm Allen Guelzo for Prager University.