

# New York Review of Books

## When America Was Transformed

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[Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815](#)

by Gordon S. Wood

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Far too many congressmen were ignorant and unlearned, complained Benjamin Latrobe, President Jefferson's surveyor of public buildings, in 1806. Philadelphia and its suburbs, Latrobe said, had not sent a single man of letters to Congress. Well, it was true that one representative was a lawyer—though he was of “no eminence”—and another was a bank clerk. But others were “plain farmers.” And making matters worse, one county had even sent a blacksmith to Washington—and another a butcher.

As Gordon Wood observes in his magisterial new book, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815*, that same butcher went on to use his congressional franking privileges to mail his linen home for laundering. At least it was not a totally egregious abuse, his detractors admitted, since he seldom changed his shirt. President Jefferson once invited the butcher-turned-congressman to dine at the White House. When the guests seated around Jefferson's elegant table were served a scrawny-looking leg of mutton, he forgot his new position and blurted out that he would never have sold such a sorry specimen in his stall.

Latrobe recognized that he was witnessing the twilight of the “ideal rank” of gentlemen who had led the Revolution, drafted the Constitution, and created a great republic. He granted that there were “solid and general advantages” to the new egalitarian society, but he still had to swallow hard. “To a cultivated mind, to a man of letters, to a lover of the arts, it presents,” he sighed, “a very unpleasant picture.”

And yet this was the democratic society that America's gentlemen- founders—Washington, Madison, Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton, Patrick Henry, George Mason, and John Jay among them—bequeathed to the next generation. Today we may still be awed by their brilliance, their political ingenuity, the sheer magnitude of their achievement. Well-to-do, privileged, well-educated in Enlightenment thought, they were the social and intellectual leaders of their colonies. But they were also civic-minded men who accepted the political burdens and responsibilities that came with their elevated social status, sacrificing private interests and personal happiness for the Revolution and the cause of independence and freedom.

Within a few decades, however, that kind of visionary and courageous patrician political elite would fade in importance, displaced by butchers and tradesmen wearing the plain shirts, leather aprons, and buckskin breeches of ordinary men. Though America would never again have a generation of leaders of the intellectual caliber of the Founders, we gained something more valuable, a relatively egalitarian culture and a democratic society.<sup>1</sup>

In 1776, Thomas Jefferson viewed with enthusiasm the displacement of the old gentry by new men who were, as the Virginia businessman Roger Atkinson wrote, “not so well dressed, nor so politely educated, nor so highly born.” They were “the People's men (and the people in general are right). They are plain and of consequence less distinguished, . . . less intriguing, more sincere.” Jefferson, Wood writes, believed that the common people had a stronger moral sense than educated gentlemen. If you pose “a moral case to a ploughman and a professor,” he wrote, the ploughman, uncorrupted by “artificial rules,” will decide it as

well. While the elitist Federalist Party of Washington and Hamilton worked to tie the young nation's leading commercial interests to the government in order to create a powerful nation-state, Jefferson and Madison's Republican Party championed the enterprising "middling" people who lived by manual labor.

But the year before he died, Jefferson felt lost in a nation that seemed overrun by business, banking, religious revivalism, "monkish ignorance," and anti-intellectualism. "All, all dead," he said in 1825, as he looked back on his old friends, distressed to find himself alone amid a new generation "whom we know not, and who know not us." The Founders' revolutionary words about equality, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, along with their bold actions, had unleashed a democratic tide—one so strong that within a few decades many of them found themselves disillusioned strangers living in an egalitarian, commercial society, a society they had inspired but not anticipated.

A new generation of Americans was emerging. What kind of politics, economy, culture, and civil society did they create? How far did they stray from the vision the Founders had bequeathed to them? These are some of the questions that Wood explores in his wide-ranging and engaging book, the latest volume in the impressive Oxford History of the United States. Wood focuses on the transformative period between Washington's presidency and the end of the War of 1812. His exuberant panorama of a dynamic nation in the midst of dramatic change is informed by his immense scholarship and deep insights not only into the meaning of the American Revolution but also into American character, values, myths, leadership, and institutions. *Empire of Liberty* builds on the themes of his previous work: *The Creation of the American Republic*, winner of the 1970 Bancroft Prize, which explored the ideas that fostered the Revolution and the making of the Constitution; the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, his groundbreaking 1991 study of the triumph of a young rambunctious democracy over the remnants of a traditional monarchical society and, most poignantly, over the Founders' idealistic dreams of a classical republic; and his incisive portraits of the Founders in *Revolutionary Characters* (2006).<sup>2</sup>

Rip Van Winkle, the amiable, indolent farmer of Washington Irving's popular 1819 tale, fell asleep before the Revolution and dozed for twenty years. When he awoke he was bewildered to find himself in a society that was all but unrecognizable. Not only had his quiet village become larger and more populous, but even more disconcerting to our hero, who had an aversion to all kinds of profitable labor, everyone appeared to be working. "There was a busy, bustling disputatious tone about it, instead of the accustomed phlegm and drowsy tranquility." Nor could he understand the new language, a "babylonish jargon" that people were speaking—a dialect full of words like "rights of citizens—elections—members of Congress—liberty."

By the second decade of the nineteenth century, the United States had become a giant continental republic, with eighteen states, five territories, and a population of nearly ten million people, many of whom were migrating westward. Americans—85 percent of whom had been born after the Revolution—were breaking social and geographical barriers, becoming more enterprising than they had been in 1789.

They were also more self-confident. Far from seeing themselves on the periphery of history and culture, Wood writes, Americans came to view themselves as cast into the center. Instead of looking eastward to the great European metropolises for culture and inspiration, they looked westward, across their own expansive continent. So exhilarating were the memories of their world-historic Revolution that Americans transformed their old feelings of cultural inferiority into ones of superiority. "We see with other eyes," boasted Thomas Paine. "We hear with other ears; and think with other thoughts. . . ." They viewed their geographic isolation as a key advantage, for it fostered creativity and a self-reliant spirit. "Remote from all other aid, we are obliged to invent and execute," wrote Jefferson in 1787, "to find means within ourselves and not to lean on others."

Major industrialization and urbanization had not yet taken place—indeed there were only five cities in the United States with populations over 25,000. But Wood observes that Americans had the heady sense that they were living in a forward-moving and dynamic epoch. And since the French Revolution strangled itself in the violence that led to Napoleon's self-coronation as emperor, the United States could claim to offer the only successful example of republicanism and democracy. America was becoming, in Jefferson's words, an

“empire of liberty” in which all facets of society—from education and science to religion and banking—were undergoing exciting change.

Education was becoming democratized. Intellectuals everywhere drew up liberal plans for the widespread diffusion of knowledge, for they knew that the survival of their republic depended on literate, informed, and active citizens. They were less interested in releasing the talents of individuals than in converting men, as Benjamin Rush wrote, “into republican machines.” Some northern states supported public school systems, and twenty-four colleges were added to the nine that existed before the Revolution. Even though schooling in most states continued to be largely a private matter, the republican idea of public school systems persisted and would be realized later in the century.

Science came to be viewed not as the leisurely cultivation of knowledge by enlightened and inventive gentlemen-scientists, but as the utilitarian search for efficient and profitable ways to solve practical problems—from making cheese and removing seeds from cotton to developing steam engines and clocks. Popular forces were altering the religious landscape. Before the Revolution, most Americans were Anglicans and Congregationalists, but by the early nineteenth century, the majority were Baptists and Methodists. Itinerant preachers spread evangelical Protestantism across the nation.

Even the English language was being democratized. As Noah Webster argued, the English aristocracy used language not just to communicate but also to divide and exclude. The English they spoke effectively separated them from the ordinary, plain-speaking people in the rest of the country. But class distinctions would not be allowed to corrupt the American language. Americans had “the most *pure English* now known in the world,” he declared, and they could travel from Maine to Georgia and find themselves able to speak the same language to all.

The printed forms of communication—almanacs, novels, magazines like *Niles' Weekly Register*, and especially newspapers—helped spread knowledge and information across American society. The press in the United States, writes Wood, became “the most important instrument of democracy in the modern world.” Newspapers fostered the participation of more and more citizens in the nation’s political and civic life. America had an unprecedented number of voluntary associations. There were societies for the promotion of the manumission of slaves and the relief of the poor, missionary and temperance societies, Bible, mechanical, agricultural, and peace societies as well as societies for the suppression of vice and immorality.

Most important, the democratic tide was transforming the worlds of business and politics. Banking, for example, was becoming less elitist. Hamilton’s Bank of the United States had been a bold and novel innovation in 1791, but it provided credit only to established merchants. During Jefferson’s presidency, farmers and entrepreneurs successfully put pressure on their states to set up scores of banks that would supply the credit they needed. By the end of the second decade of the nineteenth century, as one observer noted, it seemed that wherever there was a church, a tavern, and a blacksmith, one could also find a bank. “Hamilton’s insensitivity to the entrepreneurial needs of these ordinary farmers and small businessmen,” Wood acutely comments, “suggests how little he and other Federalists appreciated the real sources of the capitalist future of America.”

The character of political life was changing as well. Founders like James Madison had hoped that ordinary people would have the “virtue and intelligence to select men of virtue and wisdom” as their representatives; if not, he warned, no government could “render us secure.” Madison expected landed, well-educated, and wise politicians—men like the Founders themselves—to govern in a disinterested manner and in the name of the public good, transcending “local prejudices” and selfish interests. But self-interested “middling” men who toiled for a living did not just want to consent to be governed by their betters; they wanted to do the governing themselves.

One person who was fed up with all the patrician talk about virtue, the “public good,” and the enlightened paternalism of the leisured “natural aristocracy” was William Findley, a self-taught backwoods

Pennsylvania politician. He recognized that the politicians who claimed to be disinterested were, under the guise of the “public good,” promoting their own class interests. And Findley did not entirely disapprove, for self-made men like him also had their own interests to promote. Arguing that it was legitimate for candidates to campaign on behalf of the interests of their constituents, Findley was setting forth, as Wood writes, a rationale for competitive, democratic, and interest-laden politics.

Men on the make like Findley admired a new kind of national hero: the “self-made man.” He was their “character ideal,” as the historian Joyce Appleby proposed in her pioneering book, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (2000), which focused on the post-revolutionary generation. The new middling man was unashamed of his obscure origins. He believed in hard work and ingenuity, Appleby wrote, “developed his inner resources, acted independently, lived virtuously, and bent his behavior to his personal goals.”

Wood describes well these ambitious people who valued work and not leisure. They aspired to be property owners, but property for them was not the static land of the gentry or the yeoman farmer. For these risk-takers, property was capital and capital was the fuel for dynamic, speculative investment. In his best-selling 1809 biography, Parson Mason Weems portrayed George Washington as a member of the hard-working middling class, turning the aristocratic slave owner into a man who worked as diligently for a living as an ordinary mechanic. Wood explains that in his depiction of Washington as an industrious businessman, Weems was validating the rising generation of middling entrepreneurs by disproving the lie that labor was a “low-lived thing, fit for none but poor people and slaves!”

In the early nineteenth century, few Americans—at least in the North—would worry much about obsessive acquisitiveness. Instead, they recognized that an individual’s quest for wealth and prosperity would enhance the prosperity of the nation. These Americans believed in virtue—but virtue, Wood contends, no longer referred to the selflessness of self-sacrificing, civic-minded citizens. Rather it meant people’s ability to be sociable and sympathetic to one another, and to get along with others for the sake of the peace and prosperity of the community. This “domestication” of classical virtue—the spread not only of politeness and civility but also of the trust that would make credit and commercial exchanges possible—is what would henceforth hold American society together. Such recasting of virtue and interest, Wood writes in a typically illuminating discussion, illustrates the evolving moral, social, and even utopian significance of the American Revolution. Indeed, well before the Jacksonian era, a new democratic vision of a prosperous, free society belonging to average working people would overcome the Founders’ vision of a classical republic.

Men of every occupation might now—or so it was thought—be referred to as gentlemen, as the celebration of work and equality replaced respect for leisure and hierarchy. “All are people,” commented the Federalist-turned-Republican Charles Ingersoll in 1810, adding that if it were not for the slaves in the South, there would be only one rank. In reality, of course, there were, as Wood recognizes, many economic and social cleavages—those that separated male and female, white and black, free and enslaved, rich and poor, educated and barely literate. Still, he argues that although the ideal of equality may have been only a popular myth, it was based on a “substantial reality—but a psychological more than an economic reality.” In the new democratic society, Wood writes, “heroic individuals, like the Founders, no longer mattered as much as they had in the past. What counted was the mass of ordinary people.” Encouraged by that myth of equality, ordinary men vigorously challenged the established order, proving, through their optimism, hard work, and success, their moral superiority over leisured aristocrats.

The old patrician order proved unable to resist the challenges of the “middling” class. Indeed, many of the members of the revolutionary generation’s political elite retired from public office—not to leisurely lives on their country estates but rather to making much-needed money. Few were wealthy enough to be able to put aside their private affairs for long. As the expenses of their huge estates became insuperable—“Where will you find an American landholder free from embarrassments?” Benjamin Rush asked John Adams—and as their speculative investments failed, those gentlemen, Wood comments, “had a great deal of trouble maintaining the desired classical independence and freedom from business and the marketplace.” Alexander Hamilton had to leave the Treasury Department early in 1795 to return to Wall Street and earn money for his family. And several high-ranking Federalists like Henry Knox, James Wilson, and Robert

Morris ended their careers in bankruptcy and, in some cases, debtors' prison. In the South, the patrician elite fared better than in the North, at least for a while. Thanks to the labor of their slaves, the gentlemen-planters of the South could enjoy their leisure and devote themselves to public service, though even some of them—including Jefferson and Monroe—would eventually face financial ruin. It was simply a fact of American life, Wood writes, that many members of the gentry could not live up to their pretensions of aristocratic status.

Madison's hopes for government by the select few did not survive the democratic age. But neither did Hamilton's grandiose vision of the United States as a powerful, European-style fiscal-military state. In fact, Wood argues that implicit in President Madison's controversial handling of the War of 1812 was his rejection of that Hamiltonian vision. Though historians have criticized his wartime leadership as inept, Wood rightly praises his determination to protect republican values. Madison, he writes,

knowingly accepted the administrative confusion and inefficiencies, the military failures, and the opposition of both the Federalists and even some members of his own party, calm in the conviction that in a republic strong executive leadership could only endanger the principles for which the war was fought.

Indeed, Madison managed to withstand a powerful foreign force and win a "second war for independence" from Great Britain while protecting civil liberties at home and refusing to build up state power in the monarchical manner that Hamilton so admired.

Still, all was not lost for the Hamiltonian Federalists. While their elitist platform lacked popular appeal and their political influence waned in Congress and disappeared in the executive branch, they would continue to wield power in the third branch of government: the judiciary. Disillusioned with legislative democracy and fearful of the consequences of Jefferson's presidency, they turned to the law and to judges, Wood writes, to provide restraints on popular power. Since Federalists were about to "experience a heavy gale of adverse wind," said Gouverneur Morris on the eve of Jefferson's inauguration, "can they be blamed for casting many anchors to hold their ship through the storm?"

Wood incisively points out that whereas Jefferson considered the Constitution a political document and believed that judges had no monopoly in interpreting it, Chief Justice John Marshall treated the Constitution as a legal document, which gave judges the authority to decipher its meaning. As Virginia jurist St. George Tucker said, because the men of greatest talents, education, and virtue were unable to compete in the new scrambling world of popular electoral politics, they necessarily had to look to the law for security. Thanks to the brilliant strategizing of Marshall, who described himself as "gloomy" about the democratic future under Jefferson, the Supreme Court took upon itself the power, nowhere granted to it in the Constitution, to declare laws enacted by popularly elected legislatures unconstitutional and invalid. Through this power of "judicial review," the Court would henceforth be able to act with a freedom, writes Wood, "that sometimes is virtually legislative in scope. Nowhere else in the modern world do courts wield as much power in shaping the contours of life as the Supreme Court does in the United States."

The great irony in the history of the early republic, Wood underscores, is that many of the leaders of the democratically minded Republican Party were southerners like Jefferson and Madison. They unleashed the forces of egalitarianism, manufacturing, and capitalism in the North, and yet the South—their South—remained mostly immune to that dynamic culture. Though the ethos of work, enterprise, and prosperity had come to define the "national" culture of the United States, it had in fact taken hold only in the North. The South, Wood recognizes, stood apart, as many southerners disdained not only work, which they deemed fit only for slaves, but also commerce and industry. While the North plunged into the future, nostalgic southerners turned to the past, clinging to the agrarian myth of yeoman farmers leading independent, virtuous lives on the soil as well as to the aristocratic idyll of a leisurely, gracious life of family, hospitality, books, and slaves on lovely plantations. Even Virginia, which had been the revolutionary nation's premier state in size, population, wealth, and leadership, rejected the ideology of economic development. Virginia's leaders scorned the Yankee faith in progress and the notion that economic growth and industrialization were the guarantors of happiness.

The South had fewer towns, schools, roads, canals, newspapers, businesses, manufacturing firms, banks, and shops—and fewer teachers, doctors, publishers, and engineers. Southern legislatures taxed their citizens less and spent less on education and social services. Politically, too, the South remained backward, for the patrician order of slaveholders that dominated the culture and politics of the South took a dim view of an intrusive national government and a restless people who might challenge their authority. As the dynamic, enterprising, egalitarian North seized control of the nation’s identity, the South defended and even celebrated its difference. And as southern men of letters devoted themselves to elaborate defenses of slavery, praising slave owners for their Christian and patriarchal stewardship, for civilizing and caring for inferior black people, they put the seal on the intellectual as well as the economic impoverishment of the South.

Things had not worked out as the Founders had hoped and expected. Hamilton hated President Jefferson’s policies, which, he insisted, could be traced directly to “the culpable desire of gaining or securing popularity at an immediate expence of public utility.” Nor was John Adams pleased. “Oh my Country,” he lamented in 1806, “how I mourn over...thy contempt of Wisdom and Virtue and overweening admiration of fools and knaves! the never failing effects of *democracy!*” While Federalists like Hamilton and Adams bemoaned social trends, southern Republicans like Jefferson despaired about economic ones. “Pseudo-citizens...infected with the mania of rambling and gambling” filled Jefferson with loathing and apprehension.

Though he recognized that the problem of slavery was devastating the South, he came to believe that something even more lethal was ravaging the empire of liberty. Although it was his commitment to liberty and equality that, in Wood’s words, “justified and legitimated the many pursuits of happiness that were bringing unprecedented prosperity to so many average white Americans,” Jefferson somberly concluded that an obsession with commerce and moneymaking was threatening the very existence of the young republic. Withdrawing to his mountaintop home after his retirement from the presidency, he held out the hope that the agrarian states not only of the West but also of the slaveholding South would be the “last asylum and bulwark” of the principles of free government.

The final irony, Wood memorably reminds us in this superb book, is that Jefferson, who had the bracing perception that “the earth belongs in usufruct to the living” and that the dead had neither powers nor rights over it, bequeathed, much to his chagrin, to his successors the crippling legacy of slavery, leaving future generations to resolve in war and in blood the mortally competing visions of the American nation.

1. 1

See Gordon S. Wood, "The Democratization of Mind in the American Revolution," in *Leadership in the American Revolution* (Library of Congress, 1974), pp. 63–89. [↵](#)

2. 2

[Reviewed in these pages](#) by Fred Anderson, September 21, 2006. [↵](#)