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Revolutionary Republicanism

You'll recall that my convergence/developmental model describes how the colonies became more alike over time. This is very important in the process of uniting to stage a rebellion.

British policies played an important role also. Colonists, especially the elites, who were more radical than most of the common people, became increasingly angry because of these policies.

Finally, revolutionary leaders had to convince the common people that separation from Britain was in their best interest also.

The ideology they turned to justify revolution and get support from the average person was called "republicanism." This ideology did several things:

Demonstrated that America would have a unique form of government – step in progress (remember Winthrop's beliefs of "city on a hill").

Would help explain why British policies were tyrannical.

Would inspire common people to revolt.

Would justify leadership of educated elite.

Republicanism (please don't confuse with current political party labels) had a variety of sources and wasn't a completely new form of government. Let's consider a few alternatives.

Monarchy – Monarch holds the power (is sovereign) – unaccountable and can become a tyrant. For the Americans they had "been there, done that."

Oligarchy – small group of aristocrats' rule – probably a little better. These would be inclined to protecting property and seeking peace, for their own benefit, but with a trickle down to others.

Democracy – people rule- at the time this seemed the most dangerous and could result in anarchy. Especially bad from the perspective of minority groups.

The system that the colonists had been under was a combination of all three that had, in their opinion, lost it's ability to check and balance the competing interests of the various groups.

What were the sources of "republicanism?"

Athens and Greece – ancient history had examples of small republics in which the people ruled through representatives. These were often frail though.

Roman Republic – probably the best, strongest and longest lasting example.

During the republican period, before Julius Caesar, the people of Rome developed a system that usually, except in times of crisis, placed power in

the hands of the people who conferred it on various representatives in the government, for example consuls (two who could veto each other) and senators.

Italian city-states – medieval and renaissance cities in Italy often allowed the people to rule, though frequently oligarchic families accrued power.

English Commonwealth – early 18th century England – King George I was a German who allowed his ministers, primarily Robert Walpole (perhaps the first Prime Minister) to rule the country. Walpole and his cronies were considered corrupt courtiers (called the Court). Opposition factions coalesced into the Country group or the Whigs. The Whigs opposed the corruption and tyranny of George and his ministers.

Scottish philosophers – Adam Smith – The Scottish developed liberal economic theories in the 1700s that emphasized a free market and individualism in the market place.

Enlightenment – John Locke – remember that Locke justified the overthrow of governments to make society better.

Puritans – Winthrop – “City Upon a Hill” beliefs in the uniqueness of the American experiment in liberty. Progress required a “new” ideology.

Let’s return to Walpole for a moment. Opposition and corruption and power were a central focus of republicanism, as was the need to increase individual liberty. Many believed Walpole’s government (1715-1742) was very corrupt. He was criticized for many policies, especially taxation and keeping a standing army (previously the English army was small in peacetime because England was an island and didn’t face serious threats). Critics made little headway in the ½ of the 1700s. But, in the 1770s the colonists realized that the arguments from earlier fit their situation perfectly – taxes and standing armies.

Every time the colonists sought redress for their complaints, one minister or another blocked them. The threat to their liberty, elites and common people, seemed real.

In their reading of history, the people had granted their sovereignty to a monarch in the distant past, and could take that sovereignty back if the monarch trampled their liberty. They could then redistribute their sovereignty to representatives that would protect liberty by controlling power and avoiding corruption (we’ll discuss the form of government that could achieve this in a later lecture).

How can a republic succeed?

Need a virtuous citizenry that would put the good of the republic before their own interests. Selflessness and sacrifice are necessary.

Need an independent citizenry. People, who are dependent on others, for example wage laborers or tenant farmers, can be coerced into voting a

particular way out of fear for their job. The best citizen is the independent yeoman farmer.

Relative equality of wealth.

An Educated citizenry that can understand issues and have a sense of duty and responsibility.

Historians had largely ignored Republican ideology until the 1960s. Since then, it has become an overarching theme used to explain ALL the events in US history prior to the Civil War. This probably is an overreaction, though looking at events through the context of “republicanism” does help to explain what happened, why and how people reacted, and their justification for acting the way that they did.

One thought? Do you think that everyone had the same meaning for words like liberty, power, freedom, and independence?



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