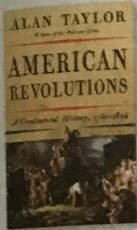


People power?

Adam IP Smith praises a history of the United States' revolutionary era that has potent parallels with today's world



American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804
by Alan Taylor
WW Norton, 704 pages, £30

There is nothing new
in rich men posing as

friends of the poor, nor in wealthy elites building popular support by alleging conspiracies against 'the people'. Nor would our ancestors be unfamiliar with a politics in which economic grievance became overlain with racial prejudice and resentment at the often-imagined preferential treatment given to 'alien' groups. Alan Taylor's new take on the American revolutionary era shows how a faction of the colonial elite in 13 of Britain's most populous North American colonies harnessed populism in almost proto-Trumpian terms.

It is a story that begins, as great political upheavals in history often do, with a pyrrhic victory – in this case, in the war against the French and their Native American allies that ended in 1763. Without the French presence to rally against, and with new expenditures to meet, the colonies fractured. Contrary to romantic foundation myths, the problem with the British government was, in some respects, that it was too weak rather than too strong. It wanted to stop white Americans dispossessing Native Americans of their lands west of the Appalachians, but lacked the means or money to do so. This, predictably, frustrated all sides. And when the king's



American patriots pull down a statue of George III in New York in 1776 during the revolutionary era, when "colonial leaders chose not to play ball" says Adam Smith

ministers sought to raise at least *some* revenue in the colonies to help support defence, they found that they lacked the infrastructure to cope with opposition.

The issue was that the newly enlarged empire had an inefficient and overly decentralised structure. Perhaps it could have been reformed in a consensual, incremental way, but enough colonial leaders chose not to play ball. After all, running their own affairs in their own way was the essence of their rights as Englishmen – and these colonies were becoming more, not less, British in their economic ties and cultural identity. When political resolution of the tension between London and colonial elites broke down, the result was violence.

The ensuing revolution was, in Taylor's telling, at least as much about people desperately trying to protect their privilege in the old order as it was about turning the page on the new. The war pitted factions of Americans against one another and, with huge consequence, revived Anglo-French military conflict. It also destabilised relations with Native

Americans and the power structure that ensured dominance over enslaved Africans. This messy civil war led to a result hardly anyone sought at the outset: the creation of what seemed the most notoriously unstable of all governmental forms – a republic.

Taylor has no illusions about how politics in the new republic worked. It didn't matter to Thomas Jefferson's supporters that their hero was a French-speaking, concubine-keeping, aristocratic slave-holder; his election as US president in 1800 was still said to have returned the revolution to its democratic roots. Ever since his triumph, Taylor writes, "Americans accepted government by wealthy men so long as they pretended to have common manners".

This is a tale grounded in the avarice, confusion and prejudice of real people. If it becomes the standard history of the revolution, as it deserves to, it will do great service in desacralising the world-changing events it describes. 🌐

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