

# The New York Review of Books

## Was the Big Revolution in 1775?

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*1775: A Good Year for Revolution*

by Kevin Phillips

Viking, 628 pp., \$36.00



Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource

*Etching of the Battle of Bunker Hill, fought on Boston's Charlestown peninsula, 1775*

Explaining why the North American colonists revolted from Great Britain in 1776 has never been easy. The eighteenth-century colonists probably enjoyed the highest standard of living of any people in the Atlantic world. The white colonists were certainly not an oppressed people; they had no crushing imperial shackles to throw off. Most white Americans knew they were freer and less burdened with feudal and monarchical restraints than any other people in the eighteenth century. Indeed, they keenly realized that the liberties they enjoyed actually came from the heritage and traditions of the British nation of which they were a part. They were British subjects who had all the rights and privileges of British subjects—elected legislatures, trial by jury, habeas corpus, and widespread religious toleration. Why then would they have broken away from the nation that was the

source of these rights and liberties?

These peculiar circumstances made the American Revolution seem different from other revolutions. With none of the legendary tyranny that had so often driven desperate peoples into rebellion, the American Revolution has always seemed strange. To its victims, the Tories or loyalists, the Revolution was totally incomprehensible. Never in history, said Daniel Leonard, John Adams's antagonist in the Massachusetts debates in 1775, had there been so much rebellion with so "little real cause." Peter Oliver, who wrote the most vitriolic Tory history of the Revolution, said that it was "the most wanton and unnatural rebellion that ever existed." The Americans' response seemed out of all proportion to the stimuli. "The Annals of no Country," declared a thoroughly bewildered imperial official at the outset, "can produce an Instance of so virulent a Rebellion, of such implacable madness and Fury, originating from such trivial Causes, as those alledged by these unhappy People."

In order to explain the inexplicable, both the Patriot participants and later historians tended to argue that the Revolution appeared to have been peculiarly an affair of the mind, that the Americans had somehow reasoned themselves into revolution. The Revolution, said Edmund Randolph, governor of Virginia and later Washington's secretary of state, was a revolution "without an immediate oppression, without a cause depending so much on hasty feeling as theoretic reasoning."

At the end of the nineteenth century, Moses Coit Tyler, the originator of what became the field of American Studies, was driven by the same logic to see the Revolution as "pre-eminently a revolution caused by ideas, and pivoted on ideas." Tyler conceded that ideas played a part in all revolutions. But, said Tyler, in most revolutions, like that of the French, ideas had become important only when they had been given meaning and force by long-experienced "real evils."

The American Revolution was different. It was directed "not against tyranny inflicted, but only against tyranny anticipated." The Americans revolted not out of actual suffering but out of reasoned principle. "Hence," Tyler concluded,

more than with most other epochs of revolutionary strife, our epoch of revolutionary strife was a strife of ideas: a long warfare of political logic; a succession of annual campaigns in which the marshalling of arguments not only preceded the marshalling of armies, but often exceeded them in impression upon the final result.

Throughout the twentieth century and into our own time this intellectual explanation of the Revolution, repeated by many historians and developed and brought to heights of

refinement by Bernard Bailyn in his *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, has been countered by a series of studies by progressive-minded historians. More or less conceding that the Revolution cannot be explained by imperial oppression, these progressive historians have sought the sources of the Revolution in the conflicting passions and interests of the American people themselves. But these studies, such as the ones explaining the Virginia gentry's pressure to participate in the Revolution solely out of their internal concerns and fears, have never seemed entirely persuasive.

Now, with Kevin Phillips's *1775: A Good Year for Revolution*, we have a full explanation of the Revolution that doesn't rely on its being a peculiarly intellectual affair or on its being exclusively the consequence of internal fights and clashes among Americans themselves. Although Phillips is much more sympathetic to the progressive view that the Revolution was a civil war among the colonists, he believes that the progressive historians have been too deterministic and have too often missed the complexity of economic affairs. Besides, he never intended his book to be a solution to the historiographical struggle between those who believe the Revolution was an intellectual event and those who think it was mainly a result of domestic conflicts. (The public, he says, is little interested in "historiography—the study of history and its processes"—which "is dull stuff.")

Still, in his meticulous detailing of the thousands upon thousands of resentments, grievances, and injuries experienced by countless Americans at the hands of British officials and the many others who seemed, often unfairly, to stand in for royal authority, he makes the Revolution seem to be the consequence of tyranny after all. The subtitle of his book might have been "The Death of the British Empire by a Thousand Cuts."

Phillips began his career writing about contemporary politics, in particular with his influential *The Emerging Republican Majority* (1969) that predicted the beginning of a new Republican era in presidential politics. Since then he has written many books about contemporary political and economic issues. In 1999 he made an initial inquiry into the past with his provocative *The Cousins' Wars: Religion, Politics, and the Triumph of Anglo-America*; this was followed in 2003 by a presidential biography of William McKinley. The paralyzed politics of the twenty-first century have more and more convinced Phillips that concentrating on today's world is not very rewarding. Instead of analyzing further political alignments in the present, he wants "to delve back into history and examine English-speaking North America's first political realignment, the 1774–1776 resort to war by which thirteen colonies quit the British Empire with such great consequence."

This new book, which Phillips calls his "second psychological holiday from national

politics and the ups and downs of the Republicans and Democrats,” is very different from *The Cousins’ Wars*. While that earlier work of history swept through centuries, from the English Civil War of the seventeenth century to the American Civil War of the mid-nineteenth century, *1775* concentrates on a single year of the American Revolution.

Phillips was led to this emphasis on the year 1775 by what he believes is the present’s “Fourth of July boosterism” and its “excessive immersion in 1776 as a moral and ideological starting point” of the United States. He believes we need to get beyond the handful of great men who drew up the Declaration of Independence and pay attention to the thousands upon thousands of lesser figures, all those ordinary folk, who made the Revolution possible.\*

By his own deep and arguably excessive immersion in the events and circumstances of the period, he has concluded “that in many respects, *1775 was more important than 1776.*” The Revolution was no spontaneous uprising; it was long in preparation. By 1774 if not earlier many Americans seem to have been primed for rebellion. Their instantaneous and widespread reaction to the Coercive Acts of 1774, which closed the port of Boston, nullified the Massachusetts charter, interfered with the town meetings, and appointed a general as governor of the colony, suggested as much. The colonists were not about to cut the British Crown any slack whatsoever. The Pennsylvania governor reported back that the

general Temper of the People, as well here, as in other Parts of America, is very warm. They look upon the Chastisement of Boston to be purposely vigorous, and held up by way of intimidation to all America; and in short that Boston is Suffering in the Common Cause.

How did British authority, never deeply rooted to begin with, slip away so suddenly? By 1775, Phillips recalls, much of the necessary underpinning of the Revolution had already been created. The Patriots had already swept aside their royal governments and forced their royal governors to flee to British warships. They had already created congresses in their various provinces, formed hundreds of local committees of observation, inspection, and safety, installed dozens of seaport regulators, and established many other popular grassroots organizations. “By mid-1775,” writes Phillips, “credible local governments were administering no-nonsense loyalty oaths and exercising control of the local militia.”

As early as the winter of 1774–1775 the colonists had begun importing gunpowder and arms across the Atlantic from Sweden, Hamburg, Holland, the Austrian Netherlands, France, Spain, Portugal, and West Africa’s Slave Coast. In April 1775 at Lexington and Concord and two months later at Bunker Hill the colonists had inflicted surprisingly heavy

casualties on the once-invincible British army. All these achievements made the colonists optimistic, even cocky, about their abilities to stand up to the mother country. That optimism, Phillips suggests, was essential to get the Americans through the failures and disillusionments of the subsequent year of 1776. His point, emphasized over and over again, is persuasively established. Well before the Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1776, the Americans had achieved de facto independence from Great Britain. “As 1775 ended,” Phillips writes, “the only place the British still controlled was occupied Boston.”

Phillips’s book is not a narrative of the year 1775. It is not a story that proceeds chronologically from one event to another. It is instead a collection of twenty-six chapters, each of which analyzes specific issues and events that occurred in what Phillips refers to as the “long” year of 1775, from the summer of 1774 to the summer of 1776. Because of their analytical nature the chapters inevitably include some repetition and lots of cross-referencing, e.g., “as we saw in Chapter 14.” The chapters jump from a discussion of religion in the colonies and the growing antagonism to the Anglican Church to a description of the many economic roads to revolution, including the colonists’ debts, their paper money problems, their smuggling and rum production, their obsession with the acquisition of western land, their antagonism to the Navigation Acts, and their many efforts at economic self-determination.

In each of his chapters Phillips describes the early alienation of various groups and occupations from British authority. Everywhere the increasingly complex British regulations and the punitive enforcements by placemen and other officials who scarcely understood the localities they were dealing with created multiple resentments, injuries, and grievances. In other words, the colonists’ sense of frustration and anger went well beyond their legal claim of “no taxation without representation.” Beneath all the rhetoric of revolution, says Phillips, was a myriad of popular complaints and injustices that could be blamed, justly or not, on royal authority and the British imperial structure.

Phillips builds his case for revolution by amassing all these colonial grievances, frustrations, and injuries, however small some of them may have been. For him the Revolution was the consequence of many different causes—economic, political, social, ethnic, and religious. Sometimes his accounting for the multiple causes becomes schematic. Calvinism, he says, may not have been “a principal ideological or theological driver of the American Revolution. But it might have been among the six or eight most important.” He thinks that the belief in a Crown conspiracy to tyrannize the colonists and deprive them of their liberty as an explanation for the Revolution, which was central to Bernard Bailyn’s famous book, is too “narrow” and “parochial,” for it excludes religion and economics. Nevertheless, he adds, “‘conspiracy’ might have been a factor in giving

ideology a greater than usual relevance and zest.” Generally, however, Phillips does not want to “try to allocate percentages” to his lists of causes. Indeed, none of the various causes or factors by itself was “all-determining,” but collected together they seem to be overwhelming.

Phillips has read and absorbed well over four hundred monographs on the American Revolution, including some unpublished doctoral dissertations—in effect justifying all the detailed historical research on the Revolution that has gone on over the past century or so. Although the frame and general thesis of his book are his, he says that for all the complexity that he emphasizes, all the specifics he details, “be they colonial money supplies, local merchant ethnicity and religion, the European munitions trade of 1774–1775, the evolution of Philadelphia committees, or the intramural tensions between Coetus and Conferentie in what is now suburban New Jersey, the original spadework is someone else’s.”

He treats all these hundreds of monographs more or less equally, none of them seeming to be much more important than another. What he wants from them is evidence of some irritation, some clash in imperial relations that will help explain why the majority of colonists supported the Revolution. Each of his chapters is rich in interesting and often unfamiliar detail drawn from the many historical monographs he has absorbed.

Nearly everyone has heard of the battles of Lexington and Concord, but outside of North Carolina few know about the Battle of Moore’s Creek Bridge that occurred in February 1776. How many Americans know about the colonists’ capture of the British schooner *Margaretta* off the coast of Maine in June 1775, an event that James Fenimore Cooper called “The Lexington of the sea”? We have a similar disparity of knowledge between the famous “Boston Massacre” of March 1770 and the earlier “Battle of Golden Hill” in New York City. In January 1770, two months before the event in Boston, cutlass-wielding and club-carrying seamen and dock workers in New York confronted bayonet-armed redcoats and suffered many injuries and one fatality. These Sons of Neptune, as the angry seamen, dockworkers, carters, sailmakers, and others in the seaports often called themselves, became important participants in the coming of the Revolution, perhaps as important,



Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

*Lieutenant Thomas Grosvenor of the Connecticut Minute Men at the Battle of Bunker Hill, 1775; detail of a painting by John Trumbull. The figure behind him may have been either Peter Salem, a freed slave who fought with the Americans in the Revolutionary War, or Grosvenor’s servant.*

Phillips claims, as the more well-known Sons of Liberty.

Everywhere in the colonies countless numbers of ordinary people like the Jack Tars—artisans, mechanics, militiamen, and farmers—were radicalized by arrogant, out-of-touch officials and irritating government regulations and actions; and they were exceedingly touchy, and ready at a moment's notice to rise in defense of what they called their liberties. As Edmund Burke pointed out in 1775, the colonists anticipated grievances before they actually suffered them: "They auger misgovernment at a distance, and snuff the approach of tyranny in every tainted breeze." Everywhere in North America, says Phillips, "matches were being put to a surprisingly short fuse."

In September 1774, six months before Lexington and Concord, militiamen in western Massachusetts and southern New England heard rumors that the British had bombarded Boston. Thousands of them took up arms and marched on Boston and only turned back when the rumor proved false. Lexington and Concord were no surprise. "Conflict," says Phillips, "was less an accident waiting to happen than an expectation."

In his amassing of mountains of facts from numerous monographs, Phillips has tried to do what most academic historians these days have not been much interested in doing—bring together all the meticulous research that has been going on for decades and turn it into a comprehensive and readable book designed for general readers. Much of what Phillips has written is clear and free of jargon. His assessments of the various military situations, especially those faced by the British, are always realistically based, and his judgments of what was possible and what was not possible for the British to do are always sound.

Still, Phillips's book may not ultimately suit many readers. Although he says that he has "tried to avoid too much detail" in his analyses, he also admits that his experience has "bred not contempt for detail but appreciation." And it shows. Convinced that "proof matters" and that "elaboration is sometimes essential to understanding," he has given his readers very large amounts of particulars. Those who will especially love it are Ph.D. graduate students preparing for their preliminary examinations and young professors trying to put together lectures for a course on the American Revolution.

Phillips also tends to presume too much knowledge on the part of readers. He refers to the Tea Party of December 1773, for example, but never describes it; he assumes readers will know what it was. Without any chronological story line, and overwhelming in its accumulation of facts, this largely analytic book will mainly appeal to those who already know something of the period.

Phillips's handling of ideas and the political and constitutional debates between the

colonists and the mother country seems particularly weak. Instead of seeing ideas as the means by which people understand, explain, justify, and rationalize their behavior—in other words, as necessary accompaniments to all human action—he treats them as simply “factors” to be lumped alongside other “factors” as causes of events. Consequently, his treatment of ideas and his discussion of the imperial constitutional debate are thin and ill-informed. He can’t really appreciate Bailyn’s ideological argument in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, even though it grows out of the same widespread sense of colonial grievance, fear, and anger that he himself has been documenting.

Nor does Phillips understand the development of the constitutional debate between the colonists and Great Britain. He mentions more than once that by 1774 the colonists’ arguments over the issues of taxation and representation were losing their cogency without being aware that by that date the overwhelming issue of sovereignty had replaced them. As far as Phillips is concerned, the disappearance of the issues of taxation and representation is simply evidence that the colonists were already emotionally separated from Great Britain and no longer needed those ideas.

Although the debate over sovereignty—the most important notion of politics in the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world—was what finally broke the empire apart, Phillips doesn’t understand it. The idea of sovereignty, made most famous by William Blackstone, held that in every state there must be one final, supreme, indivisible lawmaking authority; and for most Englishmen that authority was Parliament. The colonists tried to argue that Parliament could do some things, such as regulate their trade, but it could not do other things, such as tax them. But the British replied that since Parliament’s sovereignty was indivisible, if the colonists accepted one iota of Parliament’s authority they had to accept all; or if they denied Parliament’s authority even in one instance, they had to deny Parliament’s authority in all instances.

Finally tiring of trying to divide the indivisible, the colonists by 1774 gave up, accepted the logic of sovereignty, relocated it in their separate provincial legislatures, and concluded (not “periodically,” as Phillips claims, but once and for all) that they were totally outside of all parliamentary authority. Hence, they said, each of their legislatures was tied solely to the Crown. This is why the Declaration of Independence was scrupulous in not mentioning Parliament, even though Parliament had been the source of most of their grievances over the previous decade.

Despite his misunderstanding of the imperial debate, however, Phillips’s book is a significant achievement. He has read more about the early months of the Revolution and soaked up more of the details of that reading than most historians. In his meticulous



account of the local and often obscure events of 1775, he has compiled a convincing case that most colonists were angry and prepared for revolution well before 1776. He is correct in saying that we are not as well informed about the period between the fall of 1774 and the beginning of 1776 as we ought to be. “To call this a ‘hidden history’ of the early Revolution,” he says, “is an exaggeration. But this is principally because it is not really hidden, merely too little studied.”

Although many experts have suggested that if the British were to put down the insurgency, they had do it quickly, in the early years of the war, before the entry of the French and Spanish, Phillips persuasively demonstrates that this possibility was unlikely in 1775–1776. Support for the Patriot cause was wider and deeper early on than we have usually acknowledged. Loyalty to the Crown, where it existed at all, was largely dependent on the presence of royal troops. The Patriots everywhere harried and harassed the royal authorities. Right from the outset, for example, most harbor pilots refused to help British ship captains navigate into the tricky waters of America’s ports. Royal commanders could only shake their heads in bewilderment at the various ways the colonists sought to undermine and sabotage British authority. It wasn’t IEDs or suicide bombing, but it was effective. “The ingenuity of these people,” declared one exasperated British officer, “is singular in their secret modes of mischief.”

Putting down an insurgency thousands of miles away is not easy, as we Americans have been finding out. Not only does Phillips’s book demonstrate that the year 1775 was more important than we have generally appreciated, but it also shows that the American insurgency had such an initial degree of popular support that British suppression of it was probably not possible.

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1. \*  
Phillips’s book powerfully reinforces the argument of T.H. Breen’s recent work, *American Insurgents, American Patriots: The Revolution of the People* (Hill and Wang, 2010). Unfortunately, Phillips does not seem to have used Breen’s book. ↵