

A black silhouette of a Revolutionary War soldier stands against a vibrant red background. The soldier is shown from the waist up, facing right, wearing a bicorne hat and holding a long rifle. The year '1775' is printed in large, white, serif font across the soldier's chest. Below the year, the subtitle 'A Good Year for Revolution' is written in a white, cursive script. Further down, the author's name 'KEVIN PHILLIPS' is displayed in large, white, serif font. At the bottom, the text 'Author of American Dynasty' is written in a smaller, white, cursive script.

1775

A Good Year for Revolution

KEVIN
PHILLIPS

Author of American Dynasty



Bad Money

American Theocracy

American Dynasty

William McKinley

Wealth and Democracy

The Cousins' Wars

Arrogant Capital

Boiling Point

The Politics of Rich and Poor

Staying on Top

Post-Conservative America

Electoral Reform and Voter Participation

Mediocracy

The Emerging Republican Majority

1775

A Good Year for Revolution

KEVIN PHILLIPS

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John Jay, president of the Continental Congress and later the first U.S. Chief Justice, opined years later that “the true history of the American Revolution can never be written...A great many of the people in those days were not at all what they seemed, nor what they were generally believed to have been.”¹ If they were not—and some evidence and similar statements by others uphold Jay’s point—perhaps it is best to let events, circumstances, suspicions, and necessities tell more of the tale. Less need be taken from the memoirs of the gentlemen, however worthy, whose portraits grace our currency, coinage, and postage stamps. Which is one of this book’s underlying premises.

Seventeen Seventy-five, easy title that it is, stands for the somewhat forgotten and widely misunderstood first year of the American Revolution. If 1775 hadn’t been a year of successful nation building, 1776 might have been a year of lost opportunity, quiet disappointment, and continued colonial status.

Although I will of necessity cover events both before and after 1775, the title means what it says: 1775 is the crucial, early-momentum year of the Revolutionary era. Still, the period profiled in these pages is not a standard January 1 to December 31 chronology. It is the larger sweep of a powerful state that put independence farther along earlier in time than most Americans realize.

Bluntly put, much of “the history” of the American Revolution suffers from distortion and omission tied to the twentieth century’s excessive immersion in 1776 as a moral and ideological starting point. If July 4 of that year is truly the nation’s birthday, then 1775 was little more than a number of months *in utero*. And this it categorically was not.

The infant named the United Colonies, born in 1775, was conceived during the Continental Congress of September and October 1774. The famous date, July 4, 1776, was actually a belated christening, with only a few godparents on hand. Indeed, the actual ceremony—the gathering, the signatures that bore witness—did not occur until August. Few thought the date or delay mattered. No one was Thomas Jefferson the true father. Back in autumn 1774, Lady Liberty had never seriously dated him. He was still just Peyton Randolph’s string bean of a nephew in remote Albemarle County, Virginia.

The initial purpose of this book, as contemplated in 2008, was to argue that *1775 was as important as 1776*. The finished book goes farther. It argues—and I hope substantiates—that in many respects, *1775 was more important than 1776*. The earlier year’s cocky optimism, its advance guard of hundreds of new grassroots Patriot committees, its political gambles, and its unsung military successes enabled and entrenched *de facto* American independence. Moreover, it was begun powerfully enough to survive the crushing Patriot defeats and disillusionments that came in summer and autumn 1776 as the British Army and Royal Navy won major battles in and around New York. Much of the necessary underpinning of American self-governance—provincial congresses, local committees of safety, new seaport regulators, the flight of royal governors to small British warships obliged to provide cramped and humble quarters, and Patriot militia ordered to double as political police—had been put in place, as part of the spirit of 1775. Jefferson himself thought that the United Colonies already had *de facto* independence before the Declaration came along. As 1775 ended, the only place the British still controlled was occupied Boston.

A second spur to write on this topic came from my fascination over more than a half century with the periodic realignments of U.S. politics. My first book, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, written in 1966–1968 and published in 1969, predicted the beginning of a new Republican era in presidential politics. In 1993, when Bill Clinton was inaugurated, the departing GOP had held the White House for

20 of the last 24 years.

Two decades later, I am not sanguine. Both major parties seem chained to pernicious interest groups and tired ideologies. In 2008, given this context, it had seemed more rewarding to stop analyzing the present and instead 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. That was an era of political hope and ambition to take seriously. The political realignment achieved amid revolution was unique—no other has come with simultaneous ballots and bullets, although the Confederacy tried in 1860–1861.

As for 1775 and 1776, no stretch is needed to talk about an emerging republican (small-*r*) majority or plurality. And despite exhaustion and disillusionment, much of this civic commitment hung on through 1782 and 1783. The U.S. Constitution, to be sure, was hammered out and ratified five years later by a somewhat different combination—one in which many persons who had been Tory-minded or neutrally inclined during the war came together with the wealthier Patriots to write more conservative national guidelines. Many of the farmers, artisans, laborers, and seamen—vocal rebels whose egalitarian postures circa 1775 had disquieted the northern commercial and southern plantation elites—opposed the new coalition a decade later. But although this further transformation is a fascinating one, this book does not pursue it. *Seventeen Seventy-five* focuses entirely on the early biases, ballots, and bullets that—literally—made the United States, albeit with the critical assistance of French and Dutch gunpowder.

My decision in 2008 to forgo current affairs for history had its own small backdrop. I had immersed myself between 2002 and 2008 in early twenty-first-century U.S. politics and the American political economy. In four sequential national election years, I had published books that sought to explain national predicaments and their implications—*Wealth and Democracy* in 2002; *American Dynasty: Aristocracy, Fortune, and the Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush* in 2004; *American Theocracy: The Politics and Perils of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money* in 2006; and *Bad Money: Reckless Finance, Failed Politics, and the Global Crisis of American Capitalism* in 2008. All were best sellers, but the quandaries persisted.

The “financialization” of America—an ill omen I had been writing about since 1993—helped bring about a crash in 2008, but postcrash politics did not yield the needed far-reaching reform. Finance continued to sit in the catbird seat. Between 2008 and 2012, the relative economic decline of the United States and the shift of influence to Asia moved from theory to reality. The prospect is not cheering, but I have discussed it at sufficient length in earlier books. *Seventeen Seventy-five* represents a decision to write about a United States taking shape rather than one losing headway.

The present book completes another disillusionment-spurred cycle in my writing. Back in 1994 and 1995, after souring on a lobbyist-larded Washington preoccupied with Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich, I opted to spend the next four years on a history project published in 1999 under the title *The Cousins' Wars: Religion, Politics, and the Triumph of Anglo-America*. This volume examined and sought to interrelate the three principal English-speaking civil wars—the English Civil War of the 1640s, the American Revolution, and the American Civil War—and their sequential role in the hegemonic rise first of Britain and then of the United States. The book was well received, and the change of subject matter and residence was restorative. Soon thereafter the Bush family's return to the White House in 2001 lured me back to my word processor, initiating the four 2002–2008 books mentioned above.

The Cousins' Wars, in turn, worked to seed this new book—first, by leaving a desire to revisit the American Revolution in greater depth, yet also by encouraging a second psychological holiday from national politics and the ups and downs of the Republicans and Democrats.

In its own way, to be sure, *1775* is a political book. My aim has been to view and describe the onset of the American Revolution in the thirteen colonies through much the same multiple lenses that I had first employed between 1966 and 1968 in *The Emerging Republican Majority*. That book ventured its prediction on the basis of my examining prior decades of national politics and presidential, state, and local election returns against a teeming backdrop of history, economics, major wars won or lost, geography, migration, culture, race, ethnicity, and religion. This was an in-depth fascination I had started developing as a teenager in 1956. National election patterns went from hobby to vocation. Most of that volume was written before I worked as assistant to the campaign manager in that year's Republican presidential effort. In fact, the early manuscript got me the job. The deeper I got into national politics, the more convinced I became that these various criteria served to explain most of the population's presidential-level psychologies, trends, and electoral decision making. Voting for president in the United States has not been a haphazard thought process.

If, over nearly a half century, my books have been characterized by one vein of ongoing original research, it has been this fascination—deepening, enlarging, and extending my knowledge of the grassroots United States. Back in 1968 or even 1980, I might have known which presidential candidate carried a fair number of the nation's individual counties, and I might have known the Republican or Democratic leanings of most congressional districts. No longer, of course. I have not kept up systematically on the detail of national elections since 1992, save for religion-related research in 2005–2006. That project was for a section of a larger volume, chapters that detailed the rise since the 1960s of conservative and born-again religious voters within the Republican Party's national coalition. In the United States, religion is rarely unimportant in national politics. The 1770s provide their own strong affirmation.

Since the 1990s, the balance of my research and writing has shifted from contemporary politics back into earlier history. The focus in *The Cousins' Wars* was on grassroots behavior and decision making during the periods leading up to and including the Revolution and the American Civil War. In researching *William McKinley*, my 2003 biography of the twenty-fifth president for Arthur Schlesinger's *American Presidents* series, my search included grassroots detail, especially in the Midwest, for the realigning character of the 1896 presidential election. Over the last few years, *1775* has required its own round of museums, libraries, and back roads, ranging from coastal New England to Canada, and Vermont to the Chesapeake and the upcountries of both Carolinas. Once again, I found that ethnicity and religion most often guided a man's choice of uniform—if he chose one—although many decisions were swayed by vocation, crops, hard times, or indebtedness.

I have tried to avoid too much detail on these matters. However, 50 years of some familiarity have bred not contempt for detail but appreciation. Proof matters. Elaboration is sometimes essential to understanding. Hopefully, a reasonable line has been drawn between documentation and minutiae.

In the process of reading and writing this book, my familiar methodology has buttressed my conclusion and vice versa. Taking all thirteen colonies together, no sweeping one-dimensional explanation of why 1774–1776 became a political and revolutionary watershed—be it ideology, economics, or religion—works everywhere, all of the time, or even most of the time. If anything, the upheavals of 1775 were laboratories for the *complexity* of local behavior and Revolutionary motivation.

History and Fashion

Unlike trends in men's and women's clothing, whose overnight shifts are documented avidly, fashion in American history change only slowly. The rapid inching-up of women's hemlines above the knees toward midthigh, first seen in the 1920s and again in the 1960s, was closely observed and widely taken

as a national barometer of more permissive morality and speculative finance. Reinterpretations of American history, more glacial and less sensuous, occur over decades or generations, although old ones sometimes remain influential beyond their time.

The public, as opposed to the profession, has little interest. Historiography—the study of history and its processes—is dull stuff. A proposal entitled “The Role of the Consensus and Neo-Whig Schools in Shifting Public Perceptions of the American Revolution, 1946–1976” might win plaudits as Ph.D. ambitions go. However, as a published book it would be lucky to reach number 325,000 on Amazon.com. So this volume, including this preface, will tread carefully, but sometimes contextualizing comments are in order.

Briefly put, the ongoing, exaggerated American focus on 1776, which grew in the nineteenth century, became even more insistent after World War II. This was when historians of the so-called Consensus and later Neo-Whig schools—less than electric names, obviously—displaced the Progressive or Economic Determinist schools. The latter’s own downfall had come from overstating economic factors and motivations in the Revolution. Deification of 1776 was further encouraged by the bicentennial commemorations in 1976, which, as [Chapter 7](#) will amplify, promoted that single year as if it—or the Declaration of Independence—were a toothpaste or automobile. In recent decades several scholars have gone so far as to describe the Declaration’s portraiture as quasireligious.

Such legacies are not trivial, because they continue to weigh on national opinion. It has often been remarked, for example, that Washington officeholders pontificating on markets, taxes, and monetary policy are usually repeating the ideas of some dead economist, often one of whom the orator had no inkling. Similarly, Fourth of July speakers holding forth about the Declaration or the Spirit of ’Seventy-Six are often repeating the ideas of some deceased Consensus historian or trite bicentennial commemoration. Such are the ways that historical fashion can linger well beyond its expiration date.

For example, the theses offered by Consensus historians in the confident decades following World War II typically emphasized American distinctiveness and exceptionalism. Many played down internal divisions in the colonies, instead suggesting a considerable homogeneity of pro-Revolutionary opinion. In the words of Daniel Boorstin, the Revolution “was hardly a revolution at all” and bore little resemblance to upheavals in Europe.² If Americans were not entirely united in 1775 and 1776, the argument went, they were not seriously divided either. Neo-Whigs were less consensus driven. Although they rejected social and economic causations, most singled out “more political, legalistic and constitutional” explanations of the Revolution’s emergence. Patriot victory, pronounced one, represented “the triumph of a principle.”³

The late 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s were also a time when prominent thinkers imagined an “end of ideology” and a triumph of moderation. Others enthused over a “melting pot” bound to lessen ethnic and racial differences. Some homogenization was presumed, if not endorsed. The concept of Americanism became strong enough that the House of Representatives could establish a Committee on Un-American Activities. Beyond politics, for those of us old enough to remember the cooking of the 1950s, that too was bland. Jell-O was a staple; frozen pizza was a breakthrough.

More depth and attention to historical complexity developed in the 1970s and 1980s, abetted by the rise of specialties such as military history, as well as by cliometrics and neoprogressive emphasis on “bottom-up” economic history that analyzed the circumstances of ordinary folk. The first camp directed attention to internal conflict and civil war in Revolutionary America. The second latched on to social and economic discontent, not least in prewar cities and seaports. From a relatively conservative perspective, military historians were persuasive in maintaining that “close study of the areas committed to one side or the other supports the view that ethnic and religious differences were important determinants of Revolutionary behavior.”⁴

Sophisticated information technology has been a particular boon, opening up new resources, making available specialized detail, and providing easy access to hard-to-find collections and publications. This, too, diminished misconceptions of relative colonial homogeneity and the oneness of political opinion. The Internet Revolution, especially in the 2000s, worked its own magic. Colonial America regained complexity and tension; Consensus and to a lesser extent Neo-Whig interpretation lost ground. Social, economic, and internal conflict-based explanations regained influence.

This book does not contend that a particular set of social and economic forces touched off the Revolution. On the contrary, no one set of causations played that role, because too many separate ingredients were involved. Of thirteen colonies, roughly half were economic and cultural amalgamates. New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and the Carolinas were conspicuously so. Social, economic, political, ideological, and religious forces all influenced local versions of the Revolution.

The last third of the twentieth century saw the new or further documentation of many innovations, local animosities, and competing interests. Consider the First Continental Congress in late 1774. It called for localities to set up committees of observation and inspection. By mid-1775, some 500 to 600 counties and towns had done so, many of them quickly developing loyalty-enforcement and regulatory mechanisms. The Revolution's committees, conventions, congresses, and associations, although recalling English Civil War terminology and precedents, were deployed more quickly and in much greater numbers. In Philadelphia, as research published during the 1980s showed, the local committee structure mushroomed between 1774 and 1776. What's more, as [Chapter 5](#) will illustrate, committee membership became more radical in each stage. True, their politics and practices fell short of what emerged in France during the 1790s. But although the French analogy is limited, the number of Loyalist émigrés who fled the United States ultimately exceeded the count of Frenchmen who fled their revolution.⁵

Military historians have documented the civil war characteristics that the Revolution displayed in many areas. In New York, New Jersey, and the Carolinas, tabulations show that in roughly half of the battles in which militia participated, Americans were fighting Americans.⁶ This bitterness continued to the war's end.

Population-minded scholars have shown how the rapid growth of the thirteen colonies worried British officials by the 1760s, pushing them toward restrictive measures like the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which sought to prohibit settlement west of the Appalachians. Unless western expansion could be stopped, it was feared that the colonies would soon be too populous to be restrained militarily. Migration to North America was for some years seen as threatening depopulation and loss of wealth in northern Ireland and parts of Scotland.

As for colonial economic growth and opportunity, it is now clear that especially after 1764, British policies unduly restricting paper money shrank the local money supply in some American colonies to an extent that throttled commerce and forced more people into debt. The expanding ranks of artisans, most notable in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, grew restive in the pre-Revolutionary decade as their share of municipal wealth and income declined. Remedies they put forward included reducing or cutting off imports from Britain, as well as promoting the growth of American manufacturing enterprises that Parliament discouraged or flatly prohibited.

Powerful ethnic and religious divisions mocked notions of cultural and political homogeneity. Wartime loyalties were splintered and divided among emergent groups like Germans, Irish Catholics, Methodists, and Baptists, and despite nineteenth- and twentieth-century boosterism determined to praise their Patriotic fervor, probing scholars have documented something less. In New Jersey, for example, bitter divisions set Patriot Dutch Reformed adherents of the Coetus faction against Conferentie-faction congregations who took the Loyalist side. In South Carolina, Regular Baptist

clergymen on the Patriot side failed to sway backcountry Separate Baptists, many of whom instead followed an unctuous pro-Tory preacher.

Sometimes the new detail has been double-barreled in its revisionist effect. Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., in 1917 a young Ohio historian, made a splash that year with his influential volume *The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution, 1763-1776*.⁷ Much of the revolutionary impetus of the 1760s, he argued, came from merchants, and the eventual Revolution represented a clashing of economic interests. Late twentieth-century research has amplified how different specializations with the urban merchant communities, not broad overall merchant status, best explained their Patriot-versus-Loyalist commitments. This upheld the salience of economic issues. However, the same research into Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Norfolk, and Charleston loyalties has shown how ethnicity and religion split the merchants, rebutting the notion of a largely economic clash of issues.

Ideally, this information should rebut the insistences of historians who claim a singular and paramount role for politics, economics, or religion. Part of that singularity is also a matter of definitions, which need not detain us here.

Historians and others who write for a popular audience tend to minimize or eliminate the quotations from scholarly tracts and from others in the field. This book does, too, but not always happily. As with *The Cousins' Wars* a decade and a half ago, and for that matter *The Emerging Republican Majority* forty-five years ago, the frameworks, general theses, and interrelations in this book are mine. However, when it comes to specifics of the new complexity, be they colonial money supplies, local merchant ethnicity and religion, the European munitions trade of 1774–1775, the evolution of Philadelphia Revolutionary committees, or the intramural tensions between Coetus and Conferentie in what is now suburban New Jersey, the original spadework is someone else's. I have drawn on individual historians whose names and writings should add to the credibility of the points made.

If those names appear mostly in endnotes, I should acknowledge a particular debt to several groups of specialists in American history. One such combines the scholars and writers who have seen a great turning point in 1774's fierce response to the several Coercive Acts and its culmination in the First Continental Congress. A second related school hypothesizes an accelerating mid-1770s rejection of George III by American colonials—a psychological version of regicide, which helped the public to embrace republicanism over monarchy. This aided a steady 1775–1776 transfer of legitimacy to a new nation, a Congress, and a new framework of thirteen republican states. Yet another small group of scholars identifies 1775 as the bold, daring year from a military as well as popular opinion standpoint. Their conclusions evoke a vivid “spirit of 1775,” not an ebbing “spirit of 1776.” This early confidence was essential.

A fourth body of opinion explains the American Revolution as a civil war—a clear display of the sort of bitter fratricide in which existing and emerging religious, ethnic, and sectional divisions deepen in both politics and warfare. In 1774, Thomas Jefferson penned his own fears of “civil” war. Then in 1776 he insisted that a united “people” were separating themselves from another “people” in Britain. This book takes the “civil war” position.

A fifth category includes authors who have examined an opening year, 1774 or 1775, from the standpoint of one province, Massachusetts, Virginia, South Carolina, or Connecticut, where confrontation began early. Titles include *The First American Revolution: Before Lexington and Concord* (profiling Massachusetts in 1774), *1775: Another Part of the Field* (explaining Virginia during that year), and *The South Carolina Civil War of 1775*.⁸ Doubtless there are others.

The Book's Plan

This volume's attempt to set out a new view of the United Colonies and how they managed to become the United States is divided into four parts. The structure can be summarized as follows:

Part I, the *Introduction*, is a single chapter designed to explain what the future United States was like in 1775, what the key events were between the summer of 1774 and the spring of 1776, and how they have been minimized or even pushed aside by a fixation on 1776. This discussion also previews several of the book's subjects, from the international gunpowder trade to Samuel Adams's backstage role in Massachusetts.

Part II, headed *The Revolution—Provocations, Motivations, and Alignments*, examines the multiple origins of the American Revolution. The Continental Congress and most of the provincial congresses met in secrecy—wisely, because what they were planning and plotting amounted to treason. But the principal circumstances and subject matter can be set out in six chapters, which address the political, religious, economic, and cultural frustrations and motivations that underlay the Revolution.

To establish the leading actors, **Chapter 2** argues that four colonies—Massachusetts, Virginia, Connecticut, and South Carolina—made up the vanguard of the Revolution, contributing two thirds or even three quarters of its momentum and leadership. These four boasted roughly half of the population, more than half of the wealth, and much more than half of the thirteen colonies' political history. They were the old colonies, directly chartered by seventeenth-century kings (who granted territory west to the Pacific), proud of century-and-a-half- or century-old histories of defending against France, Spain, and a dozen Indian tribes, and equally proud of long-established assembly houses that considered themselves New World parliaments. Much of the colonial self-confidence and aggressiveness of 1774 and 1775 came from these four. Pennsylvania and New York, by contrast, although populous and important, lacked a parallel tradition and were foot draggers in revolutionary commitment.

Chapter 3 weighs the great importance of religion in the Revolution and puts it on a par with two other incitements to action: political and constitutional clashes with Britain, and North America's growing demand for economic self-determination.

Chapter 4 catalogues and assesses colonial economic circumstances and complaints, emphasizing twelve. These include shortages of currency and money, lack of land banks or other banks, growing colonial debt burdens, so-called enumerated commodities (tobacco, rice, et al.) that could only be shipped to Britain, objectionable taxes, oppressive maritime regulation and customs red tape, imperial trade constraints, attempts to limit American population growth, increasingly restrictive British land policies, the transfer to Canadian jurisdiction in 1774 of western territory claimed by leading colonies, constraint of colonial industries like iron making, hats, and woolens, and growing American desire to manufacture what had to be imported from Britain. Simply put, the mushrooming colonies were already more populous than Holland or Switzerland, and British curbs and limitations that had been acceptable in 1750 were becoming unacceptable, even insulting.

The focus of **Chapter 5** is on how the leading colonial cities—Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston—were particular seedbeds of revolution. Emphasis is put on seamen, artisans, and mechanics, and radical militias, the latter a real force in Philadelphia circa 1775.

The expansion of the colonial backcountry—from Maine to Georgia, but particularly in the south—was so pronounced that it unnerved the British. They feared not only the expense of Indian wars but that North America would soon populate beyond London's control. However, as **Chapter 6** shows, the new southern backcountry settlements and large influx of poor whites also disturbed the coastal planter elites, who feared losing control of politics in the Carolinas and Georgia. In both Carolinas,

white settlers who had arrived since 1750 outnumbered the preexisting coastal or low-country white populations by two or three to one. These latter-day settlers provided the framework of civil war in both Carolinas.

[Chapter 7](#), “The Ideologies of Revolution,” casts doubt on the role of abstract ideology or radical pamphleteers in bringing about the American Revolution, which some have asserted. Instead, it emphasizes five broadly ideological factors: *community* (the growth of American nationhood), *commerce* as resentment (colonial frustration over economic subordination), *constitutions* (competing British and American legal concepts), *Calvinism* (with its theology of republican religion and just war), and *conspiracy* (a long-standing English sensitivity further developed in America).

All of these angers and pressures contributed to the Revolution, albeit in different proportions from one colony to the next.

Having surveyed the principal causes and motivations, I’ve aimed in [Part III](#) to shift attention to the Revolution’s major political and military arenas as they emerged and developed in 1775. For historians to describe battlegrounds and confrontations as taking real shape only in 1776 is misleading; it passes over much of the essential context of what happened and why.

In this new vein, [Chapter 8](#) discusses “Fortress New England,” which is meant literally. Although the Patriot elites in Virginia and the Carolinas were not far behind in their politics and mobilization calendar, the four New England colonies, all dating back to the seventeenth century, and all largely English by ancestry, were the most united and cohesive bloc. They were wedded to the belief that Englishmen in colonial Boston, Hartford, or Portsmouth had the same rights as Englishmen living in towns with those same names on the other side of the Atlantic. Because they had forced the issue, the major battles of 1775 were joined in New England or alongside it in upper New York or Canada. New England furnished most of the early soldiers.

The title of [Chapter 9](#), “Declaring Economic War,” means just what it says. In October 1774, the First Continental Congress called for a phased-in popular refusal to import British products, followed by a prohibition against the export to Britain of key commodities like tobacco, rice, and naval stores. This did nothing less than challenge the central economic premise of the imperial system. By April 1775, even before Lexington and Concord, Parliament was identifying nine of the thirteen colonies as rebellious because of their participation.

[Chapter 10](#) underscores how the war tilted north during the summer of 1775 as the British, with many regiments immobilized in Boston, nervously turned to defending Canada against an invasion—and almost lost.

[Chapter 11](#) lays out one of the least-known but highest-priority enterprises of 1774–1775—the global munitions contest to determine whether the would-be rebels would have the gunpowder and arms needed to revolt. For example, although obtaining munitions was only a sidebar to invading Canada, the British commander there in November 1775, General Guy Carleton, was so worried about Quebec falling to the Americans that he returned to Britain a transport stuffed with needed munitions because it was likely to be captured.

Difficult and mismanaged logistics dogged the British from the start, as [Chapter 12](#) details. In late 1775, as war spread, there were too few escort vessels to guard military transports crossing the Atlantic and too few transports to move the British soldiers stuck in Boston to New York where they needed to be.

[Chapter 13](#) details one of the most inept British strategies of 1775—the “southern expedition” conceptualized during the summer and put into motion by the king and Lord North during October and November. It was planned around an early 1776 naval and troop-transport rendezvous off Cape Fear, North Carolina, and it was botched so badly that the British and mercenary regiments expected to

reach New York by spring did not get there until the summer, jeopardizing the 1776 invasion calendar.

British Admiral Samuel Graves's late-summer orders for the Royal Navy to burn seaports along the New England coast became, as [Chapter 14](#) details, a powerful Patriot point of condemnation. Although the Americans themselves were not beyond torching cities—Norfolk, Virginia, and possibly part of Manhattan in 1776—widely regarded as nests of Loyalists, Washington, Adams, and company handily won the propaganda war.

[Chapter 15](#), “Red, White, and Black,” looks at the British-laid plans of 1775 to have hostile Indians raid the American frontier, incite white indentured servants to run away to the British Army, and promise freedom to black slaves who would enlist in His Majesty's forces. Lord Dunmore, the royal governor of Virginia, pursued all three, but his tactics backfired and drove white Virginians toward independence.

[Chapter 16](#) explains how the Britain of 1775 could not fight a major war without hiring large numbers of mercenaries. The Russians were approached first, but refused in November. That meant hiring Hessians, Brunswickers, and other Germans, but their employment offended public opinion in much of Europe, North America, and even Britain.

The Chesapeake region, centered on the thirteen colonies' largest estuary, had a large Loyalist population and might have been an effective British invasion route. [Chapter 17](#) looks at who made the case and how British planners, literally and figuratively, missed the boat in Chesapeake Bay.

[Chapter 18](#) looks at how the American Revolution was also an English-speaking civil war, principally in North America but also to an extent in the British Isles.

Between the summer of 1775 and June 1776, the Continental Congress produced a wide range of proclamations, declarations, and enactments that moved the United Colonies further and further toward independence, with little left undone. [Chapter 19](#) looks at these various “almost-declarations” and makes the argument that the Declaration approved in July was anticlimactic and principally aimed at finalizing American withdrawal from the empire for legal, diplomatic, and treaty-making reasons. But it also had to be agreed to before the arriving British in New York harbor could disembark enough troops to scare New York and New Jersey back into the arms of King George.

[Part IV](#), [Chapters 20](#) through 26, goes beyond individual battles to interpret the overall meaning and significance of the principal campaigns and confrontations of 1775—the “long” 1775 that began in the late summer of 1774 and ended in the spring of 1776, when de facto American independence finally became de jure. From “The Battle of Boston,” fought between the Coercive Acts of 1774 and British withdrawal in March 1776, to Britain's woeful “southern expedition,” bungled from its conception in 1775 to its conclusion in Charleston Harbor, these were auspicious underpinnings for the United Colonies that often go unrecognized.

Several other points need to be made. To begin with, *1775* concentrates on the thirteen British North American colonies that mounted the Revolution. Five that did not—Quebec, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island (St. Jean), East Florida, and West Florida—are mentioned only in passing. There is an interesting larger context, which I discussed in *The Cousins' Wars*. However, to put it simply, these were new colonies created from captured territory in 1763 and either were run by the army or navy or, like Nova Scotia, Quebec, and the Floridas, were home to major British bases. Although each held Patriot sympathizers—as for that matter did Bermuda and the Bahamas—none of these colonies wanted to participate in the Continental Congresses. They were a different breed.

Secondly, in identifying the four vanguard colonies in [Chapter 2](#), it may be well to offer a few sidebars. One powerful reason for picking Connecticut will be fleshed out in the several chapters that discuss military preparedness in 1775. All but independent under its royal charter, Connecticut did not have to change governments in 1775, and its chief executive, ardent Patriot Jonathan Trumbull,

already in office for six years, served eight more through 1783. The colony was uniquely positioned between the three major hot spots of 1775—Boston, New York City, and Lake Champlain—and was uniquely able to raise and send regiments where needed. Trumbull, who worked closely with George Washington, deserves much more recognition than he has ever received.

As to why Virginia and South Carolina are identified as vanguard colonies and North Carolina is not, the latter was neither an old colony nor a national leader. But its rarely recognized importance in discouraging the 70-ship and seven-regiment southern expedition set in motion by King George and Lord North in October 1775 deserves a special mention.

The years 1774 and 1775 have more than their share of unsung heroes. Some of these have provided a further, welcome refreshment in this era of political disappointment.

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

The Spirit of 1775

In one sense it is doubtless true that nobody, in 1775, wanted war; in another sense it is almost equally clear that both the Americans and the British were aching for a showdown.

Henry Steele Commager and Richard B. Morris, *The Spirit of 'Seventy-six*, 1958

How do we account for the hostilities on Lexington Green?...Simple, in that control of munitions was crucial to both sides—to the Americans for making war, to the British for avoiding it.

Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 1971

Such was the arousal and spirit of 1775 that *rage militaire*—a patriotic furor, a passion for arms—swept the thirteen colonies that spring and summer, giving the American Revolution its martial assurance and its vital, if somewhat delusionary, early momentum. Great hopes took hold, and sedentary lawyers, publishers, and preachers pored over their libraries of English political and revolutionary precedents.

Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill sowed confidence, and by summer, scarlet-coated militia might had shrunk back to encircled Boston and a few fast-deserting companies in New York. Following these initial successes, Patriots soon developed “a national conceit of born courage in combat with a sudden acclaim for a superior form of military discipline, easily acquired”—that of a valorous and virtuous citizen soldiery.¹ It was all very heady.

Virtue, the old Roman credo, clad itself in a uniquely American garb. Hunting shirts, belts, and leggings became fashionable, what a later era might term militia chic. Even gentry-minded Virginians cast aside their imported velours and joined in. Before the opening of a June 1775 legislative session in Williamsburg, burgesses were recommended to attend in shirtmen’s garb—frontier-type apparel—“which best suits the times, as the cheapest and the most martial.” And “numbers of the Burgesses did indeed come wearing “coarse linnen or canvas over their Cloaths and a Tomahawk by their Sides.”² New Englanders, informed by Harvard and Yale scholars, boasted that no plausible European army could be large enough to overcome the combination of American space and just cause. In Pennsylvania, even erstwhile pacifist Quakers marched in a volunteer light infantry company nicknamed the “Quaker Blues,” for which some were quickly read out of their monthly meetings.

Three thousand miles away, many British policy makers suffered from an opposite “empire militant” style of conceit. No colonial ruffian could hope to stand up to the professional armies of the world’s preeminent imperium. The revolutionaries would scatter in panic after two or three of their well-known leaders were hung as traitors. General James Grant told amused listeners that he could march from one end of the American colonies to the other with 5,000 British regulars. The king’s aide-de-camp, General Thomas Clark, thought he could do it with 1,000 men, gelding colonial males as he went.³ Boston radicals, “Oliverian” at heart, were the trouble spreaders, subverting loyal and unwary subjects elsewhere. Through much of 1774 and 1775, even as British ministers transferred troops to hostile Boston, they naïvely emptied barracks elsewhere.

Clearly both sides misread some military and political realities. However, the rebels of 1775 had the better reason for confidence. Provincial boundaries of that era being imprecise, disputed, or vague

no researcher can hope to calculate the ratio of the thirteen-colony domain—from Maine (then a district of Massachusetts) south through Georgia—still effectively occupied by British soldiers or administered by functioning officials of His Majesty’s government at year’s end. Whatever the maps in Whitehall or St. James purported to show, the reality on the ground was stark: practically nothing.

Consider: in Virginia and both Carolinas, the summer of 1775 saw Crown-appointed governors ignominiously flee their unfriendly capitals for cramped but seizure-proof accommodations on nearby British warships. In February 1776, the governor of Georgia, all but powerless, finally decamped to a convenient frigate. In most places, the king’s writ no longer ran. In all four southern colonies, Patriot-led provincial congresses and committees of safety had taken extralegal but effective control of government. Forts had been captured, munitions seized, sea actions fought, towns burned, and regiment after regiment mustered into the new Continental Army.



An ocean away, the punitive intentions of King George III also kept growing—from his late-1774 comment about looking forward to putting down rebellion in Massachusetts to his mid-1775 hope of hiring Russian mercenaries, only to settle by year end for Hessians and Brunswickers. Henry Howard twelfth Earl of Suffolk and a principal secretary of state, had agreed that the Russians would make “charming visitors at New-Yorke, and civilize that part of America wonderfully.”⁴ A year before July 4, 1776, the die was all but cast. In fact, participants from King George to John Adams used precisely that phrase, first employed by Julius Caesar when he crossed the Rubicon in 49 B.C.

The reader can learn about these events and escalations in the history books, just not conveniently or in very much detail. Over two centuries, as the Revolutionary War became all but sanctified as “the single most important source for our national sense of tradition,” public attention was diverted from the struggle’s more complicated, less-inspiring realities.⁵ Disregarding the necessities of munitions smuggling and using militiamen to suppress political dissidence, the origins of the republic became ever more romanticized around the assertion of 1776 as a moral and ideological watershed not just for North America but for the world. Events were also confected into neat celebratory symbols like Paul Revere’s ride, George Washington’s greatness, Benjamin Franklin’s genius, Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, Betsy Ross’s flag, and the seriously misrepresented Liberty Bell. Boston, Lexington-Concord, Philadelphia, and Valley Forge became the hallowed venues, with legend-building side excursions to Mount Vernon and Monticello. This adulation has served to minimize comprehension of what actually happened—not least how a *rage militaire* helped put down deep enough early foundations for American nationhood to withstand the disillusionments that mounted in the second half of 1776.

Behind the bunting, reality is not merely a corrective but a more gripping tale. Much of it is scarcely known. Massachusetts and Virginia did play central roles, just as schoolchildren properly learn. However, the sprawling canvas of 1775, beyond even the other eleven insurgent North American colonies, stretches to include events in Bermuda, the Bahamas and the West Indies, Canada, Ireland and the Irish Sea, London, Glasgow, England’s Isle of Wight, the sea lanes off Holland and the Austrian Netherlands (now Belgium), Paris, Nantes, the smuggler-ridden Channel ports of Dunkirk and Ostend, the Prince-Bishopric of Liège (Europe’s principal independent weapons contractor), and Hesse-Cassel and a half dozen other minor principalities in northern Germany, as well as Madrid, Gibraltar, Mediterranean Minorca, and West Africa’s Slave Coast. Intrigue even reached the St. Petersburg palace of Catherine the Great, Russia’s czarina, who scoffed at King George’s Russian troop-hire request. All were venues where British or Americans, publicly or privately, sought critical assistance—mercenaries, munitions, or both. Competition and then confrontation were global.

Another essential subject is rebellion’s political geography—the different degrees of involvement and intensity within the insurgent thirteen. New England’s other three provinces, for example, were scarcely less motivated than Massachusetts. Self-governing Connecticut and Rhode Island, only nominal “colonies,” were in Patriot political hands from the start. In New Hampshire, the royal governor, John Wentworth, soon took refuge in harborside Fort William and Mary. Then in August 1775, he sailed away to Boston on HMS *Scarborough*, which six months later also became home to Georgia’s fugitive executive. In the South, despite the speed shown in driving out royal governors, important divisions lingered. As for the middle colonies—the future states of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware—overall they included the highest ratio of doubters and temporizers. Their indecision during the winter of 1775–1776 worried commander in chief George Washington as well as pro-independence strategists in the Continental Congress. Part of our tale of 1775 involves the often-bitter backstage battle for political allegiance.

Massachusetts: The Coercive Acts as a Seedbed of Revolution

As the North American rampart of the militant Protestantism so involved in England’s two earlier revolutions, New England stood to be—arguably *had* to be—the epicenter of the British imperial crisis of the 1770s. Where King George and his ministers erred was in underestimating the *American* nationalism growing in the other colonies, generated less by Boston’s provocative tea dumping than by the Crown’s overreaction. To many Patriot leaders, the Coercive Acts—in colonial parlance, the

Intolerable Acts—reiterated the prerevolutionary arrogance and practices of Charles I before the English Civil War and of James II before the Glorious Revolution of 1688. But with or without the analogy, the result, as it had been in the previous century, was a growing revolutionary mindset.

On September 12, 1774, the military governor of Massachusetts, Lieutenant-General Thomas Gage, unnerved by summer militia rallies and huge public demonstrations, shared his foreboding in a letter to the American secretary in London, Lord Dartmouth: “It is needless to trouble your Lordship with daily Publications of determined [local] resolutions not to obey the Late Acts of Parliament... The Country People are exercising in Arms in this Province, Connecticut and Rhode Island, and getting Magazines of Arms and Ammunition...and such Artillery as they can procure, good or bad... People are resorting to this town [Boston] for Protection...even [from] Places always esteemed well affected...and Seditious flows copiously from the Pulpits. The Commissioners of Customs have thought it no longer safe or prudent to remain at Salem...and are amongst others come into the Town [Boston], where I am obliged likewise now to reside on many accounts.”⁶ Intermittently optimistic in late spring and early summer, Gage now admitted the truth: New England was all but out of control.

The Bay Colony, proud of its early self-government and charters dating back to 1629, had since May been occupied by four additional regiments of British troops sent to enforce the Boston Port Act and the companion Massachusetts Government Act. These two statutes stood out among the five acts urged by George III and enacted by Parliament between March and June 1774.* Designed not just as punishment for December’s Boston Tea Party, these measures were also expected to caution and humble the other colonies. Instead, the prevalent response was radicalization.

Although the punishment of Massachusetts included installing army commander Gage as governor, by winter neither office gave him any real punitive reach. The farmers of the colony’s interior, less concerned about tea or even the Boston Port Act—this closed Boston harbor to shipping until the dumped tea was paid for—reacted quickly on learning of the colonywide scope of penalties imposed by the Massachusetts Government Act. The Massachusetts Charter of 1691 was eviscerated. Key provisions of the new statute all but eliminated town meetings, ended locally chosen juries, gave the governor sole power to appoint and remove judges, and transferred the selection of the Governor’s Council, the upper legislative house, from elected representatives to Crown appointees.

A third new statute, the Justice Act, inflamed matters further by interfering with traditional British concepts of trial by jury. Under this legislation, someone acting under Crown authority—customs officer, naval captain, soldier, or county sheriff—who was charged with committing a capital crime in performance of his duty could have his trial moved from the province in which the act had been committed. The governor need only decide that no fair trial could be had locally. Concluding that soldiers could shoot and escape punishment, people in Massachusetts called it the “Murder Act,” an epithet echoed by George Washington and other conservative Virginians.⁷ The fourth statute, another Quartering Act, imposed soldiers on unwilling civilians.

The Quebec Act, unrelated but enacted more or less simultaneously, established the Catholic Church in French Canada, while also extending Quebec’s boundaries south to the Ohio River. This was a particular blow to the western territorial claims maintained by Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Virginia under their seventeenth-century charters. Its religious dimension will be examined in [Chapter 3](#); however, the enactment of new constraining and insulting borders was also a frontal challenge to incipient American manifest destiny.

As details crossed the Atlantic in June and July, indignation in Massachusetts deepened into confrontation. From Pittsfield in the western hills to Plymouth in the east, huge crowds in the 3,000- to-5,000-person range rallied in the colony’s principal shire towns to shut down what were now seen as corrupted and compromised local governments, courts in particular. In Worcester, the local militia

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