

Introduction

If you live in the United States in the twenty-first century, you can't escape the American Revolution. Take a drive. Chances are, streets or neighborhoods in your town bear the name "Washington" or "Jefferson" or "Franklin" or "Adams" or "Madison" or "Hamilton," and you live in or near a city or county named for one of the famous founders. Walk by a bookstore or your local library. You'll find a display featuring the latest best-selling founder biography. Take a look in your pocket, and see whose faces stare back at you from the bills in your wallet or the coins in your purse. Mail a letter. Maybe you'll be affixing a "forever" stamp adorned by the Liberty Bell. Got a three-day weekend? Might be Presidents' Day or July 4. If you turn on the TV you'll be greeted with commercials featuring actors in Washington costumes selling you something. Change the channel. Sooner or later, you'll be treated to political campaign commercials that remind us of what the founders wanted for our country and how the candidates honor their intentions. And if you travel to the nation's capital, you'll encounter the founders everywhere. Look up to see the Washington Monument, stand in line at the National Archives to see the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, stroll into the Capitol's rotunda to see Jonathan Trumbull's twelve-by-eighteen-foot paintings of four scenes from the founding period. Wander to the other end of the Mall to gaze at the Jefferson Memorial, across the tidal basin. Get lost in the nearby maze of roads and you might even stumble upon the forlorn memorial to Jefferson's lesser-known Virginia colleague, George Mason.

My favorite place on the National Mall—one of my favorite places in the world, actually—is in the area called Constitution Gardens. North of the Reflecting Pool that stretches between the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial, greenery surrounds a pond maybe an acre's size.

A low footbridge leads to a small, kidney-shaped island. Arrayed in an arc, fifty-six low, polished granite markers, one for each of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, sit grouped according to state delegations. Each stone bears an engraved facsimile of a delegate's signature and his name in block letters. Just a few hundred feet from the rush of busy Constitution Avenue, Signers' Island allows for quiet contemplation. I loved coming to this spot during my years working in Washington, D.C., when I first got the bug to be a professional historian and to specialize in the nation's founding period. I wanted to know how and why the structures and ideas from the founding era came into being, the ones that these men whose names graced the markers had a hand in building. In graduate school, I was fortunate to have Ronald Hoffman as my advisor, a man perhaps as well read on the American Revolution as any other historian. Summers and eventually weekends during the academic year I worked at Colonial Williamsburg, interpreting the Revolutionary era to the general public and school groups. My dissertation and then my first book were about the founding of corporate power in America—something that people had assumed happened sometime late in the nineteenth or early in the twentieth century but, as I argued, was part of the founding bargain of the United States. I teach the Revolution to college students, read about it with my two girls, and, as a citizen, see references to the Revolution in myriad facets of American life. While I still have the passion to research the Revolution itself, I came to realize that I am doing so in a context in which anything written or spoken about the American Revolution inherently holds political and cultural implications.

Despite being a process that occurred more than two centuries ago, and memorialized everywhere, the American Revolution continues to be a subject of controversy. It's rarely the subject of open debate. But the way Americans show it, talk about it, and write about it reveals that we are deeply divided about the Revolution's meaning. Republicans use it one way in speeches, Democrats another. Moviemakers and television production teams engage in spirited discussion about how to portray the Revolution on the big and small screens. Historians trade subtle barbs in their footnotes or, occasionally, open jabs in interviews and opinion pieces. The professionals who design and work in historical sites agonize over what they will show and what they won't, and residents of the communities that host those sites sometimes engage



Figure I.1. Signers' Island: The arc of stones on which are carved the names of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence.

themselves in the process. To show where they stand on pressing political issues, entire social movements name themselves after particular groups of Revolutionaries or Revolutionary-era events. Judges write opinions and legal scholars write law review articles that cite seemingly obscure documents from the 1780s and 1790s. True, other historical events also attract controversy—sometimes the Civil War, World War II, or the Vietnam War—but not across the broad spectrum of American geography, culture, and politics the way our founding period does. The American Revolution might be long over, but to Americans, it's not settled. Considering how historians have interpreted the Revolution, and how I encounter it, I realized that I was looking through the haze of my own preconceptions and view of the world. So, too, were other historians. So, too, are we all. And the more I thought about it, the haze is not even natural; it's more like the "smoke" from a dry ice machine—in other words, a haze largely of our own making. This book attempts to clear the air, if only a little.

Fighting over the Founders illuminates Americans' views of the past as well as the present and plumbs our central conceptions of what our nation means. Is the United States a nation in decline from a golden past, a founding moment of perfection that we can only strive to emulate but are fated to miss the mark? Or did the flawed founders set a standard that they failed but that we are continuing to struggle to approach? How are we to balance the tension between our heritage of individual freedoms and our sense of common purpose toward each other and our country? What is the proper role of government, and what are its limits? What is the nature of belonging to our country—who belongs, and who doesn't? How do we negotiate between the enduring wisdom of the founding fathers and their only-human inability to see fully their own time or the future? These are the kinds of answers that we seek every time the American Revolution comes up, whether we're watching a movie, reading a book, attending a march, pleading a case, or going to a historic site. The American Revolution is so distant from us that, in a nation of now over 315 million people, no more than a handful of our grandparents' grandparents could have remembered it, and it is far enough away that we can easily bend its interpretation to meet our purposes (whether intentionally or inadvertently). But because of how well documented our founding generation is, and how its figures and events so suffuse our popular and political culture and even our daily life, the Revolution is one of the prime ways that we ask, answer, and debate these questions. We live in the founders' world, just as they live in ours.

This book aims to untangle the ways that battles over the contemporary memory of the American Revolution serve as proxies for America's contemporary ideological divide. One strand of contemporary Revolutionary memory, which I call "essentialism," relies on the assumption that there was one American Revolution led by demigods, resulting in an inspired governmental structure and leaving a legacy from which straying would be treason and result in the nation's ruin. The essentialist view suggests a concept of history as a single text with one discernible meaning and so is inherently conservative in its outlook and in its prescriptions for the Revolution's contemporary lessons, which often emphasize private property, capitalism, traditional gender roles, and protestant Christianity. I use the term "essentialist" advisedly, as it's a term that refers to concepts with a long history. The ancient Greek philosopher

Plato proposed that all sets of objects have a true, eternal form, and each individual instance of the set is a copy that has some essence of that form. Every tiger is a manifestation of tigerness, every oak tree is manifestation of oakreeness, and so on. In more modern times, the idea has been used and challenged in many fields, among them psychology, philosophy, and biology. It continues to hold currency among many Americans: the notion that men and women are necessarily different and have inherent behavioral patterns (“men are tough,” “women like to gossip”) is a kind of essentialist thinking. I’m applying the term “essentialism” to a strand of contemporary memory of the American Revolution in the sense that the Revolution, too, is often portrayed as having one, true, knowable, unchanging meaning for us now and forever: an essence. In the coming pages, I also describe the essence that many politicians, writers, museums, activists, and reenactors express, wittingly or not. From a purely essentialist standpoint, the suggestions that George Washington was not a hero or that Great Britain was not tyrannous are not interpretations to be debated; they’re flat-out wrong.

At the other end of the spectrum, those Americans espousing what I label the “organicist” interpretation of the Revolution agree with essentialists in that the nation has changed over the last two centuries, but they have a different sense of how we think of the past. For organicists, there are many pasts that may share elements but no one fixed truth. Rather, the past must be interpreted to be understood. According to this train of thought, you and I might have different but, depending on the evidence, equally compelling conceptions of the American Revolution: you might insist that white Virginians revolted primarily because they wanted to keep their slaves, and I might insist that white Virginians revolted primarily because they resented British governance, and we could both have a legitimate claim to be debated. While the essentialists see a Revolution with a perfect result, organicists believe that Americans are ever in the process of trying to complete a Revolution that the founders left unfinished. They see themselves furthering the never-ending task of perfecting the union through an inclusive multiculturalism that looks to celebrate historical agency in the Revolutionary era and embodies, not eighteenth-century actualities, but the lofty words associated with the Declaration of Independence. I chose the term “organicism” because it fits this view of history itself, as something that changes

over time, in step with differing conditions, almost like a living thing. It's a less perfect fit than "essentialism." Very late in the process of writing this book, Clara Platter (my editor) and I discussed the suitability of other terms, like "pluralism" or "evolutionism," but they had their own drawbacks. We also discussed using a phrase, but that would have been stylistically messier than using one word as an easy shorthand. Plus, I was already in print using the term "organicism," so organicism it is. In writing as in life, sometimes we seek the best fit, rather than perfection.

Many Americans and foreign observers have noted that we seem to be the only country whose citizens want to be in conversation with our founders, as though men dead for two centuries would still have much to tell us. There's more than a little truth to that charge, to which some Americans reply that the United States is exceptional among nations and that our founders possessed uncanny sagacity that transcends time and space. Both sides are partly right. Neither the United States nor its founders hold a monopoly on wisdom, political or otherwise, and a quick look at a globe shows that there are many democracies no less functional and no more dysfunctional than ours. Furthermore, all countries have their heroes, their exemplars who appear on stamps and money, are the subjects of biographies and movies, get mentioned in political speeches, and become cast in bronze. The United States is not the only country that engages in what sociologist Robert Bellah called a "civil religion." Nonetheless, the American Revolution was indeed unusual, as is its relation to the American present. Unlike many other countries, the United States can point to a period of less than two decades as its seminal founding moment. Most other nations have either multiple founding moments or have lived through various evolutions. Unlike the United States, most countries trace their origins to ethnicity and language, rather than to the establishment of a particular political structure. The United States retains its governmental form from the federal constitution that served as the Revolution's crowning achievement, and so its citizens look to the people who established that form as authorities on it. Most other countries have been through multiple iterations of their national governments. The founding generation of the United States was a particularly articulate bunch, whose vast public and private writings have been preserved, ever at the ready. Few other nations have a single generation of leaders that happen to have

left such a wordy legacy, always available for apparent authority and, perhaps, exploitation.

Americans debate that legacy because we perceive a lot is at stake. In any society, ownership of an authoritative past provides a powerful political rhetorical weapon. Ernst Renan, one of the first analysts of nationalism, proposed that a nation is composed of two principles: “One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.” More recently, theorist Benedict Anderson conceived nations as “imagined communities.” Countries are too big for people to know more than those in their local communities. What binds them, then, is a sense of common belonging, and among those things that people in a nation share is a store of memories. In all nations, the ability to claim an authoritative version of crucial national memories makes for powerful ammunition in fundamental debates. Defining memory defines the nation, and defining the nation means the privileging of some values and policies over others. We’ve long sparred over government’s role in economic and civil affairs. Did we have a primarily limited Revolution, dedicated only to independence, or a broader Revolution that was also about equality? The Revolution’s richness as a historical process, its broad cast of characters, and the expansive scope of its contrasting principles offers a great deal for us to latch onto. In speech, poetry, and literature, a “synecdoche” is a part that stands in for the whole. In American civic and cultural life, the Revolution stands as the perfect synecdoche for the nation, specific enough for us to be able to use its words and deeds but distant enough so that the differences in detail between the eighteenth century and today can be glossed over.

Our recent rise in interest with the American Revolution coincides with anxieties concerning nationalism. The phenomenon of Revolution-related best sellers and movies arrived at the cusp of a cultural moment in which Americans increasingly associated patriotism with militarism—a typical reaction of a nation at war, and one that the United States has experienced before. The biggest scare in the headlines during the summer of 2001 was shark attacks, notwithstanding that the probability of shark attacks continued to be far lower than being struck by lightning, even for beachgoers. But after September 11

that year, an unabashed American patriotism combined with a faith in violence to achieve security washed over the airwaves. The rhetoric of fear to be resisted by violence resonated in American news media. The U.S. Department of Defense's brilliant policy of "embedding" reporters with military units during the U.S. invasion of Iraq led to breathlessly supportive press coverage, especially because the practice lent itself to focusing on human interest stories rather than investigative reporting. Military press conferences held in a quarter-million-dollar TV-network quality briefing room from Qatar further glamorized a war while minimizing its negative consequences. Perhaps there was no better example of governmental media manipulation than the Bush Administration policy of forbidding press photography of American servicemen's coffins. Lest we think these attempts by the federal government to influence public perceptions during a war were either new or overly partisan on the part of a Republican president, we should remember that the Democratic Roosevelt Administration pioneered similar strategies during World War II. As we will see upon examination of the film *The Patriot*, national defense sometimes become conflated with national values. Recent invocations of the American Revolution can serve as bellwethers in the greater cultural debates concerning whether varying opinions and the challenging of leaders weaken the nation or contribute to American vitality.

For the pluralistic nation that is the United States, the tussle over the Revolution has also increasingly become a debate about belonging. As such, the Revolution has served as a roundabout way to debate the merits of multiculturalism, that is, the idea that citizens of an ethnically, racially, ideologically, and religiously diverse nation like the United States should embrace and celebrate its many pasts and presents, rather than cling to one story for everyone. Is our country primarily white, primarily Christian, primarily heterosexual? If so, then we might emphasize the founding fathers; if not, then we might consider many other Revolutionary-era Americans. Opponents of multiculturalism argue that it unnecessarily divides Americans rather than emphasizing their commonalities. In some ways, multiculturalism's friendly critics have offered more trenchant critiques. They charge that its categories are too rigid or so socially constructed as to be meaningless, that it fails to account for multiethnic people; that it further privileges gendered

cultural norms; and that cultural diversity has often been pursued at the expense of class diversity, especially among whites. The engagement with multiculturalism in the academic study of the American Revolution has resulted in the broadening of topics of inquiry and thus broadening understanding, as well as, in some cases, fundamentally altering considerations of what caused the Revolution. The main challenge with the application of a multicultural ethos to interpretations of the American Revolution is that multiculturalism is a social and philosophical sensibility, rather than an explanation of historical process or reality. By the same token, a past that only celebrates the founding fathers is no more representative of the fledgling United States, a nation born with about 2.5 million people, women and men, over a quarter of whom were people of color, and who worshipped in many religious denominations (or chose not to worship at all).

Those battles over the Revolution's meaning raged even before the ink was dry on what we now consider our sacred founding documents. As early as the 1780s, farmers protesting against raised state taxes and other policies friendly to creditors complained that such policies violated the "Spirit of '76." Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, allies in the writing the Federalist Papers to promote the Constitution's ratification, eventually sparred over the original intention of various clauses. Thomas Jefferson continued calling his enemies "tories" for decades. In the 1820s, wealthy Bostonians began celebrating a hitherto-forgotten local event by calling it a "tea party" so as to downplay the radicalism of the mass destruction of private property. Some abolitionists seized on the Declaration of Independence's promise that "all men are created equal," while William Lloyd Garrison blasted the Constitution as "an agreement with hell" for its entrenchment of slavery. Both sides in the Civil War claimed to be acting on the founders' legacy. Turn-of-the-twentieth-century nativist writers and politicians bemoaned what they perceived as the cultural chasm between the new immigrants and Anglo-Saxon American Revolutionaries. Various ethnic groups countered with founders of their own: Baron Friedrich von Steuben (German), Tadeusz Kosciuszko (Polish), and Haym Solomon (Jewish). Isolationists seized on Washington's warning against "foreign entanglements" to oppose action against Hitler in the 1930s, while those favoring the allies called it a fight against tyranny no less than the Revolution. The founders were

both in favor of and against the Vietnam War and civil rights for African Americans and women. Thomas Jefferson applauded President Ronald Reagan's attempts to devolve some federal responsibilities to the states but not his exploding of the federal deficit. And Alexander Hamilton, whose extramarital affair with Maria Reynolds was the first sex shocker in U.S. politics, was both sympathetic with and appalled by Bill Clinton during the controversy over his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. We continue today to enlist the founders for our own political battles and to invoke the Revolution in our culture.

We should not go further without a common understanding of what I mean by the "American Revolution." For my purposes, the American Revolutionary era spans from the mid-1760s—that is, from the passage of the Stamp Act (1765)—through the ratification of the federal constitution in 1788. It encompasses the many political, social, military, economic, and cultural changes people experienced along the Eastern Seaboard in the area that became the United States. My American Revolution did not end with the Battle of Yorktown (1781) or with the Treaty of Paris (1783)—when Britain acknowledged the new nation—any more than the French Revolution ended with the execution of Louis XVI. Instead, the American Revolution continued through the establishment of a broadly recognized, stable national government—thus making the distinction between the War of Independence and the overall Revolution. Deciding when a historical process begins and ends is an interpretation unto itself. If we think of the Civil War as beginning with the firing on Fort Sumter (1861) and ending with Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox (1865), then it was primarily a military struggle; if we think of it as beginning with Southern states' secession (1860) and ending with the close of Reconstruction (1877), then it was about states' relation to the federal government; and if we think of the Civil War as beginning with the *Dred Scott* case (1857), when the Supreme Court declared that the enslaved were not citizens, and ending with *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), when the Supreme Court applied the doctrine of "separate but equal," then the Civil War was about African Americans' legal status. I begin my American Revolution with the protests over the Stamp Act because that was the moment at which many colonial British Americans first questioned the legitimacy of British authority over them, and I end it with the ratification of the Constitution because that

moment signaled that most Americans—the free white ones, anyway—recognized the new national and state governments as being legitimate. It's an interpretation that also holds the virtue of being in line with that of most historians and the general public.

Just as defining the “then” is necessary, so is defining the “now.” This book covers the years from about 2000 through 2012. There are some outliers. With presidential campaigns seeming to begin nearly moments after the last one's been decided, I included candidates' speeches from 1999. Similarly, big-budget movies take years to evolve from a gleam in the writer's eye to a cinema projector's beams, so I cast back into the late 1990s to consider the development of *The Patriot*. Debates over Thomas Jefferson's paternity of Sally Hemings's children heated up with the publication of Annette Gordon-Reed's *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* in 1997, the same year that Joseph Ellis's best-selling *American Sphinx* hit the shelves. Those pre-millennial milestones were to some extent related: an election featuring wide-open primaries in both parties, the first blockbuster on the American Revolution in decades, and the reopening of a controversy concerning one of the foundingest of fathers, so to speak. In addition, not long after the turn of the twenty-first century, a controversy erupted over how the Liberty Bell and the first president's house would be interpreted, and David McCullough's best-selling *John Adams* arrived in bookstores. In the 2000s, Supreme Court majority opinions for the first time would show the full fruit of originalism, and the tea party movement made its appearance at the decade's close. American culture, too, changed significantly in the 2000s, as opposed to the 1990s, with the ubiquity of the Internet and increasing political and cultural polarization. Whether the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the political and cultural reaction to them were intensifications of trends beginning in the decades before or departures from them, everyone who lived through the 2000s knew that they felt different from the preceding years. For each chapter, I considered my subject matter in the context of what had gone before, mostly relying on the work of previous writers who investigated those times. But in the interest of consistency and brevity, this book sticks pretty much to the twenty-first century.

I'm far from the first to consider our collective memory of the American Revolution. The historian Wesley Frank Craven remarked in a 1955

lecture, “Of the many different ways of calling the common tradition to witness as to the right and wrong of a current issue, none has been so favored among Americans as the simple and direct appeal to a standard presumably raised by the founding fathers.” The most authoritative scholar of Americans’ memory of the Revolution from the eighteenth century through the Revolutionary Bicentennial in 1976, Michael Kammen, agreed with Craven in suggesting Americans have mostly remembered our Revolution in a conservative way. For Kammen, Americans have cast their Revolution as a national coming of age, rather than as a fundamental debate about rights, liberties, and obligations. But as Kammen argued, that perception has also led to the idea that the United States has remained unchanged since that moment, stuck in amber as a youthful country trying to preserve its innocence (or, perhaps, naïveté). Some historians have chronicled how Americans have remembered particular founders over the decades, noting how Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton’s stars have waxed and waned, not only in relation to each other’s, but also in relation to contemporary battles over the size of government and the degree to which it should be active in the economy. Scholars have considered how particular historical sites like Colonial Williamsburg (funded originally by the Rockefeller family) or Independence Hall (operated by the National Park Service) put into practice their sponsors’ visions of how their visitors should perceive the nation. Authors have tracked the Revolutionary afterlife of particular events (the Boston Tea Party), documents (the Constitution), and even symbols (the Liberty Bell) to illuminate Americans’ mixed anxieties and dreams concerning class, governance, and race, respectively. But, to my knowledge, no one has considered memory of the American Revolution more broadly since the turn of the twenty-first century. That’s what this book aims to do.

My use of the first person marks a departure from my previous writing and from nearly all books written by academically trained historians in this country. Compared to sociologists, ethnologists, and cultural critics, American historians are notoriously un-reflexive, and historians of the American Revolution are perhaps among the least reflexive of the bunch. That is, we’re taught not to think about our research in relation to ourselves or, even worse, to mention ourselves in our work. One of my graduate school professors counseled us to “remove the scaffolding”

from our writing. What he meant was that when we were finished with a piece, we were to go back through it and remove any reference to our thought process so what the reader saw was a perfect edifice, as if constructed out of thin air. He learned that metaphor from one of his professors, Edmund Morgan, who taught dozens of graduate students in his forty years at Yale, and that approach is pretty standard in the profession. The advantage of the method is that it can clear prose to make way for great stories without the distraction of moving between the past and the present. But there's a danger, too. Such fluid history writing gives us the illusion that there is one past that stands on its own, there for the discovering, rather than being shaped by the interpretation of human beings—humans who, despite their best intentions, cannot help but to come to the material at hand with a range of experiences and values. And by not writing out loud about those values, we deny to our readers and ourselves necessary information for evaluating our work: why we include and why we leave out, why we praise and why we condemn. Those are partly judgments of craft, but at one level or another, they are always informed by our experiences, our education, and our values.

So here are mine. I grew up in what most Americans would call an “upper-middle-class” Jewish home in northern New Jersey, but by nearly any quantifiable measure, in other countries we'd be referred to as “wealthy.” Both my parents had graduate degrees, and my older brother preceded me to college. I attended a small but high-quality public high school and a very prestigious college (Yale), and afterward I worked in management for a major corporation and then as a database analyst for a Washington, D.C., contractor for the Department of Justice. Living in the nation's capital amid monuments to the Revolution made me want to explore the origins of today's political structures, so I went to the College of William & Mary to study the American Revolution. Since 2001, my wife and I (and now our two daughters) have lived in a small midwestern town with a mid-size state university, where we both teach. Although my graduate training was pretty typical of history, I always had the notion that any complex problem required multiple methods to understand it. My dissertation and first book featured not only the kind of historical methodology that I had learned in graduate school but also economics, the philosophy of technology, a little architectural history, and social network analysis. I leaped at the opportunity to teach in an

interdisciplinary American Culture Studies program, and doing so led me to think differently not only about history but also about memory. I've always been fairly liberal in the contemporary American sense, culturally and politically, but I am much less dogmatically so than I used to be, or, perhaps more accurately, maybe I'm just more willing to see multiple sides to complicated questions. I came to this book out of the realization that in order for me and other historians to understand the American Revolution better, we had to become aware of the lenses through which Americans encounter the Revolution today.

One of my goals in writing this book was to take every interpretation seriously. I conducted in-person, phone, and email conversations with scores of public history professionals, movie and TV industry people, historians, and reenactors (and even a brewer). All graciously shared their thoughts. Without exception, they earnestly desired to understand the American Revolution and to portray it accurately and responsibly within the context of their vocation. They had consulted archives, engaged in deep conversations with collaborators and internal reviewers, lavished money (or, in the case of Hollywood, other people's money), and spent months or years working to understand their subjects, often to what might appear to other people as trivial detail. Out of respect for them, I read and re-read speeches and books, visited historical sites multiple times, and played DVDs, hit the "back" button, and played them again. As the pages ahead reveal, I don't agree with every portrayal, and some I take strong issue with. But just as we academic historians preach to our students that people in the past were not less smart than we are just because they didn't have smartphones and that we must try to understand people in the past no matter how much their values clash with ours, so, too, I have assumed that the people who produce the works analyzed here did so smartly and in good faith. I have endeavored to grapple with politicians, speechwriters, screenwriters, authors, reenactors, directors, public historians, and jurists on their own terms. Their expressions of the American Revolution constitute forms of understanding the past, each appropriate to its own medium and logic. History produced by academic historians, too, follows its own logic and conventions to generate products about the human past. Readers will find that I'm least tender with professional historians and legal theorists. Of all the people in this book, we are ones who have

chosen a life of ideas and have the opportunity to write at length and with nuance. We work in genres that allow for being thoughtful. When we're not, we should be taken to account.

I began this book with grand ambitions: to write the comprehensive tome on the American Revolution in contemporary America. I would read all the popular books crowding bookstore shelves and Amazon best-seller lists, go to all the historical sites and tourist destinations, cover all of politics, watch all the movies and TV shows and documentaries, and scour the Internet for sites, blogs, and discussions. I quickly realized that such a task was neither possible nor desirable. Material comes out faster than any one person can keep up with. In addition, a broad sweep risked my making generalizations that might be interesting but at the expense of deeper understanding. I decided to be more particular. "Truths That Are Not Self-Evident: The Revolution in Political Speech" concentrates on the speeches and debates of Republican and Democratic presidential primary candidates and nominees. "We Have Not Yet Begun to Write: Historians and Founders Chic" explores best-selling non-fiction books about the Revolution and the founders. "We the Tourists: The Revolution at Museums and Historical Sites" examines historical sites in Philadelphia, as well as Mount Vernon, Monticello, and Colonial Williamsburg. My consideration of the American Revolution on-screen ("Give Me *Liberty's Kids*: How the Revolution Has Been Televised and Filmed") focuses on the biggest productions: *The Patriot*, the *National Treasure* franchise, *Liberty's Kids*, and *John Adams*. "To Re-create a More Perfect Union: Originalism, the Tea Party, and Reenactors" delves into the commonalities and differences among constitutional originalists, minutemen, tea partiers, and reenactors trying to bring the Revolution into the present. Admittedly, there's much that's missed. Other books, other films, other historical sites, other speeches. Readers might want more concerning two areas in particular that this book does not address. School textbooks and curricula have become increasingly politicized, and the founding era has been among the areas of contention for state boards of education. There have also been several video games set in the Revolution. Others writers, though, have taken on those tasks. Besides, if one expands a book to encompass everything, it would never be completed. Whether the following pages do justice to what I have covered is for you, Dear Reader, to judge.