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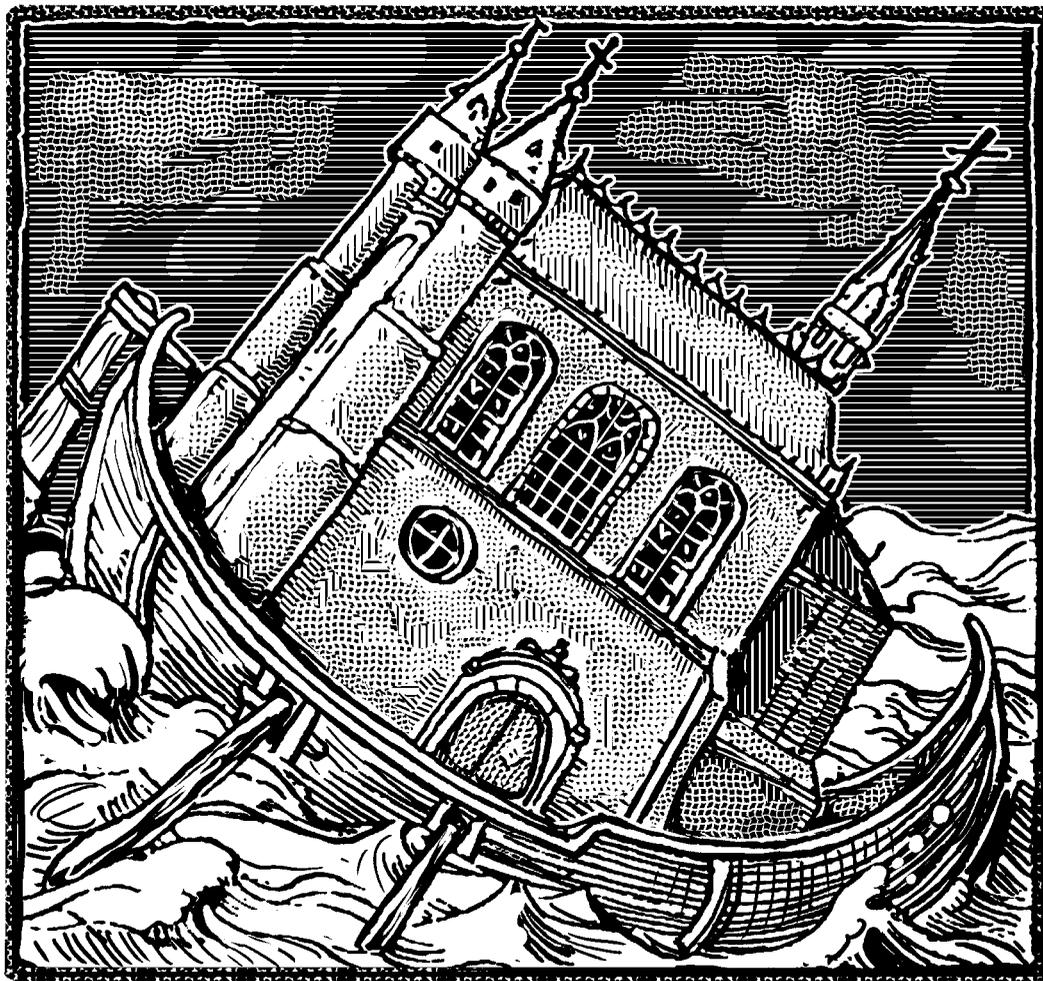
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Book Review by Ralph Ketcham

LOSING FOCUS

American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750–1804, by Alan Taylor.
W.W. Norton & Company, 704 pages, \$37.50 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper)



ALAN TAYLOR'S *AMERICAN REVOLUTIONS: A Continental History, 1750–1804* is a wonderful book. Taylor provides a careful, concise account of the quarrels, wars, diplomacy, frontier and internal skirmishes, and uprisings that occurred in North America, from Canada down through Central America and the Caribbean, between 1750 and 1804. The result is the placing of the “American Revolution” between white American colonists and the British Empire (1775–1783) in a much larger context. One can see in Taylor’s simple chapter titles the range and scope of his book: “Colonies,” “Land,” “Slaves,” “Rebels,” “Allies,” “Loyalties,” “Wests,” “Oceans,” “Shocks,” “Republics,” “Partisans,” and “Legacies.” Only the chapters on Loyalties, Wests, and Oceans center on the events usually understood as *the American Revolution*.

A Pulitzer-Prize winning professor of history at the University of Virginia, Taylor explains how in the 17th and 18th centuries largely white European slave-owning colonists settled between Boston and Charleston, helping Britain gain dominance in North America against Spain and France and their

neighboring colonies. In the process, Taylor explains, the colonists came to think of themselves, like their British forbearers, as “especially blessed and enlightened by commerce, civil liberties, the common law, and their Protestant faith,” compared to the “economically backward, religiously superstitious, culturally decadent, and submissive to despotic rule” French and Spanish colonies. Possessed of British ideas of government by the consent of the governed, the colonists took part in the titanic struggle for control of the vast lands of the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys. Siding with the mother country in the “Great War for Empire” against France (1754–1763), the colonists helped France lose her lands in Canada and east of the Mississippi to Britain, and west of the river and in Florida to Spain.

Assured of their right and destiny to fill the lands between the Appalachians and the Mississippi, the colonists sent settlers and militia to drive out Native Americans and their European supporters, launching a half-century of frontier warfare. Supposedly seeking freedom for all, settlers moved with their slaves into the new lands and made vassals

of, or exterminated, the Native Americans. What Thomas Jefferson imagined would be an “Empire of Liberty” was often an empire of oppression for non-whites and led to many “revolts” among the slaves and Native Americans, as well as among groups of white settlers seeking “sovereignty” in the newly occupied western lands.

MAKING CAREFUL AND LEARNED USE of studies of slaves, Native Americans, and Loyalists, including his own previous works, *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia: 1772–1832* (2013) and *The Divided Ground: Indians, Settlers, and the Northern Borderland of the American Revolution* (2006), Taylor presents a fuller view of the American Revolution. He offers new details about the use by Lord Dunmore, Virginia’s last British governor, of freed slaves to battle Virginia patriots seeking to protect their property in their slaves. Loyalists from Massachusetts to South Carolina formed militias to fight the patriot army of George Washington and support the British armies sent to North America. Skirmishes and “revolutions” against



oppression permeated the larger American Revolution. Taylor's view of that revolution is more nuanced and conflicted than the traditional one. Historians have long known many details of this view, but Taylor offers a clear and well-organized account.

Reminiscent of Charles Beard's landmark progressive tract, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913), Taylor's approach sees the patriots as a well-organized, elitist group of Northern merchants, financiers, market-connected farmers, small businessmen, state political leaders, and Southern slave owners determined to protect their property and extend the limited self-rule they had enjoyed during the years of Britain's benign neglect. The loyalists were largely back-country yeoman farmers in need of British protection, and well-established, wealthier farmers and city-dwellers who sought to preserve their local political power and good social standing with their British overlords. The American Revolution was thus a class struggle between what John Adams said was the one third of the population who supported the Revolution and the one third who opposed it (the other third supposedly were neutral or indifferent to it). This division persisted under different terms during efforts to form the state constitutions after 1776, government under the Articles of Confederation, efforts to form and ratify the new Constitution, and to establish partisan control of the new government in the 1790s.

Taylor notes that most revolutionary patriots had "genteel manners, family connections, elite education, and superior wealth." He quotes "a New York grandee, Robert R. Livingston, Jr." who argued that "the better sort' alone should govern because 'the learned, the wise, the virtuous...are all aristocrats.'" "While seeking home rule," Taylor argues, these aristocrats "meant still to rule at home." They had little interest "to empower the poor, free the enslaved, or grant rights to women." In conducting the war, establishing self-governing states, and governing under the Articles of Confederation, the patriot elite continued to fear uprisings of the

common people (like Shays' Rebellion) as a threat to their aristocratic rule, and worked to replace the Articles with a stronger national government. The establishment of such a government in 1789 left the elites in charge, and the undercurrent of class struggle submerged into the partisan politics of the 1790s. Women, slaves, yeoman farmers, frontiersmen, and the poor remained as oppressed and marginalized as they had been before the struggle with Great Britain had begun in the 1760s.

Taylor acknowledges that important advances in republican self-government were achieved by the elite patriots of 1776–1789, but argues that there was no radical change in the lives of the common people. In emphasizing the period's economic and social features, though, Taylor too much downplays the changes in government that were epochally important in creating a new state in the former British colonies. John Adams noted that far from beginning in 1776, the essence of the revolution was over by then. It had, he declared in his old age, occurred "in the minds and hearts of the people" as they had debated their decreasing allegiance to the British Empire in the previous decade. "This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people was the real American Revolution." What had happened in 1776, Abraham Lincoln noted "four score and seven years" later, was that "Our forefathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." These new convictions and sentiments, soon to be validated in the Revolutionary War, effected the real Union that would draft and ratify the Constitution in 1787–88 and establish republican government in the 1790s.

Chief Justice John Marshall and ex-president and congressman John Quincy Adams—revered patriots of the revolutionary war and leaders of the new government—held the same view of the Union in the 1830s. Marshall, in a Fourth of July address, approved Adams's assertion that "the Declaration of Independence itself is also a

declaration of a previously existing union. That the independence of the states is a graft on the stock of the union, and is nourished by that stock." Quincy Adams replied that his "view of the Declaration of Independence [was of] a Proclamation of Union already formed, by the whole People of the United States." It is "almost unaccountable to me," he reaffirmed, referring to the preamble to the Constitution, "that these three initial words in our present compact of National Union have no meaning, and that the parties to the bargain are the States." Adams and Marshall were refuting John C. Calhoun's thesis that the union was simply an agent of the states, enabling them to live together as each preserved its special interests and regional needs, and could be dissolved by any of the states to save their "peculiar institutions."

Rather, the Union, conceived in liberty and dedicated to equality, gave timeless purpose to the Constitution it created. It provided government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" in a government intending, to "transmit this City not only not less, but greater, better, and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us," to borrow the words of Athens's Ephebic Oath. This was the inspiration of most of the founders and of the millions of citizens who followed them—more deeply important, probably, than the welter of regional, race, class, gender, and selfish interests Alan Taylor outlines so fully. He furnishes us with a learned and brilliantly inclusive understanding of the myriad dimensions of the revolutions taking place in the Atlantic world in the last half of the 18th century. But he too little emphasizes the supremely significant *political* revolution, full earnest and brilliant in its own right.

Ralph Ketcham (1927–2017) was the Maxwell Professor Emeritus of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, and the author of many books, including *James Madison: A Biography* (University of Virginia Press), *Presidents Above Party: The First American Presidency, 1789–1829* (University of North Carolina Press), *Individualism and Public Life* (Wiley-Blackwell), and *The Idea of Democracy in the Modern Era* (University Press of Kansas).

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