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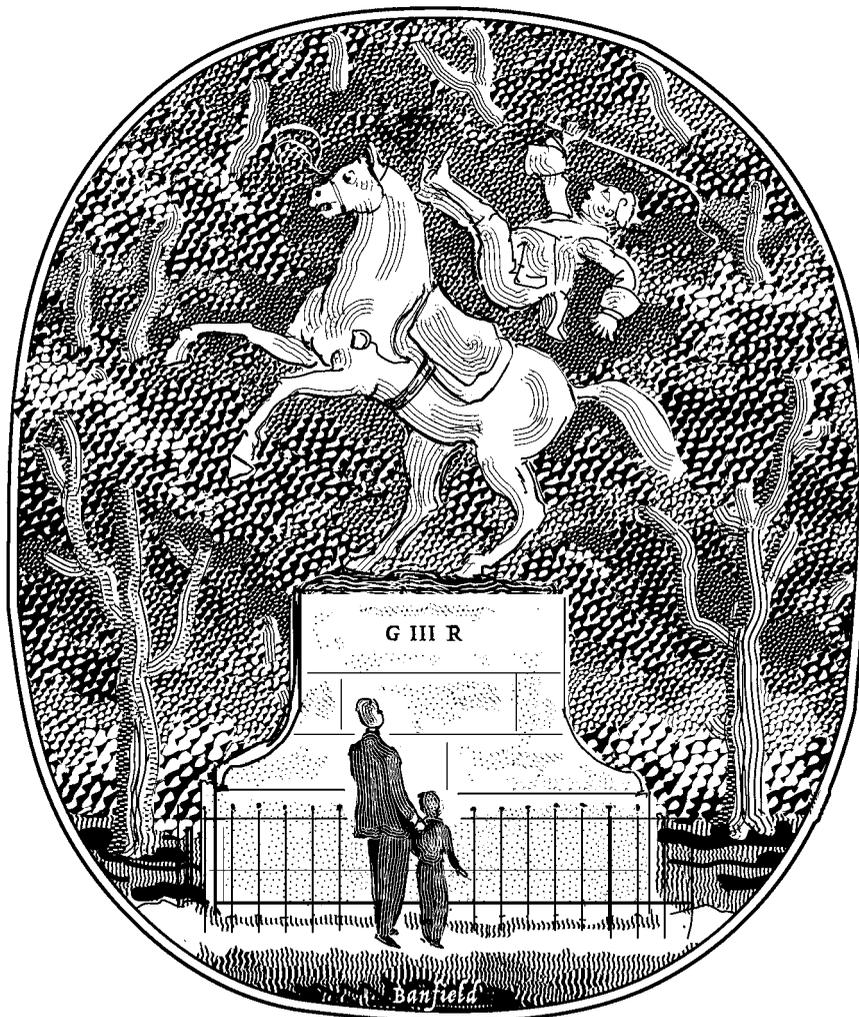
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Book Review by Andrew Roberts

THE REGULARS ARE COMING!

The British Are Coming: The War for America, Lexington to Princeton, 1775–1777, by Rick Atkinson.
Henry Holt and Co., 800 pages, \$40



RICK ATKINSON HAS WON ONE PULITZER Prize for journalism and another for history, and if the next two volumes of his Revolutionary War trilogy are as good as *The British Are Coming*, he'll probably scoop a third. The research and scholarship is all one would expect from the author of the World War II trilogy *An Army at Dawn* (2002), *The Day of Battle* (2007), and *The Guns at Last Light* (2013), and the writing incisive, humane, humorous, and often scintillating.

Despite the subtitle dates, Atkinson opens in June 1773, with King George III's review of the Royal Navy at Portsmouth—a high point in British self-confidence and power only six months before the Boston Tea Party. Atkinson supplies an invaluable 50-page explanation of how the 150-year-long Anglo-American relationship collapsed before those

famous shots “heard round the world” at Lexington and Concord in April 1775. The book ends with George Washington's victories in 1777 at the Second Battle of Trenton on January 2 and the Battle of Princeton on January 3.

The war is told from the ordinary soldiers' point of view on both sides, but without losing sight of grand strategy. Atkinson doesn't fall into the trap of some military histories of allowing the tactics to obscure the overall big picture. He moves effortlessly from the plans of commanders to the campfires of troops. The extraordinary scholarship involved—his meticulous endnotes cover 133 pages—is testament to a historian at the very top of his game.

The title of the book is of course something of a misnomer, as Atkinson recognizes. Paul Revere would not have shouted “The British are coming!” because many colonists still con-

sidered themselves “British” in 1775. Revere instead probably shouted, “The regulars are coming out,” which, admittedly, doesn't have the same resonance as a book title.

AS AN ENGLISHMAN, I WAS SET ON finding yet another American depiction of George III as something between the tyrant of Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence and the joke villain of Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*. Instead, Atkinson presents him as an enlightened monarch—indeed almost a renaissance prince—whose interest in physics, music, astronomy, horticulture, and the arts was deep and genuine. Atkinson portrays no “royal brute of Britain” (in the words of Tom Paine's *Common Sense*) but someone who, three thousand miles away and served by several dis-

tinently mediocre ministers and generals, was constantly outmaneuvered both politically and militarily.

It was George III's great tragedy to have lived at the same time as a constellation of founding geniuses. What extraordinary bad luck to have as his antagonists a political draftsman of the brilliance of Thomas Jefferson, a soldier of the courage and bloody-minded doggedness of George Washington, a propagandist of the literary fluidity of Tom Paine, a financial brain as astute as that of Alexander Hamilton, a diplomat as charismatic as Benjamin Franklin, ideological rabble-rousers with such a flair for revolution as Patrick Henry and Samuel Adams, and legislative leaders of the calibre of John Adams and James Madison. It is tremendously rare for so much sheer talent to congregate around a single cause in a single country at a singular moment of history, and King George should not be considered a fool or an incompetent for having been consistently outwitted.

“UNKIND AND UNTRUE THINGS OFTEN were said of him,” says Atkinson of the last king of America—for instance, that he could not read until he was 11, whereas in fact he was fluent in English and German at eight. The king “was never known to sign a death warrant without expressing visible emotions,” said a contemporary—although those emotions were not permitted to halt the signature. Atkinson mentions Paine's “wild inaccuracies” and describes the king as “an admirable man of parts—diligent, dutiful, habitually moderate, peevish but rarely bellicose.... He was frugal in an age of excess, pious at a time of impiety.” The author is wrong in stating that George III liked Shakespeare; it was an unusual gap in his otherwise excellent literary tastes that he did not. (He once told Fanny Burney, “Was there ever such stuff as the great part of Shakespeare? Only it's *Shakespeare*, and nobody dare abuse him.”)

“He was no autocrat, but his was the last word,” writes Atkinson; “absent strong, countervailing voices from his ministers, his influence would be paramount, particularly with respect to, say, colonial policy.” One of the tragedies of George III's reign was that despite its 60 years—the longest of any English king—there were few dissenting voices from his ministers for there were few powerful personalities among them. The king took against the only one—William Pitt the Elder—in favor of concessions to avert war.

If George III had been less dutiful and engaged, he might have hung on to the American colonies longer, although they almost certainly would have broken off from what he called “the Mother Country” at some stage. He fretted over the national debt, especially that part of it incurred financing the French and Indian

War. Had that war not been so successful in negating the threat to the Americans from both the French and Indians the colonists might have hung on to the Mother Country's apron strings a little longer. History's iron law of unintended consequences is a powerfully recurring presence throughout this book.

ATKINSON DRAWS A FINE PEN PORTRAIT of England in 1775:

the greatest, richest empire since Rome.... A majority of all European urban growth in the first half of the century had occurred in England...the steam engine patented in 1769 and the spinning jenny a year later. Canals were cut, roads built, highwaymen hanged, coal mined, iron forged. Sheep would double in weight during the century; calf weights tripled.

Yet it was also a nation crippled with debt. The Seven Years' War had cost Britain £100 million, much of it borrowed. The National Debt approached £245 million in 1775 with interest payments alone costing half the £12 million annual tax receipt, while public spending was around £11.3 million.

The fiscal gap needed to be made up somehow, and it was not unreasonable to encourage the burgeoning American economy to contribute *something*. There was no income tax, but Britons were very heavily taxed on commodities—including soap, salt, candles, paper, carriages, racehorses, and male servants—with duties of 25% not uncommon. By contrast, as Atkinson shows, the average American paid one fiftieth in Crown taxes of the average Briton (sixpence a year versus 25 shillings).

George III's premier George Grenville decided the American colonies should help pick up the slack, as they were being protected in the west by the British Army to the tune of £400,000 a year, not including the amount spent on the Royal Navy's protection of American trade from the French, Spanish, and privateers. Was the Stamp Act, only intended to raise £60,000, really so unreasonable in those circumstances?

The problem, of course, was the principle as much as the cash. “No taxation without representation” was an old Irish complaint—it was not until 1801 that directly-elected Irish M.P.s appeared at Westminster. Ireland was only two or three days' travel from London; America was five or six weeks away. Nonetheless, few seem to have considered seriously the possibility of having a phalanx of American M.P.s sitting in the British parliament representing Americans, and a concomitant number of American peers in the House of Lords. Instead, the British replied that Americans

did not need an actual vote to have their interests “virtually” represented in Parliament.

ACTUAL AMERICAN REPRESENTATION never happened because it would possibly have wrecked the delicate English parliamentary balances between various factions of Whigs and Tories, as the advent of the Irish did for 121 years until 1922. Taxation without representation continued, disastrously and unfairly, as British colonial policy—a practice unknown today, except in the District of Columbia, the capital of the country that complained so much about it.

Neither George III nor any of his cabinet ever visited America (nor did the king visit Hanover despite being its elector, or Scotland despite being its sovereign). It is astonishing that so inquisitive a man should have been so entirely uninterested in travel, but he hardly ever ventured outside the home counties around London. In retrospect, he should have quit England altogether—the Hanoverians had only resided there since 1714—and moved the Royal Family to America, where power and wealth were to reside over the ensuing three centuries. Notably gracious at receiving petitions for the redress of grievances, had he lived in New York he might have been able to head off the coming revolt in a way no absentee monarch ever could.

Instead, as Atkinson puts it, “Almost imperceptibly a quarrel over taxes and filial duty metastasized into a struggle of sovereignty.” By the mid-1770s huge differences existed between the societies of England and America, most of which tended toward promoting separation. The American population of 2.5 million—Britain's was over 10 million—was doubling every 25 years, a birthrate four times higher than Britain's. Two thirds of white males in America owned land, compared to one fifth in England. Two thirds were literate, a higher proportion than in England. Two thirds, moreover, had the vote, as against one sixth in England. Atkinson's book is full of surprising statistics, such as that in the 15 years before 1776 Philadelphia had more booksellers than the top ten English provincial cities combined.

This is a fine military history which follows the fortunes of the Continental and British armies in their struggles, and strays into the minutiae of politics only when it is necessary to do so, such as when “a lanky, ginger-haired Virginia planter named Thomas Jefferson” drew up the Declaration of Independence in his second floor rented rooms at Seventh and High Street in Philadelphia. Otherwise the book recounts with immediacy and a wealth of contemporary quotation the siege and eventual evacuation of Boston, capture of Ticonderoga, battle of Bunker Hill, operations

against Montreal, Benedict Arnold's expedition to Quebec, the battle of Valcour Island, Long Island, Harlem Heights and White Plains, Washington's retreat through New Jersey, and concludes with the two battles of Trenton and the capture of Princeton. It is an epic tale, epically told.

ATKINSON EXCELS AT DEFTLY SUMMARIZING personalities. George Washington, who was 43 when he entered Cambridge Camp as commander of the Continental Army, dominates the book. "Over six feet tall," writes Atkinson,

but so erect he seemed smaller; nimble for a large man, as demonstrated on many a dance floor, and so graceful in the saddle that some reckoned him the finest horseman of the age; fair skin that burned easily, lightly spattered with smallpox pits and stretched across high cheekbones beneath wide-set slate-blue eyes; fine hair with a hint of auburn, tied back in a queue. He had first lost teeth in the French and Indian War, symptomatic of the perpetual dental miseries that kept him from smiling much.

A novelist could hardly have introduced the hero better. Over the following pages, Washington emerges not simply as a military genius but as a truly great leader of men—and the book ends eight months before he even reaches Valley Forge.

Similarly, Atkinson depicts Benedict Arnold, as "muscular and graceful, with black hair, a swarthy complexion, and that long, beaky nose. He was adept at fencing, boxing, sailing, shooting, riding, and ice-skating," and was "as fine a captain as America would produce that century, a man born to lead other men in the dark of night. Yet he would forever be an enigma, beset with both a gnawing sense of grievance and the nattering enmity of lesser fellows...his was an unquiet soul." Atkinson is sympathetic enough toward those grievances, though of course none could justify what will take place in the next volume.

"Thomas Paine had failed at everything he ever attempted in Britain," Atkinson says of another traitor, instancing Paine's "shop-keeping, teaching, tax collecting (twice), and marriage (also twice). For years he made whalebone corset stays in dreary commercial towns, then worked as an exciseman, chasing Dutch gin and tobacco smugglers along the English coast before being sacked for cause." He donated the huge royalties from *Common Sense*, which sold 150,000 copies in 56 editions, to the Continental Army's mitten fund.

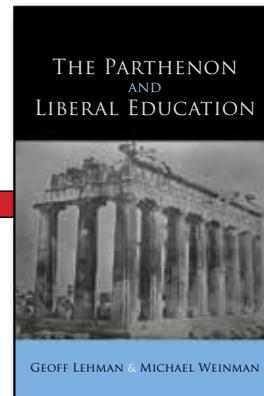
That army desperately needed mittens, as well as everything else. Atkinson's explanations of how low it got on supplies, how the Continental Congress tried to run the war from afar, and how the Revolution was financed and fed, are quite as brilliant as his explanation of strategy and battles. Despite Britain being divided by a 3,500 mile ocean from her army, there were three or four key occasions when she might have won the war before General John Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga in October 1777. Due in part to the regular expiration of temporary enlistments, the number of troops Washington could deploy was often tiny, at least in comparison with subsequent wars and certainly relative to the momentous events they wrought. He only had 7,559 effectives in his attack on Princeton, for example.

ATKINSON'S EVEN-HANDED APPROACH to the British monarch is replicated in his account of the courage shown by the British Army, where ordinary soldiers could show great courage even though on other occasions they could act with terrible brutality. He never sugarcoats the terror of war, but is fair-minded enough to point out that atrocities were perpetrated by both sides. Rick Atkinson takes as the moral of his book Washington's General Orders of August 23, 1776: "The hour is fast approaching on which the honor and success of this army and the safety of our bleeding country depend. Remember, officers and soldiers, that you are freemen, fighting for the blessings of liberty." But he is too honest a historian to ignore the fate of the colonists' slaves—who clearly did not enjoy "the blessings of liberty"—and the central irony summed up by Samuel Johnson's rhetorical question, "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?" Atkinson comments: "That at least a third of the delegates who would sign the Declaration [of Independence] were slaveowners—Jefferson alone had two hundred—was a moral catastrophe that could never be reconciled with the avowed principles of equality and 'unalienable rights,' at least not in the eighteenth century." Even when Lord Dunmore freed the slaves of the rebellious colonists, it was a military and political move rather than a moral one, since he did not free the slaves of the Tories who stayed loyal to the king.

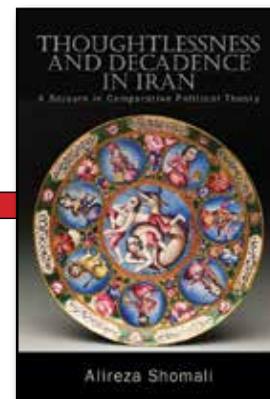
Anyone reading *The British Are Coming* will finish it looking forward impatiently to the next two. The trilogy looks fair to become the standard account of the war that brought the American Republic into being.

Andrew Roberts is the author of many books, including, most recently, Leadership in War: Essential Lessons from Those Who Made History (Viking).

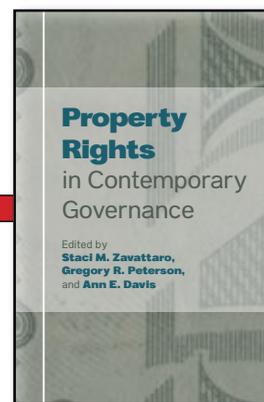
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