

Revolution Since 1776: Is the American Experience a Model for Developing Areas?

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In the last thirty years, American foreign policy has often involved an opposition to so-called movements of "national liberation." Critics of American foreign policy charge that such opposition to revolutionary movements fighting against allegedly reactionary regimes involved a betrayal of American revolutionary tradition. In brief, the revolutionary nation in 1776 is accused of being reactionary in 1975.

Consideration of the validity of such a charge is especially pertinent at this time when the United States is preparing for the observance of the 200th anniversary of independence. Since there is no doubt about frequent American opposition

to current revolutionary regimes, one pertinent question is whether or not such regimes are really comparable to the American Revolution or whether they involved a new and different type of social movement.

Colonialism Not the Issue

Perhaps the first thing that might be said is that the charge that America has reversed its position on revolution does not mean that it has ended its opposition to colonialism. The action of the United States in granting the Philippine Commonwealth status in 1935 with independence to follow, is, in itself, the first major action of decolonialization in the 20th Century.

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Since that time, the United States has rather consistently supported movements for national independence even when such support involved friction with European allies. It was, for instance, partially pressure from the United States which caused the French to grant independence to their North African colonies and the Dutch to withdraw from Indonesia. In spite of this record, the Afro-Asian bloc in the United Nations frequently opposes United States policies. Opposition was often expressed to the U.S. support of the Saigon regime and the recent American withdrawal from Vietnam is regarded by critics as an example of the failure of an effort to stem the onrush of a valid indigenous revolutionary movement. Again, it is appropriate to repeat the question implied in the title of this article: is the American Revolution a prototype for existing revolutionary movements?

Social Conditions in 1776 and 1975

The first observation which might be made is that there is a rather considerable contrast between the social condition of the people currently involved in "revolutionary movements" and that of the people in the United States at the time of the American Revolution. For

one thing, most of the people in the developing world are landless peasants with extremely limited incomes. North America was far less wealthy at the time of the American Revolution than it is today, but the bulk of the voting population were neither poor nor rich. They were mostly land-owning farmers or independent tradesmen. Further, the people in the developing countries usually have had very little, if any, experience with democratic self-government on either local or national levels. The Americans, by contrast, had a hundred and fifty years of experience in local self-government before the time of the American Revolution. Most of them were immigrants from England which had established a fairly democratic government on the local level for at least three or four centuries before the time of the American Revolution. The Revolution was not so much a sharp break in history as it was a carrying forward of trends which had been long underway.

Aims of Revolutionary Movements

Likewise, if one looks at the aims of the two types of revolutionary movements, there is a vast difference. The Americans did

not revolt because they wanted more government, but because they wanted less. They resented what today would be considered rather minor taxes and restrictions on trading activities. The American statesman who coined the phrase "that government is best which governs least" was expressing a reaction not only to the royal British government, but to any government on the American scene. The Americans felt that a government should maintain local order, defend the citizens against foreign enemies, maintain a currency, carry the mail and conduct courts of justice. At about this point, government functions should end. Even education, for the most part, was a private voluntary activity and provision for any kind of education above the primary level was quite limited. Karl Marx had not yet written his challenge to the capitalist system and the idea that the government should actually carry on important economic enterprises had not yet appeared. The welfare state developed. No government anywhere guaranteed its citizens protection against unemployment, offered welfare for the poor or provided pensions for the old. Likewise, governments had not yet begun efforts to seal themselves off

from the rest of the world. Foreigners were free to come into the country, to engage in business, to bring money in and to take profits out. Labor unions were practically unknown. Protective tariffs existed, but were used with a good deal of restraint and were only accepted on the basis that they were necessary for a limited period of time for the protection of "infant" industries. The American hoped for prosperity, but saw government more as an impediment than a help. If he felt confined and frustrated by the existing power structure, he could leave the east coast and become an independent farmer on the open land of the frontier.

The contrast with the "liberation" movements of today is well high overwhelming. These are sponsored by people who regard the government, not as a provider of minimum services, but as the principal agent to usher in an industrial revolution which will lead to a good life in the sense of a higher standard of living. The notion of the "invisible hand" proclaimed by Adam Smith, which, through the process of competition, automatically provided the best use of labor and capital is regarded as obsolete. Instead, we look to the iron fist of

government to rectify the injustices of a class system. If democracy is preceded by "peoples," then it is considered a good term. If it is preceded by "bourgeoisie," then it is regarded as a synonym for exploitation. According to the context, "democracy" is either a vague expression indicating the good life or an epithet designating supposedly imperialist nations. The American Revolution, in great part, was a protest against excessive taxation and government regulations. The current People's Liberation Movements have little concern with taxation and see prosperity as the result of a large flow of government funds.

Democracy and Revolution

Although the American revolutionists spoke much about democracy and the rights of individuals, it was a democracy carefully circumscribed in practice, with a balance of power between the judiciary, the legislative and the executive which made it difficult for the government to take prompt and decisive action in any field. Further, although the voters supposedly had ultimate control of the government, the electorate was far from comprising all of the population. At the time of

the American Revolution, for instance, women did not vote which excluded about half the people; slaves did not vote which excluded perhaps fifteen per cent and those without property were excluded which eliminated approximately half the remaining white males. The American Revolution ushered in a government whose citizens had limited expectations, whose capacity for effective action was minimized by a separation of powers and which was controlled by elections in which participation was restricted to the property owning white males. Certainly, in both spirit and form, this kind of regime is far different from the current "liberation" movements which seek a powerful welfare state of infinite power and responsibility. Such "liberation" movements laud quick and powerful government action and tend to gravitate either to a democracy based on a universal franchise or a dictatorship of some particular class or group.

Territorial Unity Vs. Fragmentation

Still another distinction between the American Revolution and today's struggles concerns the territorial dimension. If the American Revolution had been patterned along the lines of revolutions in

Africa, for instance, this would have meant the fragmentation of a continent. Instead of the confederation and eventually a nation formed by the thirteen colonies, there would have been at least thirteen separate nations. Each nation would have had frontiers, tariffs, immigration restrictions, currency controls, and consequent points of contention with other nations. Fortunately, rather than breaking down territorial dimensions to allow smaller ethnic units a place of their own, the American Revolution sought to bring substantial blocks of territory together to form a united government.

Great Power Politics in 1776

One point of similarity with present struggles in the developing world is that the American Revolution became a pawn of great power politics. The British recruited soldiers from the German State of Hesse to enlarge their counter-revolutionary forces, but it was the French who determined the outcome of the war. The final victory of the American Revolution could not have been achieved without the cooperation of the French fleet. One difference from contemporary "liberation" movements though is that after independence was

achieved, the United States was economically viable without the aid of foreign governments. In part, this viability represented a moderately high degree of development; in part, it was made possible by an economic system which welcomed private foreign investments and perhaps, in part, it was made possible by the more modest expectations which people had of governments at that time.

Comparing Revolutions of 1776 and 1975.

From the foregoing analysis, it should be clear why those who are still attuned to the Revolution of 1776 may be somewhat cool to the revolutions of 1975. Beyond this coolness, the question is whether such differences reflect abiding and still pertinent divergence of thought or whether they merely represent two different periods of time in world history. As historians emphasize, it is certainly correct that history never exactly duplicates itself and each situation is, to some degree, unique. Granted that this is true, is the American reluctance to accept current liberation movements simply a sign of neo-colonialism and a reactionary social attitude or are the principles of the American Revolution still pertinent today?

Currently, the problems of "liberation" movements seem to be more apparent than their successes. These problems include constant unrest and violence, corruption and inefficiency in government, inflation which has clouded the hopes of their people for a better life, together with a trend toward increasing direction and control by governmental units of all man's activities. Perhaps these trends reach their maximum expression in the Soviet Union. Solzhenitsyn, the dissident Soviet author, in protesting some of the moves of the United States towards detente recently wrote, "I was born slave while you were born free, why do you then help our slave owners?" Many observers viewed the Khmer Rouge as a movement to liberate the Cambodian people from a reactionary regime. Such "liberation" has meant a completely totalitarian rule which solves urban problems by driving people out of the cities into the wilderness.

The emergence of governments in the Philippines and Singapore which accepts cooperation with economic forces in the rest of the world, limit the extent of popular control of government and make full use of private enterprise, seems to represent a counter trend. The

form of these governments is drastically different from that of the government which emerged from the American Revolution, but the substance has more similarity than appears on the surface. They represent a realization that, if a government is to serve its people, it must be insulated, to some extent, from popular passions and demagogic agitation. The American revolutionists sought to accomplish this by restricting the franchise to supposedly responsible elements and by limiting the role of government. Neither of these approaches are acceptable today. Government cannot avoid the obligations of the welfare state and when elections are the means of decision making, no group is willing to be excluded from the voting process. When utopian schemes for a perfect society command popular support, the result is to justify rigid tyranny. Today's governments face the task of making progress toward a better life for all while simultaneously avoiding disruption by those who demand perfection at once. Such governments may follow procedures which differ from either the pattern of "liberation" movements or the limited government which was favored by the American Revolution.

Now let us turn back to a comparison of the revolutions of

1776 and 1975. It is obviously impossible to recapitulate in detail a pattern adjusted to the conditions of two centuries past. This does not, however, mean that the problems faced by earlier men and the solutions they found are irrelevant today. Thus the tension between the pattern of the American Revolution and current "liberation" movements may be a tension between destructive and constructive patterns of social change, rather than a simple confrontation between radicals and conservatives. It is at least arguable that the American reluctance to endorse current liberation movements is not so much a blind reactionary allegiance to the 18th Century as it is a desire

not to help the "slave owners." If the United States has been supporting freedom while opposing "liberation," then it may indeed be true that the ideals celebrated in the Bi-centennial observance still have some relevance for the rest of the world. These ideals include a respect for individual rights, freedom for a private to operate, responsible stewardship of economic assets and the protection of government against the whim of demagogic mob leaders. Governments today may use techniques to realize these ideals which vary from the patterns of 1776, but the ideals themselves are still as valid today as they were two centuries ago. □