

Weekly Feedback

The American Revolution established republicanism as the dominant political philosophy in America. However, what Revolutionary America citizens referred to as republican is still a hotly debated topic. As Joyce Appleby explains in “Republicanism in Old and New Contexts,” Federalists, like John Adams believed in a classical republicanism, which combined classical and Renaissance ideas into one. This view is supported by J.G.A. Pocock who sees the American Revolution not as a part of the Enlightenment, but rather as the end of the Renaissance. On the opposite side, were men like Thomas Jefferson, who believed in the notion that individuals should be used as the measuring stick for progress, embracing a new type of world. As Appleby explains, “Jefferson’s victory [in the election of 1800] stirred deeply his champions because his republicanism represented a carefully constructed alternative to the human predicament so forcefully depicted in classical republican texts (34).”

After the Revolution that gave birth to a republican form of government, women were seen in a new light. With civil order returning to society by the 1780s and 1790s, women were seen as more virtuous because of the patriotism that they inspired in men. This contrasted with the previously held societal belief that virtue was only a masculine trait. Ruth H. Bloch attests in “The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America” that “American men were advised that good republican citizenship, as well as personal happiness, would follow ineluctably from true love and marriage (47).” Unfortunately, however, as public virtue was feminized, it legitimized that women were simply meant to serve men and that they would not become a part of political life.

All men in the new republic, though, were not on the same page when it came to how much of an influence they wanted government to play in their lives and what level of government (local or national) that they wanted to listen to. In “Breaking into the Backcountry: New Approaches to the Early American Frontier, 1750-1800,” Gregory Nobles explains that “people settled [in] the frontier regions for many reasons, but they shared a desire to determine their own lives free of overbearing outside interference. This type of thinking had an adverse effect on the Indians of North America, as well. In “Indians, the Colonial Order, and the Social Significance of the American Revolution,” Edward Countryman explains how the new political ideology of republicanism, in addition to America’s newly won independence transformed the North American continent. No longer would the British be able to protect the Indians. As a result, the sovereignty of the Indians would slowly diminish, as the Americans desired to expand onto the lands that they were living on. Nobles believes that it is essential to document that the American Revolution was the reason why Indians lost their sovereignty, and he wants to make sure that this notion becomes part of the historical record.

Indians felt the effect of American imperialism even more with the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803, with Americans slowly drifting west and impeding further on the rights of Native Americans. This western expansion, however, increased the sectional split in the country between Southerners, who believed in maintaining a “slave republic” and Northerners, who wanted a free republic. South Carolinians, especially, took this issue to heart, as Stephanie McCurry accounts in “Gender and Proslavery Politics in Antebellum South Carolina.” The issue over whether the new territory in the West should enter the US, as free or slave states required the Missouri Compromise to temporarily settle the issue. This sectional split, caused by slavery, that was built into the constitution with the recognition and acceptance of slavery, was not just deemed essential by Southerners, but it was in fact a way of life for them. The legitimacy of Southern white male property holders to rule over women, dependents and slaves was at the forefront of their fierce battle against the North and the abolitionist cause.