The Era of the American Revolution (H242)

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Class: 9:30-10:50, Tuesday, Thursday
Office Hours: 11:00-12:00 Tues., Thurs.; 1:30-2:30 Weds.; by appointment and chance
Office: Rice 306
Classroom: King 243

The American War of Independence – the formative event in this nation’s history – gave birth to the United States, but the American Revolution involved a much broader course of events, feeding a long struggle between the Revolution's twin ideals of republicanism and liberty. This course will consider the military campaigns as well as political, ideological, and cultural influences in the revolutionary era. Topics will include the imperial crisis, resistance, independence, diplomacy, loyalists, race, gender, religion, the “Critical Period,” as well as the formation of the Constitution.

Generally, classes will be structured as a lecture and discussion. I expect students to attend class and to be prepared to participate in a discussion. I will not be taking regular attendance in this class, but attendance is in your interest; missing classes inevitably tends to hurt one's grade. Regular absences will be taken up by the professor. Exams will cover materials from lectures as well as the textbooks and readings. If you must miss a class, I suggest that you get notes from one of your colleagues.

Tardiness: All students are expected to be in a seat and ready for the class to begin at the scheduled start time of 9:30. Entering class late or leaving during class time is disruptive and disrespectful to the class, and our class time is short.

Use of electronic devices (laptops, netbooks, cellphones, etc.) during class is prohibited.

Grades will be based upon a mid-term (37%), a final (50%), and questions (discussed below) (13%). (The professor reserves the right to modify these percentages on a case-by-case basis but will not do so to the detriment of a student.) Class participation can also assist a student’s grade. Any student who receives a “C-” or lower on the mid-term exam must schedule a meeting with the professor to discuss the exam and the class. Grading guidelines are posted to Blackboard.

The drop deadline for this class is February 11; the last day to withdraw is April 6.

The textbooks for this class are:


The texts should be available in the bookstore, or you can obtain them on-line. (I recommend bookfinder.com, half.com, abebooks.com, and amazon.com.) Make sure that you get the correct edition of Brown (the new, 3rd ed., is entirely different from the 2nd ed.).

Other materials will be posted on “Blackboard.” Only material listed as “Reading” is assigned; “Suggested Reading” and “Additional Reading” are listed for your benefit (and are certainly not a thorough or even balanced list of scholarship in the area). The reading is not perfectly spaced each day, so look ahead on the syllabus and plan your reading as necessary. Listed “Discussion Questions” are also for your benefit and may or may not be discussed in class.

**Questions Assignment:** Beginning with the second full week of class (the week of February 9), once each week, by no later than 8:00 a.m. on the day of class, each student must post in the Blackboard Discussion Board for that week a question concerning the readings for that day. The question can be submitted on Tuesday or Thursday for the readings for that day. With the exception of the week beginning March 16, when the mid-term is scheduled, a question must be submitted each week through, and including, the week of May 4. The question might simply seek clarification of some point in the material. Preferably, the question should raise a broader matter of analysis or understanding and place the question in the context of the readings and the course. For example, one might ask of the readings for the first day:

Implicit in Wood’s argument seems to be the idea that the general oppression of people inherent in a hierarchical system had to be eliminated (by the American Revolution) before more specific types of oppression could be addressed (e.g. oppression of blacks and women). (Young’s radicalism raises similar issues.) If so, wouldn’t we expect that the Revolution would be led, to a significant extent, by those who were particularly oppressed by hierarchy, i.e. people of a lower class or even religious dissenters? Does the extent to which the upper classes in America controlled the American Revolution undermine this argument? Or does his thesis assume that the control of the upper class was something which developed after the Revolution itself, for example in the drafting of the Constitution?

A question and any background to understand its context should be no longer than a paragraph. These questions will be graded and account for 13% of your grade. I encourage you to discuss questions on the readings with other students. As the semester proceeds, this *may* become a group project with students assigned to groups by the professor (in which case groups will change each week). If so, each group will be responsible for as many questions as there are members of the group. It will behoove you to meet to discuss these questions as a group: First, such a discussion will certainly improve the questions. Second, every member of the group will receive the same grade for the questions submitted by the group.

This class will, of course, be subject to the Honor Code.

This syllabus is subject to change at the instructor’s discretion.

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Students with a disability requiring special consideration: Oberlin College will make reasonable accommodations for students with properly documented disabilities. If you are eligible to receive an accommodation and would like to request it for this course, please discuss it with me during the first two weeks of class. You will need to provide the Office of Disability Services (50 N. Professor St., Peters Hall Rm. G-27/28) with appropriate documentation.

Day 1: Tuesday, February 3: The American Revolution and American Myth and Memory

Discussion of the Revolution, its historiography, and the class.

Reading:

Brown, Major Problems, Chpt. 1


Suggested Reading:


Discussion Questions:

How revolutionary is the Revolution? Compared to the French Revolution and the English Civil War?

What should we study about the Revolution?

Day 2: Thursday, February 5: Empire and F&I War

Reading:

Ferling, Leap, Chpt. 1, 1-22.

Brown, Major Problems, Chpt. 2, 36-77.

Suggested Reading:


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Additional Reading:


Discussion Questions:

Were the colonials “British” at the end of the French & Indian War? What made one, or a people, “British” at this time?

Is class status and economic structure the best way to measure revolutionary changes?

Does the parent-child metaphor for British-American relations enlighten or obscure?

What were the seeds of the Revolution after the French & Indian War? (Are they only visible with hindsight?)

When did the Revolution occur? When did the Revolution become inevitable?

Day 3: Tuesday, February 10: Stamp Act Crisis

Reading:


Ferling, Leap, Chpt. 2, 23-52.

Virginia Stamp Act Resolutions: Patrick Henry version, Newport Mercury version, Maryland Gazette version (Blackboard)

The Boston Riot, in diary of Josiah Quincy, Jr. (August 27, 1765) (Blackboard).

The Declaration of the Stamp Act Congress (Oct. 19, 1765) (Blackboard).

Suggested Reading:

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Parliament’s Right to Tax the Colonies: The British Position (Thomas Whately) and the American Position (Daniel Dulany) (Blackboard).

**Additional Reading:**


**Discussion Questions:**

Why was the Stamp Act passed? What was the basis of colonial opposition?

What was the significance of the Declaratory Act? Why did the Rockingham Whigs support it?

What institutions supported colonial resistance?

When does the war become inevitable? Why?

**Day 4: Thursday, February 12: Townshend Duties**

**Reading:**


Earl of Hillsborough’s Circular Letter (Apr. 21, 1768) (Blackboard).

Earl of Hillsborough to General Thomas Gage (June 8, 1768) (Blackboard).

Resolves of Parliament, Defense of Parliamentary Authority (Feb. 9, 1769) (Blackboard).

The Boston Massacre (Blackboard).

The Burning of the Gaspee: A British Sailor Describes the Attack and The Case Against the “Gaspee” (Blackboard).

**Additional Reading**


**Discussion Questions:**

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Did the colonists provide a rationale ideological basis for opposition to the Townshend Duties? How much of the opposition was economic/social?

How central was the press in the American Revolution? Why?

Why did the island colonies in the West Indies not join the effort in opposition to British control? Why not Canada?

**Day 5: Tuesday, February 17: Resistance to Revolution: Continental Congress**

**Reading:**


John Ragosta, “Introduction,” in *Patrick Henry: Proclaiming a Revolution* (Blackboard)

**Additional Reading:**


**Discussion Questions:**

Was there a British conspiracy against American liberties? If so, what was it? If not, how could the Americans be so mistaken? Did it matter?

What were the Intolerable (Coercive) Acts? Did they threaten other colonies?

What is significance of 1st Continental Congress?

**Day 6: Thursday, February 19: Conflict: Lexington and Concord**

**Reading:**


Orders from General Gage to Colonel Smith:

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Report of Massachusetts Provincial Congress: Narrative of the Excursion and Ravages of the King’s Troops under the Command of General Gage (Blackboard)

Report of Major Pitcairn: http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/revolution/account3_lexington.cfm


Additional Reading:


Discussion Questions:

What is the role of propaganda in the war? Does that role continue to influence our understanding today?

What role did the difference in “republican virtue” and individual rights play at this time? When/how does this change in America? What is the significance of this?

Day 7: Tuesday, February 24: Second Continental Congress and Independence

Reading:

Brown, Major Problems, 135-55.

Ferling, Leap, 135-76.
Edmund Burke, *On Conciliation with America*, excerpts (Blackboard).

Patrick Henry, *Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death* Speech (Blackboard).


**Suggested Reading:**

*Olive Branch Petition* (Blackboard).


**Additional Reading:**


**Discussion Questions:**

What determined support for independence or reconciliation among members of the Continental Congress in 1775-76?

Why was *Olive Branch* petition drafted as it was?

What was the impact of *Common Sense*? Why?

Analyze the differences in Jefferson’s draft and final Declaration of Independence.

Were there an American people in 1776? If so, what made them such?

What was the significance of Henry’s (and others’) rhetoric against tyranny? What confidence can we have in the accuracy of Henry’s reported speech?

What influence did Bunker Hill have on the British?

Why did Canadians not rally to the American cause? What were the implications?
Day 8: Thursday, February 26: War (to 1777)

Reading:


Additional Reading:


Discussion Questions:

What did France hope to achieve through the Revolutionary War? Given French interests, did France enter the War too early or too late?

Discuss the outline of the French alliance. How did this differ from what the Americans initially hoped to achieve?

What do we take from the fact that the average American soldier was “poorer, more marginal, less well anchored in society,” Brown, than the average citizen?

How, and why, did the British fail in the campaign of 1777? Why did Howe and Burgoyne fail to raise significant Tory support?

Why did the militias fight for Gates?

How and why has Valley Forge been mythologized?

How culpable is Washington for the failures of 1776? 1777?

Was Charles Lee a traitor, incompetent, or both?

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Day 9: Tuesday, March 3: War (to 1777)

Reading:


Michael V. Kennedy, “The Home Front during the War for Independence,” Companion, 332-41 (Blackboard).


Day 10: Thursday, March 5: Expanded War and British Response

Reading:


Additional Reading:


Discussion Questions:

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As a historian, what else would you like to know to evaluate the varying claims about diplomatic failures and successes in the American Revolution?

Did the entry of France prolong the war or shorten it? What would have been the alternative?

**Day 11: Tuesday, March 10: Southern War (to 1781)**

**Reading:**


Nathaniel Greene reports on Guilford Courthouse in a Letter to Thomas Jefferson (March 6, 1781) (Blackboard).

**Additional Reading:**


**Discussion Questions:**

What were the implications of the partisan war in the South? Why did it rage with such ferocity?

Why did Clinton and Cornwallis find so little loyalist support in the South?

How should we evaluate the militia in light of the southern and northern campaigns?

How close to collapse was the American cause in 1780? What were the primary problems the patriots faced?

**Day 12: Thursday, March 12: Other Wars**

**Reading:**


**Suggested Reading:**


**Day 13: Tuesday, March 17: Mid-term**

The examination will likely include multiple choice, short answer and an essay question (grammar and writing count). Topics can include anything from the class discussions or the reading assignments.

**Day 14: Thursday, March 19: Movie: Mary Silliman's War**

*Mary Silliman's War* is an award-winning film on the American Revolution. The film relates the true story of a remarkable woman, whose husband, a patriot leader, was kidnapped from their home by a band of Tories. Left to fend for herself and their children as she sought her husband's release, Mary Silliman's story presents an important perspective on the War for Independence. It is based on the biography by Richard and Joy Day Buel, *The Way of Duty* (Norton, 1984).

**SPRING BREAK**

**Day 15: Tuesday, March 31: War at Sea and in Asia**

Discussion of mid-term

**Reading:**

John Ferling, "'We Have Occasioned a Good Deal of Terror': The War at Sea" in *Almost a Miracle*: 359-91 (Blackboard).


**Additional Reading:**


**Discussion Questions:**

Did British action against “neutral rights” help or harm its war effort? How would this policy change with the end of the American Revolution?

Do the naval forces supporting the patriots have a significant influence on the war or is this more of an interesting diversion?

**Day 16: Thursday, April 2: Yorktown, Treaty of Peace, and Newburgh**

**Reading:**


American Victory at Yorktown: Earl Cornwallis to Sir Henry Clinton (October 20, 1781) (Blackboard).


Lieutenant Enos Reeves of the Pennsylvania Line, Mount Kemble, N. J., January 2, 1781 (Blackboard).

Washington’s speech at Newburgh (Blackboard).

**Suggested Reading:**


**Additional Reading:**

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**Discussion Questions:**

How serious a threat to the new republic was Newburgh? Why did it fail?

**Day 17: Tuesday, April 7: Articles of Confederation: Success and Failures**

**Reading:**


Letter from Thomas Jefferson to James Madison (January 30, 1787) (Blackboard).

Letter from George Washington to Henry Knox (February 3, 1787)

**Suggested Reading:**


**Additional Reading:**


**Discussion Questions:**

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What were the successes and failings of the Articles of Confederation?

Were the differences in the union in the 1780s primarily sectional, class-based, religious, etc.?

What was the role of the Northwest Ordinance in ending slavery?

What was the threat that Shays' Rebellion suggested?

Was the "Critical Period" critical or is this a reactionary rationalization?

Day 18: Thursday, April 9: Constitution: Philadelphia Convention

Reading:


Suggested Reading:


Additional Reading:


Discussion Questions:


What were the bases of the Great Compromise and the slavery/commerce compromise? Relate these to the purposes of the Revolution.

What was the significance (and wisdom, or lack thereof) of making the Constitution dependent upon "the people"?
Why is the mythology of the Constitution's history so important in America today?

What is the significance of sectional differences in the 1780s and as the Constitution is drafted? Are the larger fault-lines north-south or east-west?

**Day 19: Tuesday, April 14: Constitution: Ratification and Bill of Rights**

**Reading:**


**Additional Reading:**


**Discussion Questions:**

Why was ratification successful in the face of serious anti-federalist opposition? How serious was the risk of non-ratification?

What was the role of sectional, class and religious conflict in adoption of the constitution?

Is the Constitution a “sacred text” in America? Should it be? What does that mean?

Looking at the map of ratification, what factors seem to control support or opposition to the Constitution? Why does Georgia support?

**Day 20: Thursday, April 16: Loyalists**

**Reading:**

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Brown, *Major Problems*, Chpt. 4, 134-35; Chpt. 5, 177-80, 184-91


**Additional Reading:**


**Discussion Questions:**

What were patriot policies toward Loyalists? Were these wise? What else might have been done?

Did loyalists have an alternative?

**Day 21: Tuesday, April 21: Women**

**Reading:**


**Additional Reading:**


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**Discussion Questions:**

How did women’s roles change as a result of the American Revolution?

**Day 22: Thursday, April 23: Religion and Religious Freedom**

**Reading:**

Brown, *Major Problems*, Chpt. 9, 327-63


**Suggested Reading:**


**Additional Reading:**


**Discussion Questions:**
What role did religion play in the coming or resolution of the American Revolution?

What was the impact of the Revolution on religion in America? How does one evaluate the view of the “Founders” on questions of religious liberty?

Was religious liberty inevitable in a United States of America?

**Day 23: Tuesday, April 28: Native Americans**

**Reading:**


**Suggested Reading:**


**Additional Reading:**


Glatthaar and Martin, *Forgotten Allies*.

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**Discussion Questions:**

How did Indians’ participation affect the War? Were there other options (for the British, the Americans, the Natives)?

**Day 24: Thursday, April 30: Slave/Slavery**

**Reading:**


**Suggested Reading:**


**Additional Reading:**


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**Discussion Questions:**

How central should the “central paradox” of American history be to our study of the American Revolution?

How was the revolutionary spirit reflected in treatment of African Americans?

**Day 25: Tuesday, May 5: Issues in the Historiography of the Revolution**

**Reading:**


**Discussion Questions:**

Assess the importance of the Franco/American alliance? Did France get what it deserved?

Why did the British lose the War?

What did the British do wrong both in colonial administration and losing the war?

**Day 26: Thursday, May 7: Catch-up and Review**

**Reading:**

Selected Additional Readings on the Revolution:


