The

HISTORY

of the

AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Volume I

DAVID RAMSAY
1749 – 1815

The HISTORY of the AMERICAN REVOLUTION

IN TWO VOLUMES

by David Ramsay, M.D.

EDITED BY LESTER H. COHEN

Volume I

Liberty Fund
INDIANAPOLIS

This book is published by Liberty Fund, Inc., a foundation established to encourage study of the ideal of a society of free and responsible individuals.

The cuneiform inscription that serves as our logo and as the design motif for our endpapers is the earliest-known written appearance of the word "freedom" (*amagi*), or "liberty." It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Frontispiece portrait of Dr. David Ramsay (1749–1815), oil on canvas, by Rembrandt Peale. Courtesy of the Gibbs Museum of Art/Carolina Art Association, Charleston, South Carolina.

Facsimile title pages for both volumes are courtesy of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Cover art for Volume I is of Paul Revere's ride, by an anonymous artist. Cover art for Volume II is a woodcut illustrating the battle at Lexington, by John W. Barber.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ramsay, David, 1749–1815.
The history of the American Revolution/by David Ramsay; edited by Lester H. Cohen.
p. cm.
Originally published: Philadelphia: Printed and sold by R. Aitken, 1789.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-86597-078-5 (set).—ISBN 0-86597-081-5 (pbk.: set).
ISBN 0-86597-079-3 (v. 1).—ISBN 0-86597-082-3 (pbk.: v. 1).
ISBN 0-86597-080-7 (v. 2).—ISBN 0-86597-083-1 (pbk.: v. 2).
1. United States—History—Revolution, 1775–1783. 2. United States—Politics and government—1783–1789. 3. United States—Constitution. I. Cohen, Lester H., 1944– . II. Title.
E208.R187 1989
973.3—dc20 89-14583

14 13 12 11 10 09 C 6 5 4
15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 P 7 6 5 4

Liberty Fund, Inc.
8335 Allison Pointe Trail, Suite 300
Indianapolis, Indiana 46250-1684

Contents

FIRST VOLUME

CONTENTS

SECOND VOLUME

CONTENTS

Foreword

DAVID RAMSAY'S *The History of the American Revolution* appeared in 1789, during an enthusiastic celebration of American nationhood. "Nationhood," moreover, was beginning to take on new cultural and intellectual connotations. The United States had declared its *political* independence more than a decade earlier, and a rising group of "cultural nationalists" was asserting that it was now time to declare *cultural* independence as well. The American people would never be truly autonomous otherwise. "However they may boast of Independence, and the freedom of their government," wrote Noah Webster, lexicographer, historian, and the nationalists' most brilliant spokesman, "yet their *opinions* are not sufficiently independent." Instead of liberating themselves from the influences of English culture, as they had from England's arms and government, the

Americans were continuing to manifest "an astonishing respect for the arts and literature of their parent country, and a blind imitation of its manners." While such "habitual respect" for England was once understandable, even laudable, it had become an impediment to creating an independent American character and therefore posed dangers for the future.[1]

Cultural nationalism was almost inevitable in the aftermath of a revolution that seemed to require Americans to define not only their political identity, but their spiritual identity as well. Such nationalism manifested itself in a variety of ways in literature and the arts, science, and education. In its superficial manifestations, it testified to an American inferiority complex, consisting mainly of defensive protests against the notion, common in eighteenth-century Europe, that the New World was a physically and morally debased version of the Old, and of mushy effusions of patriotic sentiment over any product of American literature, art, or science. Thus one commentator gushed over Ramsay's *The History of the Revolution of South-Carolina* (1785), saying that it "reflects honour on this country, and gives room for hope that her literary will in time equal her military reputation," and Rev. James Madison enthused that the work's "Dress is altogether American." Another reviewer, praising *The History of the American Revolution,* observed that it is a "necessity that the history of the American revolution be written in our own country, by a person of suitable abilities, who has witnessed the incidents attendant on that great event."[2] Thus did patriotism pass for culture, and Ramsay's work obviously measured up.

On a more sophisticated level, some cultural nationalists—Ramsay among them—developed greater insight into the idea of American

1. Noah Webster, *Dissertations on the English Language* (Boston, 1789), pp. 397–398. See Lawrence J. Friedman, *Inventors of the Promised Land* (New York, 1975) and Richard M. Rollins, *The Long Journey of Noah Webster* (Philadelphia, 1980).

2. *Columbian Magazine, or Monthly Miscellany,* 1 (1786): 22–25; Rev. James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, March 27, 1786, in Robert H. Brunhouse, ed., *David Ramsay, 1749–1815: Selections from His Writings,* American Philosophical Society, *Transactions,* New Series, 55 (1965), Part IV, p. 226; *Columbian Magazine,* 4 (1790): 373–377.

cultural identity. These nationalists recognized that, along with the richly deserved celebration and self-congratulation, the new nation needed a strong unifying culture. Without a culture that articulated the fundamental tenets of liberty, constitutionalism, virtue, and simplicity, the principles of the American Revolution would soon become corrupted. Such corruption could come from without, through the people's continued reliance on English cultural values; it could also come from within, through the disintegrating forces already operating to dissolve the new nation into a multitude of disparate fragments. This realization prompted the nationalists anxiously to develop a notion of American identity that rested on two major premises: that politics, culture, and society were inextricably intertwined, so that a change in any one would subtly alter the others; and that culture was a significant force in shaping human consciousness, an idea which offered a powerful incentive to use literature as a means of exhortation.

Like all the historians of the Revolutionary era, Ramsay saw historical writing as a vehicle for fostering nationhood, an instrument for promoting the kind of unity, even homogeneity, that the cultural nationalists desired.[3] Almost all the leading cultural nationalists were also political nationalists, the surest sign of which was that they saw the Constitution as the great vehicle for both creating and preserving American unity. And, although it was possible to be a nationalist culturally while opposing the Constitution for political reasons (as the historian, poet, and playwright Mercy Otis Warren made clear), Ramsay's reasons for writing a peculiarly consensual or national history were intimately tied to his Federalist political views.

Those reasons were motivated by Ramsay's perception that the new nation faced two sorts of danger: on the one hand, the danger of political divisions between the states and within each state, divisions which had already given rise to factions with competing economic interests; and on the other, the threat of social and cultural

3. See Arthur H. Shaffer, *The Politics of History: Writing the History of the American Revolution, 1783–1815* (Chicago, 1975); Lester H. Cohen, *The Revolutionary Histories: Contemporary Narratives of the American Revolution* (Ithaca, 1980), Chapter 6.

divisions among the people of the several states and regions, which could readily lead to insularity and hostility.

Thus, for example, he wrote in political terms about his fellow South Carolinians who put local interests ahead of national unity and opposed ratification of the Constitution. "To write, to speak, or even to think of a separation of the states is political blasphemy," he wrote to Jedidiah Morse. " 'One Indivisible' is my motto."[4] He even postponed publication of his history of the Revolution until the fate of the Constitution had been decided, for "The revolution cannot be said to be compleated till that or something equivalent is established."[5] But Ramsay continued to fear the potential for disunity even after the Constitution had been operating for years. "We should, above all things, study to promote the union and harmony of the different states," he cautioned in 1794. "We should consider the people of this country . . . as forming one whole, the interest of which should be preferred to that of every part."[6]

While it is impossible to separate his political from his cultural motives, Ramsay was at his best when he spoke of the importance of historical writing with his cultural concerns in mind. In fact, in his Federalist pamphlet, "An Address to the Freemen of South-Carolina (1788)," he cast one of his strongest political arguments for the Constitution in cultural terms. He called upon his fellow Carolinians to "consider the people of all the thirteen states, as a band of brethren, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, inhabiting one undivided country, and designed by heaven to be one

4. Ramsay to Jedidiah Morse, May 5, 1813, in Brunhouse, pp. 118–119, 174. See Ramsay to Benjamin Lincoln, January 29, 1788.

5. Ramsay to Benjamin Rush, February 17, 1788, in Brunhouse, p. 119. Ramsay was a staunch Federalist delegate to his state's constitution-ratifying convention; he wrote to Rush, April 21, 1788, exulting: "I hope in my next [letter] to congratulate you on South Carolina being the 7th pillar of the new Government." Ibid., p. 120.

6. Ramsay's "An Oration," for July 4, 1794. Ibid., p. 195. However, Ramsay's was not a naive vision of homogeneity, for he also thought that "Even the prejudices, peculiarities, and local habits of the different states, should be respected and tenderly dealt with." Ibid. He emphasized unity of vision—an intellectual consensus—rather than a bland uniformity of customs or conduct.

people."[7] Ramsay was as sensitive as any intellectual of his era to the kinds of divisions, real and potential, that tended to separate Americans and undermine the unity he sought. Even ratification of the Constitution was less a culmination than a beginning, less a sign of unity than a foundation for it. "We are too widely disseminated over an extensive country & too much diversified by different customs & forms of government to feel as one people[,] which we are," he confided to John Eliot in 1795. But through historical writings, such as Jeremy Belknap's *History of New Hampshire* (1792), "we might become better acquainted with each other in that intimate familiar manner which would wear away prejudices—rub off asperities & mould us into a homogenous people." Belknap's achievement was all the more remarkable, for Belknap had written about a single state, yet his work breathed a national spirit.[8] In short, even in ostensibly local history, it was possible—indeed, necessary—to write of the nation and its character, for such writings tended to unify the people. "I long to see Dr. [Hugh] Williamson's history of North Carolina," Ramsay wrote to Belknap in 1795. "Indeed I wish to see a history of every state in the Union written in the stile and manner of yours & Williams's history of Vermont. We do not know half enough of each other. Enthusiastic as I am for the Unity of our republic[,] I wish for every thing that tends to unite us as one people who know[,] esteem & love each other."[9] In 1809, Ramsay's own *The History of South-Carolina* would join the list of nationalistic state histories.

Ramsay's passion for unity and his fear of fragmentation prompted him to invent a national past characterized by consensus. This is not to say that Ramsay was a dissembler or deceiver who created a past out of whole cloth. It is, rather, to emphasize that for Ramsay, as for all the historians of the Revolution, historical writing was not so much an end in itself as it was a means to cultivate the political

7. "An Address to the Freemen of South-Carolina, on the Subject of the Federal Constitution," (Charleston, S.C., 1788), p. 13; rpt. Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *Pamphlets on the Constitution of the United States, Published During Its Discussion by the People,* 1787–1788 (Brooklyn, 1888), p. 379.
8. Ramsay to Eliot, March 11, 1795, in Brunhouse, p. 139.
9. Ramsay to Belknap, March 11, 1795, in Brunhouse, pp. 139–140.

and moral consciousness of the present and future generations. Sensitive to divisions within America—political, ethnic, racial, religious, economic—Ramsay genuinely feared chaos, and his experience in both state and confederation politics led him to believe that only by generating a constellation of commonly held values and principles could the nation resist the forces that tended to pull it apart. Ramsay did not invent those values and assumptions; he drew them out of the intellectual climate of Revolutionary America and found clues to them in America's past. But he focused upon them and molded them into the story of the new nation, so that his version of the past appeared to be inevitable. Thus, when Ramsay spoke of using history as an instrument of national unity, he meant to incite future generations to commit themselves to the principles of revolutionary republicanism.[10]

Ramsay, even more than his contemporary historians, was experienced in politics, knowledgeable about world affairs, sensitive to the economic and political interests of his compatriots, and had access to a vast number of historical records. He knew that America's past had been marked by tensions that from time to time had erupted into open conflict. Yet he purposefully created an image of the colonial past that diminished the importance of conflicts and portrayed the colonists as revolutionaries—an image of consensus, unity, and an unfaltering commitment to republican principles. In short, he attempted to create a national future by inventing a consensual past—to provide an instant tradition for a revolutionary people.

Ramsay's principal strategy was to establish a republican lineage, an unbroken succession of American generations that were strenuously committed to the principles of revolutionary republicanism from the moment of settlement in the seventeenth century. The colonists' chief characteristic was that they formed an intellectual, even spiritual, consensus on three major principles: they were politically dedicated to an ordered liberty within the context of law and balanced, representative government; they were ethically com-

10. See Lester H. Cohen, "Creating a Useable Future: The Revolutionary Historians and the National Past," in Jack P. Greene, ed., *The American Revolution: Its Character and Limits* (New York, 1987), pp. 309–330.

mitted to the obligations of conscience and the public good, so that social life was simple and felicitous and individual conduct marked by industry and prudence; and they were convinced philosophically that people are free and efficacious beings who are responsible for their actions and for the consequences their actions bring about. It was this constellation of fundamental principles that constituted the American national character as Ramsay depicted it; and it was to this constellation that he pointed when he exhorted members of his own and future generations to develop cultural unity as a bulwark against division.

Again, Ramsay insisted that these principles were not new to the Revolutionary generation; the conflicts between the Americans and the British during the 1760s and '70s had merely called forth the original settlers' character. The complex coincidence of geography, politics, social arrangements, and values in colonial America had "produced a warm love for liberty, a high sense of the rights of human nature, and a predilection for independence."[11]

"From their first settlement, the English Provinces received impressions favourable to democratic forms of government." Colonization generally coincided with the struggles in England between Parliament and the crown, so that the issue of popular government based on consent, as contrasted with the divine rights of kings, was a current topic of debate. The colonists who emigrated to the New World consisted mainly of people who were "hostile to the claims of [monarchical] prerogative." They "were from their first settlement in America, devoted to liberty, on English ideas, and English principles." Crucially, these ideas were not mere abstractions. The colonists "not only conceived themselves to inherit the privileges of Englishmen, but though in a colonial situation, actually possessed them."[12]

By showing that republican principles and practices had been deeply ingrained in the people for generations, Ramsay vivified the image of a revolutionary past so far as to suggest that the colonists

11. David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution* (hereafter *HAR*), I, p. 26.
12. *HAR,* I, pp. 31, 27.

had been *independent* from the beginning. "The circumstances under which New-England was planted, would a few centuries ago have entitled them, from their first settlement, to the privileges of independence." The colonists had set out at their own expense, with no prospects other than hard work, to build homes and plant civilization in a wilderness. They purchased their lands from "the native proprietors" and exerted themselves to reap the bounties of nature. One hardly needed John Locke to make the argument that people who expended their own labor, paid for their own lands, and voluntarily formed their own governments owed no obligations to Britain except those that "resulted from their voluntary assent" as revealed in "express or implied compact." And those were manifestly limited. The people knew that government rested upon contracts freely entered; that taxation and representation were indissolubly joined; that they held and alienated their property only by consent; that the end of government was the happiness of the people; that the people were free to assemble and petition the government for redress of grievances; and that, all proximate means failing, the people had the natural right to rebel against tyrannical rule.[13] Thus did the colonizing generation consist of proto-revolutionaries.

The colonists were not only republicans in politics, they were also dedicated to personal and social practices that conduced to individual happiness and to the public good. "The state of society in the Colonies favoured a spirit of liberty and independence," Ramsay wrote. Here, the "inhabitants were all of one rank. Kings, Nobles, and Bishops, were unknown to them." The people were "unaccustomed to that distinction of ranks" which characterized European society, and they were "strongly impressed with an opinion, that all men are by nature equal." The colonists' religious practices "also nurtured a love for liberty." The majority were Protestants, Ramsay noted, "and all protestantism is founded on a strong claim to natural liberty, and the right of private judgment." There were, of course, numerous sects, but "they all agreed in the communion of liberty, and all reprobated the courtly doctrines of passive obedience, and non-resistance." Nor were the colonists subjected to the pernicious effects

13. *HAR,* I, pp. 334–337, 27–33.

of the luxury and opulence indulged in by the courts of Europe. Instead, "inured from their early years to the toils of a country life, they dwelled in the midst of rural plenty."

Colonial American society, in short, was characterized by simplicity of manners, and habits of industry, prudence, and morality. The colonists' experience thus "gave a cast of independence to the manners of the people" and diffused among them "the exalting sentiments" of liberty.[14]

Given the colonists' ingrained political and social values and their commitment to the principles of liberty and democratic government, it was obvious that the American Revolution was not a sudden upsurge of resentment against particular acts of Parliament. Resistance and revolution were the inevitable and justifiable responses of a people long habituated to such values. "The genius of the Americans"—that is, their original "republican habits and sentiments"—had prepared them to resist encroachments on their rights and to form popular governments during the Revolutionary era. This was the final element in Ramsay's message to future generations: confronted with arbitrary power, the colonists had established a tradition of showing the courage of their convictions, resisting inroads against their liberties, and taking responsibility for the future.[15]

But why should Ramsay have presented this manifestly one-dimensional image of the colonists as strenuous republicans, committed to simplicity, industry, prudence, equality, and natural rights? To some extent he actually did see them as American revolutionaries in the making, for so powerful was the "republican synthesis" in his own day that it shaped his ideas and experience and predisposed

14. *HAR,* I, pp. 29–33. Even the colonists' readings, though few in number, "generally favoured the cause of liberty." They included *Cato's Letters,* the *Independent Whig*, and, in New England, histories of the Puritans, which "kept alive the remembrance of the sufferings of their forefathers, and inspired a warm attachment, both to the civil and the religious rights of human nature." Ibid., p. 30. Ramsay, who wrote of the powerful unifying force exerted by New England histories, was no doubt influenced by them in his own writings.

15. *HAR,* I, p. 350.

him to see all of history in its terms.[16] Yet this will not entirely explain Ramsay's over-simplifications, which seem drastic insofar as his history contains little or no intercolonial rivalry, popular uprisings against proprietary governors, political strife among competing interest groups, ethnic tensions, religious intolerances, or class divisions. Even slavery appears in Ramsay's *History* as a mitigated evil, which, while manifestly wrong, at least had produced sentiments of liberty and independence among the masters.[17] If for five or six

16. The major sources are Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967) and *The Origins of American Politics* (New York, 1971); Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1969); and J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, N.J., 1975). Three excellent historiographical essays are Robert Shalhope, "Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 3d Series, 29 (1972): 49–80, and "Republicanism and Early American Historiography," Ibid., 39 (1982): 334–356; and Linda K. Kerber, "The Republican Ideology of the Revolutionary Generation," *American Quarterly,* 37 (1985): 474–495. I have discussed the impact of republicanism on one historian in "Mercy Otis Warren: The Politics of Language and the Aesthetics of Self," *American Quarterly,* 35 (1983): 481–498.

17. In fact, Ramsay publicly opposed slavery and branded the slave trade an "infamous traffic." [See Ramsay to Rush, August 22, 1783, September 9, 1783, January 31, 1785, December 14, 1785, April 12, 1786, in Brunhouse, pp. 76, 77, 86–87, 94, 99.] According to Winthrop Jordan, moreover, Ramsay was the only Southerner who, upon receipt of a copy of Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia,* wrote that he thought Jefferson had "depressed the negroes too low." Ramsay was as strong a proponent of the Lockean principle that environment shapes human nature as one could find in eighteenth-century America. He believed that "all mankind [is] originally the same & only diversified by accidental circumstances." [Ramsay to Jefferson, May 3, 1786, in Brunhouse, p. 101. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1968), p. 456.] While Ramsay's attitudes toward slavery are beyond the scope of this essay, it is useful to note that his failure to condemn slavery more vehemently in his *History* was integral to his strategy of diminishing the