

# A revolutionary people at war

[War, Revolutionary War](#)



Rightfully taking its place on the bookshelf next to Alexis-Charles-Henri Clerel de Tocqueville's (1805 to 1859) *Democracy in America* and Howard Zinn's *A Peoples History of the United States* (1980), Charles Royster's classic study *A Revolutionary People at War* (Chapel Hill, 1996) takes us once more through an emotionally stirring panoramic view of the Revolutionary War and the people who fought it.

In a similar vein to Zinn, Royster's book focuses on the political and cultural forces that have arguably remained somewhat at the heart of the American character. Royster as well, is never too shy about informing us just what made us who we are, and how we came to remake ourselves in the process. Although it is not always pleasant to hear, he never fails to tell us the truth.

This is a book about how the Revolutionary War came to shape the character of the American people; and not the other way around. It is about broken promises, fear and suspicion, and then it is about the broken hearts of so many loyal American soldiers who left the battlefield, some of them after eight long agonizing years of war, truly feeling as if they had been betrayed by their country.

They could not have felt much unlike many Americans must feel today. We are also living though an era when families of fighting men and women in Iraq have often expressed feeling alienated by their own country; while the burden of fighting this war seems to have rested solely upon their shoulders. The emotions felt by many who fought in the Revolutionary war could not have been much unlike the feelings of so many Viet Nam era combatants, who faced down a skilled guerilla army in a foreign land with no clear

purpose in mind; only to return home and be spat upon and treated like criminals by their own people.

The only difference here is that there was indeed a clearly defined purpose for the revolutionary colonist to throw off the yoke of British colonialism. If there was one thing that 75% of the colonialist could agree upon, it was that they were sick of British taxes and British rule. They ultimately took up arms and fought with honor. However, before the war was over the burden had become too great for some to bear.

In the beginning, the war had promised the fighting men glory beyond everything else, because at the heart of the mounting revolutionary sentiment was an undeniable sense that the nation was offering them a “dual immorality; in heaven and posthumously” (p. 32). In the end though, the nation had largely disparaged and then abandoned them altogether.

Royster’s book is about the clamor for resistance that got us into war in the first place, and the sense of betrayal that many soldiers in the Continental Army felt afterwards. It is about the sense of fear and suspicion that the citizenry grew to feel towards the soldiers who were raiding their farms and confiscating their wagons and life stock at will, all throughout the war (52).

Yet, it is also about an officer or two, who ultimately left the battlefield feeling beset with a sense of anger; and then the looming sense of dishonor that would accompany them at the end of the war. It is about the resentment of the soldier towards the Continental Congress for not doing the right thing by awarding them the pay that they deserved, after putting them in harms way.

Yet it is also about the riotous manner in which a portion of men brought dishonor upon themselves. Royster presents the Clausitzian concept of the natural Trinity, framing a primordial surge towards violence, hatred, and enmity, and the effect that this came to have upon three contentious forces of our society; the army, the Continental Congress, and the people, all of whom conspired in their own self-interest to drive the nation to war.

He presents the evidence and then he lets the reader decide for themselves. This is because in the end, it is really up to us as a part of this great experiment to decide how we view the motives of each of them.