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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

By: Robert Smith Radicalism of the American Revolution By Gordon S. Wood

Gordon Woods Radicalism of the American Revolution is a book that extensively covers the origin and ideas preceding the American Revolution. Woods account of the Revolution goes beyond the history and timeline of the war and offers a new encompassing look inside the social ideology and economic forces of the war. Wood explains in his book that America went through a two-stage progression to break away from the Monarchical rule of the English. He believes the pioneering revolutionaries were rooted in the belief of an American Republic. However, it was the radical acceptance of democracy that was the final step toward independence. The transformation between becoming a Republic, to ultimately becoming a democracy, is where Woods evaluation of the revolution differs from other historians. He contributes such a transformation to the social and economic factors that faced the colonists.

While Gordon Wood creates a persuasive argument in his book, he does however neglect to consider other contributing factors of the revolution. It is these neglected factors that provide opportunity for criticism of his book. The overall feeling one gets from reading Woods book is that republicanism was not a radical concept to the American colonists. Wood believed the American colonists had a deep- rooted concept of Republicanism that existed before revolutionary ideas were conceived. The idea of republicanism could be seen in the colonial belief in independence and self-sacrifice. These principles were the founding forces that led to the beginning of the revolution.

Wood would seem to believe that these founding forces Smith pg. 2 were not as radical as the transformation to democratic thought. It is here that Wood

points out the uncontrollable social and economic forces that leads republican thought to the progression of democracy. Wood believes the revolution was meant for the elite (gentlemen) and not for the colonists themselves. It is the colonist self-motivated social and economic interests, which leads to the transformation they had been yearning for. Wood contributes several different social and economic factors to the transformation. The first social factor that led to the reformation was the colonist self-interest. The colonist self-interest seemed to conflict with principles of republicanism.

The self-interest of the colonists led to capitalistic traits, while the republican idea of self-sacrifice was put on the back burner. It was natural for the colonists to want to advance their social and economic standards to that of the elite. The problem being republican virtues had to be sacrificed to gain individual prominence.

Social factors played an important role in the transformation from a monarchy to a democracy. However, there were also economic factors that played an intricate role. One such economic force was trade interaction among the colonists. People became independent on one another for their lively hood. Through inner-commerce people began to share the same interests and the same goals. This was a change from previous republican views on trade. People became inherently dependent on one another instead of being dependent on the government. At this point in history you can begin to see the social ties of Americans grow stronger.

Wood writes on the changing economy of the early 19th century, America suddenly emerged a prosperous, scrambling, enterprising society not because of the constitution was created or because a few leaders formed a Smith pg. 3 national bank, but because ordinary people, hundreds of thousands of them began working harder to make money and get ahead. (Wood 325).

It is economic factors such as this one that will be the driving force, which bonds Americans together in the early 19th century. Wood builds his argument by supporting his claims with personal accounts as well as using documents of that time period. It is pieces of evidence such as these that gives Wood a particular insight into the revolution. This insight at first glance would be hard to deny. However, Woods lack of concrete evidence gives historians a chance to critique his account. Wood seems to place a lot of confidence on individual historical accounts of the revolution. Not only does he rely on these individual accounts, but the people he relies on fall under the same race, gender, and social class.

Barbara Clark Smith, a curator at the Smithsonian when Woods book was published, comments on Woods narrow-minded accounts, . to a striking extent Wood keeps the Revolution in the hands of the elite. It is not simply that elite and privileged sources are the ones Wood generally cites, the ones whose opinions he trusts. (Smith 3). As Smith points out the problem with relying on limited sources when writing a book is the one-sided story you almost always get. Smith later points out in her review that Wood not only relies on a limited source base, but he also neglects to mention other racial and gender forces that played an important role in the revolution. Smith

writes on Woods absent account to abolish slavery, Woods revolution takes too much credit.

It slights the agency of those who did struggle to end slavery and makes it difficult to comprehend or even credit those who opposed Smith pg. 4 abolition. (Smith 5). As Smith points out there are obvious neglecting aspects to Woods book. It is important to note that Woods intent on leaving out such forces is to get at the overall ideas and ideologies behind the revolution, and not so much the individual players of the revolution. The next problem with Woods account is his dereliction to include traditional forces, which played an intricate part of the revolution.

Wood neglects to mention the series of acts and events such as the Boston Tea Party as a driving force for the revolutionary movement. As Smith points out only twenty of the 369 pages is dedicated to the actual revolutionary struggle (Smith 3). Once again Wood is trying to range his text to include forces that span before and after the revolution. Wood, rather than rely on the importance of fighting the revolution, cites changes both socially and economically to get at the deeper importance of the American Revolution. Wood furthers his neglect on traditional forces by depersonalizing the heroism that personifies the struggle of the American Revolution. Take for instance the painting done by John Trumbull, which depicts the surrender of Lord Cornwallis at the Battle of Yorktown. Trumbull depicts the American soldiers as proud, and paints the American flag as bright and waving. A painting such as this one reminds us of the struggle to gain independence as well as the triumphant victory against British forces.

When reading Woods book it is hard to get a feeling of what the people were like during the Revolution. Wood takes his book and moves the revolution into the hands of a mass movement, instead focusing on individual accomplishments. While this may give Woods book some claim of legitimacy, I feel it is equally important to note individual Smith pg.

5 accomplishments during the Revolution. For instance in Woods history of the Revolution, there is no evidence of Paul Revers existence. As David Fischer points out in his book Paul Revers Ride, Revere played a significant role in the saving of lives and has since become an American hero. Fischer makes the claim that it might have been the single-handed effort of Paul Revere that turned the tide in favor of America during the Revolution.

Revere is not the only hero that has been left out of the Wood text.

Countless other individual efforts by men such as, George Washington, Sam Adams, and Thomas Jefferson, all have been neglected. Despite, the fact that these men have been recognized throughout history as playing important roles in the Revolution, Wood does not seem to find their personal accomplishments worthy enough for his book. Woods attempt to depersonalize the war was successful.

However, I feel it was this successful attempt that led Woods book to have a dehumanizing effect on the Revolution. I believe that Woods book could have been better had he mentioned at least some of the traditional forces that were significant during the Revolution. I do not feel that Woods book can stand on its own. It takes notation of such heros as Paul Revere to make the history of the American Revolution complete. Perhaps if Wood could have

combined his social and economic forces with those of traditional forces his book would have a better claim on legitimacy. Gordon Wood gives an interesting insight into the Revolution. Overall, I find Woods argument to be persuasive and refreshing.

There is little doubt that the forces that Wood proclaims as significant in his history of the Revolution are important. However, it is this same concentration on non-traditional forces that leads to my criticism of his book. Smith pg. 6 Wood should not have focused entirely on his commonly overlooked social and economic forces.

Instead, he should have combined his insight along with the insight of other traditional forces to give his book a well-rounded theory behind the American Revolution. Word Count: 1498