
"There was no 'American Revolution' for African Americans" Discuss

Revolution. According to the Cambridge dictionary, the definition of a revolution is “a change in the way a country is governed, usually to a different political system and often using violence in war.” For Caucasian Americans, there was certainly one, marked by The Declaration of Independence on the 4th of July 1776 in which the thirteen colonies cut their political ties with Great Britain. But, the change experienced by African Americans tells a different story, after all slavery was not fully abolished until January 1865, nearly one hundred years after the supposed war of liberty. Therefore, it is apparent that African Americans did not undergo a revolution and the limitations of liberty for the oppressed will be explored further in this essay. Yet, this does not mean that the American fight for independence did not help to spark the beginnings of some major changes to the lives of people of colour.

Liberty and equality in the minds of the people of the revolution was of extreme importance. One of the most significant causes of the civil war was the founding of the colonies as many of these colonies were originally formed by those seeking sanctity from religious persecution in England and so the increasing involvement of the British government in affairs created strong fears that they would once again lose their freedoms. Subsequently, it seems plausible that the obvious contradiction between liberty and human bondage would play a key role in shaping the revolution as well as changing the lives of African Americans, particularly slaves who had previously held no rights over their often barbaric masters. British author, Samuel Johnson was one of the first to highlight the disparity here, citing that “we hear the loudest yelps for freedom among the drivers of negroes”, pointing out that many of the colonists who were fighting for freedom were also slave owners, including George Washington himself.

Yet by 1776, it became clear that the revolutionary rhetoric of the founding fathers did not include enslaved blacks; the Declaration of Independence promised liberty for all men but failed to put an end to slavery. However, African Americans remained optimistic and it was this hope of greater freedom that drove them to become actively involved in the war effort. For example, in 1775, ten to fifteen black soldiers (including some slaves) fought against the British at the battles of Lexington and Bunker Hill. Yet, this was not some patriotic endeavour.

Many African Americans supported the British, believing that they offered the most advantageous position in terms of gaining self-determination. Lord Dunmore’s Declaration is indicative of this: it promised freedom to any slave who left his American owner and joined the British forces. Several thousand blacks followed suit and abandoned America, who for many represented the crux of their bondage. In particular, Continental Congress had adopted a policy of excluding black soldiers from the army, “out of sensitivity to the opinion of Southern slave holders”, who were much more conservative in their attitudes towards the importance of liberty for all.

The reluctance of slave owners here strongly suggests that white Americans truly feared that their fight for independence might include African Americans and it was only after Dunmore’s announcement in 1775 that those above the Potomac River were permitted to join the war effort, and even then they mostly consisted of free blacks. His proclamation also only applied to

slaves owned by rebels and this was intended as much to terrify rebels, and to furnish himself with more troops, as to help the slaves. Blacks who answered Dunmore's call suffered hunger, disease and bombardment, proving that the harsh realities of involvement in the war were far removed from any aspirations African Americans may have had. The American Revolution fell short of bringing an end to the Atlantic Slave Trade, depriving approximately 20% of the population any sort of retribution. But, needless to say the war arguably marked the beginnings of the long road to freedom through the emergence of anti-slavery societies. The very first one was formed in 1775 by Philly Quakers who found the situation regarding slavery in America to be appalling.

This proved to be of great significance as it led to Philadelphia abolishing slavery, providing a safe haven for fugitive slaves. Philadelphia's actions set a positive example to the rest of the colonies and soon other states began to adopt similar measures. For instance, Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance in 1787 which banned slavery in the Northwest. It seemed that for some African Americans, life was beginning to improve. However, the motivations behind the Northerners to provide them with greater freedom is partly tainted. The climate of the Revolution made the institution of slavery unacceptable in the minds of those in Northern states, but only because, unlike the South, they did not rely on forced labour as part of the economic system. In other words, places like Philadelphia only supported ending the slave trade because they could afford to do so.

Although, this of course is not the case for all states or individuals. Surprisingly, there was an anti-slavery movement in the Upper South inspired by those who saw the true moral and ethical dilemma behind the idea of human bondage. In Somerset County, Maryland, manumitting slaves was extremely unusual. Yet, during the years 1785 to 1800, 151 enslaved African Americans were granted freedom and of these, a staggering 101 were freed because their slave owner viewed slavery as immoral. Here, the war has helped to alter the once narrow-minded views of people by exposing them to the importance of liberty for all. African Americans excluded from immediate equality would later use the sentiments behind these abolitionist movements to win their own fight for independence, signalling that the work behind the societies like the Quakers was a necessity.

Nonetheless, the attitudes still of many Caucasian Americans proved detrimental to the progress that blacks hoped to make during the revolution. In order for there to be a long term positive change to the lives of African Americans, the mindset of the slaveowners must also be transformed. Unfortunately, this was not the case in many states where white Americans were so disturbed by the thought of the slave trade ending in 1808 that they set off a panic to import as many slaves as possible before the supposed deadline. According to abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, the constitutions response of a pro-slavery document may have strengthened the slave trade in the short term: "a covenant with death and an agreement with Hell."

Known as the Three-Fifths Compromise, the government forbid Congress from closing down the Atlantic Slave Trade for 20 years because the Founding Fathers thought that concessions on slavery were necessary to ensure the support of Southern delegates for a secure central government. Essentially, this prevented African Americans from seizing the revolution as their own and working to bring about change themselves. Instead, any improvements they experienced were down to the generosity of their white counterparts, rather than any actual work people of colour put in. Therefore, despite the advances made, African Americans did not experience a revolution because they remained so reliant on white Americans. On the other

hand, whilst the lives of the majority of African Americans remained much the same, a few individuals experienced considerable developments in their quality of life implying that although the revolution was not one for the masses, it may certainly have felt like one for a lucky few.

One such figure was James Armistead, a Virginian born slave who served as a double agent for Lafayette on the American side. His loyal and valuable service resulted in him being freed, although not until after the war in 1786. A further African American subject to the more positive aspects of the civil war was Henri Christophe. He enlisted as a soldier at the age of 12 but was injured prior to the Battle of Savannah in which he was due to fight. Regardless, the skills he gained during his time in the armed forces allowed him to successfully lead Haiti in its' own revolution and become the first king there, a marked improvement from his humble beginnings. Discouragingly though, the list of prosperous Afro - Americans is a rather small one. Most slaves who joined the war returned to their masters and remained as slaves for the rest of their existence and those who managed to escape to other Countries in the chaos of war as refugees often found that their standard of living was poorer than it had been when they were enslaved. For example, some African Americans were sent to Nova Scotia on the South East coast of Canada but were met with segregated housing and economic oppression. Life for refugees in London was no better where people of colour faced staggering rates of unemployment and imprisonment for those who resorted to begging and stealing as a source of income. Hence, the options available for the bulk of the black people in America were for the most part dismal, remaining tied down by slavery.

Lastly, it is important to consider the fact that emancipation does not necessarily mean equal rights and opportunities. Even today, people of colour in the United States face prejudice and discrimination on all levels highlighting that although slavery was abolished in 1865, the racism ingrained in people's minds remains a lasting problem. The Ku Klux Klan was founded after the 13th Amendment with the ambition of maintaining white supremacy through fear and violence. Often carrying out their attacks at night, the members would resort to murder such as through lynchings if it meant effectively intimidating and oppressing their black neighbours.

Most disturbingly of all though was that the KKK managed to infiltrate itself in politics. Theodore Bilbo, who served twice as governor of Mississippi and later became a US Senate, was a prominent figure in the KKK and argued strongly against any bills which might better the lives of African Americans, including the anti-lynching bill which he stated would "open the floodgates of hell in the South." Bilbo was openly racist and used his powers to terrorise people of colour into submission and deter them from attempting to advance themselves, proving that a law cannot necessarily alter the attitudes of white Americans, instead it is a much longer and more drawn out process which much like the American revolution, requires blood and suffering before any real positive changes can be brought about. This does not mean that the lives of African Americans did not undertake any worthwhile alterations.

As part of the 13th Amendment, blacks were granted certain legal rights including marriage, owning property and suing in court through the Black Codes. But, the codes also prohibited people of colour from serving on juries and serve in state militias, for example. More pressing though, was the lack of education that the majority of African Americans faced as a result of their past oppressive lives. As a result, most black Americans lived in great poverty leading them to rent land from their former masters which tied them down just as they had been as slaves. The economic and political injustice which continued to bombard African Americans shows that even for free blacks during the American War of Independence, there was no

revolution. In conclusion, the American Revolution was not entirely exclusive to Caucasians. Some people of colour, both free and enslaved experienced improvements in their lives, be it by being emancipated for their service or by escaping to more liberal Countries where they could enjoy greater rights.

However, there was no revolution for African Americans because for the vast majority, any improvements were at very least indirectly the result of changing attitudes of white Americans and so despite blacks playing a heavy role in the revolution, they were by no means the driving force behind it because for most, their social status prevented them from making any advancements independently, and were instead reliant on their oppressors.

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