



Book of the Month

The Cause: The American Revolution and Its Discontents 1773—1783

by Joseph Ellis

Book Review by Eddie Keith, Friends of the Starkville Library Board Member

Most Americans have been taught American history repeatedly in primary and secondary school, and some perhaps in college as well. Since there were over 250 years to cover, it's likely much of that which we learned has been forgotten. Fortunately, historians like Joseph Ellis have provided us with the resources to learn, refresh, and update our knowledge of the founding of our nation. *The Cause* is the latest of several books which Ellis has written on the Revolutionary War and leaders of America in its infancy, including *Founding Brothers* (a Pulitzer Prize winner in history), *American Creation*, and *The Quartet*. It's safe to say that I've learned more from reading Ellis's books than in all the American history classes I took combined. While he's a historical scholar, his books are easy reads, *i.e.*, Ellis is a gifted writer who is also a scholar and retired history professor.

What about the title? When Americans today hear the term "The Cause" it is generally associated with the so-called "Lost Cause," which Southerners embraced as a rationale for secession and the Civil War. In his preface Ellis describes *The Cause* as a term used by the former colonists/new Americans to describe their war for independence—a term which by its ambiguity covered a variety of different regional and political beliefs and issues. As Ellis points out, loyalties and goals changed quickly and dramatically for the American colonists. The Founding Fathers' generation did not initially seek independence from England. Instead, they saw themselves as Englishmen, and many, including George Washington and others who were to become leaders in the Continental Army, just 10 years earlier had fought for England in the Seven Years War, which was known in North America as the French and Indian War. Ironically, after that war England chose to lean heavily on their colonies, a distant but huge source of resources, to pay for their war. Colonists felt that Parliament, with the blessing of King George III, violated their rights as Englishmen by taxing and passing repressive tax legislation on the

American colonies without their consent or representation. Those who became revolutionaries became so only after they were continually rebuffed in their efforts to govern themselves—to enact legislation and tax themselves—as they felt was their right as Englishmen.

Following a steady stream of legislation, *e.g.*, the Stamp Act, the Townshend Acts, the Intolerable Acts, and the Navigation Acts, many American colonists felt that England had turned against them and treated them as second-class citizens. Although a significant number of colonists (known as Loyalists or Tories) remained loyal to Great Britain leading up to and even during the war, the drive for independence was embraced by not only the colonial elite, but ordinary citizens from across a vast area through the colonies from New Hampshire to Georgia. Although there was no feeling of “nationalism” among them, they had a common oppressor.

The stage was set for war long before the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. In 1763 England had just established itself as the preeminent military and naval power in the world by defeating France and Spain in the Seven Years War. Approximately 48,000 troops and numerous naval ships were stationed in North America. As a result of their incursions into the Indians’ territory and the fallout from the French and Indian War, the colonies had formed and supplied their own militias. After considerable discussion and no success at resolving their differences with the Crown, the First Continental Congress in 1774 called for an economic boycott of England and instructed the various militias to prepare for war. In a move that sounds like the Soviet Union 150 years later, they formed approximately 1,000 Committees of Safety or Inspection comprised of regular citizens whose role was to watch and report on their fellow citizens to ensure that the boycott of prohibited items was followed. To overcome the challenge of communicating over the long distances they formed Committees of Correspondence. Circular letters and pamphlets, such as Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, were widely distributed to make their case for independence throughout the American colonies. Support for independence was not universal. Bitter disagreement among colonists led to violence between those who supported independence and Tories or loyalists, as those who remained loyal to England were known. Many on both sides were killed, and some loyalists emigrated Canada.

Perhaps inevitably the fuse was lit. About 400 combined casualties occurred at Lexington and Concord, MA in April 1775 as colonial militia units fought English army units who were seeking to seize their arms and ammunition. The Americans pursued the British back to Boston, where at Breed’s Hill they engaged a large contingent of British army and naval forces in 1775 in the Battle of Bunker Hill that resulted in a combined 1,500 casualties. The Continental Congress appointed George Washington as its Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army’s 15,000 militiamen on June 15, 1775. The Declaration would be signed a little more than a year later.

As one would expect, Ellis discusses the Revolutionary War thoroughly. Rather than a rehash, I’ll take the liberty of bullet-pointing some observations, many of which were surprising to me:

- Despite having “home field advantage,” the Continental Army was comprised of untrained militiamen, who would take on the world’s greatest military power. The British Navy had over 250 ships; the Continental Navy had 20.
- Washington’s war record started poorly when in New York he almost lost his entire army when they were routed on first Long Island then Manhattan. He had miraculous escapes from both, due to British overconfidence and the personal designs of the Howe brothers who commanded the British army and navy. (You’ll find Ellis’s views on the Howes’ plans and actions particularly interesting.)
- The Continental Army, initially poorly trained militia, suffered from low numbers (as soldiers served their initial enlistment, then returned home), poor equipment, and failure of the Continental Congress to adequately fund them for basics such as ammunition, food, and clothing. [We’ll revisit this issue later.]
- Europeans (apparently not fans of the British Empire) played a key role in transforming the Continental Army into an effective fighting force. While there were some rather useless pretenders, immigrant warriors such as Prussian Baron von Steuben, French teenager Marquis de Lafayette, and Polish engineer Thaddeus Kosciuszko were invaluable to Washington and his army.
- The United States most assuredly owed the French our support during WWI and WWII. In the decisive Battle of Yorktown half of the Army which surrounded Cornwallis, forcing his surrender of over 7,000 men, were French under the command of Lt. Gen. Comte de Rochambeau, and the British were cut off by sea by the French fleet under Admiral Comte de Grasse, which had sailed up from the Caribbean, defeated a British fleet from New York at the Virginia Capes, and sealed off Chesapeake Bay.
- Although the Battle of Yorktown in late September–October 1781, is generally regarded as the final battle of the Revolutionary War, the war did not officially end until the Treaty of Paris was signed in September 1783, and British troops did not leave America until two months later. Although British forces were present on American soil, and there were a few engagements, for several months after Yorktown neither side was eager for more fighting, but neither knew the other’s plans.
- The military victory in the Revolutionary War was greatly aided by the success of American diplomats such as Benjamin Franklin and John Jay, who made allies in Europe who provided financial assistance, military supplies, and eventually military aid.
- Although wealthy Americans are often criticized today (with justification in some cases), the generosity of one rich New Yorker, Robert Morris, saved the country as he repeatedly used his personal resources and credit to purchase food and supplies for the Continental Army when they were without either. He culminated his support by practically bankrupting himself to pay the veterans of the army the back pay and severance wages they had been owed by Congress, who had failed to pay.

The attitudes and values associated with The Cause, which motivated the 13 Colonies to demand their rights as Englishmen and failing in that to declare their independence from

England, to mobilize citizen soldiers, and to take on and defeat (*wear down* is probably the more accurate term) the most feared military and naval power in the world at that time, also created some lasting challenges. Primarily among those were a distrust of centralized authority, especially those from afar, to make decisions affecting each colony's citizens without their consent. This aversion to centralized government meant that the Colonies from 1781, the very end of the Revolutionary War, until the Constitution was ratified eight years later in 1789 had no chief executive, no way to tax or raise revenue (other than the voluntary contributions of colonies/states), no standing army or other defense force other than individual militias, no federal judiciary, and no ability to regulate interstate or international commerce. Congress had one representative from each state, regardless of size and population. Leaders typically chose to serve in the state legislatures, which had the true power during the time of the Articles. The powerlessness of the Congress and of the Continental Congress during the Revolution probably prolonged and threatened a successful outcome of the war through its inability to raise revenue to pay, equip, and feed its soldiers. Not even George Washington and Baron von Steuben had been paid after the war. As mentioned previously, Robert Morris saved the new nation the embarrassment of shirking its financial obligations to those who had made independence possible, and following the Revolution averted the very real possibility of open rebellion by destitute, desperate veterans who demanded what had long been promised them.

Left in the wake of the Revolution was a loose collection of 13 separate states, somewhat resembling today's European Union, with little to bind them together. It is, after all, 800 miles (533 nautical miles) from New York City to Charleston, SC, and it would have taken weeks for either a horse and rider or a ship to travel that distance. There were, of course, no cars and highways, trains, telephones, telegraphs, radios, televisions, etc. with which to expedite travel or communication. The colonies in New England had large cities and were merchant-driven, while Southern colonies were rural and depended on slave-driven agriculture. In short, the states had relatively little in common once their common foe had been vanquished. Among the issues the new nation had to face was that of slavery. Although the northern colonies had initially permitted slavery and still prospered from the goods purchased from the Southern states, where it continued, a movement, led by the Quakers in Pennsylvania, to end slavery in the United States began. Even Virginia planters like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, who owned slaves, came to recognize that it was antithetical to The Cause and to the words and spirit of the Declaration of Independence. Yet there is little record of discussion in the Continental Congress that indicates that abolition was ever seriously debated. The new union was too fragile to deal with an issue that would have divided—indeinitely if not permanently—the states and would have rendered the new nation stillborn. As Ellis has described it in previous works, the Founders instead chose to “kick the can down the road.” The bill would come due about 70 years later.

In conclusion, I urge anyone interested in the founding of the United States to read Joseph Ellis's *The Cause*. It will be an enjoyable and fascinating history lesson. It will also give you insight into where we've come from as a country, as well as realization that contentious issues

today—distrust of the federal government, taxation, gun ownership, the rights of states vs. federal government, and even violence disagreement with our neighbors—spring from our roots and seem to be part of our DNA as a people.

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