

Opinion | What explains the genius of the American Founders?

Looked down on by England's ruling class, they reacted by redefining what it means to be civilized.

By Gordon S. Wood
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"The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776" by John Trumbull. (Trumbull Collection/Yale University)

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As we approach the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, we are bound to look back at the Founding Fathers — or the Founders, as our anti-patriarchal climate now prefers — with somewhat different feelings from those we formerly had. Although most generations of Americans conceived of the Founders as larger-than-life, "a forest of giant oaks," as Abraham Lincoln called them, we have tended to diminish them, seeing them as seriously flawed in matters of race, social equality and the role of women.

It is true: They did think of themselves as aristocrats, and they were not embarrassed by their superiority to ordinary people. Many of them were enslavers, although some were the first in the world to legally abolish African slavery. And there were certainly no women among them, for they mistakenly

believed that women were too gentle and fragile to survive in the rough-tough world of politics.

Still, when we set aside our present-minded criticism of the Founders' backwardness, it is difficult to deny the originality of their thought and the creativity of their politics. They inspire in us both a sense of awe and an acute sense of loss. We know that they possessed political and intellectual capacities well beyond our own, and we know that we will never see their likes again. What accounts for the originality and creative genius of this singular generation of political leaders?

These notable North Americans lived in colonial societies that were different from the society of metropolitan England, the center of the British Empire. They were well aware of the luxury and sophistication of London and were often embarrassed by the cultural deficiencies of their simpler provincial societies. But these differences from the self-satisfied mother country, disconcerting as they were, ultimately became important sources of their originality and creativity.

It is astonishing that such extraordinary leaders were produced from a population of just a few million. Every colony on the eve of the Revolution had its share of brilliant politicians. Massachusetts had John and Samuel Adams. New York had Alexander Hamilton and John Jay. Pennsylvania had James Wilson and John Dickinson. But Virginia had the most.

On the eve of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the colony of Virginia contained only about 350,000 White inhabitants — roughly the size of present-day Wichita, Kan. — yet this relatively small population created a dazzling array of leaders: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Patrick Henry, George Mason, John Marshall, James Monroe and others. All these men served in Virginia's legislature and were used to dealing with an electorate. Of all the colonies, Virginia had the largest percentage of White inhabitants qualified to vote in elections, and it usually had the highest rate of electoral participation as well. Despite the colony's extensive experience with elections, however, Virginians still lived in a pre-democratic world. These Virginian leaders and the leaders in the other colonies knew they lived in enlightened times, and they were eager to adopt the new prescriptions for becoming polite and civilized, prescriptions that were associated with classical republicanism. Traditional monarchists still defined aristocracies by the pride of their families, the size of their estates, the lavishness of their display and the arrogance of their bearing. But others increasingly downplayed or ridiculed

these characteristics, instead emphasizing those involving graciousness and civility. Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice" was all about getting these proper, enlightened values straight.

America's revolutionary leaders — by English standards, minor gentry at best — worked hard to adopt the new liberal characteristics that had come to define what it meant to be truly civilized — politeness, taste, sociability, learning, compassion and benevolence — and also what it meant to be good political leaders: an aversion to corruption and courtier-like behavior. These enlightened and classically republican ideals, values and standards came to circumscribe and control their behavior. Life became a theater, and the leaders became actors and characters. Jefferson was obsessed with politeness, and it became the source of much of his success in life. Washington always acted as if he were a character on a stage.

The revolutionary leaders thus committed themselves to behaving in a certain moral, virtuous and civilized manner. The intense, self-conscious seriousness with which they made that commitment is what ultimately separates them from later generations of American leaders. But that commitment also sets them sharply apart from the older world of their fathers and grandfathers. They sought, often unsuccessfully but always sincerely, to play a part, to be what Jefferson called "natural aristocrats" — those who measured their status not by birth or family, but by enlightened values and benevolent behavior.

They had good reason for doing so, for they were men of high ambition yet of relatively modest or unrefined origins, and this combination made achieved rather than ascribed values naturally appealing to them. Almost all the revolutionary leaders — even the second and third ranks of leadership — were first-generation gentlemen. That is, almost all were the first in their families to attend college, to acquire a liberal arts education and to display the new 18th-century marks of an enlightened gentleman. Of the 89 men who signed the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution, only eight are known to have had fathers who attended college. (The revolutionary leaders who did not attend college, such as Washington, Benjamin Franklin and Nathanael Greene, usually made up for this lack with intensive self-cultivation in liberal enlightened values.) As the physician Benjamin Rush noted in 1790, "Many of the first men in America are the sons of reputable mechanics or farmers."

Jefferson's father, Peter Jefferson, was a successful Virginia planter and surveyor who married into the prestigious Randolph family. But he was not a refined and liberally educated gentleman. He did not read Latin, he did not

know French, he did not play the violin, and, as far as we know, he never questioned the idea of a religious establishment or the institution of slavery.

His son Thomas was very different. Indeed, all the revolutionaries knew things that their fathers had not known, and they were eager to prove themselves by what they believed and valued, by their virtue and disinterestedness — that is, their enlightenment.

There was one prominent revolutionary leader who did not seek to play the role that the others did. On the face of it, Aaron Burr had all the credentials for being a great Founder. He was a Revolutionary War veteran, a Princeton graduate, and a charming and wealthy aristocrat. Burr eventually became a senator from New York and vice president of the United States. But unlike the other revolutionaries, Burr possessed a notable lineage. John Adams said that he had “never known, in any country, the prejudice in favor of birth, parentage, and descent more conspicuous than in the instance of Colonel Burr.” Burr was the son of one president of Princeton and the grandson of another: Jonathan Edwards, the most famous theologian in 18th-century America.

Because of his distinguished ancestry, Burr took his aristocratic status for granted and felt no need whatsoever to emphasize his virtue. He never thought about politics and government the way the other Founders did. He never expressed any ideas on political principles or constitutional matters and seems to have had no vision for the nation. Compared with his colleagues, he wrote very few letters, always worried that they might “miscarry” and reveal his many nefarious schemes. Consequently, he always seemed to be promoting his own interests at the expense of the public good. His deviant character and behavior made him the great exception among the Founders that proves the rule.



A vintage portrait of Aaron Burr, third vice president of the United States. (iStock)

Many 18th-century Englishmen shared these enlightened values and sought to become more cultivated and civilized, but they lacked the intensity and urgency of their North American cousins. English politics were dominated by about 400 noble families whose fabulous scale of landed wealth, political influence and aristocratic grandeur was unmatched by anyone in North America. The English aristocrats were arrogant, complacent about their constitution and unwilling to think freshly about most things. When they thought about the outlying and underdeveloped provinces of their greater British world at all, they tended to look down upon them with disdain. In the eyes of the English ruling class, not only North America but also Scotland was contemptible and barely civilized.

The Americans and Scots, as provincial peoples living on the edges of the metropolitan English world, felt this disdain and reacted accordingly. Both lacked the presence of the hereditary noble families that were at the ruling center of English political life. America had never permanently attracted any of the great aristocratic English families, and after the Acts of Union in 1707, the Scottish nobles had tended to migrate to London, where the action was.

Consequently, in both North America and Scotland, unlike in metropolitan England, the uppermost level of society and its politics were dominated by minor gentry — male professionals or relatively small landowners — who were anxious to have their status determined less by their ancestry or the size of their estate and more by their behavior or their learning. On the eve of the Revolution, Washington was one of the wealthiest planters in Virginia, yet his estate's earnings of about 300 Virginia pounds a year put him, according to a visiting Englishman, "in point of rank only equal to the better sort of yeoman in England."

Both the Scots and the North Americans were keenly aware of the degrees of civilization and spent much time writing and reading essays on the stages of social progress from rudeness to refinement. The Scots invented the stadial theory that explained the stages of social progression based on subsistence. Both the Scots and the North Americans knew that they lived in cruder and simpler societies than the English, and that England was well along in what was seen as the final stage of social development — commercial society — and had much to offer them in the ways of politeness and refinement. Both the Scots and the North Americans, moreover, were acutely aware of the contrast between civilization and what they saw as the nearby barbarism of the Highland clans and the North American Indian tribes.

Yet at the same time, both the Scots and the Americans knew that the polite and sophisticated metropolitan center of the empire was steeped in luxury and corruption. England had sprawling, poverty-ridden cities, overrefined manners, gross inequalities of rank, complex divisions of labor and widespread manufacturing of luxuries — all symptoms of social decay.

These provincial peoples were ambivalent about being part of the British Empire. Proud of their simple native provinces but keenly aware of the metropolitan center of civilization that was London, the North Americans and the Scots each had the unsettling sense of living in two cultures simultaneously. Although this experience may have been disturbing, it was at the same time stimulating. It helps explain why North America and Scotland became remarkable places of enlightenment and intellectual ferment in the English-speaking world during the late 18th century. Scottish intellectuals such as David Hume, Adam Smith, Francis Hutcheson, Adam Ferguson, John Millar and Lord Kames matched if not exceeded the American Founders in brilliance and creativity.

Living so close to what they regarded as savagery and barbarism, the Scottish and North American leaders felt compelled to think freshly about the meaning of being civilized. In the process, they put a heightened emphasis on learned and acquired values at the expense of the traditional inherited values of blood and kinship. Contemptuous of the pretension and luxury of metropolitan England, they enthusiastically adopted the new, enlightened 18th-century ideals of gentility and public service.

Both provincial peoples would have endorsed the views of a second-level Founder, William Livingston, New Jersey's first governor, who at the very outset of the Revolution set forth prescriptions for proper enlightened behavior: "Let us abhor Superstition and Bigotry, which are the Parents of Sloth and Slavery. Let us make War upon Ignorance and Barbarity of Manners. Let us invite the Arts and Sciences to reside amongst us. Let us encourage every thing which tends to exalt and embellish our Characters. And in fine, let the Love of our Country be manifested by that which is the only true Manifestation of it, a patriotic soul and a public Spirit."

These prescriptions for a healthy and civilized society seem relevant today.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/07/02/american-founders-provincials-british-empire/>

Those damned Indians and Highlanders! How they would have "loved" being grouped together. (Hebrideans and Orkney men populated the fur trade on the ground in North America; Lowland Scots, in the middle between them and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) English, made fortunes from both of them.)

Growing up in a rural Saskatchewan era of summer sports days and picnics, we played fastball against the Scots settled around their captivating stone Catholic church in the St. Andrews settlement just off the CPR Mainline and, now, the Trans-Canada Highway, South of Wapella. The St. Andrews Picnic was a treat.

Whatever we were too busy doing otherwise—like trying to get ahead in the unforgiving hardscrabble terms of farming given to us—we never bothered to inquire about the history of these hard-working Scots.

Turns out they were first Gaelic-speaking refugees from the Highland Clearances, crofters driven off their Hebrides lands by aristocrats determined to replace them with sheep to be sheared for wool to feed the insatiable English textile mills clothing the Empire.

Coaxed or coerced onto ships in 1883 and 1884 by agents serving their “patron,” Lady Cathcart, saddled by loans to be paid back at 5% interest, they made it past North Atlantic icebergs to then be off-loaded from the railway onto the bare Northwest Territories prairie. They trekked to their lands over prairie blackened by prairie fires—housed in tents, then holes in hillsides, then “potato pit” root cellars, then log houses—somehow getting some crops sown late in season only to often watch hail and insects wipe them out. Then the winters ...

To this day, do not expect St. Andrews folk to show much, if any, “gratitude” to Lady Cathcart. Other than the “stout peasant in a sheepskin coat” who pioneered farming elsewhere that no one else could do, only a Hebridean Highlander could survive, and eventually, prosper, in such unforgiving terms.

Not 50 miles away to the West, Indigenous bands (“Indians” to the Scots) were at this time being herded—driven—onto reserves along the South shore of the Qu’Appelle River.

As told from her daughter’s point of view a century later in a local history book, an Isle of Skye settler on the top of the Valley sat toiling away one summer day when “an old Indian came and sat in her mother’s tent and watched her spin on her spinning wheel for an hour or more, then got up and went home. He shook his head as he got up to leave, as he had not seen anything like this before. He came back each day to do the same thing.”

Here is more than a “missed opportunity” (if either saw it as one). This illustrates tragedy. Both Highlanders and First Nations had had their ancestral lands taken from them, both were thrown mercilessly into a radically different, difficult and dangerous way of life. Do you think they recognized this in each other, joined in some “fellow feeling” as victims of a common oppressor? Not at all (or at most, marginally and ephemerally). Both knew they were heading in different directions into the Canadian future—at least the desperate Scots hoped they were—and this had been sold to them on divergent terms. But one served a purpose for the exploiter, the other did not.