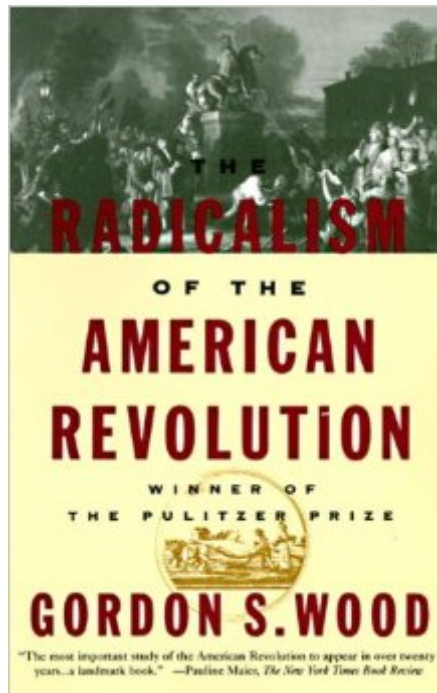


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The Radicalism Of The American Revolution



Synopsis

In a grand and immensely readable synthesis of historical, political, cultural, and economic analysis, a prize-winning historian depicts much more than a break with England. He gives readers a revolution that transformed an almost feudal society into a democratic one, whose emerging realities sometimes baffled and disappointed its founding fathers.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I first read the work of Gordon Wood in graduate school a quarter century ago, especially his magnificent and massive 1972 book, "The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787." This study, "The Radicalism of the American Revolution," is essentially a continuation of that earlier work, probing the intellectual underpinnings of the era. It, too, is a magnificent work and fully deserving of the Pulitzer Prize that it received. While covering some of the same ground as Bernard Bailyn's "The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution" (Harvard University Press, 1967), this book develops a more detailed, rigorous, and compelling portrait of a society transforming itself from one of feudal relationships to one predicated on republicanism, democracy, and market-driven capitalism. At a fundamental level, Wood argues, the American Revolution was truly a radical episode in world history. He comments that "The republican revolution was the greatest utopian movement in American history. The revolutionaries aimed at nothing less than a reconstitution of American society. They hoped to destroy the bonds holding together the older monarchical society--kinship, patriarchy, and patronage--and to put in their place new social bonds of love, respect, and consent. They sought to construct a society and governments based on virtue and

disinterested public leadership and to set in motion a moral government that would eventually be felt around the globe" (p. 229). They advocated ensuring equality as the first task of society; Wood calls this "the single most powerful and radical ideological force in all of American history" (p. 234). And all Americans, he argues, embraced the idea of equality as manifested in labor and accomplishment. He notes, "Perhaps nothing separated early-nineteenth-century Americans more from Europeans than their attitude toward labor and their egalitarian sense that everyone must participate in it" (p. 286). Wood closes "The Radicalism of the American Revolution" with this, "No doubt the cost that America paid for this democracy was high--with its vulgarity, its materialism, its rootlessness, its anti-intellectualism. But there is no denying the wonder of it and the real earthly benefits it brought to the hitherto neglected and despised masses of common laboring people. The American Revolution created this democracy, and we are living with its consequences still" (p. 269). Above all, Wood argues that ideas and ideological issues matter in the context of American history. Self-interest is very real, but ideas and ideals serve as powerful motivations for actions. This is a stunningly significant book that must be read by all who seek to understand the origins of the United States.

Gordon Wood covers much the same ground as did Bernard Bailyn did in "The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution," but charts it in a more linear fashion. Wood illustrates how the American colonies emerged from a monarchical system into a Republic, and eventually into a Democratic society. The focus is on representation, beginning with the colonial assemblies. The American colonies had a legacy of representative institutions, which helped in forming the necessary consensus in order to achieve independence. Throughout its revolutionary history, Americans felt they had a moral imperative for self-determination, dramatized by such events as the Boston Tea Party. The colonies took great pride in their assemblies, and in many ways felt they were the ultimate authority. If the Americans were answerable to anyone it was the King, not the parliament, which increasingly exercised more control over the colonies, especially in the form of taxes to pay for the various services it provided the colonies, such as protection. Wood notes how agents, such as Benjamin Franklin, petitioned for the rights of the colonies in the parliament. When these petitions were no longer heard, the colonies chose to rebel. What is intriguing about Wood's analysis, is the reluctance many Americans had about making a complete breach from England. Americans realized that their institutions were an outgrowth of English Republican ideas. It was a slow, evolving revolution, carrying these principles to their fullest realization. Never short of praise for themselves, the Americans thought they had succeeded where the British had failed in creating

a truly representative government. Wood offers an especially fine analysis of the events which shaped the American Revolution, and how it was a natural outgrowth of an increasingly dynamic society. The book is copiously annotated and well indexed. It is a book that you will refer to again and again.

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