

Consider Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (2018), 94: “Not the taxes and the tea, not the shots at Lexington and Concord, not the siege of Boston; rather it was this act, Dunmore’s offer of freedom to slaves, that tipped the scales in favor of American independence.” Lepore’s huge causal claim is based on flimsy evidence and faulty analysis. The only scrap of proof adduced is a Dec. 8, 1775 letter from one single South Carolina patriot, Edward Rutledge, to another, Ralph Izard. But white South Carolinians always had a cockeyed view of slavery and were hardly representative of colonists to the North. The letter was merely one hopeful South Carolinian patriot’s prediction of what Dunmore’s proclamation would “effectuate” rather than a sober assessment of what the proclamation did in fact “effectuate.” Lepore ignores the key fact that the proclamation aimed only at rebel slaves. Thus, at least some slave-holding fence-sitters, predicting that Britain would win the war should independence be declared, probably tried to protect their land and chattel post-proclamation by disavowing the patriots and embracing loyalism. (That was Dunmore’s bet.) In any event, Dunmore’s November 1775 proclamation came only after most patriots in most parts of America had already backed armed conflict and de facto independence. The proclamation was more the *consequence* of the actual war already underway than its *cause*. Pre-proclamation, there were more than “shots” at Lexington and Concord in 1774. More than a hundred men died. (Lepore, oddly, counts only twelve, *ibid.*, 92.) There was more than a “siege” in Boston. More than a thousand men died or suffered grievous injury in ferocious fighting on or near Bunker Hill, a key June 1775 episode all but unmentioned in Lepore’s sweeping tome. Long before Dunmore’s proclamation, Washington had taken charge of a vast and self-described continental army; George III had proclaimed all the mainland colonies to be in revolt; and indeed the monarch had formally told Parliament that “the rebellious war now levied is become more general, and is manifestly carried on for the purpose of establishing an independent empire.” Speech of Oct. 27, 1775. Lepore’s general narrative sidesteps these key facts and also scants the myriad issues arising out of “the taxes and the tea”—especially the existential issues raised by the Coercive Acts. Many of these issues—the backbone of standard accounts of the American Revolution—centered on Boston, where slavery was not rampant and was in fact abolished by patriots in the early 1780s. The yearlong delay between Bunker Hill and formal independence had rather little to do with

Dunmore's Virginia, which had already in effect joined Adams's convoy. Rather, formal independence was delayed mainly because of the sluggishness of the middle colonies, including Quaker-filled Pennsylvania, which had few slaves and which took steps to end slavery soon after independence. For an incisive analysis of middle-colony moderates in 1774-1776 that tellingly makes no mention of Dunmore, see Jack N. Rakove, *Revolutionaries: A New History of the Invention of America* (2010), 71-111. Most of the key moderates highlighted by Rakove were notably anti-slavery: Pennsylvania/Delaware's John Dickinson, who freed all his slaves in 1777, Pennsylvania's James Wilson, and New York's John Jay and James Duane. Granted, New York was another important laggard colony, and slavery loomed larger there than in Pennsylvania. But Lepore offers no proof that Dunmore's proclamation in fact galvanized New York patriots. (For Lepore's earlier prizewinning work on Manhattan slavery in the early 1740s, see *New York Burning; Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (2006).) Even if some Americans revolted to preserve slavery, many other Americans surely had other ideas. Thus, several newly independent states abolished slavery not long after declaring independence—among the world's first acts of abolition as distinct from emancipation. The new union also abolished slavery in its northwestern backcountry.