Gordon Wood's Radical Achievement

Jeffrey Rosen*

It's an honor to be part of this celebration of Gordon Wood, our greatest living American historian. And I'm grateful that Steve Calabresi has asked me to talk about *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, which I hadn't previously read. The book was published in January 1992, the year after I graduated from law school. My teacher and mentor, Akhil Amar, viewed Gordon Wood's *Creation of the American Republic* as the central text in Founding Era constitutional history, but he didn't have the opportunity to assign the new book during our final year.

I'm grateful for the belated homework assignment because *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* has transformed my understanding of the Revolution, just as it has transformed the understanding of so many readers. Gordon Wood shows that the American Revolution was not just a political revolution but a social and cultural revolution, and as a social and cultural revolution, it was as radical as any the world has ever known. As Wood writes, "If we measure the radicalism by the amount of social change that actually took place—by transformations in the relationships that bound people to each other—then the American Revolution was not conservative at all; on the contrary: it was as radical and as revolutionary as any in history."[1]

The radicalism of the American Revolution, as Wood shows, was based on the transformation of American society from one based on hierarchy and monarchy to one based on equality, republicanism, and, ultimately, democracy. And although Thomas Jefferson initially framed the debate between America's two political parties as a debate between republicanism and monarchy, the Revolution set in motion democratic forces that swept further than either he or Alexander Hamilton imagined.

In the Declaration of Independence in 1776, Thomas Jefferson defined America in terms of three shining ideas: liberty, equality, and government by consent. But just a decade later, after the new Constitution was drafted

* Jeffrey Rosen is President & CEO of the National Constitution Center and a law professor at George Washington University. His new book is The Pursuit of Liberty: How Hamilton vs. Jefferson Ignited the Lasting Battle Over Power in America.

1. Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1992), 5, Kindle edition.

in 1787, Jefferson and Hamilton began a heated debate about the relationship between these three ideas. That initial debate between Hamilton and Jefferson has framed the epic battles about how to balance liberty and power that have unfolded throughout American history.

Hamilton believed in the Union and national sovereignty; Jefferson believed in local self-government and state sovereignty. As a result, Hamilton believed in the supremacy of "We the People of the United States" and Jefferson believed in the supremacy of "We the People of the Several States." For Jefferson, the growth of centralized power always threatened liberty; for Hamilton, a vigorous national government could help to secure liberty. Jefferson, author of the Declaration, was determined to expand democracy; Hamilton, defender of the Constitution, viewed democracy as a turbulent force to be filtered and checked. Jefferson construed the Constitution strictly to limit federal power; Hamilton construed the Constitution liberally to expand federal power.

In *The Pursuit of Liberty,* I suggest that the battle between Hamilton and Jefferson was framed during a dinner at Jefferson's home in 1791. Jefferson recorded that Hamilton had exclaimed: "The greatest man that ever lived was Julius Caesar."[2] He concluded that "Hamilton was not only a monarchist, but for a monarchy bottomed on corruption."[3] And he proceeded to found the Democratic Republican party in opposition to the purported plans of Hamilton and the Federalist to resurrect monarchy in America. In fact, both Jefferson and Hamilton were devoted to republicanism, or government by consent. At the Philadelphia Convention, Hamilton had proposed a House of Representatives popularly elected by universal white male suffrage, a proposal no less democratic than anything Jefferson ever embraced. By mischaracterizing Hamilton's devotion to the British constitution as an endorsement of Caesarism and hereditary rule, however, Jefferson managed to associate his rival with the reviled and discredited British monarchy in ways that would resonate over the next two centuries.

Wood's account of the transformation of American society from one based on allegiance to monarchy to one based on republicanism and ultimately equality and democracy shows how Jefferson was able to exploit the anti-democratic strains in the Federalist Party (and the repeated praise of elected monarchs by Hamilton, Gouverneur Morris, and other Federalists) for political gain. And Wood shows that in addition to grappling with the political evolution from monarchy to republicanism, both Hamilton and Jefferson were grappling with radical social change in how the American people understood their relations to each other.

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2. Jeffrey Rosen, *The Pursuit of Liberty: How Hamilton vs. Jefferson Ignited the Lasting Battle Over Power in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster), xii.

3. Rosen, *The Pursuit of Liberty,* xiv.

Both Hamilton and Jefferson embraced republicanism rather than direct democracy at the national level, with Jefferson favoring representation by natural aristocrats and Hamilton rule by a professional elite. But, as Wood argued in *Power and Liberty: Constitutionalism in the American Revolution*, Hamiltonian Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans essentially disagreed about the relationship between liberty and power. Jefferson came to see all of English and American history as a Manichaean battle between liberty and power, while Hamilton believed that the separation of powers in a vigorous national government could secure liberty, achieving what Hamilton called "the perfect balance between liberty and power."[4]

Jefferson distinguished sharply between monarchies and republics; Hamilton, like Hume, maintained that monarchies could achieve perfection when blended with the republican form. Jefferson insisted that the best government is the most limited government and that people are most capable of virtuous self-government at the most local level; Hamilton insisted that a strong central government can use its influence to win the loyalty of financial elites and provide security and prosperity.

Wood shows that the disagreement between Federalists and Republicans was both political and social. In other words, Hamilton and Jefferson disagreed not only about the relationship between liberty and power, but also about how to respond to the transformation in the understanding of social equality, property, and labor heralded by the Revolution. Jefferson saw equality as synonymous with independence and embraced freehold suffrage for white men; Hamilton feared assaults on property by the mob. In the final letter he wrote the day before he died, Hamilton insisted that breaking up the Union would offer "no relief to our real Disease; which is DEMOCRACY."[5]

The political and social disagreements between Hamilton and Jefferson extended into the Constitution making period when, as Wood shows, classical republicanism gave way to liberalism and rule by elites gave way to democracy. Hamilton clung to the British Constitution as a model and yearned to resurrect its Polybian balance of powers; while Jefferson, divided against himself, had a foot in both the classical republican and liberal eras.

When it came time to justify the American Revolution, Jefferson developed an elaborate legal theory based on the Saxon myth of lost English liberty, which he absorbed from his youthful reading of his favorite historian, Tacitus. From his reading of Germania, Tacitus's history of the Saxons, Jefferson concluded that the German invaders of ancient Britain, after the Romans left in 410 CE, had created an ideal community of self-

4. Rosen, *The Pursuit of Liberty*, 41
5. Rosen, *The Pursuit of Liberty*, 120

governing freemen. The ancient Saxons, in Jefferson's view, maintained a balanced constitution of an elected king, an annual assembly of tribal chieftains, and trial by jury, which guaranteed the liberties of the common law. This idyllic republic of yeomen farmers was unburdened by the rents, entails, and other feudal obligations to the hereditary monarch until it was destroyed by the Norman Conquest in 1066. Jefferson insisted that the original Pilgrim settlers of America, including his Welsh ancestors, had exercised their natural rights of emigration and taken with them the ancient rights of English common law, unencumbered by the subsequent usurpations of the English Parliament.

During the Revolution, however, the Saxon myth, based on the classical republican or Whig theory of history, proved inadequate to support American liberty, as King George III refused to recognize the traditional rights of Englishmen that the colonists claimed to have inherited from their ancient ancestors. As a result, in the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson broadened his gaze from the common law to the natural rights of humankind. He located those natural rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness not in English history and tradition, but in the self-evident truth of our equal creation. The American Idea of liberty, equality, and democracy, embodied in the Declaration, has inspired millions to argue for equal rights and full inclusion in the American experiment.

In *The Pursuit of Liberty*, I suggest that Jefferson's conflicting accounts of what it means to be American have been at war with each other from the beginning. From the Civil Rights Movement to the women's rights movement, Americans have invoked Jefferson's liberal vision to create a more perfect union; from secessionists to insurrectionists, those opposed to federal power have invoked Jefferson's classical republican vision to defend individual rights and state sovereignty.[6]

Wood shows that the same battle between the classical republican and liberal visions at war in Jefferson's soul were also at war between and among Federalists and Republicans throughout the Founding Era. And he illuminates Jefferson and Hamilton's battle over democracy versus rule by elites by showing a radical evolution in American society's understanding of equality. In particular, the idea of equality led to a transformation in American politics from republicanism to democracy. "Equality was in fact the most radical and most powerful ideological force let loose in the Revolution," Wood writes. "Its appeal was far more potent than any of the revolutionaries realized. Once invoked, the idea of equality could not be stopped, and it tore through American society and culture with awesome power."[7]

Wood also highlights the complexity of relationship between political

6. Rosen, *The Pursuit of Liberty*, 3
7. Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution,* 39, Kindle edition.

and social change, as each inspired the other. Jefferson late in life insisted that that all people could be divided by nature into two parties: Tories and Whigs, aristocrats and democrats. But Wood demonstrates that the American shift from monarchy to republicanism to democracy represents a social revolution rather than simply a political revolution, one that went further than both Jefferson and Hamilton imagined. Both Jefferson and Hamilton initially embraced a classical republican vision of civic republican leaders – Jefferson's natural aristocrats and Hamilton's professional class of elite lawyers and meritocrats. The radicalism of the idea of equality, however, led to a democratic revolution, as Republicans insisted on a universal freehold so all (white male) citizens could vote on equal terms.

Hamilton and the Federalists viewed Madison's extended republic as too mild a remedy for democratic turbulence. As Wood writes, in his quest for "honor and glory Hamilton deliberately set out to "corrupt" American society, to use monarch-like governmental influence to tie existing commercial interests to the government and to create new hierarchies of interest and dependency that would substitute for the absence of virtue."

Jefferson and the Republicans responded by charging Hamilton and the Federalists of a conspiracy to resurrect a "monarchy bottomed on corruption," leading to the destruction of the Federalist Party and the realignment of American politics along Jeffersonian lines. But as the Era of Good Feeling gave way to the Jacksonian era, the exorable force of the idea of equality went further than Jefferson had intended, replacing Jefferson's vision of a natural aristocracy with a Jacksonian populism that filled Jefferson with dread. Two years before his death, Jefferson called Jackson an "dangerous man" who was "unfit" to be president;[8] he also looked down on tavern keepers as "the hackneyed rascals of every country" who "must never be considered when we calculate the national character."[9] Nevertheless, he was unable to resist the populist wave. "Here in this destruction of aristocracy, including Jefferson's 'natural aristocracy,' was the real American Revolution," Wood concludes. It was a "radical alteration in the nature of American society whose effects are still being felt today."[10]

"The competing positions of Hamilton and Jefferson are like golden and silver threads woven throughout the tapestry of American history, sometimes side by side, sometimes crossing each other, and at critical moments, pulling so far apart that they threaten to snap."[11] In *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, as in each of his pathbreaking books, Wood helps us untangle the threads of American intellectual, social, and political history and follow them from beginning to end. Each of his

8. Rosen, *The Pursuit of Liberty*, 151
9. Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution,* 28, Kindle edition.
10. Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution,* 276, Kindle edition.
11. Rosen, *The Pursuit of Liberty*, xviii

books illuminate different aspects of the Founding Era; but all are animated by the enthusiastic conviction he expressed during our symposium – namely that the American Revolution, based on the ideas of liberty, and equality, and government by consent, is one of the most inspiring events in world history. For inspiring Americans to learn about significance of the American Idea, Gordon Wood will always occupy an honored place in American history.