

The Pen, The Press, and The American Revolution

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Applicant learned of the contest through her father encouraging

her to enter.

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According to David Ramsay, author of ‘The History of the American Revolution’ and one of the first historians of the American Revolution: “In establishing American independence, the pen and press had merit equal to that of a sword.”¹

As Parliament continued its iron grip on the colonies following the French and Indian War, many colonists felt the need to revolt against their British homeland. Noticing the early signs of a revolution, newspaper and pamphlet writers took advantage of the prime opportunity to persuade the colonists that freedom was the only option. As the cry for independence increasingly brewed in the colonies, propaganda acted as a binding agent that brought the American people together to fight for justice. Propaganda, through the use of pamphlets and newspapers, during the American Revolution-era not only fanned the flames of rebellion, but ultimately aided in the outcome of the war.

Years before the first shots were fired at the Battles of Lexington and Concord, propaganda was spread throughout the colonies through the use of pamphlets that argued support for colonial independence. Often written by upper-class aristocrats under pseudonyms, pamphlets served as key conveyors of ideas before and during the American Revolution. According to Bernard Bailyn, American history professor and historian, pamphlets during the war were “booklets consisting of a few printer’s sheets, folded in various ways so as to make various sizes and numbers of pages and sold . . . for a few pence, at most a shilling or two” and they were the “most important and characteristic writing of the American Revolution.”²

As the fight for freedom gained momentum, pamphlets gained popularity as driving forces that persuaded the American people to support the war. In 1776, there were approximately

400 pamphlets published in the colonies that pertained to the war, and nearly four times that by the end of the war in 1783. Colonists, no matter what profession or religion, read pamphlets in order to enrich their knowledge of events that happened in the colonies and to inform themselves of information that pertained to the territory that their loyalty was with.

Not only did citizens turn to pamphlets as a source for inspiration, but American leaders also used pamphlets to motivate themselves and the people under their leadership. On Christmas night 1776, General George Washington and his troops were encamped nine miles from Trenton on the banks of the Delaware River. They were preparing themselves for a surprise offensive that Washington hoped would rejuvenate his troops. His soldiers were painfully weary due to the harsh winter weather, lack of supplies, and the fact that they had lost several battles in the previous months. Hoping to inspire his soldiers, Washington ordered all of the officers under his command to read Thomas Paine's pamphlet, 'The American Crisis', to their troops. As the powerful words "These are the times that try men's souls..."³ echoed throughout the camp, the soldiers regained momentum that carried on to the next day, where they went on to win the Battle of Trenton. Although it was a small victory, it was the first battle that Washington's troops had won in months. The victory changed the entire psychological atmosphere of the war for the colonial soldiers, which helped lead to their victorious outcome in the end. Pamphlets were not only sources of propaganda that helped convince the American people to break away from their British homeland, but were also monumental tools used to achieve a colonial victory.

As pamphlets were a popular use of propaganda before and during the American Revolution, newspapers were also an important communication avenue that kept colonists hundreds of miles away aware of current events. The monumental importance of newspapers during the colonial-era cannot be overlooked, as stated by Thomas Jefferson, author of the

Declaration of Independence and third president of the United States, when he wrote that “I would rather live in a country with newspapers and without a government, than in a country with a government but without newspapers.”⁴ Containing official dispatches, powerful eyewitness accounts, and battlefield letters, colonial newspapers were jam-packed with raw, breaking news, full of thrilling action and suspense that put readers on the edge of their seats. During the war, there were three dozen active newspapers printed in the colonies that each produced a weekly four-page issue and were distributed by the hundreds. Benjamin Franklin described the power of newspapers perfectly when he wrote to a friend in 1782 that “by the press we can speak to nations,” and that newspapers enabled political leaders to “strike while the iron is hot.”⁵

In a very real sense, the American Revolution would not have been possible without newspapers to connect and unite the colonists towards the common goal of freedom and independence. Prior to the war, the colonists faced extreme difficulty in uniting as one cohesive unit, due largely to the fact that they were separated not only by vast distances, but were also quite diverse in their beliefs, religions, and cultures. Newspapers helped make this problem less severe by serving as a means of communication for the colonists to share. Because of the structure of the newspaper business during the colonial-era, the stories that appeared in each separate newspaper were “exchanged” from other papers in different cities throughout the colonies, which allowed for the same story to appear in multiple different newspapers throughout North America. Colonists hundreds of miles away from each other were able to pick up a newspaper and read the same story, which provided a way for colonists to relate and unite to each other. As the war drew nearer, the colonists grew closer than ever before, thanks in part to the

unity that newspapers provided. The fact that the colonists succeeded in “becoming one” was a feat so great that even John Adams was impressed. He stated:

The complete accomplishment of it in so short a time and by such simple means was perhaps a singular example in the history of mankind. Thirteen clocks were made to strike together: a perfection of mechanism which no artist had ever before affected.⁶

Therefore, the importance of newspapers during the colonial era cannot be overstated.

Newspapers brought a new wave of communication to the colonies when it was needed the most and bonded a group of diverse individuals in such a cohesive way that many did not think was possible. With the backing of the colonists as one united group, the colonial soldiers had a fresh wave of support and secureness, knowing in comfort that the American people were not only willing to fight together, but *wanted* to fight together to accomplish the freedom that they deserved.

It is difficult to imagine an American victory in the American Revolution without the help of propaganda, in the form of pamphlets and newspapers, which lit a fire inside the American people to fight for freedom and justice. Pamphlets and newspapers not only brought the colonists closer as a whole and aided in the outcome of the war, but also paved the way for a revolutionary new avenue of communication that has continued to impress people across the world even today.

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