
The Radicals' Rancorous Rage

BY BECKY AKERS

In a revolution for liberty, they sought power. In an age of individuality and self-reliance, they demanded obedience. In a century of personal excellence, they relished “leveling.”

They called themselves Radical Patriots, as though the troops who starved and froze at Valley Forge weren't patriotic enough. But these eighteenth-century politicians had about them little that was either radical or patriotic. They tried to subvert the truly radical revolution raging round them because, as one Loyalist bitterly summarized it, they “hate Tyranny, but . . . their meaning is they hate Tyranny when themselves are not the Tyrants.”¹

The Radicals first roared to power in Philadelphia in the 1770s. They were establishing themselves, flexing their muscles, when the British sent them flying and occupied the town during the winter of 1777–78.

Philadelphia's reprieve ended with the British withdrawal that June. The Radicals returned, with policies so disastrous that they brought the city to the brink of financial ruin and civil war. Nevertheless, their influence seeped throughout the state because their ideology had been codified in Pennsylvania's constitution. That document extolled government as a benign agent for progress, declaring that God “alone knows to what degree of earthly happiness mankind may attain by perfecting the arts of government. . . .”²

From Pennsylvania, the Radicals ascended to the Continental Congress. They never achieved their dream of ruling America, but for a few heady months they ruled Congress. Fortunately, the Radicals as a political

party faded with the war. Unfortunately, their legacy lingers to this day.

Their rapid rise was helped by the desperate circumstances the American Revolution inflicted on Philadelphia. Before the war, Philadelphia had been one of the New World's loveliest cities. Its wide streets were paved, a contrast to the dirt lanes in other towns, and they lay at right angles in a spacious, logical grid. Lining them

were elegant brick homes and churches, general stores, specialty shops, and even a few theaters, despite Quaker objections. Boasting roughly 30,000 inhabitants, Philadelphia was the largest city in the British empire after London (with 1,000,000).

Then came the war. Philadelphia's glory sank beneath the twin blows of inflation and invasion.

Under the Crown, the 13 colonies had been forbidden to coin silver and gold. That meant the newly “free and independent States” had few mines, no dies for coining, and consequently no hard money for prosecuting the war. Congress turned to the printing presses, whose abundance in literate America proved a curse when paper money flooded forth. The resulting inflation crippled the revolution as seriously as a military defeat. Everyone suffered as markets emptied and necessities became luxuries. But at least those Americans who farmed would not starve. Philadelphians, on the other hand, were unable to grow the food and firewood they could no longer buy.

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In September 1777 British and Hessian troops under General Sir William Howe captured Philadelphia. They would make the city their winter quarters for the next nine months. While civilians scrambled for scraps, the enemy feasted at banquets, threw parties, gambled, and attended theater, often in the company of Philadelphia's young belles. Some of these girls were Loyalists; most probably cared little about politics, especially when a party was in the offing. A few may have been Patriots stranded in the city, though many Patriots, real and Radical, fled their homes.

The British officers who took over those abandoned houses did not trouble themselves to preserve rebel property. They chopped holes in parlor floors so that privies could drain into cellars. They fed furniture and fences to their fires. They looted valuables and trampled gardens. They converted churches into riding schools after cooking dinner over the pews and pulpits. With callous irony, they degraded the State House, which had seen the signing of the Declaration, by imprisoning captured American officers there.

When the army evacuated the following June, both varieties of Patriots returned to a city and to homes devastated almost beyond recognition. The officers and troops who had wreaked such damage were gone, beyond the homeowners' revenge. But large numbers of Philadelphians in addition to the flirting ladies had remained in town through the winter. Whether they were too old or weak to leave, or whether they were Loyalists glad to welcome His Majesty's government into the rebels' capital, these folks had accommodated the troops, sometimes by choice, other times by compulsion. That made them all Loyalists to the furious Patriots now seeing their ruined homes for the first time.

The Radicals, consummate politicians, manipulated this explosive situation to increase their power. They welcomed citizens' demands that revenge be taken for the destruction and dissipation the British had left in their wake. Radicals promised that their government would enforce morality while rooting out the corrupt culture the British had foisted on their city. Coincidentally, that meant rooting out anyone who enjoyed British fashions, books, victuals, or friends.

The Radicals also promised a solution to the worsening inflation. They had already tried their hand at this

in 1776, when they passed laws to save the credit of the Continental dollar—which succeeded as well as if they had legislated that the Continental Army would no longer lose battles. Nevertheless, blithe in the face of failure, the Radicals now tried fixing prices and wages.

Though the Radicals had no authority to do so, they appointed a "Committee of Inspection" to spy on merchants and guarantee that they were cheating themselves in accordance with the new policies. The committee was soon poking its nose into all sorts of private transactions. Merchants suspected of selling goods for more than the Radicals liked were hauled before the committee and threatened with seizure of their stock—or worse. Though one leading Radical disapproved of these extra-legal shenanigans, he wanted to monitor those "suspected characters" whose "spirit of Aristocracy and Pride of Wealth" prompted them to sell their goods for a profit.³

Goods went from scarce to nonexistent as merchants packed up their wares and sought saner markets in states where price-fixing was still the stuff of madness and "inconsistent with the principles of liberty."⁴ The Radicals retaliated by condemning the entire class of merchants, cursing them as "forestallers" and "monopolists."

Price Controls Violate Property Rights

In 1779, with hunger still haunting Philadelphia, 80 of those forestallers and monopolists argued before the Pennsylvania Council that requiring anyone to accept an arbitrary price for his goods destroyed property rights: "The limitation of prices is in the principle unjust, because it invades the laws of property, by compelling a person to accept of less in exchange for his goods than he could otherwise obtain, and therefore acts as a tax upon part of the community only."⁵ The merchants pointed out that price-fixing had accomplished exactly the opposite of its proponents' claims: far from reducing costs, it had instead made the fixed goods scarce while raising prices on those goods that had thus far escaped the government's control. Anyone who could afford to was hoarding in anticipation of further scarcity.

Also bewailing Radical economics was General John Cadwalader, a merchant whose service with Pennsylvania's militia had nevertheless not been enough to redeem him in Radicals' eyes. He warned that controlling prices "must inevitably produce immediate ruin to the mer-

chants and mechanics [the working class]; and a scarcity, if not a want of every necessary of life, to the whole city." Worse, there was no natural famine, only the shortage that results when government interferes with supply and demand: "A plentiful harvest has filled the country with an abundance . . . and a market would bring such quantities to the city, that there would be no want of these necessaries in the future."⁶

Pennsylvania's delegate to Congress, James Wilson, protested price-fixing schemes to that body: "There are certain things . . . which absolute power cannot do. The whole power of the Roman emperors could not add a single letter to the alphabet. Augustus could not compel old bachelors to marry," and government could neither improve nor prevent the give-and-take of the market.⁷

But it would take more than a ruined city to dent Radical arrogance. Even after witnessing the misery to which their policies had reduced a once wealthy town, they refused to admit their mistakes. They remained true to the Politicians' Creed—"I believe it's everyone else's fault, not mine"—and excused Philadelphia's empty pantries by proclaiming, "If goods have been removed, we are not the persons who have removed them; and if those who have been guilty of such practises, should plead in excuse that they did it because they could get a few pounds more in other places, what is it but to confess they care nothing for the welfare of the community among whom they reside, and that avarice and self-interest are their only principles."⁸

"Avarice and self-interest" were the worst sins a Radical could conceive, far more heinous than stealing Loyalist estates or hanging political opponents. One Radical even fumed that "to induce persons to lend money [to the Continental Army] by promises of exorbitant interest, is not only to *dishonour a virtuous cause by applying to our vices for support*, but is adding distress to our country, by fueling the disease which occasioned it."⁹ Radicals saw wealth as corrupting—unless, of course, it was theirs. Wealth was a mark not of ambition, foresight, discipline, and self-restraint, but of wickedness, while those who created wealth, who owned businesses or land, were evil. Making money, per se, was evil too. The Radicals strove to reform those showing self-interest, the wealthy and those trying to become wealthy, by vilifying their "greed" and hobbling them with regulations.

The Radicals expected citizens to injure themselves in favor of the "common good," which, as defined by the Radicals, meant their regulations: "the social compact in a state of civil society . . . requires that every right or power claimed or exercised by any man or set of men, should be in subordination to the common good."¹⁰ Then, as astute officials often do, the Radicals redefined their terms. Rather than a market's being free when left alone by government, it was free, they declared, when it guaranteed "the right of everyone to partake of it, and to deal to the best advantage he can, on just and equitable principles, subordinate to the common good; and as soon as this line is encroached on, either by the one extorting more for an article than it is worth, or the other for demanding it for less than its value, the *freedom* is equally invaded and requires to be regulated."¹¹ Obviously, only Radical bureaucrats could decide whose principles were just and equitable, when private deals violated the common good, and what sorts of regulation would best redress extortionate prices, as well as the point at which those prices became extortionate.

Radicals further controlled the economy by branding certain transactions moral and others sinful. Men selling shoddy wares at low, Radical-approved prices were good. Men smuggling rare goods into Philadelphia for sale on the black market were bad because they charged high prices to cover their risk and trouble. Radicals expected Philadelphians to content themselves with moldy bread and sour butter, sold at controlled prices, rather than hanker for good but expensive beef and pork.

Ferocious Hatred

The Radicals did nothing by halves: they loathed and loved with equal ferocity. They hated wealthy men, extravagance with one's own money, frugality with the public's money, free markets, monarchy. They loved government (providing they ran it), mobs, demagoguery, and, amazingly, the Revolutionary War. That last might have been their one virtue, had their fanaticism not turned it into a vice. They persecuted, sometimes to death, anyone whose support for the war they deemed lukewarm.

The words to describe Radical ideology would not be coined until a later century's horrific experiments in

totalitarianism, but they were fascists in their itch for control, socialists in their economics, and Marxists in their humorless sanctimony. They were also utopians who cared little for their victims as they struggled to remake the world to their Spartan specifications. Their version of nirvana was frighteningly modern: a strong government regulating social and economic interactions while forcing citizens to be virtuous—or at least to cultivate those “virtues” the Radicals approved. These consisted primarily of veneration for the state, simplicity in manners and fashion, disdain for luxury, and thrift. The Radicals also expected every citizen to “feel for the public as for himself.”¹² Those who “felt” for family and friends ahead of the abstract “public,” who were wealthy or aspired to be, who were ambitious and self-interested, and who defined the Radicals’ virtues differently or prized other virtues more were enemies of the state.

Also high in the Radical pantheon were equality and democracy. And, as many Americans still do, the Radicals stretched these strictly political ideas to cover all of life. Anyone who considered himself a notch above his fellows, even if he had earned such distinction, could hardly be a good Patriot. Most likely, he was not a Patriot at all. It wasn’t long before anyone of great learning or wealth or excellence in any area was suspected, even hated.

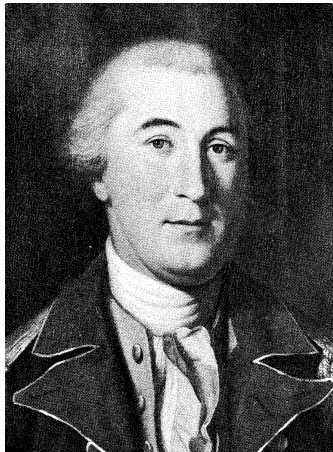
That applied particularly to some of the wealthiest folks in the world, the British king and nobility. Hating them was a Radical duty, if not a downright pleasure. Indeed, the Radicals so savored the hating that they extended it to all things British. The revolution, then, became a war aimed at the *British* rather than the British *government*. That distortion, immortalized in countless textbooks and taught in countless classrooms, allows the significance of a rebellion against the statist muck mirroring mankind to slip past unnoticed.

Despite their catastrophic reign, the Radical Patriots have escaped all censure. This may be due to the legitimacy that men who should have known better, such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine, lent them by

helping them write Pennsylvania’s constitution. But many lesser-known Radicals are also revered as heroes. Joseph Reed, for example, a leading Radical who became president of Pennsylvania, began the war as a lackluster officer on General Washington’s staff. But Reed benefited from something more telling than courage: an admiring descendant wrote his biography.

He whitewashed Reed’s record with the army and also papered over blemishes in his career with the Radicals. President Reed could sound positively Robespierri-an at times—he once called two citizens whom he was about to hang “animals” and expressed hopes for their “speedy execution”¹³—but his biographer ignored such outbursts.

Then, too, the Radicals have been almost entirely forgotten. Out of the extensive body of literature on the American Revolution—Amazon.com carries almost 4,000 books on George Washington alone—perhaps a handful of volumes mention them at all, and only one is devoted to them. That study was written by a Marxist who openly admitted his admiration for his subject.¹⁴



Joseph Reed (1741–1785)
 Revolutionary officer, Pennsylvania
 political leader, member of
 Continental Congress

Painting by Charles Willson Peale.
 Courtesy Independence National Historical Park

Radical Legacy

But though the Radicals have disappeared so completely not even footnotes disclose them, their ideas continue to torment the country—as do their methods: what worked on eighteenth-century Americans works as well today, and politicians, seldom original in their evil, merely recycle Radical tricks. During their tenure in Philadelphia, the Radicals pulled stunts still popular in the political repertoire, whether setting wage and price controls or banning anything fun, specifically theater, horse-racing, and gambling. They stifled dissent by dismissing their critics as “Loyalists” in cahoots with the British, just as the President’s critics today are slandered as soft on terrorism. Not surprisingly, many Philadelphians with choice estates turned out to be Loyalists whether they protested Radical measures or not, and their properties were confiscated in an early version of asset forfeiture. They were the lucky ones: a few “Loyal-

ists” who especially irritated the Radicals were hanged. Finally, as they committed their worst outrages, the Radicals canted about liberty. Like modern leaders, they used the same words other Americans did but first took care to twist them to their purposes. The Radicals called for “freedom” loudly and often, but they meant freedom *through* government, not freedom *from* government. Nor were they concerned that they thereby spoke not of freedom at all but of slavery. They were perhaps the first American politicians to use the rhetoric of liberty to destroy liberty.

The beggary the Radicals inflicted on eighteenth-century Americans warns 21st-century Americans against the state. Neither original nor unique in their folly, the Radicals were the usual run of rulers, mouthing the same tired lies, hiding behind the same old excuses. Like today’s politicians, the Radicals claimed they could manage markets better than those participating in them. When that failed, they played one group of citizens against another, consumers against merchants, Patriots against Loyalists, persuading each that the other was an enemy from whom only government could save them.

The cooperation inherent in free markets vanquishes such paranoia, but many folks, then and now, listen to the demagogues instead of trusting their own experiences in the marketplace. And because revolutionary Americans nearly worshipped political freedom, the Radicals couched even their most dictatorial laws and ideas in the language of liberty. However, they subtly and without fanfare reinterpreted terms until their words meant the opposite of what their audience actually heard. So it goes today. Politicians speak of “security” when they mean surveillance by government, “gun rights” when they mean gun registration, and “equality”

when they mean that some groups will be favored over others.

A poet who survived the Radicals’ rampage described their tactics, still in use today:

The Mob tumultuous instant Seize
With Rancrous Rage, on whom they please.
The People Cannot Err.
Can it be wrong in Freedom’s cause
To Tread down Justice, Order, Law
When all the Mob concur?¹⁵



1. Samuel to Hannah Peters, n.d., Samuel Peters, *Papers*, Connecticut Historical Society, VIII, 24.
2. Pennsylvania Constitution, 1776.
3. William B. Reed, *The Life and Correspondence of Joseph Reed*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1847), vol. 2, p. 139.
4. Quoted in Thomas Fleming, *Liberty! The American Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1997), p. 285.
5. *Pennsylvania Packet*, September 10, 1779.
6. General John Cadwalader, *Pennsylvania Packet*, July 31, 1779, quoted in Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of its Growth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968) p. 41.
7. James Wilson, quoted in Page Smith, *A New Age Now Begins: A People’s History of the American Revolution*, 2 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976), p. 1364.
8. *Pennsylvania Packet*, September 25, 1779.
9. Massachusetts Historical Society, *Proceedings* (Boston, 2d series, vol. III [1855–58]), p. 15.
10. *Pennsylvania Packet*, September 10, 1779.
11. Steven Rosswurm, *Arms, Country, and Class: The Philadelphia Militia and the “Lower Sort” During the American Revolution* (New Brunswick, N.J., and London: Rutgers University Press, 1987), p. 196.
12. Principles and Articles of the Constitutional Society (a Radical political club), *Pennsylvania Packet*, April 1, 1779.
13. *Pennsylvania Packet*, November 7, 1778.
14. Robert Brunhouse, *The Counter-Revolution in Pennsylvania, 1776–1790* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1971 [1942]).
15. Joseph Stansbury, “Historical Ballad of the Proceedings at Philada 24th & 25th of May.” MS. 1491–1492, Chester County Historical Society.