

## Poseidon's Curse: British Naval Impressment and Atlantic Origins of the American Revolution

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Christopher Magra believes that impressment played a vital role in the origins of the American Revolution. Sailors not only were the shock troops of the resistance movement in popular disturbances in the 1760s and 1770s. They had real economic grievances which translated into opposition not just to the impress, but also to the very nature of the imperial project that left maritime workers in the North America mainland colonies particularly vulnerable to forced recruitment. From this perspective, when seamen resisted the press gang they were doing more than defending their own lives and their community, they were also challenging the British empire. As such, Magra goes beyond my own work on crowds and sailors in the 18th century. He also questions the recent study of Denver Brunsman which argued that impressment was crucial to the success of the British empire in the 18th century because it effectively brought the most skilled workers into the navy and thereby ensured British dominance on the high seas.<sup>(1)</sup> Magra agrees with Brunsman that, 'Naval impressment helped Britain's seaborne empire'. But then asserts that it also 'contributed to its decline' (p. 6) and ultimately led to rupture in the American Revolution. Magra divides his book into three sections: first he explores the relationship between commerce, the seaborne empire and impressment. Second, Magra details what the impressment of men and ships meant to both merchants and sailors in the British Atlantic world. And finally, he traces the opposition to impressment in North America in relationship to changing British imperial policy.

Poseidon's Curse is well written, carefully organized, and deeply researched. In part one Magra does a masterful job of illustrating the symbiotic relationship between British commerce and the navy and empire, even as that relationship put pressure on the need for manpower by both the merchant and naval fleets. He also describes the working of the impress system over time and demonstrates how the British government sought to ameliorate some of the harsher features of the impress, but could never fully resolve the contradiction between the needs of commerce and empire in providing for the navy that would protect both. In part two, Magra explains the perspective of merchants striving to succeed in a complex set of commercial exchanges and brings to life the experiences of real sailors in the British Atlantic. He describes the high cost to merchants of impressing both men and ships by the British navy, demonstrating how they cut into profits through the loss of property as well as through the increase of wages. Moreover, Magra argues that beyond

the capital issues, there were political costs as merchants began to view impressment as an arbitrary assault on the sanctity of private property. Whatever, the merchant might have experienced, ultimately it was the mariner who had more at risk. Not only was he horribly paid aboard a man of war, but he was also likely to be denied wages he had already earned in private employment. More importantly, life in the British navy was dangerous. The common seaman was poorly fed and harshly treated. He might be killed or injured in combat, but was more likely to suffer fatally by being sent to exotic climes where disease and death were rampant. Taken together, these two sections provide a nice portrait of life, work, and commerce within the British Atlantic in the 18th century

Despite the many strengths of the book, at times Magra pushes his evidence too far. These problems appear in the opening and closing of the book in Magra's treatment of the Declaration of Independence. For Magra, it is a self-evident truth that if the Declaration of Independence included mention of the forced recruitment of sailors into the British navy, then, ipso facto, the issue must have been an important cause in the movement for independence. Without diminishing the significance of the Declaration of Independence, we must also recognize that Congress wrote the document for propaganda purposes and packed it with half truths and distortions, beginning with blaming George III for 'repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States'. That Thomas Jefferson wanted to include among the litany of complaints the idea that the king had compelled Americans to engage in the slave trade, suggests further that perhaps we should not rely heavily on the Declaration as a guide to the causes of the Revolution. Magra, of course, focuses on a provision Congress included in the final draft of the document, but here, too, he may read a little too much into the evidence. Toward the end of the list the facts 'submitted to a candid world' – really a multi-pronged indictment of the king – was the statement that George III 'has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands'. While this complaint obviously indicates that the British navy was forcefully recruiting Americans sailors – something we might call impressment – it specifically identifies those mariners as 'fellow Citizens taken on the high Seas'. As it turns out, beginning in 1775 the British navy compelled any seaman found on American merchant ships into the navy, while treating most privateersmen and mariners aboard ships of war first as pirates and then as something akin to prisoners of war to be incarcerated either for exchange or for the duration. In other words, contrary to Magra's suggestion, the Declaration of Independence did not list the earlier experience with impressment as a grievance. There is no mention in the document of press gangs during the colonial period or of legislation allowing the pressing of American seamen, an absence all the more striking since several other 'facts' refer to British actions before the outbreak of the war and to specific legislation the revolutionaries considered tyrannical.

The same problems concerning the use of evidence emerge in Magra's analysis of anti-impress disturbances in colonial America in part three. Here the difference between my view and Magra's approach is one emphasis – but that emphasis is all important. There is no question that the Knowles riot of 1747 was the most important anti-impress disturbance in colonial America. During this event, the crowd seized naval officers, threatened physical harm, and ultimately compelled the British navy to suspend impressments. Magra demonstrates that several colonial leaders connected the Knowles riots to legislation that explicitly prevented impressment in the West Indies while implicitly permitting it in ports on the North American continent. In all likelihood, if a few colonial leaders saw this connection, there were some people in the crowd who did so as well. Magra is therefore correct in bringing this imperial issue to our attention. But riots are passionate events full of ambiguity and contradictions. In his effort to drive his argument, Magra sidesteps this complexity and again pushes the evidence too far. We can see Magra's single-minded focus on a political interpretation in the following statements. 'Mariners and merchants in the busy colonial seaport, residents and itinerants alike, understood that the refinement of Britain's blue water policy [use of the navy to defend the empire] and the 1746 act [the law that prevented impressment in the West Indies] were ultimately responsible for Knowles actions [pressing sailors in Boston]' (p. 286); 'The mob went there [the state house] to use violence to change the system' (p. 287); and 'The rioters' intentions were political' (p. 292) Magra, of course, does admit that a desire to protect the community from outsiders and distress over

Knowles violation of standard impressment practices – taking men from fishing and coastal vessels and seizing sailors from outbound ships instead of just inbound ships – played some role. But these acknowledgments are dwarfed by his emphasis on the challenge to British imperial policy in the rioters' intentions and actions. He even goes so far as to quote Carl Bridenbaugh's whiggish assertion that the rioters were "voicing the spirit of 76 in 1747" (p. 284).

This approach also leads Magra to overemphasize the violence of the mob. Repeatedly, Magra stresses how the mob was on the verge of doing more serious damage, uttered blood curdling threats, yet somehow, held back or shifted the focus of their rage. In my own analysis of riots I have concentrated not on the words, but on the activity of the crowd. It is my belief that what people do in a riot has a meaning that is reflected in the larger society and that crowds are neither irrational, despite the excitement of the moment, nor necessarily overtly political. Within this context, crowds commit different kinds of actions in different historical periods reflecting larger social concerns. In the eighteenth century, with a few exceptions (some of which were in impressment disturbances) colonial American crowds seldom used excessive personal violence. Instead, they centered their ire on objects symbolic of their grievances, and usually on objects which would not get them into too much trouble. The Knowles riot fits this pattern. Despite having naval officers in their hands – literally – these captives of the crowd emerged relatively unscathed and were turned over to magistrates. In addition, at one point the people in the street reportedly headed for a shipyard intending to destroy a 20-gun naval vessel under construction, but were easily diverted and seized a barge, hauled it through town and consigned it to flames. This change of direction, I would argue, was not accidental. Burning the larger ship would have had serious consequences. Targeting the barge, whether owned by the navy as the crowd believed, or owned by a private individual, as some reports later indicated, did not really matter. The action was limited and symbolic and did not entail a major confrontation with the royal navy. Magra, however, emphasizes the violent attack on the British empire in all this activity, writing that 'Regardless of what happened next, the mob was solely intent on destroying naval property' (p. 288). Summing up the riot, Magra writes: 'the motivations behind these riots were, in fact, subversive. Americans did not like the direction the British Empire was headed in. They wanted to effect change' (p. 292).

Another problem with this approach is that Magra minimizes the larger Anglo-American context of these disturbances. As Nicholas Rogers has demonstrated, impressment riots were a regular and persistent feature of port cities in Great Britain.<sup>(2)</sup> Indeed, the number of riots in Great Britain and their violence far outpaced whatever happened in colonial America, even when you take into consideration the differences in population. Both the colonial and British impressment riots were complex affairs that had some ideological context. Yet however many newspapers and court cases raised questions concerning the constitutionality of the impress system in Great Britain, they did not, as Magra would have us think about colonial America, inevitably lead to revolution. One definition of whig history is reading later events into the past. By stressing the connection of the Knowles riot, and other impressment disturbances in the 1750s and 1760s to the American Revolution, Magra elides the contingency of the moment and does not present these events fully in their own context.

What, then, is the relationship between impressment and the American Revolution? There is a connection. Impressment riots helped develop the crowd techniques that became so crucial in the opposition to British imperial measures in the 1760s and early 1770s. And, Magra is correct, they also helped to politicize the waterfront working class community. But the spirit of 1747 did not inevitably lead to the spirit of 1776. Instead, it took a combination of developments and some shrewd operating by revolutionary leaders to join local and immediate grievances to longer term opposition to the British empire. (See for example my discussion of the Liberty riot in *Free Trade and Sailors' Rights*).<sup>(3)</sup> But that alliance was not in place in 1747. To argue it was misrepresents the nature of colonial American society and the radical nature of the American Revolution.

## Notes

1. Denver Brunsmann, *The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic*

- World (Charlottesville, VA, 2013).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Nicholas Rogers, *The Press Gang: Naval Impressment and its Opponents in Georgian Britain* (London, 2007).[Back to \(2\)](#)
  3. Paul A. Gilje, *Free Trade and Sailors' Rights in the War of 1812* (New York, NY, 2013), pp. 88–9.  
[Back to \(3\)](#)

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