

Gentlemen Revolutionaries: Power and Justice in the New American Republic

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Americans cherish the ‘American dream’ – the notion that anyone can achieve financial success and happiness in the United States. This idea is based on an assumption of economic equality and freedom within the United States’ capitalist market. *Gentlemen Revolutionaries* by Tom Cutterham explores the origins of the myth of economic equality as a product of elite commercial culture in the 1780s. Cutterham portrays a gentlemanly culture that emphasizes commercial, mercantile activity, the interconnectedness of elite community, and the importance of credit, reputation, and character.

Cutterham offers a new look at the 1780s that explores the efforts of elite gentlemen to instill a culture in the new nation based on commercial justice and sanctity of contract. Cutterham argues that many elites saw the Revolution as a new opportunity to create a nation elite, once the royal office holders and loyalists were removed. They hoped to foster a culture based on obedience and commercial justice, in which the trustworthiness of credit and the economy were integral. Elites also worked to limit the power of state legislatures and the effective popular sovereignty on a state-by-state basis. In this context, the federal Constitutional Convention in 1787 marked a new approach to control republic culture. For the first time, gentlemen took advantage of their national ties and networks to consolidate power, quickly outpacing small farmers that had no ability to nationalize their contacts. To garner support for the new federal government, gentlemen embraced new rhetoric that emphasized equality of economic opportunity and ignored the reality that capital tended to concentrate in the hands of a few.

Cutterham argues that the definition of a gentleman depends on time and place. In 18th-century Great Britain, a gentleman’s status depended on extensive land ownership, which allowed him to live a life of luxury supported by tenants’ rent. In the colonies, few gentlemen owned estates large enough to support a lavish lifestyle. Instead, gentleman worked with their mind and quill (p. 1). *Gentlemen Revolutionaries* takes a thematic approach to the decade, exploring the importance of status, obedience, education, popular sovereignty, credit, and public backlash culminating in the Constitutional Convention. Within each section, Cutterham follows a rough chronology and offers individual stories as examples.

Chapter one explores the sense of superiority that emerged among the officer corps in the Continental Army.

The officers believed that society needed a natural elite based on merit and sacrifice. The officers forged close bonds through war and shared a sense of anxiety that civilians would not recognize their sacrifice. Young officers from poor families feared their elite place in a post-war society would not be secure. In December 1782, fueled by these concerns, Henry Knox authored a memorial for Congress, signed by a group of senior officers. Their petition offered to accept full pay for a number of years or a lump sum instead of the half-pay for life they were promised. In March, with the pay issue still unresolved, a group of officers in Newburgh threatened mutiny (p. 20–1). Only Washington's interference prevented an uprising. Alexander Hamilton and Robert Morris, both serving the Continental Congress, took advantage of the officers' discontent to push reforms through Congress. They passed a bill awarding officers full pay for five years, instead of half-pay for life. They also passed an 'impost' bill allowing Congress to raise funds without relying on state requisitions. These efforts marked the development of a new approach to government to secure status and economic rights for the elite by controlling the states (p. 22).

The creation of the Society of the Cincinnati after the end of the war reflected the officers' ongoing concerns that their honor and sacrifice would be lost. Knox proposed the Society as a way for the officers to maintain their close bonds, take care of each other and their families, and to promote the honor necessary for a new republic (p. 23). The public immediately voiced opposition to the new organization. Protests focused on the Society's hereditary membership, arguing this provision would create a pseudo-nobility, which they viewed at odds with the goals of a republic (p. 25–7). Always extremely sensitive to any blight on his reputation, Washington proposed a series of reforms that would eliminate the Society's hereditary membership and any political activity. But many of the states' societies resisted Washington's reforms, which they believed would serve as an admission of guilt (p. 32). Although the Society faced backlash, the organization encouraged further bonds between elite gentlemen. Many of the officers in the state societies also served in the state governments, which produced new commercial and trade networks.

Chapter two examines gentlemen's efforts to use education to create obedient, moral citizens and foster the growth of appropriate leaders. Cutterham offers the example of several young chaplains in the war who felt the same sense of honor and sacrifice as officers and worried about the character of the post-war republic. Noah Webster (a friend of fellow Yale graduate and sometime chaplain Joel Barlow) nurtured a metaphorical kinship with the American republic. He felt personally rejected by parents and the legal establishment. He associated his experience with British disrespect toward colonies and believed both he and the republic had to prove themselves and earn respect in a vast, international world (p. 49). After working as a teacher, Webster became convinced the republic needed an eloquent, unified language and education system to earn respect from foreign nations. Webster also advocated a new form of teaching that would offer men specific training to support their future vocations and the republic's future in business (p. 59). Around the same time, Thomas Jefferson proposed a new education plan for Virginia. Jefferson was convinced the people could not be trusted to hold power and rule themselves without proper education and upstanding moral fiber. By providing education to everyone, elites could select the best leaders based on merit and help the masses accept their place in society (p. 57–8). In Pennsylvania, Benjamin Rush pursued a complementary plan. Rush proposed a university in the western part of the state to establish control over the Presbyterian Church structure and bring elite-led education to the frontier. The university would also Americanize immigrants and homogenize culture (p. 59–61). Rush and Webster both emphasized the importance of schooling for business, which would teach citizens the value of commercial justice. Their education plans would turn all Americans into gentlemen, which would solve the problem of popular sovereignty.

Chapter three analyzes elite efforts to restrict the popular mandates for democracy that gained momentum as the decade progressed. In early 1781, the South Carolina government worked to restore order and control. The state needed money, but the British still occupied Charleston – the main source of trade. To raise revenue and respond to a widespread thirst for vengeance, the legislature passed an order to seize property from a small number of Tories. The decision to seize property was not taken lightly and Governor John Rutledge justified his actions by arguing that the British had broken social contract by committing specific atrocities (p. 69–71). In this context, John Laurens' proposal to arm black troops appeared too suspicious

and likely to encourage rebellion. Despite the damage caused by British incursions in the state, many gentlemen believed the assembly had gone too far. After the British evacuated Charleston, the legislature quickly reasserted control by establishing a city corporation empowered to preserve social and moral order. The legislature instructed the city corporation to prevent maritime harassment of rival British merchants (p. 75). Commercial prosperity was paramount and elites needed British trade to revive the city. In New York City, elites also faced uncertainty about the treatment of loyalists. In January 1784, Hamilton published 'A Letter from Phocion', arguing against legislation that threatened to confiscate loyalist property. Hamilton voiced the concerns of New York commercial gentlemen whose success depended on a thriving New York port. The port, in turn, depended on a secure legal environment that would encourage loyalist and British merchants to employ their networks of trade and credit in a safe environment (p. 79–83).

Meanwhile, John Adams, the American minister to the Court of St. James, worked to negotiate a new commercial treaty with Great Britain. After the war, American consumers giddily resumed their purchasing activities by taking out new lines of credit from British merchants. At the same time, Parliament passed restrictive trade policies shutting American merchants out of the West Indies. When the new policies went into effect, Americans found themselves without cash, overwhelmed by cheap British goods, and unable to pay back debt. The economic pinch led to calls for debtor protector laws which regularized the frequency and amounts of demands for debt payments. Southerners who had lost slaves and other property to the British during the war saw no reason to repay their debts, which the British used as justification for holding onto forts in the Northwest Territory. Adams' negotiations settled into a quid pro quo situation (p. 87–92). Until the federal government could repay its debts, a more-favorable commercial treaty seemed unlikely.

Chapter four considers the role and public debate over the Bank of North America. The purpose of any bank is to consolidate capital and make credit more available. American gentlemen argued that the bank would help build the nation's credit and reputation, just like a personal loan would for an individual gentleman. A few years after its founding, the Bank of the United States had produced further consolidation of wealth and power among those that controlled the bank. Managers decided who received loans based on personal reputation. Family and friends of the bank board members were most likely to receive loans because of their personal connections. Those loans made business success possible and improved personal reputations – which proved to be a self-fulfilling cycle (p. 106). Cutterham demonstrates how the bank played into existing regional tensions. George Washington believed the future and wealth of the nation lay in the west, but order and stability in the region were paramount. Western settlers had little affection for the states who had offered little support or protection from Native Americans. Washington also could not appeal to a sense of national character, the settlers were just as likely to break off and side with the Spanish or French. Instead, he proposed a canal project on the Potomac River to bind western settlers to eastern markets and lines of credit by creating a mutually interdependent economic relationship (p. 98–9).

Although Washington's plans eventually came to naught, tensions continued to rise. Speculators bought up immense tracts of land, raising prices for the average settler, and then used local law enforcement to evict settlers when they could not repay the debt. In response, local communities organized to resist these efforts. They made debt collection more difficult, acquitted debtors when they were tried in court, and intimidated potential buyers at debt auctions (pp. 103, 107). In Pennsylvania, they also voted reform candidates into office. On April 4, 1785, the new legislators passed a bill abolishing the Pennsylvania charter for the Bank of the United States, which was the closest symbol of the credit-based market controlled by eastern merchants. The passage of the bill kicked off a months-long campaign to first save the state charter, and then to persuade Congress to retain the national charter. Cutterham gave three examples of editorials published by gentlemen on behalf of the bank: Pelatiah Webster, Thomas Paine, and James Wilson. Webster spoke up to elite gentlemen, Paine spoke to the common man, and Wilson spoke to the representatives. All three defended the 'sacred force of contracts' and argued that adherence to rules of justice and the social compact defined republican government (p. 111–19). When the reform platform failed to improve the economy, the voters gave Robert Morris and his pro-bank allies an opportunity to improve their economic prospects. They immediately reinstated the bank charter.

Chapter five weaves together the conflict in Massachusetts and Rhode Island to show the full context of popular sovereignty. The Massachusetts experience differed from states like South Carolina and Virginia because its constitution retained a property requirement to vote. As a result, the composition of the bicameral legislature was significantly more conservative and over-represented the merchant elite on the eastern seaboard (p. 124). Rather than passing relief laws, the legislature passed heavy taxes to pay off war debt. When their petitions were ignored, farmers in western Massachusetts shut down the courts, which were closely associated with the eastern establishment (p. 127–131). On the other hand, Rhode Island had no property requirement and the voters selected a radical reform platform. The legislature immediately printed paper money, passed legislation requiring immediate acceptance of the paper currency, and established strict penalties for refusal. The legislation also determined that trials over paper money would be held in front of a judge, without the right to trial by jury. Merchants in Rhode Island refused to accept paper money and would not be pressured into complying with the laws. They hand-selected a case that would serve as a public-relations statement to turn popular opinion against the government. In *Trevett v. Weeden*, James Varnum, president of the Rhode Island Society of the Cincinnati, successfully argued that the law violated Weeden's constitutional rights by removing his right to trial by jury (p. 131–2). Meanwhile, Secretary of War Henry Knox passed a plan to call up troops to crush Shays' rebellion in Massachusetts. Knox's plan stalled when Congress could not raise the necessary funds and Virginia was the only state that responded to the call for troops. Instead, Benjamin Lincoln, president of the Massachusetts Society of Cincinnati, gathered Society officers and established a subscription among Boston elites to pay for the army. Lincoln then led the army to arrest the rebels and crush the rebellion (p. 135–9). Although Massachusetts eventually granted amnesty to all of the rebels, the government revoked the franchise for all persons involved and strengthened the control of the government establishment over the western part of the state. Rhode Island's paper money policies and Shays' Rebellion underlined the need for gentlemen to consolidate power on a national level and convinced many elites that their previous efforts in each state were insufficient (p. 141). The Constitutional Convention was a culmination of the struggle against state power and a return to the strategy originally pursued by Hamilton and Morris of strengthening the federal government to protect a commercial vision at the expense of the states.

Although the last chapter is perhaps the most complex, it also offers some of the best insights. The section on Rhode Island expertly ties the conflict to Massachusetts and the rest of New England, showing how merchant elite were interconnected with other forms of establishment and in other states. Most scholarship dismisses Rhode Island as 'the little detestable corner of the continent,' but Cutterham shows how local conditions in Rhode Island developed in a New England context, placed political power in the hands of radicals, and kept the state out of the Constitution Convention (p. 156).

Cutterham's comments on the Antifederalists provide significant food for thought for future studies of the ratification. Some elites objected to the concentration of federal power in the new Constitution, but all gentlemen favored limitations on paper money and the sanctity of contracts enshrined in Article I, Section 10. On the other hand, some radicals opposed both the concentration of power and the clauses in the Constitution that favored the commercial elite over poor farmers. This disagreement over paper money highlights the internal divisions within the Antifederalists, which limited the efficacy of their resistance to ratification. Most scholars blamed the failure of Antifederalists on their disorganization or failure to organize sooner, but Cutterham implies that no amount of organization could have overcome their fundamental differences of opinion. If my understanding is correct, I would have enjoyed further exploration of this argument, if only because I believe it has the potential to change our understanding of the ratification process.

Gentlemen Revolutionaries also pushes back at long-standing descriptions of the 1780s that race through the decade knowing the Constitutional Convention on the horizon in 1787. Cutterham also offers a more complex and active view of the 1780s. Rather than portraying elites anxiously monitoring deteriorating fiscal conditions in the face of an ineffective federal government, Cutterham argues that elite gentlemen pursued an active agenda. He also places social anxieties at the center of the story. Social anxiety shaped

elite society and was inextricably entwined with concerns about economic conditions. This argument builds on literature on social culture in the Early Republic, including Joanne Freeman's *Affairs of Honor* [\(1\)](#), but more explicitly ties social anxieties to a specific economic vision. This last contribution will make *Gentlemen Revolutionaries* especially relevant for readers, as economic and social anxieties continue to confound American society.

Notes

1. Joanne Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven, CT, 2001).
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