

SAR Presentation 10/12/17

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY WAR: THE BRITISH PERSPECTIVE

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I begin this presentation with a qualifier. In trying to present the British perspective of the American Revolution, I would not want you to think that I was anything but a loyal Son of the American Revolution. On another occasion, such a mistake was made.

When I joined the Emmanuel School of Religion faculty in 1991 we had just returned from England after having spent 10 years serving as principal of Springdale College in the city of Birmingham. I was aware of the temptation of someone returning from abroad to buttonhole anyone who would listen to them and tell them more than the listener would ever want to hear about their foreign adventures.

I thought I had avoided this temptation. But well into the semester the Emmanuel students had organized a party at which one of the entertainers was doing a skit entitled messages from God. He walked out on stage with a telephone, which rang. When he answered he was amazed to discover that it was God phoning him to upbraid him for some less than Christian behavior. After receiving his dressing down, he said, "Oh you have some messages for the faculty." This is where the fun began. He worked his way through the faculty noting idiosyncrasies that needed correcting. I was enjoying it immensely but with some apprehension as he neared the end of the alphabet. Finally he came to the W's.

"You have a message for Dr. Wetzel?" he said. "Tell him that he is not Moses, and England is not the Promised Land." With the laugh he received, I realized that I had not been as discreet as I thought. And then I remembered the saying, "Whenever people visit a different culture, there is always some idiot that goes native."

In August of 1973 my wife and I and six Milligan College students were camped in a farmer's field in the east of England. We were in the fifth week of a five week Humanities tour of Europe...eight of us in a Volkswagen van, camping all the way. Earlier in the day we had completed a three-day tour of London, driven to Cambridge, then headed east in preparation to sail from Harwich to the Hook of Holland.

Given the intensity of the travel it was easy to lose track of the calendar day. And as we had rushed around London on our final day there it dawned on one of the students that it was the 4th of July. The students were put out that no one seemed to recognize that it was a national holiday...at least for us Americans. And thus with some indignation they announced that when we got settled in camp that night they were going to stage a mile-long Fourth of July parade.

Fortunately we were not in an established camp ground with many other campers. A farmer had evidently decided to make a little money on the side by allowing travelers to camp in his pasture. We saw his sign, pulled in and set up camp. We were the only campers there except for an older couple who had parked their little caravan about 100 feet away from our four tents.

After our one-pot supper the students set up two camp stools beside the van for Bonnie and me. They then went around behind the van to organize their mile-long Fourth of July Parade. Shortly they marched by as a fife and drum corp...with improvised fife and drums. They then rushed around behind the van and prepared their next feature...a float with the Statue of Liberty. (Use your imagination. We did.) And so the parade continued! It may not have been a mile long but it was exuberant, noisy and great fun. After the parade the students were concerned that they had broken camping etiquette with all of their noise, and thus they went over to apologize to the British couple. The students came back laughing. When they offered their apology the woman responded, "Oh, that is quite alright. We didn't know what you were doing at first, and then we realized that you were celebrating the day we gave you your independence."

Obviously we Americans had not seen it that way. But it was one more instructive insight that reminds us that the rest of the world does not necessarily

see history as we do. Stanley Weintraub in his book, *Iron Tears: America's Battle for Freedom, Britain's Quagmire: 1775-1783*, does a good job presenting both the American and the British perspectives. Those of us in the SAR have a good understanding of the American perspective. But this evening I will attempt to present the British perspective. But I would be quick to add that there was no common mind among the Brits when it came to the colonies wanting to break their ties and obligation to Britain and establish themselves as independent countries.

Unlike modern British kings and queens, George III did not see himself as a ceremonial sovereign. "He examined detailed maps, resorted to his growing library of military histories, revised his ministers' strategies, read their mail, pored over the newspapers, micromanaged deployments, and developed grand plans." (p. 92, Weintraub) To George III the colonies in the New World were as much the possession of England as was any county in England itself. And hence rebellion in a British colony would have been seen in the same way had a group in England defied the throne. But an ocean separated George III and the American colonies, and hence fighting a war that far away was both expensive and especially difficult even though he was prepared to do it.

On the other hand there were some powerful leaders in England who were opponents of the war, such as Lord Rockingham, Charles Fox, Edmund Burke, the Duke of Grafton, and the Earl of Camden. (Weintraub, p. 93) The British tradition of the rights of man went back to the Magna Carta as well as later philosophers like John Locke and Thomas Reid who argued for a strong doctrine of the rights of man as opposed to monarchical dictate. But neither Locke nor Reid argued for the abolition of the monarchy.

From a business perspective, colonies were investments that were expected to pay a dividend. Suppose one of us today had a successful business, and we decided to expand. We invested heavily in setting up a branch in another community under the management of one of our current employees. The venture, though hazardous, proves to be quite successful, so much so that the branch manager comes to see himself as independent of the owner. There is little

question as to how we would address this today. It was no wonder that at the end of 1777 there appeared in England a song entitled, "Ode for the New Year" in which the Americans were called "wayward children" and "parricides."

Another financial consideration was the indebtedness that England had incurred during the French and Indian War. Hence to the Crown it seemed only fair that the North American colonies should assist in paying off that debt. And taxation was the way to raise that money. After all, if England had not been successful in winning the French and Indian War we might all be speaking French today.

Furthermore England had made a treaty with native American tribes that it would not settle beyond the Appalachian chain, but colonists were already violating that agreement. This included my ancestors who after settling in Pennsylvania in the 1750s moved on to the Ohio Valley in the 1760s to an area where Wheeling, West Virginia, is now located.

One has to hand it to the British monarchy. By gradual accommodation over the centuries with the rise of popular democracy it has managed to survive, and in some respects even flourished. I came to the conclusion while living in England that the monarchy functions for the Brits somewhat like the American flag and the national anthem do for us Americans. Think of the furor that is being caused by the disrespect of some professional football players while the national anthem is being played before a game. I remember one of my English friends who was involved in the Labor Party and politically regarded himself as a socialist. But he had no hesitation in proclaiming himself a monarchist, and in no way would speak disparagingly of the Queen. I compared that to the American who had no hesitation speaking ill of the President, but would not insult the Flag.

The British monarchy also functions as a tangible symbol of national unity. This was certainly seen in the role of the monarchy during World War II. I saw it during the brief Falklands War which occurred while we were living in England. And with the extraordinary gift for public ceremony the Brits have, the Monarchy plays a tangible symbol in what it means to be British. After all, we have our Queens for such occasions as the Rose Bowl and Orange Bowl. My one

experience of this kind was when I went to church with Prince Charles....I had better explain. In 1983 when England was celebrating the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, there were many celebrations around the country. But the center piece was to be a special service at Westminster Abbey...an invitation only affair. It so happened that one of our small Church of Christ congregations was made up immigrants from the West Indies. Being descendants of these freed slaves, the congregation was given 12 tickets to attend the service at Westminster. The leader of the congregation phoned me saying that he thought it would be appropriate for the Principal of their College to attend the service with them and could I meet them at the door of the Abbey about an hour before the service. Of course, I could! On the day of the service I took the train from Birmingham to London and the tube on to Westminster Abbey. Even though there was an enormous crowd in front of the Abbey, it was not difficult locating our small group of West Indian Christians. As I joined them their leader, Brother Neville Shaw, was counting heads. There were 13 of us, and he had only 12 tickets. Well, various ones of us were offering to drop out, but Brother Shaw said, "No one is dropping out. Dr. Wetzel, will you pray." We all huddled and I prayed. Then Brother Shaw said, "Follow me." He handed the 12 tickets to the attendant and 13 of us went through the door. I thought to myself, "That was the fastest answered prayer I had ever seen."

The nave of the Abbey was already packed out, and we ended up having to go clear to front to find seats...on the front row, no less. I said to myself, "I am not going to allow myself to become unduly impressed like a gawking tourist." But when the giant pipe organ began to play and the choir thundered out an anthem, I was in awe. And the procession that made its way down the aisle, turned and passed before us. And there was Prince Charles and Margaret Thatcher. It only occurred to me later, "What would your SAR ancestor, Martin Wetzel, think of you just now?" He would have been rightly chagrined.

Well, the Brits lost their colonies but they did not lose their ability to celebrate their identity and maintain themselves as a viable force in world affairs. The analogy that I found myself using as I heard my English friends talk about the United States was that of a mother who has seen her child leave home under

some strained conditions. But like a mother she still has a fondness for the rebellious child even if she still has to put him in his place occasionally.

On one Fourth of July the BBC interviewed a particular English television personality. He was asked, "What do you do with the 4th of July?" He responded, "I always drink a toast to King George III whose bungling efforts enable us to get rid of those troublesome colonies." Of course one could have added, "It was nice having those successful colonials around when Hitler was bent on conquering all of Europe, including Britain."