Introduction

On July 9th 1776 George Washington read to his troops assembled in what is now the Washington Heights section of Manhattan a document that would radically alter the course of history. Washington had received a copy of the freshly drafted *Declaration of Independence* from John Hancock, the president of the Continental Congress, while nervously preparing to defend New York City against General William Howe’s redcoats who had disembarked on Staten Island. The *Declaration* that Washington received was a remarkable and sophisticated promise to create a modern state. More than two centuries later, this document is still read annually at Fourth of July celebrations and reprinted in local newspapers. Throughout the subsequent centuries, mayors, members of congress, political pundits, and presidential candidates from every political party continue to cite and refer to it. This is not surprising: the *Declaration* was a modern document, and the problems America’s founders grappled with remain of vital consequence today.

The political crisis that ultimately led a set of Americans to separate themselves from the British Empire was the product of the alarming growth of Britain’s national debt during the Seven Years War (1757-1763), a massive and expensive global conflict that was fought in theaters from the Ohio Valley, to Bengal, continental Europe, Africa, and the West Indies. In its aftermath one group of politicians, led by Britain’s Prime Minister George Grenville, tried to pay down the debt with cost-saving austerity measures and by compelling Britain’s colonies to pay a share of the burgeoning British tax burden. Grenville’s political opponents, self-proclaimed members of the Patriot party on both sides of the Atlantic, argued instead that the best way to reduce the debt was to encourage economic development in all of Britain’s colonies. Experience had taught them that consumption of British manufactured goods in the colonies kept the British imperial economy growing at a rapid pace. North American consumers were understood by Patriots to be the most dynamic piece of Britain’s now global economy.

Politicians, pundits, and political essayists on both sides of the Atlantic debated how best to respond to the debt crisis. Government debt was *the* most widely discussed and hotly debated political issue of the 1760s and 1770s, just as it had been throughout eighteenth century Europe. In the British Empire, since the 1730s, this debate had focused on issues that still engage us today: the economic effects of immigration; the political, economic and legal status of the African diaspora; and the best ways for the government to support economic growth. My contention, then, is that the *Declaration of Independence* is -- and should remain -- “American Scripture” precisely because its authors were the first to seek to address these quintessential issues of the modern era.[[1]](#footnote-1)

As soon as he received the newly penned and freshly printed *Declaration of Independence* from Hancock, Washington had it “proclaimed before all the army under my immediate command” and was pleased to report that “the measure had their most hearty assent.” His troops were enthusiastic, Washington implied, because the *Declaration* “will secure us that freedom and those privileges which have been and are refused us, contrary to the voice of nature and the British constitution.”[[2]](#footnote-2) To contemporary readers this seems a shocking, almost heretical admission. Washington was commanding American troops in a war against British troops in order to defend the *British* constitution. How could this be? What did Washington mean by giving voice to this paradox?

The American Commander-in-Chief was a sophisticated, though not necessarily original, reader of the *Declaration*. Washington, like many Patriots in Britain, North America, and the West Indies, was in fact fighting on behalf of the Patriot interpretation of the British constitution. The Patriots believed that the constitution had been debased by a series of inept and possibly corrupt British politicians ever since King George III’s accession to the throne in October 1760. For Washington and his contemporaries, the British *constitution* was a capacious term. It did not mean a written document with formal legal standing. Instead Washington referred to what he took to be the British way of governing, grounded in the principles set forth in England’s Revolution of 1688-89. By constitution, then, Washington and his contemporaries referred to a government’s policies and the institutions that supported them, rather than a formal set of written laws. The great British statesman Edmund Burke referred to the British method of regulating colonial commerce in exchange for capital to support colonial development as “the inevitable constitution” of America. In a text which was “continually in the hands of the members of our congress,” the Swiss republican theorist Emmerich de Vattel insisted that a “constitution is in fact nothing more, than the establishment of the order in which a nation proposes to labor in common” to promote the general welfare. The British method of governing asserted not only the primacy of the rule of law. It also entailed a commitment to government support for economic development, development that would benefit the widest possible range of English or -- after the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707 -- British subjects. It was this dual commitment to rights and governmental activism to which Washington referred when he evoked “that freedom *and* those privileges” granted by the British constitution. Washington, like countless fellow Patriots, believed that prior to 1760 the British imperial state had not been a malevolent force or even a necessary evil. In July 1774 the Fairfax County Committee, chaired by George Washington, declared that “the experience of more than a century” proved the “utility” of the British imperial constitution, resulting in the “mutual and uninterrupted harmony and goodwill between the inhabitants of Great Britain and her colonies.” In that “long” pre-1760 period, Britons on both sides of the Atlantic “considered themselves as one and the same people.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In the view of the Patriots like Washington, the post-1688 British state, though imperfect in many ways, had been a uniquely benevolent force throughout the British Empire.

George Washington’s understanding of America’s founding document as a call for an energetic government stands in stark contrast with the majority of interpretations of the *Declaration*. Whereas Washington complained that the British imperial state since 1760 had done too little to promote the welfare and happiness of colonial North Americans, 20th and 21st century commentators criticize the British for having done too much. Whereas scholars, pundits, and politicians now agree on little else about the American Revolution, most concur that the authors of the *Declaration* celebrated limited government. One leading progressive historian, for example, interpreted America’s *Declaration* as the manifesto of “a revolt against the centralized coercive power of Great Britain and the colonial aristocracy.” The political philosopher Hannah Arendt, who understood more than most that the American Revolution was itself a successful project of state formation, also read the *Declaration* as a document that fundamentally “abolished the authority and power of crown and Parliament.” In contrast to the French Revolution, she believed, social questions rarely arose in America’s founding. The authors of the *Declaration* were committed to a concept of negative liberty, according to one leading legal scholar, by which they meant “freedom from a number of social and political evils, including arbitrary government power.” America’s Founders, chimes in one leading historian of the American Revolution, especially those who penned the *Declaration*, “tended to see society as beneficial and government as malevolent.” Another eminent historian agrees in this regard: the American revolutionaries drew on a legal tradition that was committed to “limited government.” The *Declaration*, insists yet another scholar “gives voice to a political philosophy of extremely limited government.” The *Declaration* put into words a long-held American commitment to independence, agrees another expert in early American history, because they “cast a suspicious eye on even their own colonial governments, which many of them considered remote and unrepresentative.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Countless commentators and politicians have drawn on this scholarly tradition in their insistence that the *Declaration of Independence* enshrined the American commitment to small government.

In fact, Washington understood the meaning of America’s founding document far better than we do today. He was immersed in the culture of Anglo-American political argument in which the framers of the *Declaration* also participated.[[5]](#footnote-5) What, then, was the nature of this political discussion? What were the contours of the imperial state that George Washington and his fellow North Americans celebrated in the 1770s? Only by answering these questions will it be possible to comprehend fully the document the North American Patriots drafted in June and July 1776. Only by understanding what the Patriots understood to have been the benefits of the imperial government that was replaced in 1760s will it be possible to comprehend the kind of state they hoped to construct in and after 1776. Interpreting America’s founding document requires understanding the policies pursued by the eighteenth century British imperial government.

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For over a century politicians, pamphleteers, and political essayists had wrestled with the consequences of the fundamentally new kind of state created by Britain’s revolutionaries of 1688-89. England’s revolution had created a different sort of government: a powerful one capable of defeating the world’s greatest power (France) in a series of wars fought on an increasingly global scale; but a state that was at the same time responsive to the needs and desires of its subjects. Britain’s revolutionaries of 1688-89, uniquely in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, had created an energetic *and* participatory state.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Britons could create a new kind of imperial state in the seventeenth and eighteenth century because they lived in a quickly changing commercial society. English society was radically transformed over the course of the seventeenth century. At a time when most of Europe was suffering through a long and sustained recession, England became more economically diverse, more committed to manufacturing, and more urban. By 1700 the manufacturing and commercial sectors of England were responsible for fully one third of the national product. The English developed new manufactures throughout the length and breadth of the country, including new lighter cloths, metalware, ceramics, and shipbuilding. All of these new industries immediately catered not only to domestic markets but also to a new and growing set of colonial consumers. In many ways, as recent work by economists has shown, burgeoning Atlantic markets helped to drive England’s economic transformation. New industries gave rise to new towns. Manchester, Halifax, and Leeds quickly became important centers for the production of the lighter cloths. Sheffield, Birmingham, and other towns in the Midlands produced metalwares. Shipbuilding was centered in London, Portsmouth, and Harwich. Liverpool emerged alongside Bristol and Whitehaven as great ports for Atlantic trading. Not only did the English economy grow and diversify; it also became more refined. Thatched villages were replaced with ones filled with brick houses and glass windows. More and more towns and cities paved their streets. Towns now had new amenities like lending libraries, coffee houses, and a variety of shops. At the same time newer and better roads and turnpikes, stagecoaches, and postal services connected towns and villages in new and denser networks. By the later seventeenth century England had properly become a trading nation.[[7]](#footnote-7)

British North Americans in the eighteenth century understood the commercial issues facing the British imperial polity because they, too, lived in a commercial society. In the eighteenth century, British North America was similarly and quickly becoming a commercial society. As for Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, foreign trade drove economic growth in the British North American economy as well. That trade, however, generated growth that was twice as fast as in Britain itself. Wages were well known to be higher throughout North America than they were in Britain at the same time. All of this was particularly true after 1745. While British North America remained primarily agricultural in the eighteenth century, agricultural production was increasingly geared towards producing goods consumed outside the household. British North America was emphatically a commercial society. South Carolinians sold slave-produced rice, Carolina gold, for West Indian and European markets for massive profits. From the 1740s the combination of British bounties and declining market prices for rice drove many Carolinians to produce indigo for export as well. Landowners in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina had their slaves harvesting tobacco for European markets for much of the eighteenth century. Though there, too, market pressures led farmers, including George Washington himself, to diversify their crops, generating the “wheat boom” of the middle of the eighteenth century.[[8]](#footnote-8) New Englanders produced grains and a variety of animal meats for the market.

What was even more remarkable than colonial production was the massive growth in colonial consumption of British manufactured goods. By the middle of the eighteenth century there was, in the view of Benjamin Franklin, “a vast demand” for British manufactured goods – furniture, cloth, metals of all sorts – that was so great and increasing so quickly that it would in the foreseeable future outstrip even Britain’s prodigious capacity to supply the North American colonies.[[9]](#footnote-9) In fact exports from Britain to North America more than quintupled between 1720 and 1770. North America, especially the mainland colonies, had become in this period Britain’s most important trading partner. All of this production and consumption, of course, necessitated the presence of merchants who became an increasingly prominent element in North American society. Just as in England in the seventeenth century, burgeoning trade made it possible for North American towns – Boston, Philadelphia, New York, Charleston – to become increasingly refined places in the eighteenth century. Libraries, theaters, racecourses, clubs and associations, coffee houses and shops abounded.

North America’s spectacular economic dynamism generated commensurately remarkable population growth. Benjamin Franklin estimated in 1751 that “our people must at least be doubled every twenty-five years.” The Newport minister Ezra Stiles confirmed Franklin’s theory with reams of surveys, while Edward Wigglesworth of Harvard concurred based on statistical calculations. More threateningly, Franklin concluded that within a century “the greatest number of Englishmen will be on this side the water.” Modern calculations confirm British America’s spectacular growth rate. While it was still dwarfed by the population of Spanish America on the eve of the revolution, the British American population was growing faster both through natural increase and through higher rates of immigration. British North America was by the 1770s a diverse, dynamic and complex society. Just as in Britain there was significant regional variation. But from New England to Georgia the vast majority of British North Americans were part of a modern and increasingly global commercial economy.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Britain and its empire, of which British North America was a part, were connected after the Revolution of 1688-89 by an increasingly active and powerful imperial government.[[11]](#footnote-11) England’s economic growth had made possible, though not at all inevitable, the creation of a powerful state. Whig politicians had long been agitating for a state based on different economic principles from the ones adopted by the Restoration monarchs Charles II and James II. Whereas Charles II, James II, and their Tory supporters had believed that land was the basis of property, Whigs, including their great ideologist John Locke, argued that human labor created wealth. The Whigs, like many in modern America and Europe, therefore believed that the government should promote the manufacturing sector, where human labor could add value to raw materials by producing cloth, metalwares, or ceramics. The Tories for their part sought to relieve tax burdens from the landed sector. It was only in the wake of the Revolution of 1688-89 that Whig politicians found it possible to create a state that could simultaneously help finance war against the world’s greatest power, France, and help stimulate the development of the manufacturing sector. The post-revolutionary regime created the Bank of England (1694) to lend money both to the government and to the manufacturing sector, the Board of Trade (1696) to coordinate commercial and imperial policy, and an expanding bureaucracy to collect taxes efficiently and fairly.

As a consequence of the revolution itself and the expanding capacities of the government, Parliament and British society at large began to devote an increasing amount of time and energy to discussing social, economic and imperial issues. Indeed, imperial issues that reached Parliament often generated the most controversy, the hottest debates, and the most press commentary precisely because so much money was at stake. While Parliament, like many modern states, expended more money on the military than on any other item, the British state in the eighteenth century was far more than a military machine. “The period since the Revolution [of 1688-89] is distinguished by principles of a very different nature,” the Scottish political economist Sir John Sinclair said of the eighteenth century British state at the end of that century. “The State has assumed the appearance of a great corporation: it extends its views beyond the immediate events, and pressing exigencies of the moment … it borrows money to cultivate, defend, or to acquire distant possessions, in hopes that it will be amply repaid by the advantages they may be brought to yield…. In short it proposes to itself a plan of perpetual accumulation and aggrandizement, which according as it is well or ill conducted, must either end in the possession of an extensive and powerful empire, or in total ruin.” Analysis of the British Treasury reports reveals that the British state was able, at the same time that it erected a powerful military, to spend significantly and consistently on economic development. This set the British state apart from its European rivals. One historian of the British state of the eighteenth century found that in Britain “current military expenditure accounted for between 61 per cent and 74 per cent of public spending during the major wars of the period.” This “outlay,” though large, this scholar concludes, “probably represents a much smaller percentage of national resources than in many other states.” Indeed no other European state spent less than 80% of its revenue on the military, and most spent a far higher percentage than that.[[12]](#footnote-12) The British Parliament, it turns out, spent far more heavily than their European rivals in the eighteenth century on developing social and economic infrastructure in their colonies, and in Scotland and Ireland. The British in the eighteenth century were unique in their commitment to energetic government.

All of this Parliamentary expenditure after the Revolution of 1688-89 generated a great deal of political discussion in society at large. From around 1680, the British publishers produced a dizzying array of pamphlets, essays and position papers discussing and debating the best way to improve Britain’s economy. It was “about the year 1680,” recalled Daniel Defoe -- who was a successful journalist and political pamphleteer long before he became a novelist -- that “began the art and mystery of projecting to creep into the world.” “The projecting age,” as Defoe called it, generated a widespread public discussion of schemes “of public advantage, as they tend to the improvement of trade, the employment of the poor, and the circulation and increase of the pubic stock of the kingdom.” One of England’s most successful early financial journalists, John Houghton, concurred in 1680 that “trade is a subject that hath not only taken up the thoughts and time of private men, but also of late years especially hath been one of the main concerns of the greatest princes.” “Trade and negotiation has infected the whole kingdom,” concluded one memorandum that circulated at King James II’s court in 1685, “by this means the very genius of the people is altered.”[[13]](#footnote-13) After the Revolution of 1688-89, this newly important discussion of political economy exploded, permeating sermons, infiltrating all of the newspapers and dominating discussions both in the fashionable coffee houses and in the increasingly significant House of Commons.

Party political dispute in late seventeenth and eighteenth century Britain, not unlike party politics today, was as much about political economy as it was about religion and the constitution. Thousands of Britons now had access to political economic information. Daniel Defoe’s Review and Charles Povey’s General Remark on Trade reached thousands of readers each in the first decade of the eighteenth century. Their circulation numbers were almost certainly dwarfed by the wildly popular competitors the Mercator – a joint production of the Tory Charles Davenant and the Whig Defoe – and Henry Martin’s British Merchant. Joseph Addison estimated that he and his Spectator, a journal that included sophisticated discussions of political economy among the various topics it covered, had “three score thousand disciples in London and Westminster” alone. Charles Davenant thought his numerous tracts on political economy were “an entertainment for the country gentlemen, for whose service they were written.” The young James Brydges, a future government specialist on finance, held discussions about trade and the East Indies in London chocolate houses. At Lambeth palace, with Thomas Tenison, the Archbishop of Canterbury, he chatted about “the plantations and new discoveries that might be made.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Given the intensity of party conflict, it was hardly surprising that debates over political economy and empire were quickly politicized. Economic issues in the seventeenth and eighteenth century British Empire, much like these same issues in the twenty-first century, generated intense partisan disputes. There was no agreement on supposed mercantilist principles. Fierce debates in quick succession in the later 1690s over the creation of the Board of Trade, the Scottish scheme to establish a colony at Darien in the West Indies, the renewal of the East India Company charter, and ultimately over whether to go to war to prevent the French from taking over the wealth of Spanish America helped to map imperial issues onto party politics. “As of late many controversies have arisen in the English nation,” observed a Virginian in 1701, “so ‘tis observable that the two great topics of trade and plantations have had their parts in the dispute.” Trade to the Indies, the value of joint-stock companies, and the national economic interest have “become the general subject of conversation; every man with the greatest freedom, bestows his censure upon these things,” thought the economic writer and economic guru for the Patriots Henry Martin. Addison was convinced that the dispute over whether Britain could make peace without the Spanish West Indies “has fixed all men in their proper parties.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

The Revolution of 1688-89 had indeed transformed the nature of politics in Britain. Parliament, which had previously been summoned at the whim of the monarch, now became a regular institution that met every year. Before 1688 Parliaments had passed very little legislation. After the Revolution, Parliament devoted much more time to discussing, passing and rejecting legislation – the vast majority of it dealing with social and economic issues. Unsurprisingly the rapid expansion of the volume and importance of Parliamentary activity provided ample opportunity for regular and sustained partisan debate. “The heats and animosities grow everyday higher in England,” the imperial and martial administrator William Blathwayt wrote in the early eighteenth century: “parties very much animated against one another.” The British were “a nation so divided into parties,” wrote the politically enigmatic former paymaster of the Queen’s forces James Brydges in 1714, “that no one is allowed any good quality by the opposite side.” Party divisions cut deeply into British society. Party politics was not a game played only by a rarified metropolitan elite. “A country fellow distinguishes himself as much in the church-yard, as a citizen does upon the ‘change,” noted Joseph Addison in the Spectator. “If an Englishman considers the great ferment into which our political world is thrown at present, and how intensely it is heated in all its parts,” the influential journalist suggested in 1711, “he cannot suppose it will cool again in less than three hundred years.” These divisions were so profound, so ubiquitous, that Addison worried that in them he could “discover the seeds of a civil war.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

The British establishment Whig politician Sir Robert Walpole (1676-1745) was able to create single party rule in Parliament in the 1720s and 1730s, but he was not able to end partisan debate. Indeed from the 1720s political economy and imperial issues became the central arena of ideological contestation. “We have lately had none of these party divisions amongst us with which this nation used formerly to be perplexed,” observed Daniel Finch 8th earl of Winchilsea in the late 1730s, “nothing like a division has for many years appeared amongst us *but* what was occasioned by some ministerial measure which was thought ruinous to trade or inconsistent with the honor of the nation.” Winchilsea knew whereof he spoke. The issues that divided Britons in the 1720s and 1730s, the issues that dominated the press, were no longer primarily about religion or the royal prerogative, as they had been in the seventeenth century, but about commerce and taxation. In that sense they were remarkably modern debates. Parliament and the British press constantly debated the size of the national debt and rate of economic growth. Questions of the Irish and colonial monetary supply, the rate and means to tax Scotland, whether or not to tax the English directly through land taxes on the rich or indirectly by means of excise (or sales) taxes on the poor and middle classes excited the most bitter partisan squabbles. Increasingly these debates pitted establishment Whigs – followers of the Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole – against their self-described Patriot opponents. Walpole believed that the best means to promote British prosperity was to free wealthy *English* landowners from the crushing burden of property taxes. His Patriot opponents, by contrast, sought to promote prosperity through state investment in the most dynamic elements of the economy, the manufacturing sector in Britain and the overseas colonies. In the later 1730s the two most popular newspapers, *Common Sense* and the *Craftsman*, were run by prominent Patriot politicians and regularly serialized in the new weekly news magazines, *The London Magazine* and the *Gentleman’s Magazine*. While the intensity of partisan conflict in eighteenth century Britain ebbed and flowed, it never came to an end. From the accession of George III in 1760, party animosities reached new levels of intensity. John Wilkes, himself one of the most ideologically committed Patriot politicians, observed rather uncontroversially in 1775 that “party rage unhappily divides us.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

The Whig party, the self-described party of the Revolution of 1688, had divided into competing groupings in the 1720s and 1730s. Establishment Whigs, or supporters of the Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole, found themselves facing off against Patriot Whigs on the floor of the House of Commons, in company committee rooms, in the Britain’s increasingly ubiquitous coffee houses, in the partisan press, and increasingly throughout the empire. Ideological differences distinguished the Patriots from their establishment Whig opponents. Just as in the contemporary United States, and most advanced industrial democracies, these parties involved networks of individuals who shared many but not all of the same beliefs. Just as in today’s politics, there were individuals who embraced large parts of the Patriot political platform, but dissented from other parts. Nevertheless eighteenth century commentators easily perceived the coherence and political importance of these groupings inside Parliament and out of doors, in the towns and in the countryside, and in England and throughout the colonies.[[18]](#footnote-18)

These British partisan debates about political economy had a profound impact on the North American political imagination. British debates about economic matters quickly became British American talking points in coffee houses, taverns, and town meetings. At exactly the same time that the provincial press emerged in England, Scotland, and Ireland -- in the 1720s – a robust colonial press emerged in North America and the West Indies. And just as in the British Isles, the new journalists in North America took their cues, and many of their articles, from the wildly popular Patriot newspapers. Beginning in the early eighteenth century, North American newspapers made available the best essays from the radical Whig and Patriot newspapers, from Joseph Addison’s *Spectator*, to John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon’s *Cato’s Letters*, to *Common Sense* and the *Craftsman* in the 1730s and 1740s, to *The Monitor*, *The North Britain*, and the *London Evening Post* in the 1750s, 1760s, and 1770s. Many North Americans eagerly bought, collected and bound their own copies of the essay magazines. Already by the 1730s, Americans as diverse as the Virginia planter William Byrd and Abigail Franks, a member of a New York Jewish merchant family, made sure they were kept up to date with the latest and most fashionable Patriot publications.[[19]](#footnote-19) While the American press in the 1760s and 1770s increasingly published local news and political essays penned in North America, these additions did not displace British news and British political commentary. They supplemented this information. So, even as tensions between the British government and the North American colonies accelerated in the 1760s and 1770s, newspaper readers from Savannah to Boston were kept abreast of the latest developments in the imperial Parliament, in London politics, and in social and economic discontent in the British Midlands. North American colonists were eager participants in a British imperial political culture. British Americans eagerly spent their hard-earned money purchasing journals detailing “metropolitan” political debates because they knew them to be their own.

Colonial Americans overwhelmingly read and collected the partisan publications of the British Patriot opposition. Almost half a century ago scholars called attention to the significance of British “opposition thought” of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that was “devoured by the colonists.” That contribution above all highlighted the importance of “English radical whigs” and deployed “the social scientists’ concept of ideology.” While these scholars emphasized the “political” aspects of the radical or Patriot Whig program, and their indebtedness to the seventeenth century writings of John Milton, Algernon Sidney, and James Harington, among others, we now know that in the century spanning the execution of Charles I (1649) to the accession of George III (1760) the Patriots developed a sophisticated political economic and imperial ideology as well. Patriot Whigs not only looked backwards to the great English struggles of the seventeenth century, they also looked forward to the new problems generated by the emergence of powerful states. It is no longer possible to assert, as some scholars have, that “opposition poets and polemicists alike … set classical models and morality against the spreading commercialization” of imperial society.[[20]](#footnote-20) Radical or Patriot Whigs on both sides of the Atlantic embraced commercial society, the Bank of England, the manufacturing sector, and well designed trading companies. Patriot essayists, poets, and politicians celebrated the imperial state, not only because it protected British liberties but also because its actions promoted British happiness.

By suggesting that political economic thinking mattered, and mattered decisively, in the coming of the American Revolution, I am not calling for a revival of the economically determinist arguments made popular by the progressive-era historian Charles Beard. Beard’s early twentieth century determinism rested on the conflict between “the interests of real and personal property,” between the vast majority of North Americans who held property in land and the powerful minority whose wealth was based in money and manufacturing.[[21]](#footnote-21) While not denying that social and economic differences mattered, the case I am advancing rests on *ideological* differences that defined partisanship on both sides of the Atlantic. By ideology I mean a world-view shared by broad swaths of people from all social classes. Ideologies were shaped, not determined, by social and economic realities. These ideologies were prisms through which people understood new information about government activities, economic performance, and foreign affairs. Ideological convictions led different groups of people to interpret the same piece of information in radically different ways. In the same way, twenty-first century Americans might understand the soaring cost of medical care either as the result of insufficient government involvement in the health care sector or as the consequence of too much government regulation depending on their ideological convictions.

North American Patriots responded to the critical events of the 1760s and 1770s from a particular ideological standpoint. The authors of the *Declaration* defended a government devoted to promoting economic growth; they believed in the possibility of limitless prosperity achieved through the creative interplay of production and consumption. Government, they were convinced, needed to support the numerical increase and the buying power of consumers to guarantee future prosperity. Their opponents in the British ministry and elsewhere argued instead that production was all that was important. They were therefore happy to tax colonists, constrain their trade, and limit migration in the belief that taxing colonial production and limiting expenditures on the colonies was the best means to pay down the national debt. These were conflicting interpretations of economics, to be sure. But these were above all ideologies, belief patterns that may well have been influenced by economic interests but were by no means determined by them. Just as relatively less affluent voters in the American South today often vote for Republican candidates for ideological rather than narrowly economically self-interested reasons and relatively more affluent voters in the Northeast of the United States tend to return Democratic candidates, so North Americans and Britons developed their political preferences through a complex matrix involving cultural and economic reasoning.[[22]](#footnote-22) Ideas mattered decisively. And many of the most important and hotly contested ideas in the eighteenth century Anglo-American political world were about how the economy functioned and the proper role of the state in making the economy

Patriots, from all social classes, on both sides of the Atlantic shared a commitment to a common set of economic principles. They believed that Patriot Whig politicians, pursuing their political economic commitments, had transformed Britain into Europe’s most powerful and prosperous polity. Patriots believed that it was Britain’s willingness to borrow money and invest in the manufacturing sector and colonial infrastructure that resulted in the Duke of Marlborough’s great victories in the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1713). Four decades later they credited the government activism of William Pitt’s Patriot ministry with the great victories of 1759 in the Seven Years War (also known as the French and Indian War) that seemed to bring with them the prospect of unending prosperity. They believed that a British imperial state organized along Patriot lines – that is an energetic government committed to supporting both producers and consumers – could help generate virtually limitless growth.

The vast majority of North Americans well into the 1770s believed that the British government under Patriot leadership had promoted both liberty and prosperity throughout the Empire. They understood themselves to be British Americans sharing interests, culture, and tastes with their brethren in the British Isles. “We have every influence of interest and affection to attach us to one another, and make us wish to preserve the union indissoluble,” observed the Virginian Patriot Arthur Lee in 1775 of the relationship between Britons and British North Americans. “The same laws, the same religion, the same constitution, the same feelings, sentiments and habits, are a common blessing and a common cause.” Lee’s views on this if on little else followed those of the New York lawyer and moderate member of the Continental Congress, James Duane, who also highlighted “the ties of friendship and common interest, the similarity of our government, laws, and manners” that united Britain and British North America. In 1775, the Newport minister and future president of Yale College, Ezra Stiles, shared Lee’s commitment to the British Empire. “It is my most ardent prayer to the Most High,” he wrote to the British Patriot historian Catherine Macaulay, “that the union between Great Britain and these colonies may never be dissolved: and that we may always boast and glory in having Great Britain the head of the whole British Empire.” The American historian Mercy Otis Warren, a sister of one revolutionary and the wife of another, hoped to see “the beautiful fabric” of the British constitution “repaired and reestablished on so firm a basis that it will not be in the power of the venal and narrow hearted on either side of the Atlantic again to break down its barriers and threaten its total dissolution.” “It is the ardent wish of the warmest advocates of liberty,” agreed the Virginian George Washington in 1774, “that peace and tranquility upon constitutional grounds may be restored” between Britain and America. “I am sure,” reflected the Pennsylvania member of Congress Robert Morris, “that America in general never set out with any view or desire of establishing an independent Empire.” This cultural and ideological affinity convinced the Pennsylvania Patriot Benjamin Rush, who had himself studied medicine in Edinburgh, that “not one man in a thousand contemplated or wished for independence of our country in 1774.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Why, then, did British Americans feel compelled to declare independence in July 1776? Why did George Washington believe that he could only defend the liberties and privileges guaranteed by the British constitution by taking up arms against the British army? These questions can only be answered by remembering that colonial North Americans were Britons engaged in the fiercely partisan debates about the future of the British Empire. Until the very last moment, North Americans and their British political allies did not want separation but imperial reform.

The *Declaration of Independence,* I am suggesting, was an alternative means to achieve the political reforms the Patriots on both sides of the Atlantic had long desired. It is therefore essential to recover the content and specificity of the Patriot political program for state-driven economic development. Where others have interpreted the *Declaration* by placing it in the context of the cut and thrust of “American politics” between April 1775 and July 1776, or in terms of a broad set of European ideas, or in the context of rhetorical strategies, I insist that the *Declaration* also be understood in terms of a broad imperial debate that began to take shape early in the eighteenth century. That debate centered fundamentally on the aims and purpose of government.[[24]](#footnote-24) This book traces the emergence and development of Patriot politics. The Patriots wanted to restore an imperial constitution, a way of governing the empire, developed in the wake of the Revolution of 1688, an imperial constitution that had promoted the social and economic development of the colonies. This Patriot imperial constitution had been rejected by a set of British politicians who had come to power after the accession of George III in 1760. Instead of pursuing the Patriot policies of promoting colonial economic development, of subsidizing immigration to North America, of developing North American infrastructure, of helping British Americans to penetrate Spanish American markets – policies the authors of the *Declaration* lauded -- these opponents of the Patriots sought to balance the books by cost savings and shifting some of the tax burden onto the humbler North American colonists and onto their newly gained South Asian territories. They pursued a strategy of austerity and extraction rather than a policy of government-driven economic stimulus. Both in North America and in Britain, Patriots called for a new government and a new set of policies. They wanted both new men and new measures. When the North Americans, against their fondest wishes, became convinced that their British political allies could not deliver imperial reform, they took matters into their own hands. The authors of *The Declaration of Independence* made no anti-imperial or anti-government statement. Instead, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, John Jay and their fellow members of the Second Continental Congress proclaimed their commitment to a Patriot government that would promote American development. *The Declaration* marked not the end of empire but the beginning of a new and energetic government in North America.

1. I owe the phrase to Pauline Maier, American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence. (New York: Knopf, 1997); see similarly Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Fall 2005), p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. George Washington (New York) to John Hancock, 10 July 1776, Theodore J. Crackel (editor), The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), Revolutionary War Series, Vol. V, p. 258; Gentleman’s Magazine, Vol. 46, September 1776, p. 434. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Charles-Guillaume-Frédéric Dumas (The Hague) to Benjamin Franklin, 30 June 1775, Benjamin Franklin Papers Online ; Benjamin Franklin (Philadelphia) to Charles-Guillaume-Frédéric Dumas, 9 December 1775, Benjamin Franklin Papers Online; James Bowdoin (Boston) to Benjamin Franklin, 19 August 1776, Benjamin Franklin Papers Online; Emerrich de Vattel, The Law of Nations. (London: J. Coote, 1759), Vol. I, p. 14; Edmund Burke, The Speech of E. Burke, Esq. on American Taxation. 19 April 1774. Third Edition. (Philadelphia: Benjamin Towne, 1775), pp. 29-30; Resolves of Fairfax County, 18 July 1774, Robert L. Scribner (editor), Revolutionary Virginia: The Road to Independence. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1973), Vol. I, p. 128. The radical Thomas Paine reprinted a petition expressing similar sentiments in February 1775: Petition and Memorial of the Assembly of Jamaica, 28 December 1774, Pennsylvania Magazine, February 1775, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Merrill Jensen, The Articles of Confederation. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1940), p. 163; Hannah Arendt, On Revolution. (London: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 149; John Philip Reid, The Concept of Liberty in the Age of the American Revolution. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 56; Gordon S. Wood, Empire of Liberty. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 10; Jack P. Greene, The Constitutional Origins of the American Revolution. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. xiii; Ronald Hamowy, “The Declaration of Independence,” in Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole (editors), A Companion to the American Revolution. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2003), p. 260; Thomas P. Slaughter, Independence. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2014), p. xvi, 436. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Earlier generations of American historians relied on the then cutting edge scholarship of Lewis Namier and J. H. Plumb: Bernard Bailyn, The Origins of American Politics. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), pp. 15-16, 32-33, 35-36; Edmund S. Morgan, “The American Revolution: Revisions in Need of Revising,” William and Mary Quarterly. Vol. 14 No. 1(January 1957), p. 4. More recent historians have insisted that we integrate the newest findings from British historiography: Pauline Maier, From Resistance to Revolution. (New York: Knopf, 1972); T. H. Breen, “Ideology and Nationalism on the Eve of the American Revolution: Revisions *once more* in need of revising,” Journal of American History. Vol. 84. No. 1 (June 1997), pp. 14-16. This book is an attempt to bring to bear the latest findings in British historiography on interpreting America’s founding document. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John Brewer, Sinews of Power. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989). Max Edling has also highlighted the development of the British state, but is wrong to see it as narrowly “made for war.” Max Edling, A Revolution in Favor of Government. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This paragraph relies heavily on Chapter 3 of my 1688: The First Modern Revolution. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jon Butler, Becoming America. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 2; John J. McCusker, “Measuring Colonial Gross Domestic Product,” William and Mary Quarterly. Vol. 56. No. 1 (January 1999), p. 5; George Washington (Williamsburg) to Robert Cary and Company, 1 June 1774, Theodore J. Crackel (editor), The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition, Colonial Series, Vol. 10, p. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Benjamin Franklin, The Interest of Great Britain Considered with Regard to Her Colonies. Second Boston Edition, 1760, p. 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Benjamin Franklin, The Interest of Great Britain Considered with Regard to Her Colonies. Second Boston Edition, 1760, pp. 53, 57; The Crisis, No. LXXX, 27 July 1776, p. 505; Ezra Stiles (Newport) to William Leechman (Glasgow), 2 December 1760, Correspondence Box 3 1760-1763, Beinecke, MS Vault Stiles/Folder 323

    ; Samuel Langdon (Portsmouth, New Hampshire) to Ezra Stiles, 5 October 1761, Correspondence Box 3 1760-1763, Beinecke, MS Vault Stiles/Folder 347; “The Number of People in the Colony of Rhode Island taken by the King’s Order in the Year 1730,” Beinecke, MS Vault Stiles, Misc. papers, 25; Ezra Stiles (Newport) to Dr. James Fordyce (London) , 22 November 1763, Correspondence Box 5 1763-1765, Beinecke, MS Vault Stiles/Folder 406; Ezra Stiles (Newport) to Nathaniel Lardner, 20 June 1764,Correspondence Box 5 1763-1765, Beinecke, MS Vault Stiles/Folder 435; Edward Wigglesworth, Calculations on American Population. 25 January 1775. (Boston: John Boyle, 1775), p. 5; Spanish America was about five times the size of British America in the 1770s. James Belich, Replenishing the Earth. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 30-36; Stanley Engermann, Kenneth Sokoloff, Miguel Urquiola, and Daron Acemoglu, “Factor Endowments, Inequality, and Paths of Development among New World Economies,” *Economia*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Fall 2002), p. 50. In addition to the works cited above, this paragraph and the prior one draws on Jon Butler, Becoming America; John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, The Economy of British America, 1607-1789. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Marc Egnal, New World Economies. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Emma Hart, Building Charleston: Town and Society in the Eighteenth Century British Atlantic-World. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010); Jessica Roney, Governed by a Spirit of Opposition: The Origins of American Political Practice in Colonial Philadelphia. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. When Bernard Bailyn referred to the “weak” “overall structure of the English government” he was relying on a British historiography that has since been superseded: Bailyn, Faces of Revolution. (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 64. See Lawrence Stone (editor), An Imperial State at War: Britain from 1689 to 1815. (New York: Routledge, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sir John Sinclair, The History of the Public Revenue of the British Empire. (London: W. and A. Strahan, 1785-1790), Vol. I, pp. 4-5; John Brewer, Sinews of Power, p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Daniel Defoe, An Essay Upon Projects. (London: R.R., 1697), pp. 1, 10-11, 25; John Houghton, A Collection of Letters for the Improvement of Husbandry and Trade, 8 September 1681, p. 21; “Essay on the Interest of the Crown in American Plantations and Trade,” 1685, BL, Add. 47131, ff. 24-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Perry Gauci, The Politics of Trade: the overseas merchant in state and society, 1660-1720. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 165; Spectator, 12 Marcy 1711, Vol. I, No. 10, p. 55; Charles Davenant, Discourses on the Public Revenues and trade of England. (London: James Knapton, 1698), Vol. II, p. 320; James Brydges, Journal, 4, 6 February 1697, HEH, ST 26, Vol. I. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. An Essay upon the Government of the English Plantations on the Continent. (London: Richard Parker, 1701), pp. 1-2; Henry Martin, Considerations upon the East-India Trade. (London: A. and J. Churchill, 1701), sig. A2v; Joseph Addison (Cock-Pit) to Manchester, 27 February 1708, Beinecke, Osborn fc 37/13/33; Steve Pincus, “Rethinking Mercantilism: Political Economy, the British Empire and the Atlantic World in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” William and Mary Quarterly. Vol. 69, No. 1 (January 2012), pp. 3-34. I thus disagree with Jack Rakove’s recent assertion that because of the British government’s “mercantilist conviction” drove British policymaking after 1760 in ways that were “wholly unsurprising.” Political economy was highly contested in eighteenth century Britain. The novel policies pursued after 1760 were completely surprising to many: Jack Rakove, “Got Nexus?,” William and Mary Quarterly. Vol. 68. No. 4 (October 2011), p. 637. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Julian Hoppit and Joanna Innes, “Introduction,” Failed Legislation 1660-1800. (London: Hambledon Press, 1997); William Blathwayt (Breda) to George Stepney, 21 July 1701, Beinecke OSB MSS 2/Box 2/Folder 32; William Blathwayt (Dieren) to George Stepney, 26 August 1701, Beinecke, OSB MSS 2/ Box 2/Folder 33; James Brydges to Nicholas Philpott, 29 September 1714, HEH, ST 57/11, p. 10; Spectator, 26 June 1711, No. 101, Vol. II, p. 11; Spectator, 9 July 1711, No. 112, Vol. II, p. 167; Spectator, 25 July 1711, No. 126, Vol. II, p. 250. All quotations from the 1758 Tonson edition; Lawrence Klein, “Joseph Addison’s Whiggism,” in David Womersley, Paddy Bullard and Abigail Williams (eds). Cultures of Whiggism. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), pp. 108-126. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Daniel Finch 8th earl of Winchilsea, 15 November 1739, Cobbett’s Parliamentary History of England, Vol. 11, p. 64; John Wilkes, 26 October 1775, R. C. Simmons and P. D. G. Thomas (editors), Proceedings and Debates of the British Parliaments Respecting North America. Vol. VI. (White Plains: Kraus International Publications, 1987), p. 98; John Brewer, Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Amy Watson’s Yale doctoral dissertation is tracing these dense social networks of belief in Scotland, New York and Georgia. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Michael Eamon, Imprinting Britain: newspapers, sociability, and the shaping of British North America. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015); Geoffrey Alan Cranfield, The development of the provincial newspaper, 1700-1760. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962); David A. Copeland, Colonial American Newspapers: Character and Content. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997); William Byrd II (Virginia) to Mr. Smyth, 6 September 1740, in Marion Tinling (editor), The Correspondence of the Three William Byrds of Westover, Virginia 1684-1776. Vol. II, p. 557; Abigail Franks to Naphtali Franks, 12 December 1735, in Leo Hershkowitz and Isidore S. Meyer (editors), Letters of the Franks Family (1733-1748), p. 50; Abigail Franks to Naphtali Franks, 3 December 1736, in Leo Hershkowitz and Isidore S. Meyer (editors), Letters of the Franks Family (1733-1748), p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Bernard Bailyn, Ideological Origins of the American Revolution. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 43; Gordon S. Wood, The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969). 1998 Edition, pp. 14-15; Jack N. Rakove, “’How else could it end?’ Bernard Bailyn and the problem of authority in early America,” in James A. Henretta, Michael Kammen, and Stanley N. Katz (editors), The Transformation of Early American History. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), p. 52; Steve Pincus, “Neither Machiavellian Moment nor Possessive Individualism: Commercial Society and the Defenders of the English Commonwealth,” American Historical Review. Vol. 103 No. 3 (June 1998), pp. 705-736; Robert Brenner, Merchants and Revolution. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Gabriel Glickman, “Empire, ‘Popery’, and the fall of English Tangier,” Journal of Modern History. Vol. 87. No. 2 (2015), pp. 247-280; Abigail Swingen, Competing Visions of Empire: Labor, Slavery and the Origins of the British Atlantic Empire. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Carl Wennerlind, Casualties of Credit: The English Financial Revolution, 1620-1720. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Carl Wennerlind and Philip Stern (editors), Mercantilism Reimagined: Political Economy in early modern Britain and its Empire. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Steve Pincus, 1688: The First Modern Revolution. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Alan C. Houston, Benjamin Franklin and the Politics of Improvement. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Steve Pincus, “Rethinking Mercantilism,” William and Mary Quarterly. Vol. 69 No. 1 (January 2012), pp. 3-34; Steve Pincus, “Addison’s Empire: Whig Conceptions of Empire in the early 18th century,” Parliamentary History. Vol. 31. No. 1 (February 2012), pp. 99-117; James Vaughn, “The Politics of Empire,” University of Chicago Ph. D. dissertation, 2008. Bailyn himself has recovered the important imperial debate over immigration in the 1770s: Bernard Bailyn, Voyagers to the West. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), pp. 29-66; Gordon Wood, The Radicalism of the American Revolution. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1992), p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Charles A. Beard, An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States. (New York: Macmillan, 1913). It is a profound irony that many of those most critical of Beardian interpretations of American history happily adopt interpretations of eighteenth century Britain inspired by Lewis Namier whose historical method was inspired by Beard. I am grateful for this point to Namier’s biographer David Hayton. The loyalist Joseph Galloway came the closest to offering a Beardian interpretation of the *Declaration* when he suggested that the independence party included “men of bankrupt fortunes, overwhelmed in debt to the British merchants”: Joseph Galloway’s Statement on His Plan of Union, 28 September 1774, Smith, Letters of Delegates to Congress, Vol. I, p. 120. In fact at the moment of the Association most refused to repudiate their debts. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Here I follow Andrew Gelman, Boris Shor, Joseph Bafumi, and David Park, “Rich State, Poor State, Red State, Blue State: What’s the matter with Connecticut?” Quarterly Journal of Political Science, 2007, 2: 345-367. They modify the findings of Thomas Frank, What’s the Matter with Kansas?: how conservatives won the heart of America. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Arthur Lee, An Appeal to the Justice and Interests of the People of Great Britain. Fourth Edition. (London: J. Almon, 1776), p. 3; James Duane’s Speech to the Committee on Rights, 8 September 1774, Paul H. Smith (editor), Letters to Delegates to Congress. (Washington: Library of Congress, 1976), Vol. I, p. 53; Ezra Stiles (Newport) to Catherine Macaulay, 15 April 1775, Beinecke, MS Vault Stiles, Correspondence Box 12; Mercy Otis Warren (Plimouth) to Abigail Adams, 19 January 1774, L. H. Butterfield (editor), Adams Family Correspondence. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1963), Vol. I, p. 91; George Washington (Philadelphia) to Captain Robert Mackenzie, 9 October 1774, Paul H. Smith (editor), Letters of Delegates to Congress. (Washington: Library of Congress, 1976), Vol. I, p. 167; Robert Morris (Philadelphia) to Silas Deane, 5 June 1776, Paul H. Smith (editor), Letters of Delegates to Congress. (Washington: Library of Congress, 1979), Vol. 4, p. 147; Benjamin Rush, Autobiography. George W. Corner (editor). (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), p. 119. I agree with Bailyn that “it is not much of an exaggeration to say that one had to be a fool or a fanatic in early January 1776 to advocate American independence” Faces of Revolution, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Maier, American Scripture, pp. xvi-xxi; Garry Wills, Inventing America: Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence. (New York: Doubleday, 1978); Carl Lotus Becker, The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Ideas. (New York: Vintage Books, 1970); Morton White, The Philosophy of the American Revolution. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Jay Fliegelman, Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language and the Culture of Performance. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)