

The Pre-eminent Cause of the American Revolution

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1. The Most Important Cause of the American Revolution

The causes of the American Revolution have been discussed at length over the past two hundred and thirty years. Recently, we have been reminded of what is plausibly the most significant cause (Baack 2004, pp. 514-554). The reminder is somewhat surprising when one considers how prominently the issue figured in the unsuccessful peace negotiations of 1778.

The theory is that the war came about because of a disagreement between the British and the Americans over the fate of the Northwest Territory, a huge area that stretched from the western boundaries of the colonies at the Allegheny Mountains and north of the Ohio River. The British wanted to keep it as a fur-trading reserve with the Indians continuing to occupy the land, hunting, trapping and selling furs to traders. The Americans wanted to make the land available for settlement, and this would have entailed driving the Indians off the land.

The question arises as to which Britons or Americans would have been greatly concerned over the issue. In fact, it is difficult to imagine any widespread interest. Fur garments and hats were mostly luxury goods, and probably few Britons would have even known where the furs came from. Nor were most American colonists likely to have been interested in traipsing off into the wilderness. Kentucky and Tennessee were south of the territory, but were lands recently opened to settlement. Their combined populations were in 1770 less than one percent and in 1780 merely two percent of the total colonial population (U.S. Bureau of Statistics 1960, p. 756). It seems hard to imagine that there was much

popular interest in the issue on the part of either the British or the Americans.

On the other hand, it could have been a major concern to elements within their respective social elite. Among the American elite many had an interest in land speculation and the disputed territory did later provide opportunities for the accumulation of much wealth. Such persons were well represented earlier in the colonial assemblies, later at continental congresses and eventually in the U.S. Congress. At the 1787 Convention that drafted the Articles of Confederation, a quarter of the delegates were investors in land speculation (Beard 1986, pp.150-151).

The interest of the British elite is perhaps more tenuous. The two large British fur-trading companies were the Hudson Bay Company, founded in 1670 and with its headquarters in London, and the Northwest Company that was based in Montreal and had taken over the French fur trade after the conquest of Canada. Both companies bought furs from Indians, often through extensive networks of middlemen tribes, the catchment area for the furs covering much of the northern half of the continent.

The main reason the fur trade operated as smoothly as it did was that, without really being aware of it, the HBC factors tapped into an existing Indian economic network dating back as much as five thousand years. It extended from Hudson Bay across the prairies, inland from the Pacific, from the St. Lawrence to the Great Lakes, and eventually right across the continent. (Newman 1985, p. 186)

On the supply side, both companies were large enterprises with many financially important investors, and they operated in conjunction within a wide-ranging network of mercantile suppliers in Britain (Innis 1970, pp.179-185). The entire business connection complex had an interest in preserving the disputed territory for fur-trading purposes. Nevertheless, the extent of the complex of interests' influence in political decision-making may be queried.

It is difficult to pinpoint the influence. It probably extended into the ruling aristocracy, many of whom also had business and investment

interests. Parliament did include some merchants among its members, and the membership ranged widely through the British economy and included directors of the larger joint stock companies (Namier and Brooke 1964, pp. 131-138).

Although the relevant faction among the elite was probably weaker in Britain than in America, each faction appears to be an instigator of the war. The general public were the victims. They suffered, providing cannon fodder and money necessary to wage war. The booty went to elements of the elite on the winning side.

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