

New Historians and the American Revolution: Are Their Interpretations Really That New?

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Abstract

A new wave of progressive historians have not only challenged older accounts of the American Revolution but portrayed their interpretations as overturning an overwhelmingly dominant mainstream consensus or as revealing ignored but essential aspects of the revolution. These historians sometimes associate their own work with the *New York Times*' controversial 1619 Project. In this article, I examine the writings of two such historians: William Hogeland and Woody Holton. In contrast to their popular articles, their purely scholarly works do not in fact support the sweeping factual claims of the 1619 Project. While both these historians have their own unique perspective, focus, and contributions, they in no way are running up against a monolithic consensus or dramatically overturning standard interpretations of the revolution.

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A new wave of progressive historians have not only challenged prior accounts of the American Revolution but also portrayed their interpretations as overturning an overwhelmingly dominant mainstream consensus or as revealing ignored but essential aspects of the revolution. These historians sometimes associate their work with the *New York Times*' controversial 1619 Project. Among the project's more sweeping claims, when it first appeared in August 2019, was Nikole Hannah-Jones's (2019) assertion that "one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery" (p. 18). Defenders of this charge rely heavily on the 1772 *Somerset* court decision in Britain, which freed a slave brought from the colonies. But in December 2020, even Jake Silverstein, the *New York Times Magazine*'s editor-in-chief, felt compelled to revise and soften Hannah-Jones's claim, inserting the qualification that the desire to protect slavey applied merely to "*some of the colonists*" (Mackaman 2021b; emphasis mine) The historians who appear quite sympathetic to

the 1619 Project likewise, upon closer examination, engage in similar or even more severe hedging. As a result, their ostensible revisions and corrections turn out to have not really significantly altered our understanding of the revolution.

Consider the case of two such historians: William Hogeland and Woody Holton. Hogeland (2021) denounced some of the prominent historians who have criticized the 1619 Project in an article for the *New Republic* entitled “Against the Consensus Approach to History.” Although not an affiliated scholar himself, Hogeland has written several books about early US history that are deservedly well respected. His *Whiskey Rebellion: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and the Frontier Rebels Who Challenged America’s Newfound Sovereignty* (2006) is a particularly vivid account that exposes some of Hamilton’s excesses in suppressing that rebellion. In the lead essay appearing in *Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical Is Restaging America’s Past*, he also challenged the whitewashing of Hamilton’s career by the musical *Hamilton* and by the Ron Chernow biography on which the musical was based (Hogeland 2018).

But Hogeland’s *New Republic* article is sadly tendentious to the point of being misleading. He argues that after World War II, academic writing about early American history began to be dominated by “what became known as the consensus approach.” He admits that in “scholarly circles,” the “approach has been subjected to intermittent criticism.” Nonetheless, “its credibility remains unassailable with big segments of the interested public.” Hogeland also broadens the category of consensus historians until it seems to include practically every major historian with whom he has a minor disagreement. He includes Edmund Morgan, adding that “in Morgan’s generation, were Douglass Adair, Daniel Boorstin, Richard Hofstadter, Forrest McDonald, and Bernard Bailyn. Born in succeeding decades were Pauline Maier, Gordon Wood, Carol Berkin, Sean Wilentz, and Akhil Reed Amar, among others.”

Yet what Hogeland means by the “consensus approach” and exactly what about it he objects to are not entirely clear. He starts by defining it as a historical school that holds that “a founding American consensus on principles of rights” has “persisted in postwar U.S. commitments to modern liberal democracy.” Adair, Boorstin, Hofstadter, McDonald, and Bailyn admittedly fit that description, and even the early Morgan, but not really Maier, Wood, and Wilentz. After all, Maier’s (2010) exhaustive study *Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787–1788* hardly downplays conflict, even exposing what

she terms the “strong-arm tactics” of the Constitution’s advocates. Nor do Wilentz’s *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (1984), his coauthored *Kingdom of Matthias* (Johnson and Wilentz 1994), or his *Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (2005) celebrate consensus. And then later in Hogeland’s article, his throwing of Jill Lepore, who regularly writes for the *New Yorker*, into the consensus category is bizarre. Her discussion of the American Revolution in her history of the US, *These Truths* (Lepore 2018), has actually been invoked as *buttressing* the 1619 Project (Silverstein 2021). As for Morgan, one of his most influential later books is *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (1975), among the early works spearheading historians’ greater emphasis on slavery during the colonial period.

Nor have consensus historians been as overwhelmingly dominant as Hogeland implies. E. James Ferguson’s *Power of the Purse: A History of American Public Finance, 1776–1790* (1961) deals with financial conflicts between nationalists and radicals and is still universally cited as practically definitive on government finance during that period. And then there were the contemporaneous works, accessible to the general public, regarding the American Revolution and its aftermath by the progressive historian Merrill Jensen (1950; 1964; 1966). Hogeland bemoans the lost influence of pre–World War II progressive historians such as Charles Beard. But Beard’s (1931) *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* argued not only that there was conflict between economic elites and lower classes but also that the Constitution’s framers “with few exceptions, immediately, directly, and personally . . . derived economic advantages” (p. 324) from its adoption. It was that latter conclusion that McDonald (1958) and others challenged as too simplistic. Indeed, Gordon Wood’s *Creation of the American Republic* (1969) has in fact been interpreted as being neo-Beardian for treating the same conflicts in ideological rather than economic terms and thereby confirming Beard’s view that the Constitution represented a counterrevolution. More recently, Robert McGuire’s well-received *To Form a More Perfect Union: A New Economic Interpretation of the United States Constitution* (2003) offers a modified, more nuanced and sophisticated econometric analysis that concludes that both economic and ideological factors did indeed play some role in the Constitution’s framing.

Despite Hogeland’s extensive list of consensus historians, his article offers specific and detailed criticisms of only Morgan and Wilentz. Hogeland’s critique of Morgan focuses exclusively on *The*

Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution (Morgan and Morgan 1953; 1962) and some of his related other early writings, crediting them with initiating the consensus approach. One of the many things Morgan did attempt was to rebut the then-common belief among historians that, at the outset of Stamp Act crisis in 1765, most colonists objected only to internal taxes and conceded Parliament's right to impose external taxes (including duties on imports and exports). Hogeland highlights exceptions to Morgan's generalization and verges on charging him with intellectual dishonesty. But historians make such broad generalizations all the time, knowing that there are always exceptions. Reading the second edition of *The Stamp Act Crisis*, I never got the impression that Morgan was arguing that *every single* colonist opposed *all* parliamentary taxation upon passage of the Stamp Act.

The colonists' pre-revolution views on Parliament's right to tax the colonies are a complex issue, and after the book's publication, Morgan did not fully convince all historians. Even the term "external taxes" contains some ambiguity. Many colonists opposing parliamentary taxation as unconstitutional at that time still granted the right of Parliament to regulate the empire with the kinds of provisions in the long-standing Navigation Acts. These acts confined colonial trade to colonial or British ships; required some enumerated colonial commodities, including tobacco, to be shipped solely to Britain or British colonies; and prohibited outright some colonial exports and forms of manufacturing. So where do you draw the line between purely external taxes and regulation of the empire? Furthermore, there was still a small but influential segment of the colonial elite that wanted to temper or be cautious about colonial objections.

One thing that Hogeland is clearly mistaken about is the attitude of Virginians toward external taxes. Referring to the fourth Virginia Resolve against the Stamp Act, which denied parliamentary authority over the colony's "internal Polity and Taxation," he argues that "internal" can be interpreted as modifying "Taxation." This purportedly demonstrates ambiguity in Virginia's position, undermining Morgan's claim that the Virginia Assembly already opposed external taxes. But more realistically the phrase could be interpreted as pushing objections beyond all parliamentary taxes to any domestic regulation of the colony as well, including the Crown's vetoes of acts of the colonial legislature. In none of the other four references to taxation in the four Virginia Resolves that ultimately passed does the word "internal" appear.

The Virginia Assembly was the first colonial legislature to protest the Stamp Act. Its resolutions against the act were introduced by Patrick Henry. A full two years before passage of the Stamp Act, in Henry's arguments in the Parson's Cause trial, which first brought him to prominence and which involved a Crown veto, he was already arguing that Britain had no right to tax or domestically regulate the colonies in any manner whatsoever. John Kukla's recent biography *Patrick Henry: Champion of Liberty* (2017) documents that blanket opposition to all parliamentary taxation was already widespread within Virginia by the time of the Stamp Act.

Indeed, Hogeland engages in his own type of legerdemain when criticizing *The Stamp Act Crisis*. After initially denouncing the book, he switches to alleged but trivial errors in a Morgan (1948) article that appeared in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, five years before the book's first edition. After the first edition's publication, Morgan (1959) published a collection of the official colonial resolves and many of the individual pamphlets protesting the Stamp Act, and then he and his wife issued a revised edition of *The Stamp Act Crisis* in 1962. Morgan was clearly making minor corrections along the way, inspired by the comments of other historians, as he freely admits in the preface to the second edition.

It is unclear which of the two editions Hogeland refers to. But one thing Morgan points out within the book, confirmed by later works, is that Henry initially introduced seven resolutions against the Stamp Act. A fifth resolution was passed in the Virginia Assembly by a single vote but the next day, in Henry's absence, was expunged from the official record on a technicality by conservative leaders. Fortunately copies of the fifth resolution survived. It starts by stating that "the General Assembly of this Colony have the only and sole exclusive Right and Power to lay Taxes and Impositions upon the Inhabitants of this Colony." Hogeland curiously fails to mention any of these other clauses or the fact that the few colonial resolutions that were not explicit about the unconstitutionality of all parliamentary taxation of the colonies generally also opposed the Sugar Act, an external tax passed by Parliament a year before the Stamp Act. Henry's defeated sixth and seventh resolutions went even further, calling for outright disobedience and resistance to the Stamp Act. The full seven were what were usually published in papers throughout the colonies, igniting widespread opposition and direct action against the act.

Do professional historians sometimes make errors? Of course. As Hogeland himself concedes, no single historian has the time to read

every single primary source on all questions he or she treats. Morgan may have overstated his case (although I am not convinced). But this happens all the time among historians, which is why they often disagree with or correct other historians. Indeed, Hogeland himself concedes that Lawrence Gipson “cuts corners” in his fifteen-volume history of the British Empire when he, in contrast to Morgan, depicted “the colonists as overreactive” and “portrayed Parliament as relatively considerate of colonial petitions, in some ways even sympathetic.” For Hogeland to elevate any small errors Morgan may have made into a case of intellectual dishonesty or to imply that Morgan’s account of the Stamp Act was secretly and largely the result of Morgan’s views on America’s post–World War II foreign policy seems absurd.

This brings us back to what Hogeland means by “consensus approach” and why he objects to it. Perhaps his concern is less with the historical claims about some overarching American consensus and more about the political views of the consensus historians themselves. There is no denying that current issues do often affect one’s interpretation of the past, which is a major reason those interpretations evolve over time. But this impact is usually subtle and often unconscious. Moreover, while political predispositions may help explain a particular historian’s take on the past, they are not, in the final analysis, logically relevant to determining the accuracy of her or his strictly historical claims. Equally irrelevant is Hogeland’s lament that consensus interpretations, whatever that may mean, are more persuasive to the general public.

Hogeland also insists on too sharp a dichotomy between economic and ideological motives among historical actors. What he appears to dislike about Morgan, Wood, and the rest is that they are concerned with ideology rather than purely economic incentives. Perhaps a focus on ideology rather than self-interest is really Hogeland’s defining characteristic of the consensus approach. But both motives are of historical interest. And because the two often coincide, teasing out their relative importance is difficult and controversial. Note also that Hogeland’s belief that narrow *economic* self-interest almost always determines people’s historical actions is in tension with his charge that some ubiquitous *ideological* desire to find consensus in early American history was the underlying motive of the historians he criticizes.

Only in Hogeland’s briefer critique of Wilentz does he get to the question of slavery. In an article for the *Atlantic*, Wilentz (2020) disputed the claim that the *Somerset* decision caused a sensation among slaveholders in the North American colonies, writing, “In the entire

slaveholding South, a total of six newspapers—one in Maryland, two in Virginia, and three in South Carolina—published only 15 reports about *Somerset*, virtually all of them very brief.” Hogeland paraphrases Wilentz as claiming that “just six newspapers in the South” (emphasis mine) offered such reports, pointing out that they were in fact “all of the papers published in those colonies that year” and that Wilentz had overlooked “three newspapers that were published that year in North Carolina and Georgia.” To counter Wilentz’s assertion that “the coverage appeared in the tiny-font foreign dispatches placed on the second or third page,” Hogeland responds that that is where foreign news was usually put. Fair enough.

But Hogeland’s corrections are incredibly feeble evidence that the decision had anything to do with American independence. In fact, given the colonists’ interest in foreign news, something Hogeland himself emphasizes, what would really be surprising is if colonial newspapers had *not* reported the decision. Where are the widespread colonial newspaper articles, pamphlets, and letters expressing alarm about the decision? As far as I know, no one has found them. Compare that with the mountains of written alarm—in papers, pamphlets, and letters, as well as colonial resolutions—about the previous Sugar and Stamp Acts or the subsequent Townshend Duties and Tea Act. Nor does Hogeland mention Wilentz’s pointing out that newspaper coverage in the northern colonies was more plentiful, where it instead inspired antislavery sentiments.

There was major concern about the *Somerset* decision in Britain’s sugar islands, where slavery was more economically important. Yet even there, Wilentz quotes Trevor Burnard’s *Jamaica in the Age of Revolution* as finding that “*Somerset* had less impact in the West Indies than might have been expected.” If the decision remotely spurred the colonial drive for independence, why as early as the Stamp Act were more radical opponents of British rule in Virginia, particularly Patrick Henry, complaining about the Crown’s preventing Virginia from limiting slave imports, at the same time radicals were already pushing for relaxing colonial restrictions on masters manumitting their own slaves?

In short, whatever drives Hogeland’s animus against what he considers to be the consensus approach to US history, the purely historical questions on which his denunciation hinge turn out to be relatively minor. This dramatically illustrates the general point I made at the outset of this paper. Whether the colonists objected to British external taxes that came with passage of the Stamp Act or arrived at

that stance only later is a fascinating question. But how much would the ultimate answer affect the overall interpretation of the American Revolution? And so far, no defender of the 1619 Project has offered any real evidence that the *Somerset* decision caused any significant colonial alarm about a supposed British campaign against the institution of slavery.

Woody Holton, professor of history at the University of South Carolina, has written a nearly eight-hundred-page tome entitled *Liberty Is Sweet* and subtitled *The Hidden History of the American Revolution* (2021b). His previous books include a definitive biography of Abigail Adams (Holton 2009) and *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* (Holton 2007), a work I much admire. Even before this recent Holton book was released in October 2021, it ignited controversy. Hannah-Jones touted it as evidence for the 1619 Project's claim that the revolution was provoked by a British threat to slavery. After Holton (2021a) argued in the *Washington Post* that "whites' fury at the British for casting their lot with enslaved people drove many to the fateful step of endorsing independence," six leading revolutionary historians responded in a critical open letter (Berkin et al. 2021). Tom Mackaman (2021a) was more scathing at the Trotskyist World Socialist Web Site, which previously had published several scholars' attacks on the 1619 Project. The resulting debate even spilled over onto Twitter.

But the book itself is more guarded and restrained than either its early champions or detractors presumed. *Liberty Is Sweet*, densely packed with detail and exhaustively researched, with nearly every paragraph documented with an ample endnote, is certainly interesting. It does have a unique focus and gives greater attention to certain aspects of the revolution than do other general histories of the period. Yet, despite Holton's casting occasional aspersions on an alleged standard myth about the revolution, his account does not really stray very far, at least with respect to its overall interpretation of the revolution's causes and consequences, from other scholarly volumes on the topic. Even Gordon Wood, who signed the critical open letter, gives the book a terse but apt jacket blurb: "A spirited account of the Revolution that brings everybody and everything into the story."

In the first of the book's three distinct sections, covering the events leading up to the break with Britain, Holton addresses the question of slavery's role in motivating the revolution. With respect to the *Somerset* decision, Holton (2021b) only goes only so far as to state, "For many slaveholders, it strengthened the case against the king" (p. 121). And he concedes that other measures "proved equally decisive." Indeed by

this point his narrative has covered almost a decade of colonial grievances and protests against such measures as the Proclamation of 1763 and the Stamp Act. Then in an endnote, Holton (p. 599) even backtracks slightly, admitting that while “*Somerset* angered slaveholders (especially in the Caribbean), there is much less evidence for the corollary contention that one reason white southerners favored secession from Britain in July 1776 was that they feared Britain’s growing anti-slavery movement.” Specifically citing and contradicting Hannah-Jones’s introductory essay for the 1619 Project, he adds that “this claim vastly exaggerates the strength and size of the of the British abolition movement in 1772.”

Only in the book’s second section, covering the war itself, does Holton engage in a bit of a stretch. Half a year after conflict erupted in Massachusetts, and after royal authority evaporated in Virginia, the Virginia Assembly effectively governed independently of the royal governor, the Earl of Dunmore. Dunmore had fled to a British warship, and in November 1775 he issued a proclamation offering freedom to any slaves or indentured servants who would fight for the British. The offer applied only to Virginia slaves and servants owned by rebels and not to those owned by Loyalists. Holton (p. 204) boldly asserts that “no other document—not even Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* or the Declaration of Independence—did more than Dunmore’s proclamation to convert white residents of Britain’s most populous American colony to the cause of independence.”

On the one hand, historians have long recognized that Dunmore’s proclamation stiffened resistance in Virginia, especially because it raised the specter of slave revolts. Robert Middlekauff (1982), in his history of the American Revolution, published as part of the Oxford History of the United States series, writes, “Whatever loyalty there was in Virginia pretty much flickered out with Dunmore’s call” (p. 316). Even Murray Rothbard in the fourth volume of *Conceived in Liberty* (1979, pp. 82–83) acknowledges this effect. Observe also that Holton is not claiming that the proclamation sparked the rebellion itself but only that it promoted the desire for full independence in Virginia alone. Still, on the other hand, Holton’s implication that Virginians would have otherwise hesitated about declaring independence seems far too speculative a counterfactual. Moreover, he himself in subsequent pages brings up several other factors that propelled the rebels toward a complete separation from the mother country.

British general George Clinton subsequently issued a broader proclamation offering freedom to rebel-owned slaves in all colonies,

regardless of whether they fought for the British, again excluding those owned by Loyalists. Although Holton several times refers to an “Anglo-African alliance,” it is unclear how far he can push this term. He does scrupulously record nearly every military engagement in which Blacks participated, no matter how minor their role. But he does so on both sides of the conflict, concluding, “By war’s end, some nine thousand African Americans had served in the Whig army and navy—roughly the same number who enlisted with the British” (Holton 2021b, p. 211). It is true that additional fleeing slaves who did not serve as British combatants tipped the scale toward some kind of alliance. Yet while more than three thousand emancipated slaves joined the British evacuation from New York at the end of the war, Holton (p. 487) finds that many of the African Americans who shipped out of British-held Savannah and Charleston “were likely to remain a slave,” either handed over to white Loyalists “or snapped up by a British officer,” often landing in the British Caribbean slave colonies.

Nonetheless, Holton does give far greater attention than other general accounts to African Americans, whatever their role, prior to, during, and immediately after the revolution. Which leaves me surprised that, in his discussion of “the emergence of a significant free African American population” in “the post-revolutionary United States” (Holton 2021b, p. 552), he omits one notable factor contributing to this development. He does credit Vermont in 1777, as an independent republic, for being “first in the modern world to abolish slavery” (p. 307). He also mentions Pennsylvania’s adoption of gradual emancipation in 1780 and Massachusetts’s 1780 Declaration of Rights, which made it “the first of the original thirteen states to abolish slavery” (p. 470). What he fails to mention is that the upper-South states of Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia relaxed nearly universal slave-state restrictions on masters’ voluntarily freeing their own slaves. Virginia’s doing so in 1782 resulted in the manumission of an estimated ten thousand slaves over the next decade and a half, more than were freed in Massachusetts by judicial decree.

The book’s third and final section deals with postwar events, extending beyond the Constitution’s adoption all the way to the Whiskey Rebellion and the Indian campaigns during the Washington administration. Holton’s (2021b) take on the Constitution mirrors his earlier book on the subject, treating it as a counterrevolution “in favor of government” (p. 517). This conclusion is consistent with nearly all recent scholarship, whether specific writers approve of the result or, like Holton and Hogeland, disapprove. In appraising the revolution,

Holton finds benefits and costs, with a bit more emphasis on the latter, but this is ultimately a question whether the glass is half empty or half full. At one point he warns “against any effort to explain the American Revolution in *strictly* ideological terms” (p. 98; emphasis mine), but no serious historian I know of has ever argued that the revolution was motivated exclusively by ideology, entirely unaffected by economic self-interest, even if ideology was that particular historian’s specific interest or topic. As noted above, the two motives generally operate in sync, with Holton attaching greater weight to self-interest.

There is considerable hidden history in Holton’s *Liberty Is Sweet* regarding facets and details of the revolutionary era treated less copiously or ignored in other general accounts. But as far as dramatically overturning standard interpretations of the revolution, the subtitle’s billing of the book as “the hidden history” turns out to be partly puffery. Despite both Holton’s and Hogeland’s polemical denunciations of mainstream accounts of the American Revolution, their serious scholarly efforts have done very little to bolster the 1619 Project’s more extravagant contentions about the American Revolution. In actuality, these two historians, while each having his own unique perspective, emphases, and contributions, are in no way running up against and dramatically overturning some monolithic consensus about the revolution’s causes and consequences.

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