

## Book Review: The Will of the People: The Revolutionary Birth of America by T.H. Breen

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**Breen, T. H. *The Will of the People: The Revolutionary Birth of America*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2019. 269 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95.**

Historians of the American Revolution have long focused on the actions and thoughts of a relatively small number of political leaders who articulated arguments for American resistance and independence, and of military commanders who led the fledgling nation's army against the British. Numerous historical works in the past two generations have sought to amend or even supplant this narrative by examining the complexities and inconsistencies of an emerging American nation and by highlighting the inadequacies of the Revolution, including its failure to abolish slavery and to extend rights to all. Yet the traditional narrative has remained an enduring feature of many American history textbooks and appears entrenched in popular memory. Timothy Breen's well-written work *The Will of the People* may not end the dominance of the older narrative, but it certainly adds an important dimension to our understanding of how the American Revolution survived nearly constant challenges.

Breen's eminence in the field of American History has been established by over four decades of excellent scholarship. While other historians such as Alfred Young with *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* (2000) have succeeded in showing how ordinary individuals took part in the Revolution, Breen takes a broader approach by illuminating how small communities throughout the nation experienced the Revolution. Breen argues that the Revolution succeeded in part because of community level efforts to sustain the cause, and that the entrance of many ordinary individuals into public service constituted an enduring legacy of the revolution.

Offering a new and interesting framework for perceiving transitions in the revolutionary period, Breen explains that Americans navigated through five basic phases of change from 1775 through 1783: accepting rejection, seeking assurance, dealing with fear, confronting betrayal,

and resisting the thirst for revenge. As Americans unified in a defensive response to the subjugation of Boston after the Tea Party protest of 1773, colonists began to accept that the British had rejected their claim to equal footing as royal subjects. As this phase of rejection matured into an effort to resist further British army aggression, Americans sought assurance that resistance and ultimately rebellion was justified, namely in a religious sense. In one particularly interesting chapter, Breen focuses on how local ministers, namely in New England and the middle colonies, pointed to scripture to argue that people of faith were obligated to take bold action when standing up to injustice and corruption.

Even with assurance that revolution was justifiable in the sight of God, common Americans lived with fear throughout most of the conflict. Breen again finds most of this fear rooted in and perpetuated by local sources. Community-level *committees of safety*, attempting to promote allegiance to the revolutionary cause by enforcing state loyalty laws, coerced some would-be neutrals and silent loyalists into the patriot column. Offering strong examples from multiple regions, Breen effectively argues that the local patriot committees often ruled with restraint, favoring warnings and renewed oaths of allegiance over harsher punishments for loyalist suspects. As the war continued and the realities of sustaining an economy with an unstable currency set in, community members also sought to regulate merchants who might betray the cause by profiteering or deliberately undermining continental currency. Community-level action and support sustained the cause through this particularly fragile period of the revolution, when the patriotic passion of the early years had faded. Finally, Americans mostly restrained themselves from exacting revenge on those who had opposed the Revolution, other than some limited examples of loyalist refugees facing severe punishment for their actions during the war.

Breen's most notable contribution with this work is his emphasis on local communities. Although our national memory forgets this point, the Revolutionary War was fought in different regions over several phases of the conflict. That fact meant that people in much of New England faced few military threats after 1776, while many Virginians lived far away from the major fighting until the final year of conflict before the Battle of Yorktown. The absence of a sustained military threat presented challenges to maintaining commitment to the war effort and the broader revolutionary cause in the new nation. Breen effectively argues that the Revolution was indeed a successful national cause *because* of ongoing local Patriot efforts to maintain fidelity to the cause. He also points to community-centered authority as the likely explanation for the relatively restrained nature of the Revolution. He rightly makes the point that revolutions often result in chaos and impulsive violence. In the American Revolution, however, community-situated efforts throughout each phase of the conflict likely worked to avert a similarly bloody outcome.

To strengthen his overall argument, Breen could have addressed several important points. Slavery was an integral part of many of the communities that Breen describes in this work, but he limits discussion of race or the role of African Americans to just a few examples of petitions for abolition and references to slavery in a handful of sermons. Other historians have argued that fear of slave insurrection or British regulation of the institution may have been a powerful motivation in the Revolution. Including a more thorough treatment of this topic would have been in order. Breen also draws few of his examples from the southern states. This unevenness is evident in his chapter on Americans seeking assurance of the justness of their cause. The southern states also experienced some of the most brutal conflict between communities and neighbors, especially in the last years of the war, a point that Breen acknowledges. While

he presents the southern experience as an outlier, the atrocities committed in the Carolinas challenge an important part of his portrayal of the limited nature of the revolution, and thus, they deserve more attention. These points aside, *The Will of the People* offers valuable new insights for students to consider and for other scholars to investigate further.

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