

Patriot vs. Patriot: Social Conflict in Virginia and the Origins of the American Revolution

MICHAEL A. McDONNELL AND WOODY HOLTON

Virginia, Britain's most populous and arguably most important North American colony, once seemed the perfect fit for the "consensus" interpretation of the War of Independence.¹ Indeed, the percentage of white colonists who became loyalists was probably lower in Virginia than in any other rebelling colony. The widespread agreement on secession from Britain should not, however, be mistaken for social consensus. The reality was that revolutionary Virginia was frequently in turmoil. One of the most intriguing of the local insurrections broke out in the northern county of Loudoun just five months before the Declaration of Independence. In February 1776, the county erupted into a heated confrontation pitting gentlemen against their less wealthy neighbours. Lund Washington, who was managing Mount Vernon, warned his cousin, General George Washington, who was outside Boston training his fledgeling patriot army, that the "first Battle we have in this part of

Michael McDonnell is a Lecturer in the Department of American Studies, University of Wales, Swansea SA2 8PP, UK, and Woody Holton is an Assistant Professor of American History, University of Richmond, Virginia, USA.

¹ The authors wish to thank Fred Anderson, Edward Countryman, Marc Egnal, Sylvia Frey, Warren Hofstra, Albert Tillson, Fredrika J. Teute, Ronald Hoffman, Philip D. Morgan, John M. Murrin, Steve Sarson, Thad W. Tate, John Thompson, Peter H. Wood, Peter Thompson, Daniel W. Howe, Betty Wood and the American History seminars at the University of Wales, Swansea and Cambridge University for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay. For financial assistance and support in researching and writing this piece, we would like to thank the American Antiquarian Society, Balliol College, Oxford, the Virginia Historical Society, the David Library of the American Revolution, the Huntington Library, the Department of American Studies, Swansea, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, Monticello, and the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy.

the Country will be in Loudon” – not against British soldiers, but against fellow patriots.² Within a week, the revolutionary government in Williamsburg, the Committee of Safety, felt compelled to send troops to quell the disturbances.³ Yet, for months afterwards, gentry Virginians worried that their effort to suppress the rebellion had failed. In mid-May, Andrew Leitch told Leven Powell of Loudoun, “I really lament the torn and distracted condition of your County.”⁴ The “troublesome times,” as another gentleman called them, were slow to abate.⁵

The Committee of Safety’s decision to send troops to Loudoun County makes it clear that the events in Loudoun caused gentlemen considerable anxiety in the midst of their own rebellion against Britain. Although Virginia leaders recorded few details about what the rebels did or how the rebellion was suppressed, they did describe the insurgents’ grievances. From these it is clear that the Loudoun rebellion was merely the severest of numerous expressions of discontent with gentry leadership that echoed across Virginia on the eve of Independence. Virginia thus fits the description, developed by Carl Lotus Becker in 1909, of the American Revolution as a conflict both over home rule and who should rule at home.⁶ Indeed the struggle in Virginia may have been the most significant of them all, for it helped convert the conservative protestors of 1774 into the radical secessionists of 1776. Moreover, the conflict between patriot gentry and patriot small farmers helped produce the egalitarian ethos that was the American Revolution’s peculiar legacy.

I

The particular ways in which scholars have seen internal and external conflicts intersecting in Revolutionary America can be divided into four distinct categories. Carl Becker himself identified one of these. He showed

² Lund Washington to George Washington, 29 Feb. and 7 Mar. 1776, in W. W. Abbot and Dorothy Twohig, eds., *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series* (7 vols. to date; Charlottesville, Va., 1985–), 3, 395–96 and 432.

³ Committee of Safety, Journal, 2 Mar. 1776, in William J. Van Schreeven, Robert L. Scribner and Brent Tarter, comps., *Revolutionary Virginia: The Road to Independence*. ([Charlottesville, Va.], 1973–1983), 6, 164, 166.

⁴ Leitch to [Powell], 15 May 1776, in Robert C. Powell, ed., *A Biographical Sketch of Col. Leven Powell, Including his Correspondence During the Revolutionary War* (Alexandria, Va., 1877), 87.

⁵ Lund Washington to George Washington, 15 February 1776, and 7 March 1776, in Abbot and Twohig, eds., *Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 3, 317, 432–33.

⁶ Becker’s famous formulation can be found in his *History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760–1776* (Madison, Wisc., 1909), 22.

labouring-class New Yorkers pushing conservative merchants further along the road to Independence. Becker, along with other historians such as Charles Beard, Arthur Schlesinger Sr. and Merrill Jensen, have depicted the Revolution as a struggle among different economic classes for political control during resistance to Britain and the War for Independence. Though their emphasis on purely economic motives has been rightly challenged and criticized, more recent scholars have convincingly shown that internal rivalries and political contests – often between those holding power and those out of doors – were fundamentally important in driving the colonies towards separation from Britain. In Pennsylvania, for example, the more moderate Assembly, which opposed Independence, was forcibly overthrown by a coalition of lower-sort radicals as a prelude to that state casting the final vote in the Continental Congress in favour of final separation from Britain. Thus, direct and explicit internal conflict was essential to the rebellion against an external power as ordinary white Americans struggled for home-rule in order to gain a say in who would rule at home.⁷

Agrarian rebels also indirectly and unintentionally affected the resistance movement and the move towards separation. In the late 1760s, for example, smallholders in North Carolina rebelled against rapacious lawyers, creditors, and court officers. Governor William Tryon, who had helped provoke the rebellion by engineering a tax increase in order to build himself a spacious mansion, sent troops to suppress the rebellion. At least seventeen Regulators were killed at the Battle of Alamance in 1771, and Tryon's government hanged seven more. As Marjoleine Kars has shown, this was the real revolution in North Carolina, and, after it was crushed, many farmers simply refused to participate in the Revolutionary War – on either side. A separate Regulator rebellion in South Carolina,

⁷ Ibid.; Arthur Meier Schlesinger Sr., *The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution, 1763–1776* (New York, 1918); Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (2 vols.; reprint edn, New York, 1930); Merrill Jensen, *The Articles of Confederation: An Interpretation of the Social-Constitutional History of the American Revolution, 1774–1781* (Madison, Wisc., 1940); Jensen, *The American Revolution within America* (New York, 1974). For Philadelphia, see esp. Richard Alan Ryerson, “*The Revolution is Now Begun*”: *The Radical Committees of Philadelphia, 1765–1776* (Philadelphia, 1978) and Steven Rosswurm, *Arms, Country, and Class: The Philadelphia Militia and “Lower Sort” during the American Revolution, 1775–1783* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1988). Scholars have found internal direct conflict from at least Massachusetts to Maryland. See, for example, Stephen E. Patterson, *Political Parties in Revolutionary Massachusetts* (Madison, Wisc., 1973); Edward Countryman, *A People in Revolution: The American Revolution and Political Society in New York, 1760–1790* (Baltimore, 1981); Ronald Hoffman, *A Spirit of Dissension: Economics, Politics, and the Revolution in Maryland* (Baltimore, 1973), 147.

land riots amongst tenants in New Jersey and New York, and discontent in backcountry Pennsylvania and on the eastern shore of Maryland either helped undermine the imperial relationship or at the very least led to the determination of loyalties during the revolutionary war.⁸

Recently, scholars have devoted a great deal of attention to a third category of internal conflict: enslaved Americans took advantage of the growing rift between free patriots and loyalists to strike out for their own freedom. In 1765, the freemen of Charleston, South Carolina were afire with agitation against the Stamp Act. But patriots were taken aback when they received reports of slaves parading through the town with their own banners marked “Liberty.” These were the “domestic insurrections” to which Jefferson referred in the Declaration of Independence. After enslaved Americans made it clear that they were prepared to fight for their liberty, Lord Dunmore, Virginia’s last royal governor, issued an emancipation proclamation (not too different from the one that Lincoln wrote a century later) offering freedom to patriots’ slaves who would fight in the British army. The proclamation in turn, together with the slaves’ increased rebelliousness, drove many luke-warm patriots into support for Independence.⁹

The rebellion against Britain provided opportunities and ideological fodder to domestic rebels, and these comprise a fourth way in which the internal and external conflicts intersected. Describing what J. Franklin

⁸ For North Carolina, see Marjoleine Kars, “‘Breaking Loose Together’: Religion and Rebellion in the North Carolina Piedmont, 1730–1790” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1994); Rachel N. Klein, *Unification of a Slave State: The Rise of the Planter Class in the South Carolina Backcountry, 1760–1808* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1990); Hoffman, *Spirit of Dissension*; Countryman, *People in Revolution*; Rowland Berthoff and John M. Murrin, “Feudalism, Communalism and the Yeoman Freeholder: The American Revolution Considered as a Social Accident,” in Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson, eds., *Essays on the American Revolution* (New York, 1973).

⁹ Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, & the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1999), esp. 136n; Holton, “Rebel against Rebel: Enslaved Virginians and the Coming of the American Revolution,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* (hereafter *VMHB*), 105 (April 1997), 164–66; Peter Wood, “‘The Dream Deferred’: Black Freedom Struggles on the Eve of White Independence,” in Gary Y. Okihiro, ed., *In Resistance: Studies in African, Caribbean, and Afro-American History* (Amherst, Mass., 1986), 166–87; Wood, “‘Liberty is Sweet’: African-American Freedom Struggles in the Years before White Independence,” in Alfred F. Young, ed., *Beyond the American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (Dekalb, Ill., 1993), 149–84; Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1961); Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, N.J., 1991); Robert A. Ollwell, “‘Domestick Enemies’: Slavery and Political Independence in South Carolina, May 1775–March 1776,” *Journal of Southern History*, 55 (January 1989), 21–48.

Jameson called the “Transforming Hand of Revolution,” historians have found that the social consequences of the move towards independence were profound. In some areas, small farmers lashed out at their wealthier neighbours in ways that had been rare indeed before 1774. One Marylander was reported saying in 1775 that he “understood that the gentlemen were intending to make us all fight for their lands and negroes,” so he would “damn them” and with a “few more white people” “get all the negroes in the county to back us, and they would do more good in the night than the white people could do in the day.” The “contagion of liberty” also sparked “domestic insurrections” within a number of households, as some women drew analogies between the way Britain treated their husbands and the way their husbands treated them, while sailors and artisans, apprentices and indentured servants all used the Revolution to carve out more “liberty” in their own lives.¹⁰

Although internal conflict thus took many forms in the revolutionary era, historians, even those who focused on dissent, found very little of it in Virginia. Though, more recently, scholars have begun the process of unravelling and complicating the consensual view of Virginia in the Revolution, the older image still often prevails. “Virginia was more united in support of the Revolution than any other state in the rebellion,” wrote John Selby, a leading and recent student of the topic. Even Pulitzer-prize winner Rhys Isaac spoke of the “remarkable phenomenon of Virginia’s dissent-free mobilisation for rebellion and revolution.”¹¹

¹⁰ Quoted in Hoffman, *Spirit of Dissension*, 147. Some farmers in Virginia voted for delegates who supported Independence in the spring of 1776 because they believed that in the new “form of Government,” they would be “independt [*sic*] of the rich men [and] eve[r]ly man would then be able to do as he pleasd [*sic*]” (Landon Carter to George Washington, 9 May 1776, *Papers of George Washington*, 4, 236–37). The phrase “contagion of liberty,” of course, comes from Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), Chs. 6 & 7, whilst the “Transforming Hand of Revolution” comes from J. Franklin Jameson, *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (1926; reprint ed., Boston, 1956). Excellent surveys of this literature can be found in the edited collections of Alfred F. Young, *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (Dekalb, Ill., 1976) and *Beyond the American Revolution*, and, more recently, in Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *The Transforming Hand of Revolution: Reconsidering the American Revolution as a Social Movement* (Charlottesville, Va., 1995).

¹¹ John E. Selby, *The Revolution in Virginia, 1775–1783* (Charlottesville, Va., 1988), xi; Rhys Isaac, “Dramatizing the Ideology of Revolution: Popular Mobilization in Virginia, 1774–1776,” *William and Mary Quarterly* (hereafter *WMO*), 3rd ser., 38 (July 1976), 367; Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1750–1790* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982). Even the so-called neo-Progressive historians, the heirs of Carl Becker’s faith that the revolution was not only a struggle for home rule, but also a conflict over who should rule at home, paint the same picture of Virginia as a relatively harmonious state. Edward Countryman

The apparent absence of internal conflict in what was arguably the most important North American colony has undermined efforts to portray the War for Independence as truly revolutionary.¹² The Loudoun County uprising helps lead us to a different picture of revolutionary Virginia, one that was awash in social conflict.

II

While free Virginians rarely clashed with each other over *whether* to fight the British, they did not always agree about *how* to do so. This conflict over strategy was certainly important on its own terms, but it was equally important for what it reveals about competing visions of what the Revolution was all about for both smallholders and gentlemen in Virginia. The most explicit enunciation of small farmers' grievances comes from the Loudoun rebellion, in Lund Washington's description of the concerns of the rioters there to his cousin George Washington in February 1776. Lund noted that the leader of the Loudoun rebellion, James Cleveland, had said that "Tennants should pay no Rents." At the heart of the Loudoun rioters' grievances, however, was the gentry's prosecution of the war. "[T]he pay of officers and Soldiers should be the same, or what would be still better they should not be paid at all," Cleveland apparently asserted. There was "no inducement for a poor Man to Fight, for he has nothing to defend, let us go and Fight the Battle at

wrote that Virginia, "alone among the thirteen provinces ... did not face armed internal dispute during the revolutionary era." *The American Revolution* (New York, 1985), 35. Marc Egnal spoke of the "relative docility of the poorer farmers in Virginia." *A Mighty Empire: The Origins of the American Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988), 302. Recent challenges to this view include Holton, *Forced Founders* and Michael A. McDonnell, "Popular Mobilization and Political Culture in Revolutionary Virginia: The Failure of the Minutemen and the Revolution from Below," *Journal of American History*, 85 (Dec. 1998), 946–81, esp. 948–51, for a review of the scholarship.

¹² The basis for calling Virginia the most important North American colony is that it was the most populous, and that, through its tobacco exports, it brought the imperial government the most revenue. The only part of Virginia where historians have found social conflict is at the fringes, and, even there, most historians have chalked it up to toryism. See, for example, Adele Hast, *Loyalism in Revolutionary Virginia: The Norfolk Area and the Eastern Shore* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1982); Emory G. Evans, "Trouble in the Backcountry: Disaffection in Southwest Virginia during the American Revolution," in Ronald Hoffman, Thad W. Tate, and Peter J. Albert, eds., *An Uncivil War: The Southern Backcountry during the American Revolution* (Charlottesville, Va., 1985); and Thomas Michael Costa, "Economic Development and Political Authority: Norfolk, Virginia, Merchant-Magistrates, 1736–1800" (Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, 1991).

once, and not be Shilly Shally, in this way, until all the Poor, people are ruined," he said.¹³

Lund Washington's antagonists were no Tories. But they were furious about the way in which the revolutionary army had been organized. Indeed, the Loudoun rebels' fundamental wish was actually to *revive* a patriot military establishment that had been, initially, surprisingly democratic.¹⁴ Less than a year before the Loudoun rising, thousands of ordinary Virginians, including many farmers from that county, had flocked to the patriot cause via the "Independent Companies of Volunteers." Putting the rhetoric of resistance to Britain into practice, these new companies emphasized the principles of popular sovereignty and democratic decision making. The members of the companies agreed that their officers were to be "of their own Choice" – "elected from the Inlisted Volunteers" who had "freely & voluntarily agreed" to embody themselves, or "associates." Even though their officers were democratically elected, many companies none the less refused to grant them much authority. Soldiers pledged to "adhere strictly" only "to such resolves which shall be entered into by a Majority of the Company."¹⁵

¹³ Lund Washington to George Washington, 29 Feb. 1776, *Papers of George Washington*, 3, 395–96.

¹⁴ This and the following paragraphs have been adapted from McDonnell, "Popular Mobilization and Political Culture in Revolutionary Virginia," 951–74, where the arguments and evidence have been more fully developed.

¹⁵ Charles Dabney to William Wirt, 21 Dec. 1805, in William Wirt Henry, *Patrick Henry: Life, Correspondence and Speeches* (3 vols.; New York, 1891), 1, 251–52. Our account of the formation of the Independent companies is drawn primarily from the following sources, which informed the next paragraph in addition: Declaration of Subscribers to the First Independent Company of Dunmore County, [n.d., but probably after January 1775], Dunmore County Committee of Safety Papers, VHS; Fairfax County Militia Association, [21 Sept. 1774], *The Papers of George Mason, 1725–1792*, ed. Robert A. Rutland, 3 vols. (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1970), 1, 210–11; Fairfax County Militia Plan for Embodying the People, [Enclosure of 6 Feb. 1775], *ibid.*, 1, 215–16; Remarks on Annual Elections for the Fairfax Independent Company, [c. 17–26 Apr. 1775], *ibid.*, 229; "Terms of Inlisting," [c. Apr. 1775], in R. A. Brock, ed., "Papers, Military and Political, 1775–1778, of George Gilmer, M.D., of 'Pen Park,' Albermarle County, Va.," Virginia Historical Society, *Collections*, new ser., 6 (Richmond, Va., 1887), 82 (hereafter "Gilmer Papers"); William E. White, in "The Independent Companies of Virginia, 1774–1775," *VMHB*, 86 (Apr. 1978), 152; see also "The First Independent Company of Dunmore," *VMHB*, 44 (Apr. 1936), 102–4. For further examples of enlisted men electing their officers see "Report of the Committee to inquire into the causes of the late disturbances and commotions in the country," 1 June 1775, esp. testimony of Benjamin Waller, Robert Gilchrist, and Patrick Kennan of Caroline County, and Archibald Govan, Thomas Evans, John Johnson, and George Braikenridge of Hanover, in "The Proceedings of the House of Burgesses of Virginia," (Williamsburg, 1775), in William S. Jenkins, ed., *Records of the States of the United States* (Library of Congress, 1949), mf. reel va.1b, reel 3, 1773–81.

The Independent Companies were so non-hierarchical because they were originally designed to be filled by gentlemen only. But, after fighting broke out in the spring of 1775, many of them soon overflowed with less wealthy Virginians who joined them with enthusiasm and fought against Dunmore with fierce zeal. Many of them ignored the county patriot committees that had brought them into being. Some harassed gentlemen such as William Byrd and Robert Munford, who had refused to commit themselves fully to the Patriot cause. Others took offensive and unsanctioned action in the midst of delicate negotiations with Governor Dunmore, pushing resistance further into outright rebellion.¹⁶ In a short time, many companies had become in the eyes of gentry officials rather *too* independent. Many gentlemen believed that the Independent Companies “aim[ed] at too much” and that their “wild irregular sallies” needed to be checked.¹⁷

By July 1775, gentlemen had decided to abolish the independent companies and re-establish control over the seemingly anarchic military situation. The Third Virginia Convention, which met in July and August, agreed to “melt down” all the independent companies into a new and orderly military “establishment.”¹⁸ Instead of being elected, officers would be appointed by the Committee of Safety in Williamsburg. The volunteer soldiers of the Independent Companies were to be replaced by paid professionals, with the officers earning much higher salaries than the soldiers. Prescribed terms of service and rigid rules and regulations were introduced to enforce strict discipline and a rigid hierarchy that was imposed from the top down.¹⁹

The result was resistance. Small farmers refused to serve in the new “minutemen” battalions. One of their biggest complaints concerned their

¹⁶ William Byrd to Sir Jeffery Amherst, 30 July 1775 and Robert Munford to William Byrd, 20 Apr. 1775, in Marion Rose Goble Tinling, ed., *The Correspondence of the Three William Byrds of Westover, Virginia, 1684–1776*, 2 vols. (Charlottesville, Va., 1977), 2, 812 and 806; Byrd to Ralph Wormeley, 4 Oct. 1775, Wormeley Family Papers, manuscripts department, Alderman Library, University of Virginia (hereafter UVA). Munford’s experiences were satirized bitterly in his play, “The Patriots,” written in early 1777 (see Courtlandt Canby, ed., “Robert Munford’s *The Patriots*” in *WMO*, 3rd ser., 6 [July 1949], 437–503).

¹⁷ Louisa County Committee, 4 Dec. 1775, in Dixon and Hunter’s *Virginia Gazette*, 23 December 1775. Cf. Michael A. McDonnell, “The Politics of Mobilization in Revolutionary Virginia: Military Culture and Political and Social Relations, 1774–1783” (D.Phil. Thesis, University of Oxford, 1995), Ch. 1, for an account of the formation and expansion of the Independent Companies and the fears of the gentry.

¹⁸ George Mason to Martin Cockburn, 24 July 1775, *Papers of George Mason*, 1, 241.

¹⁹ Selby, 51–52; McDonnell, 63–68.

pay, and it reflected a social vision that was far more egalitarian than the gentry's. In the Loudoun protesters' ideal arrangement, neither soldiers nor officers would "be paid at all."²⁰ The Loudoun farmers were not alone in wanting to stick with the citizen-soldier concept embodied in the Independent Companies. An officer in Albemarle County acknowledged that small farmers there felt that soldiers should receive "no pay at all," with "all marching promiscuously ... as volunteers," without "any partiality or distinction shewn."²¹

What was particularly galling about the idea of a paid army was that officers were to be paid almost eight times as much as regular soldiers. In December 1775, a Loudoun officer reported that the citizens of his county had complained of the officers' wages' "being too high."²² James Cleveland and the Loudoun rioters went further, arguing that the "pay of officers and Soldiers should be the same."²³ The men who had marched side by side as equals only a few months earlier could not understand why they should now be paid considerably less than officers when they and the officers would be drawn away from their farms for equal amounts of time.

Gentlemen took a different view. They considered a wide pay disparity absolutely vital to the maintenance of hierarchy and thus of discipline. Indeed, the pay disparity in the minuteman battalions was clearly part of a gentry attempt to reassert control over the revolutionary movement. George Washington argued that decent pay for officers was absolutely necessary to preserve distance between them and their men. If the only merit an officer possessed was his ability to recruit soldiers, his men would "consider, and treat him as an equal; and ... regard him no more than a broomstick, being mixed together as one common herd; no order, nor no discipline can prevail."²⁴ George Gilmer agreed. "[W]ithout some distinction there can be no subordination," he said. Gilmer justified the

²⁰ Lund Washington to George Washington, 29 Feb. 1776, *George Washington Papers*, 3, 395-96.

²¹ Gilmer, "Address to the Inhabitants of Albemarle," [fall 1775], in "Gilmer Papers," 122, 126.

²² Leven Powell to Sally Powell, 5 Dec. 1775, photocopy of original letter in private hands, VHS.

²³ Lund Washington to George Washington, 29 Feb. 1776, *Papers of George Washington*, 3, 395-96.

²⁴ Washington to the President of Congress, 24 Sept. 1776, in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington From the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, Vol. 6 (Washington, D.C., 1932), 110. Charles Lee also argued that "men who chuse [*sic*] to preserve the decent distance of officers, must have a decent subsistence, and without this distance no authority or respect can be expected." Charles Lee to Benjamin Rush, 10 Oct. [1775], *Charles Lee Papers*, 1, 212.

officers' higher pay using a curious metaphor: "every planter allows his Gang leader certain indulgences and emoluments above the rest of his slaves."²⁵

Gilmer's slavery metaphor seems unlikely to have reconciled many potential soldiers to the new pay policy and hierarchy in the military. Indeed, it was the same sort of inequality, subordination, dependence, and involuntary service inherent in the institution of slavery that farmers rallied against in the military. They wished to return to the "equality" of the Independent Companies. Washington perhaps best summed up the clash of gentry and yeoman cultures when he later remonstrated against the idea of raising more "volunteers" in Virginia: "Those who engage in Arms under that denomination ... are uneasy, impatient of Command, ungovernable; and, claiming to themselves a sort of superior merit, generally assume, not only the Priviledge of thinking, but to do as they please."²⁶ In their demands for no differences in pay, or no pay at all, the Loudoun rioters joined with their Albemarle counterparts in demanding that they be allowed to march "promiscuously and on equal footing as volunteers." They demanded, in short, not just the "Priviledge" but the *right* "of thinking" and doing "as they please" – of acting "promiscuously" in the eyes of the gentry.²⁷

The complaints of the Loudoun tenants and other farmers in Virginia over military service also had an important economic dimension. Perhaps the most frequently voiced complaint against the minuteman service concerned its tremendous demand on soldiers' time. The Independent Companies had trained only sporadically and had mustered only upon the appearance of an actual threat. In contrast, the minuteman battalions demanded that soldiers train several weeks every year – enough to prevent them from running their farms properly.²⁸ This extra military service was a regressive form of taxation, as everyone made the same sacrifice, regardless of wealth. In a slave-poor county like Loudoun, the grievance was particularly acute. Many worried that were they to go out and train and fight for such lengthy periods of time, they would return only to find "our Wives & Children dispers'd up & down the Country abeging, or at home aSlaving," while more wealthy gentlemen with many slaves to work in their absence could still live "in ease & Affluence."

²⁵ Gilmer, "Address to the Inhabitants of Albemarle," in "Gilmer Papers," 126, 128.

²⁶ Washington to Patrick Henry, 13 Apr. 1777, *Writings of George Washington*, 7, 407–9.

²⁷ Gilmer, "Address to the Inhabitants of Albemarle," 122, 126.

²⁸ William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia ...*, 13 vols. (Richmond, 1819–1823), 9, 20.

Ultimately, the new military establishment was, the inhabitants of Albemarle complained, “calculated to exempt the gentlemen and to throw the whole burthen on the poor.”²⁹

Another of the smallholders’ objection to minuteman companies – and to the two regiments of regular soldiers that the summer 1775 convention also created – was that equipping and training a full-time professional army would prolong the war. The Loudoun rioters said they would rather “go and Fight the Battle at once, and not be Shilly Shally, in this way, until all the Poor, people are ruined.”³⁰ Not only had the gentry closed the door on a truly revolutionary form of organization, ordinary Virginians believed, but, in so doing, gentlemen were helping to prolong the war and raise the costs insufferably. Farmers believed that a protracted war fought by a professional army would distress and ultimately ruin them in several distinct ways. One was that the enormous cost of funding and equipping a regular army would necessitate exorbitant taxes. A long war would also damage the economy. In fact, by the end of 1775, farmers were already feeling the ill effects of the Patriot gentry’s economic policies, and this hardship was a fundamental cause of the Loudoun revolt.

The non-importation plan adopted by Congress and the British blockade of colonial ports contributed to a scarcity of goods by the summer of 1775.³¹ The first and most serious shortage was of salt. Virginians used salt to preserve meat and fish. They also fed it to cattle, hogs, and sheep. During the summer, livestock had to receive salt *every day*, according to one report. In November 1775, Nicholas Cresswell, an Englishman living in Loudoun County, reported a “Great disturbance for

²⁹ Petition of Inhabitants of Lunenburg County, [26 Apr. 1776], *Revolutionary Virginia*, comps. Van Schreeven, Scribner, and Tarter, 6, 474–77; Gilmer, “Address to the Inhabitants of Albemarle,” 122–23; cf. *ibid.*, 7, 87, 114–15, 236, 349. For an analysis of these and other related complaints about the new military organization established in the fall of 1775, see McDonnell, “Popular Mobilization and Political Culture,” 963–74, and “‘Loaded Guns and Imprudent Expressions’: Military Culture and Gentry–Smallholder Relations in Virginia During the Revolutionary Crisis, 1774–1783,” paper delivered at the Southern Historical Association Annual Meeting, 11 Nov. 1994, 20–30.

³⁰ Lund Washington to George Washington, 29 Feb. 1776, *Papers of George Washington*, 3, 395–96.

³¹ See William Lee to Richard Henry Lee, 17 January 1775, Lee Family Papers, UVA; Richard Henry Lee to George Washington, 26 Sept. 1775, *Papers of George Washington*, 2, 53; Fielding Lewis to George Washington, 14 Nov. 1775, *ibid.*, 2, 372–73. Only about £2,000 sterling worth of British goods reached the Chesapeake in 1775 (United States Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1957* [Washington, D.C., 1960], 1176–78).

want of Salt,” at the same time that Lund Washington reported that “the people are run[nin]g mad about Salt.” In neighbouring Fairfax County, the patriot committee warned that they were “extremely apprehensive of the great Distress and Discontent that the Want of this necessary Article may occasion among the People.” Even the central Committee of Safety warned the Virginia Congressional Delegation on 11 November 1775 that from “all parts ... the Clamours of the people begin to be high” because of the scarcity of salt, “and we greatly fear the consequences if some method cannot be fallen on to Supply their wants.”³² In December, some of those fears were realized as the continued salt shortage led to still greater conflict. The Hanover County committee reported on 12 December that “several persons have, of their own accord, gone about in a disorderly manner to search for salt, and have taken the same.” The county committee was forced to take heavy-handed measures against suspected salt hoarders to “preserve peace and good order, and to prevent riots & tumults.”³³ But many salt hoarders were those gentlemen themselves. Even Lund Washington privately admitted he had “300 Bushels or more of Salt” but was “unwilg [*sic*] to sell it” to his needy neighbours who came looking for it. Perhaps fearing rebellion in his own home, Lund wrote that “our people must have Fish” (i.e., the servants and slaves at Mt. Vernon), and told his cousin George that he had hid the salt and “told the people I had none.”³⁴ Other wealthier gentlemen threatened more drastic action. When the disorders spread to Henrico County in the central Piedmont – where “several companies of armed men” from the “upland” counties reportedly searched houses and seized salt – gentry merchant Edward Johnston warned that “if a stop was not put to such marauding, some among us may be induced to make opposition [which] may produce civil discord.”³⁵ Nor was the rioting confined to Virginia. Throughout the Chesapeake and the South, salt rioters seized stores and “paid what price they thought proper.” And though often rioters were seen as “intirely disaffected to our cause” by

³² 20 Nov. 1775, *The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell, 1774–1777* (New York, 1924), 132; Lund Washington to George Washington, 24 Nov. 1775, *Papers of George Washington*, 2, 423; Fairfax County to John Hancock, 23 Nov. 1775, *Revolutionary Virginia*, comps. Van Schreeven, Scribner, and Tarter, 4, 455–56; *ibid.*, 379.

³³ Hanover County Committee Proceedings, 12 December 1775, *Revolutionary Virginia*, 5, 120; Cf. Dale E. Benson, “Wealth and Power in Virginia, 1774–1776: A Study of the Organization of Revolt” (Ph.D. diss., University of Maine, 1970), 301–3.

³⁴ Lund Washington to George Washington, 8 Feb. 1776, *Papers of George Washington*, 3, 271.

³⁵ Johnston to William Preston, 16 Dec. 1775, quoted in Benson, 302; *Revolutionary Virginia*, 4, 13.

leading Virginians, they were sometimes seen by others (and almost certainly by themselves) as more patriotic than the “first Gentlemen” and merchants who hoarded the necessary supplies.³⁶

The salt shortage was probably one of the crises on James Cleveland’s mind when he warned that if the revolutionary war continued much longer, the “Poor, people” would be “ruined.”³⁷ Shortly after the gentry suppressed the uprising that Cleveland led, Richard Henry Lee hinted that the shortage of salt had been among its primary ingredients. Unless gentlemen acted quickly, he warned, “the want of this Necessary will produce *universal* riot and convulsion.”³⁸

Shortages of other articles were just beginning to be felt in Virginia, but they were severe enough to prompt some to speculate that the patience of the “lower sort” was being tested. “A few months ago, the people here, were all mad with Politicks” one British sympathizer wrote, “but the numberless inconveniences, they have since felt, have much cooled them, especially the lower Ran[k].”³⁹ Lord Dunmore predicted that the patriots would defeat themselves through their commercial boycotts. The scarcity that would result from the agreements would “ruin thousands of families,” he said, mostly of the “middling and poorer sort, who live from hand to mouth.” He was confident that the “lower class of people” would soon discover that they had been “duped by the richer sort, who, for their part, elude the whole effects of the association, by which their poor neighbours perish.” In the aftermath of the first salt riots, “A Virginian” warned the readers of the *Virginia Gazette* that this confirmed the Governor’s year-old prophecy that the poor would rebel against the rich.⁴⁰

Although Dunmore’s prophecy was never fully realized, the disagreement over how to handle shortages, like the minuteman controversy, ultimately reflected a deep-seated ideological division between farmers

³⁶ Quoted in Ron Hoffman and Michael A. McDonnell, “The Ideology of Disaffection in the American Revolution” (Paper presented to the Brunel/Cambridge Conference on Early American History, June 1999), 6; Keith Mason, “Localism, Evangelicalism, and Loyalism: The Sources of Discontent in the Revolutionary Chesapeake,” *Journal of Southern History* 56:1 (Feb. 1990), 33–36.

³⁷ Lund Washington to George Washington, 29 Feb. 1776, *Papers of George Washington*, 3, 396.

³⁸ Richard Henry Lee to John Page, 19 Mar. 1776, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, ed. Smith, 3, 408n (emphasis added).

³⁹ Alexander Watson Jr. to William Lloyd, 18 Oct. 1775, *Revolutionary Virginia*, 4, 237. See also Alexander Watson Jr. to Alexander Watson Sr., 10 Nov. 1775, *ibid.*, 4, 373.

⁴⁰ Dunmore to Lord Dartmouth, 24 Dec. 1774, *Revolutionary Virginia*, 3, 67; *Virginia Gazette* (Pinkney), 9 Dec. 1775. See also Benson, 302–3, 302n.

and gentleman. Gentlemen, believing in the sanctity of property rights, assumed they could hoard needed and valuable supplies and even sell them for the market price, whatever that was; farmers, believing in the need for shared sacrifices, believed they could seize goods from those who were seen to be unfairly hoarding them. In this belief, farmers in Virginia had supporters throughout the colonies and new states.⁴¹

Virginians had stopped importing salt and other commodities in December 1774. They did not start withholding their exports until September of the following year. Yet nonexportation, which began that same month, produced hardship for farmers – and conflict between farmers and gentlemen – almost immediately. The worst victims of nonexportation were tenants, for many of their landlords continued to demand rent from them even after nonexportation deprived them of their income.

Renters comprised about one-third of the families in Loudoun County – possibly the highest proportion in Virginia. More than three hundred of the Loudoun tenants had to pay their rent in cash.⁴² Many landlords, including Richard Henry Lee, demanded that cash renters pay in specie (hard money; gold and silver) rather than in the paper money that the Revolutionary government had printed in 1775 and declared to be legal tender. Lee feared (justifiably, as it turned out) that this paper money would quickly depreciate. For him to accept it as payment for leases signed before it was circulated would be “retrospective destruction.” So Lee demanded that his rents be paid either in coin or with as much paper money as would purchase a quantity of hard money equal to the amount specified in the lease. However, the only money available to small farmers was the depreciating paper currency. *They* were bound by the Convention’s dictum that it be accepted in discharge of all debts. The trickle of income they still received after exports ceased in September 1775 consisted almost entirely of paper money. Moreover, it was in paper money that soldiers were paid. People like the Loudoun tenants were thus caught between two millstones – between landlords like Richard Henry Lee who demanded that they pay their rent in hard money or its equivalent, and employers (like the army) who paid them in quickly

⁴¹ See Barbara Clark Smith, “Food Rioters and the American Revolution,” *WMO*, 3rd ser., 51 (Jan. 1994), 3–38, and Smith, “Social Visions of the American Resistance Movement,” in Hoffman and Albert, eds., *Transforming Hand of Revolution*, 27–57.

⁴² Other tenants paid in produce either a fixed amount or a percentage of the crop. Willard F. Bliss, “The Rise of Tenancy in Virginia,” *VMHB*, 58 (October 1950), 429–30 and Loudoun County Petition, [presented on 8 June 1776], *Revolutionary Virginia*, 7, 325–26.

depreciating money.⁴³ Tenants struck back at this twin oppression. Starting around Christmas Day 1775, when annual rent payments were typically due, many tenants simply refused to pay, “assigning for reason,” Richard Henry Lee noted, “that they could not sell their produce.”⁴⁴ Whereas previously they had had markets for their crops, some of the protesters explained after the riot, it was “so Notoriously Known” that those articles were “Useless on our Hands.”⁴⁵ Lund Washington wrote to his cousin the general that “from the Accounts I have from Loudon Prince William, & some other Countys,” there was “very little hopes of Collectg money from Tenants, they say it is Cruel in the Land Holders to expect their Rents when there is no market for the produce of the Land.” The tenants were willing to pay their 1775 rent in the future if exports should resume before their 1775 crops rotted, but they told Lund Washington that if there was no market, “it woud be the height of Injustice ever to expect to be paid for that years Rent.”⁴⁶

Some landlords understood the tenants’ plight and did not harass them for their rent. “[P]erhaps if they had money I cou’d get some from them,” Lund Washington told the general with apparent resignation.⁴⁷ But other property owners directed court officers to “distrain,” or seize, their tenants’ slaves, livestock, and other property. Tenants whose property was distrained would not only lose as much property as had to be auctioned off to pay the overdue rent – a substantial amount during this time of cash scarcity – but they also had to pay a commission to the sheriff and fees to attorneys and the county clerk. Nor was distraintment the landlords’ only recourse. Some of them also threatened to evict delinquent tenants. Richard Henry Lee’s rental agent told one Lee tenant “that he might rely [that Lee] would take possession of your Tenement very shortly.”⁴⁸ Again, conflict between gentlemen and farmers shows disagreement over some fundamental principles. Since the war prevented

⁴³ As a result, depreciation did hit the tenants hard, as even Lee noted that the price of farm produce had fallen to “a pittance” after nonexportation (though he deleted the word “pittance” from the letter before sending it out). Richard Henry Lee to Patrick Henry, [26 May 1777], *The Letters of Richard Henry Lee*, ed. James Curtis Ballagh, 2 vols. (New York, 1911–14), I, 299 and 299n. After nonexportation and the British blockade began, both tobacco and wheat fetched a “very low price.” Oliver Perry Chitwood, *Richard Henry Lee: Statesman of the Revolution* (Morgantown, West Va., 1967), 137.

⁴⁴ Richard Henry Lee to Patrick Henry, 26 May 1777, *Richard Henry Lee Letters*, I, 298.

⁴⁵ Loudoun County Petition, [presented on 8 June 1776], *Revolutionary Virginia*, 7, 325.

⁴⁶ Lund Washington to George Washington, 30 Dec. 1775, *Papers of George Washington*, 2, 621.

⁴⁷ 15 Feb. 1776, *Papers of George Washington*, 3, 317.

⁴⁸ Richard Parker to Richard Henry Lee, 7 Mar. 1776, *The Lee Family Papers, 1742–1795*, ed. Paul P. Hoffman (microfilm, Charlottesville, Va., 1966).

tenants from exporting their crops, tenants believed that it was only just that they be granted some temporary relief. Gentlemen landlords believed that justice would best be served by upholding the letter of the law, which was in turn designed to protect their property.

In Loudoun County, ordinary white Virginian farmers – pressured to serve in a standing army that paid them one-eighth of what top officers earned, deprived by nonimportation of such necessary items as salt, and forced to pay their rent even though nonexportation had cut off their income – finally decided to resist. The first resistance they mounted was against the landlords who came to evict them from their farms and to distrain their property for nonpayment of rent. General Washington learned that the rent-strike leaders, whom his cousin called “transgressors of the peace,” had said they would “Punish the First officer that dare distraint for Rent.” Landlords responded in December 1775 by arranging for rent strike leaders to be “cited to appear before the Committee” – the patriot committee of Loudoun County. But when strike leaders learned of this threat, they “said they are not at all Intimidated at it.” In fact, they threatened to “turn the Committee out of the House.”⁴⁹ The gentry grew fearful. Some rent collectors demanded double and more what they usually charged because of the “troublesome times.” In the midst of the Loudoun uprising, one rent collector worried that if he travelled west to dun tenants, he might provide an opening for would-be rebels closer to home. Lund Washington wrote his cousin the general that he would have gone out and collected George Washington’s rents himself, “If I thought Mt. Vernon wou’d stand where it does, when I returned.”⁵⁰

Leaders of the uprising left no records, so we cannot know how they recruited participants. They probably worked the crowd at court day, where farmers from all over the county gathered to swap gossip as well as goods. Farmers also appear to have discussed their grievances at church. Andrew Leitch, an army officer from Loudoun, fretted over the damage that a “few disappointed, carping creatures” with “dastardly souls” could do “if they can talk and hold forth amongst their honest, well-meaning neighbors.” This would “work you more mischief in two or three church Sundays than a hundred virtuous and sensible citizens can, perhaps, eradicate in a year.”⁵¹

Protestors may also have aired their grievances at the fortnightly militia

⁴⁹ Lund Washington to George Washington, Dec. 30, 1775, *Papers of George Washington*, 2, 621.

⁵⁰ Lund Washington to George Washington, 15 Feb. 1776, *Papers of George Washington*, 3, 317.

⁵¹ Leitch to [Leven Powell], 15 May 1776, *Leven Powell Sketch*, 87.

musters. Certainly tensions ran high among farmers who had been pulled away from their work in order to train under appointed (rather than elected) officers, only to be badgered to make an even greater sacrifice by joining the regular forces. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that a new call for recruits for the regular army went out in February 1776. Officers no doubt took the opportunity of the militia musters to try to drum up recruits. But, if the farmers of Loudoun and elsewhere had grievances, the musters could also be used, as they were later in the war, more explicitly, to drum up opposition to the new army and administration.

Indeed, small farmers' suspicions about the gentry's war policy were further confirmed when it was noted with cynicism that in the midst of recruiting, the officers had to resort to enlisting men "upon credit," as "Their paper money had not yet arrived." The link between these problems and civil grievances became most explicit in early February as the court and militia met on the same day and at the same place. As recruiting officers tried to explain that not even paper money was available to pay the bounties and wages of recruits, landlords pressed the potential soldiers to pay their rents with hard money or tobacco. Though the court did open, "no business [was] done." All in all, there was "Great Confusion."⁵²

Though the full course and extent of the protest are unclear, the mood was clearly turning darker. By February 1776, the protestors had acquired a new leader. Lund Washington stated that James Cleveland had "turn'd Politician" and was "setg [*sic*] all Loudon to gether [*sic*] by the Ears." A "Party" of farmers then gathered to discuss their grievances.⁵³ By early March, when Lund Washington reported "all the talk is about the Tenants," conditions in Loudoun were severe enough that the Committee of Safety in Williamsburg "feared" it might need to call in troops to "Quell" the "disturbances."⁵⁴ Prudently, the committee moved the newly raised Loudoun company under Captain Charles West from the Third Virginia Regiment at Dumfries, Prince William County, and brought in a company from Pittsylvania County, far down in the southwestern corner of Piedmont Virginia. The Third Regiment would

⁵² Cresswell, *Journal*, 12 Feb. 1776, 138; Loudoun County Court Records, 12 Feb. 1776, f. 574-76, Library of Virginia, Richmond.

⁵³ Lund Washington to George Washington, 29 Feb. 1776, *Papers of George Washington*, 3, 395-96.

⁵⁴ Lund Washington to George Washington, 7 Mar. 1776, *ibid.*, 432; Committee of Safety, 2 Apr. 1776, *Revolutionary Virginia*, 6, 306. Cf. Benson, "Wealth and Power," 348-49.

be the first used to put down the revolt. Since it was by no means certain whose cause the Loudoun troops would embrace, the committee thought it “inconvenient to have the Loudon Compy. in that regiment.”⁵⁵ Later in March, after Nicholas Cresswell reported that there was still “Great confusion” at the general muster of the militia, the Committee of Safety sent a minuteman company from the Prince William District to Loudoun.⁵⁶ That the Committee of Safety felt compelled to ready themselves for civil strife was an ominous sign. On the eve of Independence, the prospect of civil war loomed dangerously close.⁵⁷ It was not until 2 April that the Committee of Safety felt that the situation had sufficiently “quieted” to return the Loudoun company to the Third Regiment, though gentlemen worried about the “torn and distracted condition” of Loudoun County well into the middle of May.⁵⁸

III

Given the historical consensus that revolutionary Virginia escaped major social tension, the very existence of the Loudoun rebellion is noteworthy. But, as we have shown, the problems in Loudoun were echoed elsewhere in Virginia and, indeed, throughout the colonies on the eve of Independence. The incident in Loudoun was only one of many social conflicts and divisions that troubled the genteel patriot leadership in the midst of their problems with Britain. Armed bands in both Virginia and Maryland threatened the stability of the colonies in their attempts to procure salt. Smallholders and tenants resisted incorporation into the

⁵⁵ Committee of Safety, 2 Mar. 1776, *Revolutionary Virginia*, 6, 164, 306.

⁵⁶ Cresswell, *Journal*, 22 Mar. 1776, 140; Committee of Safety, 20 Mar. 1776, 6, 231.

⁵⁷ No mention was ever made of the possibility that the rioters might have been Tories. Even Andrew Leitch thought it was “honest, well meaning” farmers driven awry by “disappointed, carping creatures.” And even the leaders of the protesters, Leitch admitted, were only “wrong from chagrin and prejudice, and not from principles of dis[satisfaction] to their native country.” The view that the tenants’ patriotism was not an issue is countenanced by James Cleveland’s later protestations. He told Lund Washington that he had been “misrepresented,” and had twice asked the Loudoun Committee of Safety to enquire into his conduct, that he might “either be condemn’d or acquitted for he knowg [*sic*] himself to be a Friend to his Country is unwillg [*sic*] to lay under the Censure he does.” The Committee apparently did hear Cleveland, but he succeeded in making it appear that “no part of his behaviour has been Criminal” or disloyal, for no suggestion of further punishment or censure appears in the records. Nor was anyone else in the revolt tried for treason or any criminal offence as far as the records show (Lund Washington to George Washington, 7 Mar. 1776, *Papers of George Washington*, 3, 432).

⁵⁸ Committee of Safety, 2 Apr. 1776, *Revolutionary Virginia*, 6, 306. Cf. Benson, 348; Andrew Leitch to [Leven Powell], 15 May 1776, *Leven Powell Sketch*, 87.

gentry's hierarchical and onerous military establishment. And, along with continued military setbacks caused by the disinclination of small farmers to serve in the new military forces, patriot leaders also had to contend with individual and collective challenges to their authority from within. Gentleman planter Landon Carter, for example, was infuriated to learn that one of his less wealthy neighbours, when called upon to help protect gentlemen's houses from British plunderers, declared "he thought it would be the better if they were burnt down."⁵⁹

Finally, just as the Loudoun rebellion was gathering steam, both white indentured servants and African American slaves posed a threat from below, both before and after Dunmore's Proclamation (November 1775) formally encouraged them to turn against their owners in return for their freedom. Lund Washington, for example, fretted about an escaped white indentured servant. What he most feared was that the servant would come back to Mt. Vernon and try "Raising the rest" of the bonded work force. Exasperated to find out that there "is not a man of them, but woud [*sic*] leave us, if they believe'd they could make there Escape," Lund Washington noted bitterly, "& yet they have no fault to find[.] Liberty is sweet."⁶⁰

Indeed, what is perhaps most surprising about uprisings such as the one in Loudoun is that they took place despite the increasing incidence of slave rebelliousness and in the face of Governor Dunmore's Proclamation. Gentlemen certainly fretted about the "Damned, infernal, Diabolical" proclamation and indeed hoped it would help unify the colony.⁶¹ But there was no rush to arms in November 1775 by ordinary Virginians, and, as we have seen, farmers did not hesitate to voice their own grievances and even prepare for violent clashes. That ordinary white farmers in Loudoun seemed to worry less than Lund Washington and other gentleman planters about the effects of their actions on the enslaved population thus raises some interesting questions about the applicability of Edmund S. Morgan's well-known thesis that whites, wealthy and poor, were able to band together on the basis of slavery and racism in building a new republic.⁶²

The "plebeian Infamy" – including the Loudoun uprising – brought

⁵⁹ 1 May 1776, entry in *Diary of Landon Carter*, ed. Greene, 2, 1031.

⁶⁰ Lund Washington to George Washington, 5 Nov. 1775 and 3 Dec. 1775, in *Washington Papers*, 2, 306, 479–81n.

⁶¹ John Hatley Norton to [John Norton], [Oct. 16, 1775], in Frances Norton Mason, ed., *John Norton & Sons; Merchants of London and Virginia ...* (Richmond, Va., 1937), 391.

⁶² Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975), Book IV.

two important results.⁶³ The first was that, in indirect and unintentional ways, Loudoun and other rebellious farmers helped push the gentry into the Declaration of Independence. Despite the gentry's anger regarding numerous ministerial actions, many gentlemen were still unready at the end of 1775 to give up on reconciliation and declare independence. One of the major arguments that leading independence advocates used on their fellow gentlemen in the spring of 1776 was that, if Virginia declared independence, it would stand a better chance of suppressing disorders such as the Loudoun rising. Pro-independence gentlemen argued that separation would help cure the "rising disorders" in two ways.⁶⁴ One was that independence would allow Virginia to secure foreign trade, which would lessen the farmers' hardships and thus their rebelliousness. The other argument was that, if Virginia declared independence, the gentry could restore formal government, which had been suspended for nearly two years, and hence re-establish law and authority throughout the colony.

The need to secure foreign trade became an important argument for independence because a significant cause of the agrarian revolts was the suspension of Virginia's international trade. Nonimportation was the direct cause of the salt riots. The conflict between tenants and landlords was rooted in the tenants' inability, during the suspension of exports, to derive any income from their estates. Gentlemen knew that they could go a long way toward suppressing these disorders if they could only resume international trade. Since trade with Britain was out of the question, the Virginia rebellions pointed the gentry more and more in the direction of entering commercial alliances with France and other European powers. Furthermore, it was only from overseas that Virginia could obtain the muskets, gunpowder, and lead shot that were vital to winning the war quickly. Gentlemen would, of course, have desired to get the war over with as soon as possible even if they had felt no pressure from below. But that desire was now accompanied by the farmers' most urgent demand of all: Virginians must "go and Fight the Battle at once, and not be Shilly Shally."⁶⁵

⁶³ Walter Jones to Landon Carter, 14 Oct. 1775, Sabine Hall Papers, UVA. Jones made the comment in the midst of another more local political upheaval – that of the new elections for County Committee members in the fall of 1775 in which there was also a good deal of change and a loss of power among wealthier candidates (see McDonnell, *Popular Mobilization and Political Culture*, Ch. 5).

⁶⁴ Francis Lee to Landon Carter, 21 May 1776, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 4, 57.

⁶⁵ Lund Washington to George Washington, 29 Feb. 1776, *Papers of George Washington*, 3, 395–96.

French diplomats had made it clear that they would not approve large-scale trade with Virginia and its neighbours while they remained colonies of Britain. Domestic efforts to manufacture arms, powder, and lead had negligible results. The French, it was noted, were “exceedingly friendly” and only too happy to provide “a much larger supply of arms and ammunition” if only they were not “doubtful of the American submission to the claims of Parliament.” The point was driven home by the *Virginia Gazette*: “The common toast among the French,” the newspaper reported, “is, the independence of America; until which is declared, they say our war with England can only be looked on as a domestic broil.”⁶⁶ Thus the only way to obtain trade with French merchants – the only way to put an end to the conflicts caused by nonimportation, nonexportation, and the war itself – was to declare independence.

During the spring of 1776, then, more and more gentlemen came to see that a prompt declaration of independence was essential to secure foreign trade and thus to preserve Virginia’s internal peace. “[T]here is no error we ought more to dread than ... inaction,” an essayist told *Virginia Gazette* readers in April 1776. Prolonged negotiations with Britain would lead to “infinite dissensions among ourselves. An enterprise that depends upon the concord and exertions of the people, will ever infallibly fail if they are long held in a state of doubtful[?] anxiety.” If the war dragged on much longer, the author warned, America would be overcome by “faction and sedition.” “For God’s sake then,” he declared, “let us waste no time in unnecessary and dangerous delays.”⁶⁷

Another important argument for independence was that it would permit the gentry to restore formal law and authority in the colony. Many gentlemen believed that the lack of a government – the House of Burgesses had not passed a law since 1773, county courts no longer tried civil suits, and so on – helped to foment disorderly actions such as the Loudoun rising. In April 1776, when Member of Congress Francis Lightfoot Lee received a letter from Landon Carter reporting on the growth of “licentiousness” in Virginia, Lee argued that the only way to suppress it was to restore formal government. Lee asserted that the reason “licentiousness begins to prevail in Virga.” was that the “old Government” had been “dissolved, & no new one substituted in its

⁶⁶ Dixon & Hunter’s *Virginia Gazette*, 6 Apr. 1776. For shortages of lead and powder, domestic efforts at producing them, and the French unwillingness to supply them unless independence was declared, see Donald E. Reynolds, “Ammunition Supply in Revolutionary Virginia,” *VMHB*, 73 (Jan. 1965), 56–62.

⁶⁷ “A Planter,” Dixon & Hunter’s *Virginia Gazette*, 13 Apr. 1776.

stead.” In such a situation, it was inevitable that “Anarchy must be the consequence.” In a later letter, Lee told Carter that the convention that would convene in May 1776 should “make such an establishment, as will put a stop to the rising disorders with you, & secure internal quiet.”⁶⁸ Other pro-independence gentlemen made similar arguments. John Page, vice chairman of the Committee of Safety, asserted that to “prevent Disorders in each Colony a Constitution should be formed.”⁶⁹ “Sir,” Francis Lee’s brother Richard Henry demanded of Robert Carter Nicholas, who opposed independence, “do you not see the indispensable necessity of establishing a Government this Convention? How long popular commotions may be suppressed without it, and anarchy be prevented, deserves intense consideration.”⁷⁰

The independence advocates’ effort to inflame the conservative Virginia gentlemen’s fears of “anarchy” and convert them to the cause of independence succeeded with at least one prominent conservative. Carter Braxton resisted the impulse to independence as long as he could. But, by early May 1776, when convention delegates gathered in Williamsburg, Braxton believed they had no choice but to seize at once “the reins of government, and no longer suffer the people to live without the benefit of law.” Inaction would invite “Anarchy and riot ... and render the enjoyment of our liberties and future quiet, at least precarious.”⁷¹ In mid-May, Braxton reluctantly informed Landon Carter, his uncle and fellow conservative, that “The Assumption of Govern. was necessary.”⁷² That meant declaring independence.

The Loudoun County uprising also had important ideological consequences, because it helped to erode Virginia’s deferential political culture and even to foster among farmers a spirit of egalitarianism. Before the American Revolution, very few Americans explicitly articulated demands for a more democratic society. During and after the Revolutionary War, many did.⁷³ Historians have detected numerous sources of these democratic strivings – for instance the literature of the Enlightenment. It seems clear, however, that the move towards a more

⁶⁸ Lee to Carter, 9 Apr. and 21 May 1776, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 3, 500–1 and 4, 57.

⁶⁹ Page to Thomas Jefferson, 26 Apr. 1776, in Julian P. Boyd et al., eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (25 vols. to date; Princeton, 1950–), 1, 288.

⁷⁰ Lee to Nicholas, 30 Apr. 1776, *Richard Henry Lee Letters*, 1, 184.

⁷¹ Braxton, “An Address to the Convention ... of Virginia,” *Revolutionary Virginia*, 6, 518.

⁷² Braxton to Carter, 17 May 1776, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 4, 19.

⁷³ See, for example, Rosswurm, *Arms, Country, and Class, passim*, and McDonnell, “The Politics of Mobilization,” esp. Chs. 5–7.

democratic culture and much of the more radical egalitarianism emerged from the revolutionary struggles themselves. Indeed, it is important to note that the Virginia farmers did not usually go into the independence movement with egalitarian demands. Rather, these demands emerged as responses to the sacrifices required of them by movement leaders. The greatest sacrifices were military. As farmers insisted upon fighting the Revolutionary War on their own terms, they began to think more concretely about the principles and values upon which their society was based, and upon which it *could* be based. Soldiers demanded the same pay and treatment as officers. Some even sought to overthrow the whole military establishment and restore the all-volunteer independent companies in which every man served as an equal and decisions were made democratically. It was not only in the military that farmers advanced the principle of equal sacrifice. Once the patriots' ban on exports had deprived farmers of most of their income, tenants refused to pay their rent. They were determined to force their landlords to share in the costs of the war.

While the very fact of smallholders making egalitarian demands of gentlemen was itself new and radical, two features of these demands are particularly notable. The first is that many smallholders and tenants took it upon themselves to judge whether particular gentry policies were just. When James Cleveland argued that “the pay of officers and Soldiers *shoud* [*sic*] be the same, or what woud [*sic*] be still better they *shoud* [*sic*] *not* be paid at all,” he was not simply seeking benefits for his class but articulating universal principles. After nonexportation began, tenants claimed it “woud be the height of Injustice ever to expect to be paid for that years Rent.”⁷⁴

The other notable feature of the farmers' demands was that they were not entirely the work of individuals. Smallholders and tenants gathered to discuss, and sometimes to act upon, their grievances. Those discussions soon led to collective action. In November 1775, after salt had become scarce, *groups* descended upon hoarders to seize salt which they redistributed among themselves. Aggrieved tenants had evidently held meetings by 30 December 1775, for the threats that Lund Washington repeated on that date – threats to beat up officers who distrained tenants' property and to overturn the patriot committee – were collective. Put together, the facts that smallholders and tenants were placing egalitarian demands upon gentlemen, presuming to judge whether particular gentry policies were “just,” and doing all of this collectively, and it is clear that

⁷⁴ Lund Washington to George Washington, 29 Feb. 1776 and 30 Dec. 1775, *Papers of George Washington*, 3, 396 and 2, 621 (emphasis added).

farmers had developed a new “way of thinkg [*sic*],” as Lund Washington observed.⁷⁵ The radical nature of the rioters’ grievances and what underlay them might be captured by a single caustic remark by one gentleman of the county. In the aftermath of the uprising, James Hendricks, serving as an officer in Williamsburg, asked another gentleman in Loudoun about the situation there, significantly using the language of the English Revolution: “How goes on the spirit of Levelling?” he asked, “Is all quiet?”⁷⁶

These ideological developments of late 1775 and early 1776 help to explain the popularity of *Common Sense*, which appeared in the midst of the Loudoun uprising. The Loudoun uprising and the subsequent politicisation of small farmers may have created fertile soil for a pamphlet that urged not just independence from Britain, but also the creation of a new form of government far more democratic than the old. Before January 1776, Nicholas Cresswell, an Englishman travelling in Virginia, never stated that any of the Virginians he met favoured independence. Then *Common Sense* appeared, making a “great noise” and tending “to subvert all Kingly Governments and erect an Independent Republic,” Cresswell said. From January onwards, Cresswell’s journal is filled with comments such as “Nothing but Independence talked of” and “Nothing but Independence will go down.”⁷⁷ Although Paine’s pamphlet was in many senses original, in its fundamentals it simply expressed what people were already thinking.

Indeed, small farmers’ adherence to such notions translated into a call for immediate independence, most notably manifested in the hotly contested elections for the Convention that would decide the question. In the run-up to the elections, planter Landon Carter had heard that at least some common farmers believed that independence would result in a radical new government “in which no Gentleman should have the least share.”⁷⁸ When farmers went to the polls in the spring of 1776 – only one or two months after the Loudoun uprising – they made it clear that the

⁷⁵ Lund Washington to George Washington, 30 Dec. 1775, *ibid.*, 2, 621.

⁷⁶ James Hendricks to Leven Powell, 5 [June] 1776, *Leven Powell Sketch*, 95.

⁷⁷ 19, 22, and 26 Jan. 1776, *Nicholas Cresswell Journal*, 136. Most historians also acknowledge the decisive impact of *Common Sense*: “Prior to January 1776, when Thomas Paine launched a furious assault on monarchy in *Common Sense*, neither republicanism nor democracy had been in good odor.” Paul A. Rahe, *Republics, Ancient and Modern: Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1992), 575. However, the degree to which Paine’s thoughts reflected a more widespread point of view amongst the lower and middling sorts and was popular for this reason, rather than advanced a particularly new viewpoint, needs further examination.

⁷⁸ 1 May 1776, entry in *Diary of Landon Carter*, 2, 1031.

popular feeling was for independence, and many candidates had to declare themselves for it before they were elected. “Our Freeholders [are] all Mad,” one planter wrote, and “determined to have a New house altogether.” In a colony and political culture unused to contested elections and legislative turnover, the many “warm contests for seats” came as a shock to many gentlemen.⁷⁹

IV

Virginia, then, actually *does* fit Carl Becker’s claim about a dual revolution. Indeed, Virginia shows how each of the myriad forms of internal conflict could combine and produce an explosive and revolutionary situation. Not only did ordinary white Virginian farmers push directly for Independence and political change in Virginia and in so doing put pressure on more reluctant genteel patriots, but they also at the same time developed a radical critique of the social and political culture that gentlemen had cultivated. Pressed by wartime demands, farmers began to think about the structure of society and question its basis. In expressing their dissatisfaction with the status quo, farmers alarmed elite leaders who feared any instability and particularly the dissolution of the white racial alliance they had always assumed was secure. The situation was even more worrying because this realization came at the same time that another form of internal conflict was reaching a head – that between enslaved Virginians and their masters. Independence was seen as the only way out: to appease the demands of ordinary white farmers, and to restore order in both black and white communities. Internal conflict was thus central in the struggle over home rule.⁸⁰

Finally, internal conflict resulting from the “transforming hand of Revolution” was clearly manifest in the *developing* ideas of small farmers in Virginia, and in its consequences. Perhaps most importantly, during the course of resistance, rebellion, and war, an alternative popular political ideology appears to have been more generally developed and articulated

⁷⁹ Josiah Parker to Landon Carter, 14 Apr. 1776, Sabine Hall Papers, UVA; Robert Brent to Richard Henry Lee, 28 Apr. 1776, In *Lee Family Papers*, ed. Hoffman. On the relatively quiet prerevolutionary elections, see John G. Kolp, “The Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Pre-Revolutionary Virginia,” *WMO*, 3rd ser., 49 (Oct. 1992), 652–74.

⁸⁰ Such an interpretation also helps to better explain Edmund Morgan’s question of how such a conservative and almost aristocratic society could be at the forefront of a radical move towards secession and republicanism. His answer was racial solidarity, but it seems clearer now that it was conflict and division that propelled Virginia into Revolution (see Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, Book IV).

further as the majority of the population was asked to make substantial sacrifices by a minority leadership. Throughout the colonies and new states, ordinary people like the farmers of Loudoun increasingly called for more equality, less authoritarianism, and more local control over their own lives, economic fortunes of their families, and the communities in which they lived as they struggled to make sense of and create new meanings during the revolutionary situation.⁸¹ In adopting, developing, and defending such ideas, farmers in Loudoun and throughout Virginia joined thousands of other ordinary white Americans throughout the colonies and new states in the push towards more democratic governments, thus ensuring that the war for independence would be a truly revolutionary war.

⁸¹ For a discussion of this developing “ideology of disaffection,” see Hoffman and McDonnell, “The Ideology of Disaffection.”