

Opinion – Reflections on the American Revolution at Almost 250

Written by Mark N. Katz

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MARK N. KATZ, JUL 24 2022

As we approach the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 2026, there is deep polarization in the United States about what sort of nation America is and should be. This current polarization, though, largely stems from how the American Revolution itself can be (and has been) viewed in contradictory ways. Just what kind of revolution was it? How one answers this question very much informs how one regards what kind of country America has been, is now, and should be in the future.

On the one hand, the American Revolution can be seen as a democratic revolution similar to—indeed, serving to inspire—other such revolutions elsewhere. This democratic vision of the American revolution is one of a secular republic enshrining the rule of law and guaranteed rights enjoyed equally by all individual citizens and thus allowing for protection of minorities against the “tyranny of the majority.”

On the other hand, the American Revolution can also be seen as a European settler revolution which threw off colonial rule and established democracy for the European settlers, their descendants, and even subsequent European immigrants, but did not do so for non-European populations in their midst who were often regarded not just as unequal but as a threat, and who were ruled over in an all too often forceful, discriminatory manner. In this European settler (or White nationalist) vision, the American revolution resulted in rule by White Americans to whom the country “rightfully belongs” over non-Whites who are “not really” equal citizens due to their non-White heritage; a negative view of how, when, or why they immigrated to the United States; or just the presumption that they tend to vote Democrat and not Republican. White fear of, and unwillingness to pay, the presumed demands for reparations from non-Whites for past (and present) mistreatment by Whites may also motivate this vision. An authoritarian, “White nationalist” vision of Christianity also serves to justify why non-Whites somehow do not deserve and thus cannot be allowed to fully participate in the American democratic process.

These two visions are clearly very different from each other. They did, though, co-exist for many years because the majority of Americans were (and still are) White. Majority rule meant White rule even when Congress enacted, the President enforced, and the Supreme Court upheld laws that favored civil (that is, minority) rights.

But America’s demographics are changing. It has been widely reported that by the mid-2040s, America will become a majority minority country—in other words, there will no longer be a White majority. Indeed, this has already happened in several American states: Hawaii, California, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, and Maryland . It is also true for the population under age 18 nationwide.

For minority groups in America (Hispanics, Blacks, Asians), this impending demographic transition holds out the prospect of greater political influence for them. For White Americans whose vision of the U.S. is rooted in the democratic view of the American Revolution, this impending demographic transition is not particularly worrisome. They are willing to cooperate with people from different racial/ethnic groups, and envision that people from these groups will also want to cooperate with them on issues of common concern.

However, for conservative White Americans whose vision of the American Revolution is rooted in the idea that

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America is a “White Christian” country in which Whites “rightfully” rule over non-Whites, this impending democratic transition is an existential threat. They fear that when non-Whites become the majority and Whites a minority, the future non-White majority may treat the future White minority as badly as the White majority treated non-Whites in the past and often still treats them in the present. Even if the future non-White majority does not do this, there are conservative Whites who fear the loss of control that their impending minority status could result in. Indeed, there are all too many conservative Whites who see this impending demographic transition as not something occurring as a result of long-term differential demographic trends among America’s main racial/ethnic groups, but as the result of what they refer to as “the great replacement” wherein non-White immigrants are being allowed to flow into the U.S. in order to bring this about.

If White conservative support for democracy in the past was contingent on there being a White majority, then the prospect of Whites becoming a minority serves to undermine their support for democracy now. In other words, given the choice between White rule and majority rule, all too many White conservatives prefer to maintain White rule, perhaps under the presumption that America will still be a democracy for them. Furthermore, as the events of January 6, 2021 and the trials and hearings about them afterward have shown, there are White conservatives who justify this view to themselves on the basis of their interpretation of the American Revolution as enshrining White rule. What is also clear is that this intolerant view has a very large following.

For those Whites and non-Whites whose view of what American democracy should be like stems from the democratic vision of the American Revolution, overcoming the White nationalist vision of it will require more than just the prosecution of its adherents who behave violently or criminally. It will also involve a battle of ideas. But, as we have seen, those adhering to the White nationalist vision are not likely to have their minds changed by those who adhere to the democratic vision. But they may change their minds when they come to realize that the White nationalist rule that they espouse will be increasingly difficult and costly for conservative Whites to maintain over the long term as their percentage of the population shrinks. Cooperating with others is not just the right thing to do, but is a far less expensive way of protecting one’s interests than through attempting to do so by forcefully suppressing a growing majority over a prolonged period of time.

About the author:

Mark N. Katz is a professor emeritus of government and politics at the George Mason University Schar School of Policy and Government and a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council.