

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 350: The Triumph of George Washington (Part 4)

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What if it was a mistake from the start?

The Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution, the creation of the United States of America.

What if all this was a terrible idea?

And what if the injustices and madness of American life since then have occurred not in spite of the virtues of the founding fathers, but because of them?

The Revolution, this argument might run, was a needless and brutal bit of slaveholders' panic mixed with enlightenment-argle-bargle, producing a country that was always marked for violence and disruption and demagoguery.

Look north to Canada, or south to Australia, and you will see different possibilities of peaceful evolution away from Britain towards sane and whole more equitable and less sanguinary countries. No revolution, and slavery might have ended as it did elsewhere in the British Empire more peacefully and sooner.

We could have ended with a social democratic commonwealth that stretched from north to south, a near-continent-wide Canada.

Wow.

So that, Tom, was Adam Gopnik, a very great essayist, in The New Yorker in May 2017, asking if the American Revolution was a mistake from the start.

And of course, you and I will have our own opinions about whether or not it was a mistake.

But the fact is that as we reach episode four of this mighty epic, we are in, what, 1778?

The French and soon the Spanish have piled in, or in Spanish case, will pile in.

And they will be followed by other countries who form a league of arm neutrality, the Russians, the Danes, the Prussians, the Austrians, the Portuguese.

They basically make it very difficult for the British.

And from this point, don't you think, Tom, the game is kind of up for Britain?

I think the game has been up right from the start.

I don't think there was any prospect of the British ever.

I think it was unwinnable from the beginning.

Yeah, I do.

So Adam Smith, Professor Adam Smith, who is the Edward Osborne Professor of American History at the University of Oxford, who has been performing manfully in these four episodes.

Adam, do you think the game was up from the very beginning?

I think the game was up if the goal was a restoration of the status quo as it had been before 1775.

I think other alternatives might have been possible.

I think if, you know, if we talked about in the previous episode, if Washington's army had been captured, if Saratoga hadn't fallen, I mean, there are other options.

Yeah.

But the possibility is narrow and narrow and narrow.

And definitely by the time you get to the French intervention, which is where we ended the last episode, it's very, very difficult to see how the British get out of this.

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And yet the funny thing is, you mentioned Washington.

So Washington at this point, I mean, he's the great hero for the Americans, obviously, commander of the Continental Army.

At the point that the French get involved, he is really in the depths of sort of despondency, isn't he? Because Philadelphia had been taken by the British and he has led his army into winter quarters of a place called Valley Forge, which is about just under 20 miles northwest of Philadelphia.

And he's there for six months and they've got nothing to eat.

It's freezing cold.

They're really miserable.

And Valley Forge is the sort of, so Ronald Reagan, big favorite of yours, Tom, of course.

Ronald Reagan used to tell this story about Washington kneeling in prayer at Valley Forge and asking God for help.

And Valley Forge is a really important part of the American mythology of the Revolution and the war, isn't it?

Because it's sort of, again, it's the underdog spirit.

The odds are against us and, you know, God was with us.

Providence was with us.

Do you think it really deserves that reputation, Adam?

Well, it was another moment when it's easy to imagine how the Continental Army could have completely dispersed.

And if that had happened, the calculations would have shifted.

It's not to say that there wouldn't have been some other kind of military force that would have been put together.

Perhaps under Washington, perhaps under somebody else.

But it was certainly a desperate moment.

And, you know, the reason, as you say, Dominic, I mean, the reason why it's become so much part of the myth of the American Revolution in the United States is because it reinforces this underdog narrative.

And in that Reaganite way, because it implies at least that it's only because of God's providence that it was possible in the end for the Americans to try out.

And women, am I right?

Martha Washington is there too.

She's, I don't know anything about Martha Washington, but she's followed George and she's there sort of bandaging people and making soup or something.

That sounds like I'm being flippant about.

But obviously women play a huge part in the American Revolution from the beginning, not least in following their husbands or their boyfriends with the army.

And they do all the important stuff behind the lines, like washing their clothes, bandaging their wounds, providing them with food, all those things.

Which an army absolutely depends on.

Well, Thomas Payne has a brilliant description of the whole setup with all the men who were busy building up the fortifications and the women laboring.

And he says that it was like a family of beavers.

That's nice.

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You like a beaver, Tom.

I love a beaver, yes.

But Adam, so women in the American Revolution, we haven't talked about women much, but they are, I mean, historiography now really plays up the part that women played in a way that wouldn't have been the case 100 years ago.

And critically so, because this was a war which, as we've in effect been emphasizing, was won or lost by the American white colonial public and their commitment to this cause.

And so it was in American households that sacrifices were made, that commitments were made to try to wait out this through this time of trial.

The presence of the Redcoats, the presence of the army in itself intensified American commitment to try to.

That the only possible outcome with any honor was complete victory, complete independence, removing British troops forever from American soil.

King George had already been taken down.

None of that is explicable if the only focus is on the men in the armies and the generals making the decisions on the American side and the founding fathers who are all, of course, men.

But of course, isn't there a famous exchange of letters, Abigail Adams?

Is it Abigail Adams?

Yes.

John Adams' wife, yeah.

Well, she writes to him when they're past the Declaration of Independence and says, you know, while you're remaking the world, think about women as well.

We get the ladies.

We get the ladies.

And he sort of writes back in this incredibly condescending way and says, yeah, right, you know, like we're going to do that.

Like we're going to give you a second thought or something.

So was there ever a...

He does.

He does.

Although in fairness, I mean, that's actually a magnificent exchange of letters.

I mean, John and Abigail Adams write to each other.

They're apart most of the time throughout this whole revolutionary crisis.

And he clearly takes her incredibly seriously as a kind of counselor and source of advice.

And he tests out ideas with her and he wants to know what she thinks and what people around her back in Boston are thinking.

So it's actually quite a really impressive and interesting close political relationship as well as emotional one between John and Abigail.

So could there have been a more, as it were, a more progressive outcome for women, for the poor, for slaves, for people who are pushed to the margins of kind of American political life?

Or was it always going to play out as it did?

But doesn't, I mean, doesn't the war is kind of bad for slaves because they are seen as having sided with the British.

So in a way, the kind of the structures of oppression become a titan as a result of the Revolutionary

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War.

Well, I think gender and class work out in different ways from race in the American Revolution. And there is a moment in the 1790s when women are enfranchised in New Jersey famously. They're kind of almost accidentally enfranchised if their property owners, some women, a tiny number of women.

In terms of poor white men, the American Revolution was almost everywhere a great boon and some of the new state constitutions that are being written around about this time.

Pennsylvania being the best example are incredibly radical constitutions that give huge amounts of power to ordinary white property-less men relative to anywhere else in the world.

Or that really has ever been properly dreamed of anywhere in the world other than, you know, at the most radical extreme moments of the English Revolution of the 1640s.

What about, let's say, Indians, so Native Americans?

So the British are trying to enlist Native Americans as allies.

And in fact, throughout all this period, there's very bloody fighting in the Western borderlands, the kind of frontier zone.

Does the American Revolution work out well or badly?

Well, I mean, I'm guessing what your answer is going to be.

The answer is not well for Native Americans.

And is that because previously they had just been seen as King George's subjects like any others, but now they are seen as enemies?

Yeah, I guess for the reasons we were talking about in the first episode, it was in the interest of policymakers in London to try to balance the powerful indigenous nations in North America against white settlers.

And the French did the same, and the French were making alliances with Native Americans.

The practical effects of American independence was that Native American peoples were then regarded as being essentially fair game within the boundaries of the newly established United States.

And no, it was the American Revolution was clearly a bad thing from the point of view of indigenous people.

And Adam, just to follow up on that, that the Native Americans are seen as having allied themselves with the British and presumably even more so.

That's the case with slaves in the South who have not only escaped their owners, but in certain cases have actually joined the British Army.

So there's a famous Ethiopian regiment, it's called.

And then there's a squad of black dragoons who are enrolled in the British Army.

Black loyalists play an important role and not a role that's dwelt in traditionally an American historiography until the last couple of decades.

And the Ethiopian regiment, I think was originally raised by Lord Dunmore and was a direct consequence of the proclamation that we talked about in a previous episode.

One of the soldiers in the Ethiopian regiment, Harry Washington, was owned by George Washington, being born in the Gambia.

Purchased by Washington some 10 or 15 years before the war, ran away when he heard of Dunmore's proclamation and fought for the king throughout the Revolutionary War, was eventually, I think, among those black loyalists who were evacuated by the British and settled in

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Nova Scotia.

So what was it, the phrase, sometimes the liberty wears a red coat or something?

Just throwing that out are American listeners.

Yeah, there are surely no American listeners left.

So let's get back to something that will be cheerier for American listeners, namely the gradual implosion of the British war effort.

So we ended the last episode, February 1778, the French piling in.

The Spanish have joined a year later, and that obviously, as we were saying before, completely changes the dynamic.

Because they wanted to brought it back. I mean, that's basically what they want.

The Spanish do indeed. But of course, for the British, it's not just defending the Caribbean, they also know how to defend Britain.

I mean, so Adam, the chances of a French invasion, I suppose, they're not enormous, but they're not negligible either.

I mean, the British are always worried about a French invasion in this period, aren't they?

Yeah, I mean, this isn't just theoretical. There was an Armada, the Armada of 1779, Dominic.

So there was an attempt by a combined French and Spanish navy.

Attended the very least to divert Britain from the war in the Americas and in the Caribbean and all these other places Britain was trying to defend.

But with a genuine prospect of landing in Great Britain.

And the most famous kind of naval innovation in this is that the French government commissions an American called John Paul Jones,

who's a kind of former slave ship captain, to actually go and raid the British coast, which he does with some success.

Whitehaven. Yeah, he shells Whitehaven and Cumberland.

He's still quite remembered there. If you go to Whitehaven, where there is, by the way, an excellent secondhand bookshop.

John Paul Jones is still remembered, he might even rightly say.

And he ends up taking shelter in the Netherlands, which I think reflects very poorly on the Dutch, that they allowed him in.

So his life then takes a serious, very bizarre twist, Tom.

He ends up in Russia after that. He's accused of raping a 10-year-old girl.

And he goes to Poland, and then he goes back to Paris, and he ends up being made US consul in Algiers.

Of course, yes, of course he does. Yes, against the slavers.

But then dies before he can take up his, he's found dead in his Paris apartment.

Isn't that a strange life?

Wow, that's the plot of a thriller.

Anyway, so that's all part of the...

So that's not good for anybody. Well, it's not good for the people of Whitehaven, I think it's good to say, Adam.

But the British still have a... The amazing thing is they don't give in.

They don't just say, right, let's just cut our losses.

Why not? Why do we keep going?

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Just pride? Stubbornness?

I think, yes, I think those things.

I mean, that really is a great question.

Because by this point, the support in the House of Commons for Lord North is ebbing away.

It starts losing some critical votes.

I mean, there are plenty of people in Britain by this point saying, let's cut our losses and get out.

But it's a massive thing.

It's a massive thing to acknowledge the independence of these 13 colonies.

But also, I mean, as late as 1780, Britain is still winning victories.

They are.

So they win the Battle of Camden, which for any Londoner is a kind of an amusing idea.

South Carolina was the Camden South Carolina.

Yes, South Carolina, not in North London.

And they're fighting in the South because there is...

And actually, this is a good answer to your question, Dominic.

I mean, as Tom is implying there, there is still this thought, well, maybe we can turn this round.

And they're fighting in the South, not least because in the South they have good reason to believe that there are still lots of loyalists there.

And there are.

There are loyalist groups who are irregular forces who are fighting to try to support the British.

And so the famous story of an American independence fighter who gets turned, of course, is Benedict Arnold.

And he is...

So what was he?

He was a kind of very distinguished general, kind of very energetic general, kind of loses his mobility.

He gets badly injured in his legs, but is still very kind of feisty.

Yes.

And feels that he's not getting the credit that he's owed.

Yes, he's not being promoted because he's from the wrong place.

And there's all this business about the Continental Congress wanting to share out the commissions among the different states and all this kind of thing.

And he's clearly a kind of prickly, ambitious figure who doesn't think he's getting his fair dues.

He's also married to a beautiful woman, Peggy Shippen, who was a loyalist from a loyalist family anyway in Philadelphia.

And he, as you say, he gets turned and he thinks, actually, maybe I could get more accolades and get more glory if I defect to the British side.

And it goes wrong from his point of view.

I mean, he ends up...

He survives.

Because he gets offered the command of West Point, doesn't he?

And it's suggested that he...

He does.

And he's going to surrender.

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The plan is he's going to surrender West Point to the British, but the plan is exposed before he can do that.

He manages to escape.

His wife, Peggy, eventually manages to escape as well.

And they're reunited in London.

But the guy who'd been running the messages, Major John Andre, is captured by the Americans.

And he's British, is he?

He's British.

And he's executed as a spy.

And he's hung.

He's not shot as a gentleman should be, but he's hung.

And even the Americans who capture him and are holding him prisoner in the weeks before he's executed, they just swoon over this guy.

They think John Andre is the most magnificent military figure, astonishing, bearing, good-looking, brave.

And when he walks out into his final execution, and he's still astonished because he thinks he's going to be shot until he sees the news hanging there.

And he's asked if he wants to say any last words.

And he says, bear me witness that I bear my fates like a brave man.

And they all go, oh, how magnificent.

Very so stirring.

So there's absolutely a sense still that the Americans are capable of admiring officers in the British Army.

And equally, there is also a figure who is up there in the annals of infamy alongside Benedict Arnold, who is a British officer called Benastro Tarleton.

Brilliant.

And he is the guy who inspires what's his name in the Patriot, the villainous.

Mel Gibson's villain.

But he's a tremendous man, isn't he?

Benastro Tarleton, he looks gallant, he kind of looks the part.

So he kind of wins a battle and his opponents surrender and then all his men slash them and kill them.

And so this is Tarleton's quarter, it's called.

The Tarleton complained that he'd been actually, his horse had been shot from under him and he'd been stuck under the horse so he wasn't in a position to...

But I mean, you could argue, couldn't you, Tom, to go back to the thing we were talking about in previous episodes, that if the British Army had had rather more Tarletons and fewer gentlemen Johnny's or whatever they were called,

then maybe they would have done a bit better than sort of playing by the Queensbury rules, which they're sort of doing throughout.

Is that fair, Adam, or am I being too ruthless?

Well, it certainly would have created a different outcome.

But as we were saying before, all the time the British are saying, well, you know, it's a hearts and minds strategy and they just don't quite bring themselves to it.

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And really, if every British general had been a bloody Ben Tarleton, I mean, is it going to fundamentally change the story?

I don't think it is.

All it would have done is to really even further entrench.

Poison relations, wouldn't it?

Just to go back to the question I asked 10 minutes ago, which was about why Britain kept fighting, why Britain didn't throw.

I suppose one answer is that the British, I mean, nobody knows how the story will end.

So nobody knows that all 13 colonies will become independent.

And as you said, there are still lots of loyalists in, let's say, South Carolina or North Carolina or wherever.

Do the British think, you know what, the South is quite lucrative with its plantations.

We could keep those states.

Maybe New England is gone, maybe Pennsylvania or wherever.

But Virginia, the Carolinas.

Well, because of course, with the French entering the war, there's the risk that the Caribbean colonies might go as well.

And the British are facing the prospect of losing all their colonies in the new world.

So the fact that they're able to hold on to their Caribbean colonies suggests that that's not entirely a foolish strategy, right?

Well, I think, yes, they're always trying to hold on to the Caribbean colonies, number one.

I mean, that is the thing that they absolutely cannot happen is that the French and Spanish would take Jamaica and Antigua and Barbados.

Did people in London envisage some scenario whereby some of the southern colonies remained loyal?

Yes, they definitely did.

All options were still on the table, I think, and that's no doubt part of the reason why the war continued.

And as Tom said, they're still winning battles.

So they've taken, they take Savannah, they take Charleston, they win this battle at Camden.

The guy who wins that is General Cornwallis, who's from a Whig family.

You know, your classic, I mean, basically a casting agency have supplied an old Atonian to Commander British Army.

But actually, he's really good at it.

Cornwallis is remembered as this terrible disaster, but he's won lots of battles.

He fought in the Seven Years' War, he's famously gallant.

He voted against the Stamp Act.

And he goes on to become Governor General India, doesn't he?

He's not a kind of complete weed and nothing like he's remembered.

And then once he's won Camden, he moves north, doesn't he?

He moves into North Carolina and he thinks, right, what I need to do is to cut the rebel supply lines from Virginia.

So he ends up going into Virginia.

And this is, I mean, it's so that the camp, we're not a military history podcast,

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it's probably everybody can tell.

But he, he's sort of trudging this way and that across the landscape and he ends up in a peninsula. He's a technical language.

Yeah, that's exactly, yeah.

Some people may say that about this podcast, that basically we trudged this way and that.

But Dominic, you know, but again, you know, what's intriguing about this is that he knows what is coming.

So he's been commanded by General Clinton to go and do this.

And he's saying, no, I think this is a terrible idea.

But he, you know, he obeys, but even as he's doing whatever it is he was saying, trudging around, he's kind of writing letters and keeping correspondence to make sure that, you know, he will be able to say that he thought this was a bad idea.

So again, it's this sense of defeatism.

He said he writes to Clinton, I assure you, I'm quite tired of marching about the country in quest of adventures.

And that's basically what he's doing.

And he ends up in this peninsula called the Williamsburg Neck, where he decides there's a place called Yorktown.

This is a good base.

I'll get supplies from the sea here.

And this obviously is, I mean, it's got a tiny bit of the feel of the Battle of Actium to it, I think, Tom.

You know, the Battle of Actium where they got kind of corner, didn't they, Mark Antony and Cleopatra, blockaded by Octavian's fleet.

And he basically manages to corner himself in this peninsula where Washington pitches up with the French.

They numbered him two to one.

And he's thinking, well, maybe I'll get supplied from the sea.

And then the French fleet sails into view and he thinks, oh, God, that ship has sailed as it were.

And then it's a swamp, which is a very poor choice, I think, of topographical choice because they all get malaria.

Half of his men get malaria.

He realizes he's not going to be able to get out.

They're all hungry, very miserable.

And eventually, the 19th of October, 1781, Cornwallis says, enough.

You know, I surrender.

And he's too ill to attend the ceremony himself.

So he says.

So he says.

What is it with you, Sinex?

Diplomatic illness.

What is it with you, Sinex?

So he sends out his second in command, doesn't he, to surrender?

And so George Washington refuses to accept the surrender from the second in command and asks his second in command to accept the surrender instead.

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The British would have been happy to surrender to the French.

Yeah.

But not to the American rebels.

Because it's humiliating for them.

And so they all walk out, don't they?

They kind of have to walk for a kind of mile, a mile long gauntlet.

They have to run it.

And then when they have to hand over all their weapons and save the British troops, hurl down their muskets and hope that they'll smash it up.

But it's been a very unsporting end.

They're not even allowed to play the right music and stuff.

And they're not allowed to carry their flags unfurled.

They have to fill their flags.

Yeah.

But having said that, Washington then, once the surrender has been completed, invites all the senior officers for a party, which is wonderful, except for one officer, who is, of course, Benastricht Alton.

Oh, Tom.

So he remains the baddie that they love to hate.

So Washington unsporting behavior followed by very sporting behavior.

But then six days after the surrender, he issues an order that says that all the slaves that have joined the British, my troops are now to round them up and return them to their owners.

Which is the kind of detail, Adam, that 21st century historian sees on as a sort of unsettling one in what's normally a very patriotic narrative.

It is unsettling if you have swallowed the patriotic narratives that I suppose many Americans did over many generations.

It's not in the slightest bit surprising, though, is it?

I mean, they're in a slave society.

The core thing about slavery is that it's a claim to property.

There would have been no possible alternative course of action for Washington himself, who, of course, is a slave holder.

And in a slave holding state colony of Virginia, what else would you expect him to have done in that situation?

So there's no sense there that that's bad behavior.

I mean, almost everybody involved with the American cause would say that's exactly what we'd expect them to do.

No, I wouldn't go that far because the 13 colonies were diverse and complicated places.

And I think, I mean, also, right, that in northern states, even Philadelphia, particularly in New England,

that the process of the war gives a massive boost to abolitionism, as it has done in Britain as well, actually.

It does, yes.

So the impact of the American Revolution on slavery is a highly complex one.

In some ways, it reinforces it.

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In other ways, it gives a huge boost to the anti-slavery movement.

You know, both things are true simultaneously.

Yeah, yeah.

OK, let's take a break now.

So Cornwallis has surrendered effectively at the end of the war.

But when we come back, let's look at how the war is officially concluded and then think about the short term and the long term consequences of it.

Hello, welcome back to the Restless History.

It's the final section of our four-part epic, the heroic Adam Smith, like George Washington.

He's been in the field for what seems years.

His sword is still unsheathed.

And Adam, we're approaching the end and basically Cornwallis' surrender, that's it.

And is it recognized as such by everyone?

When the news gets back to London, and Lord George Jermaine here, I actually don't think we've mentioned so far in this discussion,

but he's the poor guy in London who's having to try to run the war on behalf of Lord North.

He realizes the significance of this.

The King realizes the significance of this.

This isn't the only British army in the field.

The British still hold New York.

They still hold Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina.

They've still got a military presence, but this is a blow from which they know they can't come back.

And they're also the same round about the same time.

The French are one of the victors in kits and the Spanish are just captured in Menorca.

So it's like one of those, you're playing one of those kind of strategy games where everything is going wrong at once.

Do you think, okay, it's time to cut the losses?

But oddly, so this is a weird detail, Cornwallis' surrender is in October 1781,

but the Treaty of Paris is not from the two years.

What's going on in the intervening two years?

Well, partly what's going on is naval warfare in the Caribbean.

So really, the war, I mean, there are three different wars happening simultaneously here.

There's the war between the British regulars and the American troops, the Continental Army, which we've mostly been talking of.

Secondly, there's a kind of civil war within the colonies, which we've referred to a little bit,

but it's really important in some places, sort of loyalists and patriots and kind of really nasty, violent stuff.

And thirdly, there's the global conflict.

There's Britain on the one hand and France and Spain on the other.

And that war continues beyond Yorktown.

And the naval battles that take place in the coming months, which are British victories, and which secure Antigua and the other sugar islands,

that's the way in which the British in London would like to think that the war has ended.

That's the note they want to end on, and that's important to their negotiators.

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Admiral Howe, who'd been in command of the naval forces in the Revolutionary War, he's come back and he comes to the liberation of Gibraltar.

So there's a sense in which Gibraltar is more important than America.

Yes.

So actually, from the British point of view, they come out of this thinking, okay, well, we lost the colonies, that's been a bit of a disaster.

But actually, in the grand scheme of things, we've got out of this.

It could have been much worse.

Right.

It could have been much worse.

And in a way, the fact that everybody has ganged up on Britain, is that effectively revenge, as it were, for the Seven Years' War?

And is that recognition that the Seven Years' War had put Britain up there to be shot at in a kind of preeminent position?

I think that's absolutely right, Dominic.

Yeah, that's exactly right.

And it's a really scary moment.

People in London, that's what they're really frightened of, is this isolation in Europe.

Because all of British foreign policy through the 18th century is to avoid,

and into the 19th century, is to avoid isolation in Europe,

as a kind that happens in the 17, late 1770s and early 1780s.

And they don't want that to happen again.

That's the lesson the British policymakers draw.

Right.

But actually, so Britain, I think it's fair to say, I mean, obviously,

I know our remaining American listener will say,

I've never heard such a...

I've never heard such a partisan podcast in my life, Trial Victosh.

But it's fair to say that the British have made a series of very bad mistakes from the start of this series to write to this point.

But in a weird way,

the British really distinguish themselves with the peace, don't they?

Because they get the Americans to sign a piece,

they do a deal with the British alone,

and they give the Americans much more generous terms than the French or the Spanish want them to.

Absolutely.

And Franklin's negotiating it in Paris, isn't he?

Yes.

He's a very free-form negotiator.

You know, the British say, let's do this.

And he goes, yeah, why not?

Brilliant.

The story of the Treaty of Paris is usually told

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as a great triumph for Franklin's negotiating skills.
And no doubt the Americans did do a good job.
But fundamentally, what this is about
is that the British definitely did not need to agree
such generous terms to the new United States.
But it was in Britain's interest to do that.
Once the 13 colonies had been lost,
it was in Britain's interest to have a reasonably strong
United States in North America as a bollock against the French.
And also to keep them, presumably to keep them on board
because of this Canada and this Caribbean as well.
Indeed.
And you know, the worst outcome
and the Treaty of Paris for Britain
would have been France reclaiming
some of her possessions in North America
or Spain doing likewise.
And so a weak fragmented tiny United States
just clinging to the Atlantic Seaboard,
which would have been certain to invite another war very soon,
that wouldn't have been in Britain's interest either
so long as they wanted to hold, as you say, Thomas,
as long as they wanted to hold on to their possessions in Canada.
And just on, I mean, people will often talk about the,
what the Americans call the Revolutionary War
and we call it the American War of Independence.
People often talk of it as a civil war.
When it's over, I mean, when they are meeting Franklin,
who, you know, used to play chess with British guys
when he was in London before the war,
is there bad blood or are they all sort of shaking hands
and drinking port and kind of chuckling about, you know,
funny things that happen at Saratoga or whatever?
I mean, what's the sort of atmosphere like
between Britain and America in the immediate aftermath?
There's a very emotional moment when John Adams comes to London
as the first minister from the new United States
and he's presented at court
and he has a conversation with the King
and they're both very emotional about this
and the King certainly so.
But John Adams pledges the future friendship of the United States
and emphasizes all the common ties of culture and language
and religion and with the strong implication

that now this late unpleasantness is behind us,
at the end of the day, we are now like you
and like we've always been a great Protestant power
and we know who our enemies are.
They're the French and that was why Thomas Jefferson,
in contrast, did not go down so well in London.
So the answer to your question, Dominic,
is it depends on which Americans you're talking about.
Because Jefferson is a shameless Francophile, isn't he?
He is and he remains a shameless Francophile
even into the 1790s.
As the guillotine is falling, Jefferson is toasting
the chateau of the Loire and whatever it is.
So one of the famous paradoxes of history
is that actually the real impact of the American Revolution
falls on France rather than on Britain
because French support for the American war effort
costs them a lot of money,
bleeds them of so much money that it precipitates the revolution.
And you talked about America being Protestant
but one of the other interesting kind of corollaries
of the war period is that Jefferson is able to make the case
for there being kind of wide-scale religious tolerance
and that is something that simply because the structures
of kind of establishment churches are no longer able
to be maintained.
And so that's another very, very significant fruit
of the Revolutionary War, isn't it?
Yes.
I mean, pretty much everybody imagines
that the religious toleration is within a Protestant context.
It's a different matter being entirely tolerant of Catholics
and never mind non-Christians.
But once it's been kind of written into the Constitution,
then, you know, a bit like the Declaration of Independence,
you know, these are slow burners
that will burn their way through American history.
Yeah, that's right.
And disestablishment happens across the new United States
in those places that still have a church establishment
quite quickly afterwards.
Massachusetts is the last, I believe,
is the last state to disestablish its church.
So they hold the Puritan tradition clings on there

for a long time.

But that's also something that's deeply ingrained in their sense of being of English liberties.

That isn't, they wouldn't have regarded that as something that's entirely new.

They would have said, well, we've always had religious liberty, or we thought we had, and the American Revolution has given it an impetus and it's focused, you know, the Church of England and the church establishment was clearly associated and in place like Virginia, which had an established Anglican church associated with Tories and support for the king and so they were delegitimized.

Yeah, so there's that great thing right from Jefferson.

It does mean no injury for my neighbor to say there are 20 gods or no god.

It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.

And I guess only someone who's been through a very violent war could maybe have made that case.

Yeah, so Thomas Jefferson himself had not actually been through a violent war.

Now, of course, I've got war in France.

But yes, no, but I take your point.

But Jefferson's sort of performative secularism was not typical.

I mean, you know, most of the rest.

I mean, Jefferson did say he was a deist and Tom Paine, of course, was certainly performatively non-religious, but not the rest of them.

The rest of them were all very pious church attending Presbyterians or Congregationalists.

But Jefferson is a kind of sign of how far that can be pushed and that kind of brief window where it's possible to establish a new country on broadly enlightenment principles.

Yeah.

Tom, you love Jefferson, but I can tell from that way, Adam.

I don't love Jefferson.

The way that Adam uses the word performatively.

I mean, he's the rankest of hypocrites.

Oh, he is. He's a terrible one.

Right.

He ranks Tom with Bosie Douglas, John Lennon,
and Virginia Woolf as absolute enemies,
sworn foes of the rest of history
and some of the worst people who've ever lived.

Now.

I don't include John Lennon in that.

Before we move on to the future for the United States,
there is, of course, one other country in North America
that is created by these years, and that is Canada.

Is that too strong to say that this is the foundational moment
of Canada?

No.

I mean, Canada as an entity doesn't exist quite at this point,
but by definition, it exists because it's British North America,
and that's what people begin to refer to it,
it's British North America.

And everything that happens in British North America
is also happening in the United States,
and it's a base of relative religious freedom
and relatively high levels of political participation
and access to land and wars with indigenous people
and stories of exploitation.

What it doesn't have is slavery,
and it doesn't have a Republican constitution,
but it develops and flourishes and prospers,
and Canadian history begins at this moment.

So that's Canada, the United States.

So suddenly, the United States, 1783,
its independence has been recognized by Britain,
which must seem like an absolutely extraordinary moment.

Of course, they've thought of themselves as independent
since the mid-1770s,

but now they have it, de jure, as well as de facto.

But is the United States a nation at that point?

Surely it's just 13 different colonies
in an uneasy confederation.

In an uneasy confederation,
in a dangerous world
with no template that they can follow.

Well, ancient Rome, perhaps?

Well, they're looking to ancient Rome.

Some of them are even looking at Swiss republics
and the Dutch republic.

And there are historical precedents
that the ancient ones are the most relevant.
Because the assumption is at this point
in European society
that republics basically implode.
That's the assumption
that they're inherently unstable.
But they are unstable at first, aren't they?
They've got Shay's rebellion.
They've got lots of local issues unresolved.
They've got the issue of the Native Americans
on the frontier.
Who knows that the French might not come back,
the British might come back,
and they have no leadership, no capital,
no government, really, at this point.
I mean, effectively, the Articles of Confederation
are really more like a kind of peace treaty
among these 13 newly independent states
with no proper executive.
They theoretically have treaty-making power,
but they've got no tax-raising ability.
So it's a very shaky beginning
for the newly United States.
And then what, I mean, anybody who's seen
the musical Hamilton will know
that Alexander Hamilton, who we've not mentioned at all,
and James Madison, who I think we mentioned in passing,
that they are two of the key figures
in creating a kind of national government
and moving towards a constitution
and a much stronger executive.
A monarch, effectively.
An elected monarch.
What is it that provokes them to do that?
Why does everybody else having been anti-government
and anti-British power and all that stuff for so long,
why do they suddenly say,
okay, well, now we need to...
Is it fear? What is it?
Fundamentally, it is fear,
but there is effectively a revolution
in favor of government to use a phrase
that other historians have used.

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 350: The Triumph of George Washington (Part 4)

Well, it's their government, right?
It's not government that's being practiced
on the other side of the ocean.
It's their government and they can choose it.
That's exactly right.
And John Adams said around about the time
of the Declaration of Independence
that there's something odious
in a government a thousand leagues away.
And this whole movement is about,
yes, taking that control
and creating a government of our own.
Well, they have representation
and so now they can have taxation.
Yes, exactly.
They're continuing their needs about it.
I mean, without getting into the whole,
all the sort of the dotting the last
eyes and crossing the T's
of the constitution making,
there's a tension between
federalists, which is Hamilton,
Madison and Co.,
anti-federalists, which is Jefferson,
about whether or not there should be
a powerful state, whether there should be
a central government, whether you should
just let the states get on with it.
And would it be too strong to say that that runs
all that argument, which is happening
in the aftermath of the Treaty of Paris
and then to the adoption of the Constitution
in Philadelphia in 1787?
That runs all the way through American history
or is that, am I just being too simplistic
and back projecting
current American political debates
to the 18th century?
The nature of the debate changes obviously
over the generations, but that
fundamental tension is there right from
the beginning.
And there's huge unease
in opposition to the project

of creating a stronger central government. There's huge discomfort with the presidency in particular as a strong executive with prerogative powers that far exceed what George III had. A kind of model of executive, single executive based on a kind of steward conception of kingship, admittedly with the pretty massive caveat that the person is elected, rather than has any notion of being divinely appointed and being hereditary. But nevertheless, a model of the Constitution that he's like a kind of pre-glorious revolution English version of the English Constitution with a strong executive and a separately elected, separately selected legislature. But again, there is a slight hint of the Roman about it because you have the figure of Washington, this great general who has led his people, his fellow citizens and then he returns to his plow. I mean, that's the image of it. George III himself had said, if Washington does that then he is the greatest man in history, or words to that effect. And he does. He goes back to Mount Vernon and farms, or at least he gets his enslaved people to farm for him. So in a sense, when the Americans are thinking, you know, we want this kind of monarchical president, they can do that with a degree of confidence that they have the ideal candidate to hand, the figure of antique Roman virtue. Yes. And I think we probably have an emphasized Washington enough, actually, the figure

that Washington became through the war.
I mean, Dominic, you said, is this a nation? I mean, who knows whether it's you can argue about what makes a nation. Of course, historians spend a lot of time doing so. But if anything is made a nation, it's the experience of war and it's the figure of George Washington as the embodiment of the American cause with his honor and his integrity and his apparent ability to ever tell a lie. So that's a fascinating question. So that raises an interesting question about Washington. Are the Americans fortunate to have somebody like Washington who gives them a focal point, a hero, a figure around which the nation can coalesce? Or were they always going to produce somebody like that onto whom they could project those qualities? Do you think, Adam? I mean, should we, in other words, is Washington a creation of the kind of national imagination? Well, there's certainly something in that. There was evidently a yearning for some kind of replacement father figure. They got rid of one George, but fortunately they had another George ready to, in some respect, step into the shoes of the deposed king. They were fortunate that Washington was such a good figure on which to project their desires and hopes. But I think that question massively underplays the moral stature of Washington as a political leader, because if you think of the English Revolution, the American Revolution,

the French Revolution,
the English Revolution throws up Cromwell,
the French Revolution throws up Napoleon,
both of whom essentially
become dictatorial figures,
Washington doesn't, and that then
establishes the whole kind of tenor
of the American presidency, and therefore,
the character of
the United States not just as a Republic,
but in the very long run, a
democracy as well.

I strongly agree with that, Tom. I think
Washington was a great man, and I think
he probably is a figure that we
need to recognize more
for his role in all of these
events and in the creation of the
United States. Yes, I don't know who we is
in that sentence either.

Well, I guess, Adam, that you might be talking
about your academic peers,
the scholars who study
the American Revolution and
the origins of American history, because
of course this is now, you know, it's not
just a matter for scholars, is it? It's highly
contested political territory,
and the idea that Washington might be
criticized
more for owning slaves, say, than
for defeating the British, which would have been
kind of unheard of idea, maybe even
20 years ago, 30 years ago,
is now quite current in America.

Yes, I mean, at every
stage in this story, and in all the stories
that you two tell on your podcast, there is
huge contingency, right?
And that's what you two
do so well, is to tell a story
always with a kind of sense of alternative
possibilities, and that's what history is, and by
contingency, of course, we don't mean just sheer luck.

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 350: The Triumph of George Washington (Part 4)

We mean the kind of awareness of other options at every moment.

And George Washington's personality shaped the

key moments, shaped

that contingency in ways that

benefited the future stability

and, in some respects, the openness

and liberal freedom of the newly

created United States.

But can I ask, then, the corollary of that is that if the

stature of Washington is

kind of like the foundation stone

of the myth

of America's beginnings, and I don't use

myth in a pejorative sense. I mean, myth

is something that is powerful

and can be ennobling and inspiring,

that if that

foundation stone starts to

kind of be, you know, you start to shift

it, you tug at it, you kind of question

it, is that improving

Americans' understandings of their past

and, therefore, opening up new opportunities

for kind of making a better

state, or is it

by damaging the kind of

the origin myth, are you damaging

the coherence and the fabric of the

American Republic as it exists now? I mean,

that's a massive question, but it is one

that seems to shadow a lot

of the debate in contemporary America about

the American Revolution. There's a lot of

deep discomfort in the contemporary

United States with a story

of the national origins

which is built around great

men and great white men,

and great white men who many of whom

were the owners of, claimed to be the owners

of other human beings. Among whom was

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Washington himself, and Jefferson, who wrote the Declaration of Independence, yeah. And James Madison, who was the principal author of the Constitution, and Patrick Henry, who said, give me liberty or give me death. There's deep discomfort about that, and you can understand why. You can understand why, can't you? And in a way, the remarkable thing is that it's taken until this point in the 21st century for that kind of critique to have the popular purchase that it has now, and I think, you know, you mentioned in a previous episode, the New York Times 1619 project, and the fundamental value of the 1619 project is to challenge that old naming in a very direct way. And so it's directly and deliberately replacing 1776 with 1619 the data which unfree black people were landed in Virginia, and saying that that is the real origin moment of the United States rather than 1776. Of course they're both still operating within the same frame, which is that there has to be a moment of origin, and in both cases that 1776 or 1619 were in some teleological sense leading towards the creation of something called the United States. So last question, Adam for you, because you have been, I should say for those listeners who have listened to this over two weeks, you've been listening to this over two weeks but Adam has been doing this over basically the course of four hours in one go. Well, so have you two in fact. I haven't been dubbed in.

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 350: The Triumph of George Washington (Part 4)

We've just been calling up the questions to you.
It's not like Megan and Harris podcast, we're there with you.
We don't do the questions separately.
So Adam, where does the story of
the American Revolution go from here?
Because of course it's so contested at the moment.
People argue about precisely
these things that you've been talking about, but as you look
forward, how do you think people
I mean, do you think the patriotic narrative
that we see now when we go
to Boston, we do the Freedom Trail, or you go to
Mount Vernon, or you, you know, walk around
Washington DC and you see all the sites.
Do you think that will that will
effectively survive on, you know, it's
challenged in the New York Times
and by the Academy, but effectively
it's too
rooted now in the American imagination,
or do you think there will be more changes to come
in the 21st century?
I don't know, but I think
that if the American
Republic is going to survive
in something like its present form,
and of course it is, you know, the oldest
continuous, I mean, it's an incredibly old
country, the United States, the world's
oldest codified Constitution.
If it's going to
continue, then it needs its
origin myth, and that the origin myth
has always evolved. It's never a static
thing. And there
should be a way
and there is a way
of telling the story of the American
Revolution and the founding of the Republic
and those ringing
principles of the Declaration of Independence
and the
value of Republicanism and the
commitment to popular

participation in politics and
openness and the commitment
to being an asylum for mankind
and all of these things. There should be a way
of telling that story in a way that
is more inclusive
than has been the case over most of the last
two centuries.

And the reason why
I think the 1619 project
has been so challenging to
some of my academic
colleagues of an older
generation is
because of their fear
that by changing
the frame so dramatically to
focus on the question of race and
slavery, then everything else will go.
And there are certainly
academic colleagues of mine in the United
States on the left
and generally of a younger
generation who want to do that, who want
to throw out the whole concept
of the nation state and who see the United
States as fundamentally corrupted
and can't imagine any true
emancipation within the context
of the polity that was created in
1776 or 1787. There are
those people. And from the point of view
of us in Britain
one of the weird
corollaries of this narrative
that basically the
American colonists in the
War of Independence were fighting to keep
slavery is
to come to the British
Empire rather implausibly
as an agent of abolitionism
which in due course, of course it does
become but not at this point, right?

I mean it doesn't get British imperialism off the hook to say that actually they were the goodies in this because that's clearly not true. There are lots of ways in which the 1619 project can be and has been critiqued and in so far as the original 1619 articles suggested that defense of slavery was a principal reason for the American Revolution and that there was a deep anxiety in the part of American slave holders that the British Empire was turning to anti-slavery. That is a great exaggeration. I mean as we discuss, it was certainly true in the Carolinas and Virginia that plenty of slave holders were terrified at the prospect of the British using enslaved people against them. It is not true generally speaking to say the American Revolution was fought in defense of slavery. There are people who directly make the connection between the secession of the 13 American colonies in the 1770s and the secession of the southern states in 1861. That is hugely overdrawn in my opinion. Not least because while in the 1860s there was a big anti-slavery movement in the northern states and there were genuine reasons for southern slave holders to think that their security, their slave property would be undermined within the Union, that just wasn't true to anything like the same degree in the 1770s. There was an anti-slavery movement in Britain, there was an anti-slavery movement

in Philadelphia and in New England.
It was not one that was going to overwhelm
the slave holders
security had they remained within
the British Empire. What threatened
their slave property
was participating in rebellion.
Adam, we've worked
you hard enough I think.
That has been a tremendous performance.
Tom, I think a tour de force
is the time-honored expression, isn't it?
Yes, I would say
a Washingtonian campaign.
A Washingtonian campaign, you were
skulking in Valley Forge.
And not with your own teeth.
So if you've enjoyed Adam's performance
and you haven't already heard him,
Adam also did four
terrific episodes for us about the American Civil War
this time last year which you can find
on our various channels.
Adam, you have performed, I think you now
hold the record, actually
for the most appearances on the rest of history.
What an honour.
I don't know whether all your academic colleagues
would consider us an honour.
So don't advertise it to them.
But also, Dominic,
we must mention Adam's own podcast.
We must.
The Last Best Hope.
On which, in a recent, if listeners
go to The Last Best Hope,
they will hear another friend of this podcast,
Dan Jackson, explaining
how Geordies
shaped Southern American culture.
You stunned me.
So basically, everything in America,
it's all about Geordies.
Who'd have thought that Dan would come up with that?

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 350: The Triumph of George Washington (Part 4)

So, Adam, thank you very much.

Thank you to everybody for listening
and we will see you next time. Bye-bye.

Bye-bye.

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