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Colonial Controversy:
Examining the British Perspective on the American Revolution in Undergraduate American
Government Textbooks

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Introduction

According to conventional accounts of the American founding, the Sons of Liberty and other high-minded Patriots rallied Americans toward the noble goal of independence from the oppressive British crown in the late eighteenth century. This account is particularly evident in college level American government textbooks, which commonly introduce the origins of democracy in the United States as intimately tied to the cause that drove those who fought in the Revolution. Recent critical perspectives on the motivations of the Patriots have become increasingly common in the historical literature on this period, with significant attention being paid to the British perspective of the American Revolution. Looking at the Revolution from across the Atlantic, scholars have called attention to the elites who led the struggle, including the Sons of Liberty and many who would later be influential at the Constitutional Convention, and have charted their role in manipulating the masses in order to secure the political situation— independence—that would best advance their own material and political gains. Indeed, there is a long-standing emphasis on elite theory in the study of American politics, with some classic contributions, such as that of Charles A. Beard in *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, drawing attention to the vested interests of the founding fathers and the

entrenchment of those interests in constitutional design.

While it seems likely that most American government textbooks offer a critical perspective on the role of elites in U.S. politics, especially in the context of increasing concern over the role of money in contemporary politics, it is unclear whether or not they are as likely to connect this perspective to the British account of the Revolution. This paper proposes to analyze coverage of the Revolution in a wide sample of current American government textbooks through content analysis, identification of overall trends in coverage, as well as any specific reference to the British viewpoint. I will look for connections between this data and recent contributions on this viewpoint in both history and political science literature, with the goal of measuring how much consideration is currently being given to this scholarship in American Government college classrooms in the United States. In doing so, I draw on accounts of biased coverage of history in textbooks to determine what rubrics have been established for evaluating this medium, and examine whether or not such a critique is relevant to this particular case study.

The Introductory American Government College Course and Teaching the American Revolution

In his 1947 article, “The Introductory Course in Government,” Francis O. Wilcox first highlighted the importance of the American Government survey courses that are widely taught in colleges across the country, arguing that they serve to “meet the needs of the great mass of students on the campus who may soon become responsible citizens.”¹ Indeed, these courses often serve as the only opportunity college students in the United States have to study political institutions, actors, and ideas, and the subject matter can help foster a sense of civic engagement.

¹ Francis O. Wilcox, “The Introductory Course in Government,” *The American Political Science Review* 41, 3 (1947): 492-493.

However, the teaching of American Government can be highly subjective, and heavily dependent on the point of view held by the instructor and/or conveyed in the materials used for the course.

A select number of scholars have acknowledged the role that textbooks play in the American politics classroom, providing several relevant analyses of their coverage of course content.

In a recent example of such studies, Franke and Bagby emphasized the need to “know what they are taught in those textbooks and to think about how what they are taught may impact on their general view of citizenship.”² Attention to what is covered by political science textbooks has been driven not only by a concern for their ability to shape students’ views, but also their role in perpetuating biases in the discipline. In the 1970s, George Carey explored the coverage of alternative viewpoints in American Government textbooks, finding that “the authors all share and utilize what can be termed the standards and values of contemporary liberalism.”³ Noting that “these values do coincide with the prevailing orthodoxy of the profession,⁴” he highlighted the danger of limiting students to exposure to conventional accounts of politics.⁵ In a similar study, William C. Adams found little variation across a sample of 17 American Government textbooks, leading him to call for greater diversity in the perspectives being represented in them. Over two decades later, this concern was echoed in another survey conducted by political scientists, who found that “American government textbooks are more alike than they are different.”⁶ And in their analysis of 15 of these textbooks, Franke and Bagby identified three themes in scholarship on the founding era, including “an emphasis on economics and class, the revolution of ideas, and power politics,” but found that the latter was disproportionately

² Jim Franke and Laurie M. Johnson Bagby, “The American Founding, American Government Textbooks, and Civil Education,” *Journal of Political Science Education* 1, 2 (2005): 249.

³ Carey, “Introductory Textbooks to American Government,” 175.

⁴ Carey, “Introductory Textbooks to American Government,” 176.

⁵ Carey, “Introductory Textbooks to American Government,” 176.

⁶ Danie G. Stroup and William Garriott, “Teaching American Government: An alternative to Ogg and Ray,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 30 (1997): 73.

represented in their sample.⁷

These findings reflect a broader concern with selective biases in American college textbooks, with some scholars calling to expand the range of voices and viewpoints represented in them. The lack of diversity presented to students in American Government material suggests that many are receiving primarily conventional perspectives on the subject, which might be argued inhibits the development of critical thinking skills. Considering the central role that the Revolution plays in the teaching of American Government, especially through its predominant themes of democracy, liberty, and representation, it seems instructive to survey challenges to conventional accounts of this era, which necessarily include the British perspective, and examine the extent to which they have been captured in recent textbook editions.

Critical Perspectives on the American Revolution and the British Account

Critical perspectives on the motivations behind the Revolution have become increasingly common in the historical literature on this period, with significant attention being paid to the British perspective on its economic and political claims on the colonies. These critical perspectives are crucial and play a key role in American history and political science scholarship by allowing researchers to compare and contrast a multitude of different sources in an attempt to root out any forms of bias. Conventional accounts fail to address the British perspective and the rational motives behind the Proclamation of 1763, the Stamp Act, the Townshend Acts, and any other resolutions the Crown deemed necessary to maintain control over its colonial subjects. Authors like Matthew H. Spring, Michael Pearson, Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, Dora Mae Clark, and Robert Middlekauff offer critical British perspectives on the war for American

⁷Franke and Bagby, "The American Founding," 249.

Independence, portraying the struggles and strifes of Crown leadership and intervention operating in the rebellious North American colonies. For the purposes of this paper, the Critical British Perspective refers to the content analysis of information relating to the historical time period of the Revolution as viewed through the eyes of the British Crown. This view holds ideals of Parliamentary supremacy over its colonial subjects.

Since its earliest settlement, colonial North America, though not initially, thrived under a self-regulating form of government free of any direct rule from a foreign power. This was particularly evident through independent elections of colonial legislatures keen on regulating law and order in the early establishments based on the wishes of the majority. The first form of colonial legislature, and a critically important component of colonial self-rule, was the Virginia House of Burgesses established in 1619. Similarly, the Puritans in Massachusetts Bay exercised their own autonomy through town meetings, mainly at the metropolis church or chapel which was the main form of ministry throughout New England in the 17th century. In addition, the Mayflower Compact was the first contract signed by these Pilgrims escaping religious persecution symbolizing the first governing document for the Plymouth settlement. Indeed, early European colonization of North America reflects an era of autonomous self-rule which would later affect British attempts to control the colonies in the years prior to the Revolution.

The French and Indian War was the spark that set in motion rebellion throughout the colonies. After the devastating war between France and Britain in the dense wilderness of North America, Britain's treasury was all but depleted. Two signature complications arose from this lack of finances: the first was the Proclamation of 1763, which forbid colonists from settling past the Appalachian Mountains, and the second was the Sugar Act, which levied a tax on the colonists with the aim to share in the tax burden placed heavily on British subjects on the

mainland. It is important to note the disproportionate amount of tax between mainland Britain and her North American colonies. The French and Indian War also marked an end to Salutary Neglect, which outlined a laissez faire form of intrusive behavior in colonial affairs to maintain colonial obedience to Crown interests economically and politically. Following these British edicts, colonial mistrust and hatred swept across the continent, eventually leading to the American Revolution.

Among existing literature that advances a critical perspective on the rebellious American Revolution, Great Britain's position is defended as having maintained its authoritative supremacy over colonial subjects. In his book, *The Men Who Lost America*, Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy summarizes the British attitude towards its colonial subjects, arguing that "in defense of the authority of Parliament to govern America... it was essential to the maintenance of order and hierarchy that the colonies acknowledge the supreme authority of Parliament."⁸ Matthew Spring describes the colonies as nothing more than "a rebellious confederation of self governing states, not a centralized state on the European model."⁹ As a result, the colonies were not to be treated with the same respect as other centralized European nations, the colonists were inferior subjects. British Parliament defended their principles based on the belief that "the British Constitution proclaimed [the colonies] subordinate-or at least the king's' ministers thought it did."¹⁰ Parliament superiority to its colonial subjects was a belief shared among virtually all the British elite.

In her book, *British Opinion and the American Revolution*, Dora Mae Clark discusses the

⁸ Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2013), 22.

⁹ Matthew H. Spring, *With Zeal and with Bayonets Only: The British Army on Campaign in North America, 1775-1783* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press 2008), 5.

¹⁰ Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (New York: Oxford University Press 1982), 49.

British standpoint, displaying Great Britain's prowess in providing manufacturing materials and market materials to the colonies while the colonies, in turn, supplied the motherland with "necessaries and delicacies."¹¹ It was a common British attitude to look down on her overseas colonies; after all, if it wasn't for Crown support, it is questionable whether or not colonial settlements would have been able to survive the harsh conditions of the New World or, for that matter, successfully repel continual land hungry French encroachments in the Ohio Country, encroachments which at some point would lead to altercations. Thus, British rationale during the eighteenth century was centered around the preservation of the Empire. Clark further emphasizes this standpoint, arguing that "in every Empire a supreme legislative authority... must exist somewhere... otherwise it would be an Empire without government, without laws, and without power... the right of levying supplies on the people... is a right inherent in the Constitution, and inseparable from it: a right so essential to Government that it could not subsist without it."¹² Through British eyes, the preservation of a global empire required a complex system of taxes, and without them there would be no foundation for a centralized government. According to Britain, Parliament held supreme authority when deciding the course of taxation and the regulation of trade amongst its colonies. In *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789*, Robert Middlekauff expands on this by stating, "the right of Parliament to regulate trade... the empire had a center, England, and it had constituent parts, the colonies... to pull it together, superintend its commerce, and make decisions relating to matters of common concern were necessary."¹³ Parliament knew what was best for the Empire as a whole, granting it the supreme authority to regulate trade whenever necessary.

¹¹ Dora Mae Clark, *British Opinion and the American Revolution* (New York: Russell & Russell 1966), 272-273.

¹² Clark, *British Opinion and the American Revolution*, 259.

¹³ Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 126.

Also addressing the issue of tax on the colonial body politic, Clark discusses the American territory and its abilities to finance war efforts. On numerous occasions, Great Britain had relied on colonial legislatures to provide means of men and money to combat the, at the time, evergrowing French and Indian threats residing on the continent. Unfortunately, out of intercolonial jealousy, all means of self-support proved to be complete failures. No more would Britain remain dependent on colonial military support, and after the conclusion of the French and Indian War in 1763, Britain decided to deal with colonial military matters of defense on her own. Parliament concluded that colonists, “should help to pay for their own defense as well as for the war from which they had benefitted.”¹⁴ The French and Indian War was a war fought for the colonies, and Britain thought it only fair for the colonies to share the burden all British subjects on the mainland had to bear. Clark further elaborates that “although the frontier had its hardships, land was cheap, and success was the reward of toil... English country gentleman thought it only just for America to share expenses.”¹⁵ It was only fair that the colonists, in a land rich with natural resources, should share in the monetary burdens spent for a war caused by their pretentious excessive land appetites. Correspondingly, the colonies served as a market under Britain’s Imperial gaze, a market for the continent's vast abundance of raw materials and land ripe for exploitation driven by the economic and political interests of the English gentry.

British rationale behind their motives of intrusion towards colonial affairs in the 18th century marks a distinct division of ideologies across an ocean that separated an Empire from its subjects. New England merchants were the most outspoken towards the colonial commercial regulations concerning taxes, which proved to be the main issue at hand as well as the rallying cry for anti-British sentiments throughout the colonies. The British, however, believed that “the

¹⁴ Clark, *British Opinion and the American Revolution*, 127-128.

¹⁵ Clark, *British Opinion and the American Revolution*, 129.

burden should be shared with the colonies on the grounds that they had benefitted from the war [French and Indian War].”¹⁶ Surely, Crown leaders argued, it was only fair for the people who started a war to have to pay the price of its costly execution. Furthermore, concerning the tax on tea, “it was a luxury tax, a light duty that the colonies could easily afford.”¹⁷ Expanding on the luxury tax, East India Company tea actually sold for less in America in an attempt to resolve the tax issues within the colonies. This soon proved insufficient; the colonists weren’t fighting over a price, but a principle.¹⁸ Colonial revolutionary opinion was not driven by taxes, rather it was decreed by the principle ideas of Enlightenment thinkers such as the fundamental natural rights dictated by John Locke. Moreover, according to the British perspective, their rationale behind taxing the colonies was, “to pay for imperial defense and deployment.”¹⁹ The depleted British treasures after the costly French and Indian war left a huge tax burden on the Crown under these circumstances and as such they thought it prudent to refill their coffers through taxes intent on raising revenue. As stated earlier, it is only fair for the people who benefitted from the war to pay for it.

Indian problems in the colonies called for solutions, particularly colonial security which required military forces. The British rationalized that notion through a regulation of Indian trade which would help alleviate Indian pressures by, “preventing exploitation of the Indians by white traders, a fertile cause of conflict.”²⁰ Colonial encroachment of Indian lands was a main cause of hostility between the two races. An example of hostility was Pontiac’s rebellion, an Indian uprising that overpowered most British outposts on the colonial frontier. As a result, the Crown

¹⁶ O’Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 50.

¹⁷ O’Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 51.

¹⁸ Clark, *British Opinion and the American Revolution*, 74.

¹⁹ Clark, *British Opinion and the American Revolution*, 33.

²⁰ Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 52.

instituted the Proclamation of 1763, prohibiting any westward settlement past the proclamation line which ran the length of the Appalachian Mountains. After a depleted treasury from the French and Indian war, the British could not afford to finance any major military pacification of indigenous peoples in the colonies. According to Middlekauff, in the eyes of the colonists a standing army was not necessary after the French had been driven into Canada, “unless to be used to force them to yield to such oppressions as unconstitutional taxes.”²¹ By and large, taxes, governance, and security was the rationale Britain used to interfere in colonial affairs after the French and Indian war.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, Great Britain rejected the political rationale behind the colonial call to arms. According to King George III, his primary goal had been to “defend an order of monarchy, hierarchy, religious orthodoxy, and empire.”²² Uniquely, a common rallying cry among the Sons of Liberty was the ‘no taxation without representation’ slogan. Colonists were discontent with their lack of Parliamentary representation in order to defend their interests from governmental intrusion of their affairs regarding taxation, commerce, and foreign affairs. However, in response to the ‘no taxation without representation’ plea, critical perspectives argue that American colonists were, in fact, represented. This is known as virtual representation, wherein “the House of Commons represented not just the interest of the small group which elected them, but the interests of commoners everywhere.”²³ This particular parliamentary structure existed in order to meet the needs of all British subjects, regardless of social status. That does not imply social status failed to hold any political superiority, rather it was merely the ideology of the House of Commons and the House of Lords to voice the pleas of all English

²¹ Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 129.

²² O’Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 46.

²³ Clark, *British Opinion and the American Revolution*, 257.

subjects regarding overall British political policy. Nevertheless, British clergymen argued that just because everyone was not individually represented in Parliament, that did not make them a slave.²⁴ Moreover, the House of Commons dictated political action that benefitted Crown subjects as a whole; it did not grant special rights and privileges to one colony over the other. In other words, its rulings were for the benefit of the Empire as a whole while not focusing its efforts primarily towards a minority benefit. Parliamentary officers went so far as to mock colonist political activity stating that since their colonial subjects knew nothing of British politics, they should not bother concerning themselves in it.²⁵ In *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire*, Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy presents a very reasonable argument, asking why the British monarchy should have allowed individuals across a vast ocean to dictate British policy. According to this viewpoint, it is absurd to assume that a foreign policy that was so immense that it spanned the entire globe and had proven its might through the establishment of colonies and spheres of influence on virtually every continent would willingly be swayed by the opinions of a minute amount of discontent merchants in North America lamenting over very mundane tax regulations and elevated British intervention in colonial affairs.

It can be said the colonies in North America failed to understand their position as British subjects. Colonists viewed themselves as British citizens with the same rights and privileges as those on the mainland. As British citizens, those privileges come with a price: the right of Parliament to tax. Additionally, an explanation for the elevated British policies prior to the Revolution has a rational basis, grounded in the “reduction of English national debt and defense

²⁴ Clark, *British Opinion and the American Revolution*, 258.

²⁵ O’Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 174.

of the colonies.”²⁶ The heavy burdens placed on the Empire after the French and Indian War were devastating, leading to a heavy taxation of British citizens on the mainland. It was only right to tax the people who not only caused but benefitted from the war fought in the interests of the colonists. This notion is expressed under the “theory of Imperialism” which gives Parliament the right to tax and bring the colonies into submission for the sake of Empire.²⁷ At the time, most Crown officials supported this theory, as it outlined the power of the mother country and how it must be maintained regardless of the special interests of merchants or landowners. In other words, “to imperialists, the supremacy of parliament over the colonies was an end itself, not merely a means to secure trade for British merchants.”²⁸ The theory of Imperialism brings to light the British standpoint. When looking at the American Revolution through the British perspective, one must take into account the massive extent of the British Empire and how much regulation and maintenance it required. The American colonies were a minor microcosm Britain had to deal with when compared to her other outposts stretched far across the Caribbean and Asiatic regions.

Once the shots fired at Lexington and Concord were heard ‘round the world, the American Revolution ensued. Middlekauff argues that the prevailing assumption at the time was that the Americans “were... subordinate to Parliament and must be brought under control... on the emotions parents often feel over rebellious children. Like inexperienced children, the colonies had misbehaved and must be disciplined.”²⁹ These children were not regarded as colonial subjects. Instead, amongst British officials, it was a shared belief that, “a majority of Americans were loyal, and that the revolution was nothing more than a coup achieved by ‘the

²⁶ Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 129.

²⁷ Clark, *British Opinion and the American Revolution*, 208.

²⁸ Clark, *British Opinion and the American Revolution*, 181.

²⁹ Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 151.

intrigues of a few bold and criminal leaders'... an armed faction... who had usurped legal authority in an experiment that was likely to end in anarchy."³⁰ Indeed, the aftermath of the Revolution saw the implementation of the Articles of Confederation exercising very minimal federal power. Lacking any real authority, the Articles drove the colonies into disarray with an economic collapse and a social upheaval, most evident in the Whiskey Rebellion where a large body of farmers rebelled new taxation policies across the colonies enforced under the contemporary United States government to pay off the devastating debt procured from the costly war for independence. In fact after the Revolution, taxation had drastically increased under the United States compared to the minimal tax placed on the colonies by Britain. Most astutely put, O'Shaughnessy suggests that "the British regarded their opponents as criminals who were committing acts of rebellion and treason that did not entitle them to the usual conventions of war."³¹ These rebels were nothing more than a cancerous tumor that had to be expelled in order to reinstitute British authority. Accordingly, the Sons of Liberty were a radical organization whose ideals promoted the decentralization of an established state whose job encompassed regulating commerce, security, and stability among the colonies.

While the American standpoint on the Revolution portrays the British as a hostile foreign invader intent on undermining the fight for liberty, American literature on this period fails to address is the British desire for peace. The British were "especially idealistic about the possibilities of a negotiated settlement...[The goal was] showing 'the people of America that the Door was yet open for Reconciliation.'"³² British leadership did not want a prolonged war in North America, as it was apparent that the finances and manpower would prove to be too costly.

³⁰ O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 98.

³¹ O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 115.

³² O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 99.

Identically, Lord George Germain outlined the restoration of “civil government to replace martial law in the British-occupied territories in America.”³³ This is what proved to be difficult for British forces operating in North America. Similarly, O’Shaughnessy discusses British postwar plans for America by avoiding destructive methods of suppression which would antagonize the neutral populace against British control. Furthermore, Britain wanted to, “create the conditions necessary for a harmonious postwar reconstruction of civil government.”³⁴ The American colonies were considered brethren to Britain, as they shared similar customs, ancestry, and beliefs. Comparatively, the American Revolution is considered a civil war in itself, splitting the colonies between political ties: Tories and Patriots. British leadership knew that the key to subduing the populace was to win the hearts of the people. Leadership consistently doubted whether or not it was possible “to conquer the country... without having the affections of the people.”³⁵ Winning the hearts of the North American populace was a key goal of Royal forces. Britain’s goals encompassed the eradication of the rebellion and reestablishing commerce with the colonials through peaceful means. Despite their distance, colonial subjects were still considered Englishmen with equal rights and privileges similar to those on the motherland.

Indeed, prior to the outbreak of war in North America in 1776, Crown commanders had anticipated loyalist support, placing them into their military calculations. They hoped loyalist support would provide local geographical information of the land, fill the ranks of British regulars, and assist in policing the vast countryside. Many Crown Commanders had actually insisted on arming loyalist corps for policing districts under Parliamentary control.³⁶

Unbeknownst to them, loyalist support did not prove to be as effective as anticipated, forcing

³³ O’Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 192.

³⁴ O’Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 97-98.

³⁵ O’Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 220.

³⁶ O’Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 192.

Crown commanders to utilize British regulars for all military affairs/engagements. Crown commanders operating in North America further outlined their objectives in restoring royal authority by, “defeat[ing] and disperse[ing] the rebels’ conventional military forces; to encourage the populace to cease supporting Congress’s war effort, and even to transfer that support to the Crown; and to induce the rebel leadership to give up the armed struggle.”³⁷ That being said, Spring goes on to argue that “the Continental Army was the foremost obstacle to the restoration of British authority in the colonies.”³⁸ In like manner, restoration would prove to be the most difficult in North America. In his book, *Those Damned Rebels*, Michael Pearson discusses, in detail, three military campaigns: a Canadian force to expel rebels in the north, an army under General Howe to attack New York where Washington's army was situated, and lastly a contingent of troops to muster royal support in the south near the Carolinas.³⁹

In *Those Damned Rebels*, Pearson characterizes the British standpoint by defending Crown officers from their negative American ideology of incompetence, foolishness, and bumbling attributes often expressed through Britain's failure to maintain its colonies in North America. Pearson argues that this is simply an American ideology that started originally from “rebel propaganda and developed with time into legend.”⁴⁰ He goes on to discuss the achievements of Crown officers succeeding in very dire circumstances. An example of this can be found during the British march to Lexington and Concord, where “only a small handful of officers, mostly teenagers, stopped the panic stampede of British troops... and quickly forced nearly 700 terrified men to form ranks under intense rebel fire.”⁴¹ Most modern American

³⁷ Matthew H. Spring, *With Zeal and with Bayonets Only: The British Army on Campaign in North America, 1775-1783* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press 2008), 3.

³⁸ Spring, *With Zeal and with Bayonets Only*, 6.

³⁹ Michael Pearson, *Those Damned Rebels; The American Revolution as Seen through British Eyes* (New York: Putnam 1972), 148.

⁴⁰ Pearson, *Those Damned Rebels*, 8.

⁴¹ Pearson, *Those Damned Rebels*, 9.

literature on the Revolution expresses a tone of negativity when discussing Crown leaders, which is questionable when credible evidence suggests that they performed military tasks like any other military organization; every military has its good and bad leaders. The war for Independence, through the eyes of the British, was a war of ideology. As such, Crown commanders thought it best to utilize propaganda, “to persuade not only the enemy but public opinion everywhere... [their goal was to show] that the British were fighting a people in arms rather than a professional army.”⁴² Overall British viewpoints towards the American Revolution were mainly those towards suppressing a rebellion.

Royal loss of North America can be traced to five main generalizations that contributed to the failure of the Crown in maintaining her influence over the thirteen colonies. The first was the failure to disband the Continental army which represented the means for the rebellion. The Army stood as the only barrier between the British and total control of the New England and Middle colonies during the outbreak of the war. Had Crown forces acted with further aggressive behavior they could have dismantled the Continental Army and brought an early end to the war. The second reason behind the royal loss of North America was a failure of British leadership to successfully handle the colonial situation. Between a divided Parliament, concerning struggling to reconcile opinions on what to do with Britain's North American colonies and the inability of British generals operating on the American continent to successfully coordinate cooperative means of countering the rebellion, the American Revolution could have been easily quashed with a lessening of arrogance on Britain's behalf. A third reason is the inclusion of the French into the war. This alliance had brought massive military support to the colonial cause and provided a second front for Britain to reinforce as war ensued in Europe between the two colossal empires.

⁴² O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 135.

A fourth contributing factor for the British loss of its North American colonies was the unanticipated lack of loyalist support. Royal military plans had relied heavily on the use of loyal provincial forces to assist in filling military ranks and assistance in policing the American frontier. Finally, the fifth reason rests in the inability of Britain to successfully supply its forces with supplies and men.

Critical perspectives on the motivations behind the Revolution have become increasingly common in historical literature on this period, with significant attention being paid to the British perspective on its economic and political claims on the colonies. The critical perspective during the insurgency period in North America, insurgency describing the American Revolution, shows how the British upheld a hierarchic authoritative standpoint towards its colonies based on the rulings of Parliament. The military, economic, and political goals of Crown forces operating in North America reflects a sympathetic attitude towards peaceful negotiations sprinkled with an effective show of military strength to rally loyalist support and subdue any trace of rebel opinion. When defining their political actions, the British rationale defended the preservation of empire when commercial aspects came into play, such as taxes to pay for a war fought for the colonists. Colonial retaliation showed a distinct division of ideologies, both politically and economically that ultimately led to the split between the two nations. The war for American Independence can be compared to other military actions later in history such as the Vietnam War. Similarly, the United States situation in Indochina can be correlated with Britain's situation in eighteenth century North America. Both show how it is virtually impossible for a foreign nation to completely subdue a countryside without expending resources and placing a heavy financial strain on its economy. In British eyes, the American Revolution was nothing more than a rebellious uprising led by criminals, which had to be neutralized in the name of a long lasting

monarchy that would eventually grow to become one of the world's largest Empires in which the sun would never set. This paper attempts to evaluate the extent to which current American Government textbooks capture this perspective, analyzing the coverage of this time period in several editions widely used today.

Data and Analysis

My sample of twelve recently published American Government textbooks, across different publishers, included the following:

- Bardes, Barbera A., Mack C. Shelly II, and Steffan W. Schmidt. *American Government And Politics Today: The Essentials 2015-2016 Edition*. Boston: Cengage Learning, 2015.
- Connor, Karen O., Larry J. Sabato, and Alixandra B. Yanus. *American Government: Roots And Reform, 12e*. New York: Pearson, 2016.
- Harrison, Brigid, Jean Harris, and Michelle Deardorff. *American Democracy Now, 4th Edition*. New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2016.
- Jillson, Cal. *American Government, Eighth Edition*. Taylor & Francis, 2016.
- Kernell. Samuel, Gary C. Jacobson, Thaddeus B. Kousser, and Lynn Vavreck. *The Logic Of American Politics, Seventh Edition*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2016.
- Losco, Joseph, Ralph Baker. *American Government 2015-2016, Fourth Edition*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2015.
- Lowi, Theodore J., Benjamin Ginsberg, Kenneth A. Shepsle, and Stephen Ansolabehere. *American Government: Power and Purpose*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2014.
- Magleby, David B., Paul Charles Light, and Christine L. Nemacheck. *Government by The People*. New York: Pearson, 2013.

- Morone, James A. and Rogan Kersh. *By the People: Debating American Government*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Patterson, Thomas. *We The People*. McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2015.
- Volkomer, Walter E. *American Government, 14e*. Pearson, 2013.
- Wilson, James Q., John J. Dilulio, Jr., and Meena Bose. *American Government: Institutions and Policies*. Cengage Learning, 2013.

This sample covered different publishers, and were all available as online ebooks as well as in print format. While data about the popularity of these volumes was not available, the top-100 sales listings for the general subject of American Government on Amazon and the Patterson book, in earlier edition, was listed there. The other books selected represent the most popular publishers catering to the political science discipline and have several prominent scholars as authors.

Overall, my survey of these twelve textbooks revealed a significant contrast between the textbooks with positive accounts of the Revolution versus the ones that included the British perspective. Those that offered insight into this side of the Revolution had a greater level of analysis and number of sources cited, providing a more substantive account of this time period for its readers. The textbooks that were limited to a conventionally positive account, on the other hand, either listed events in chronological order or skimmed the events leading up to the Revolution with little to no analysis backing up their arguments. It is almost as if they assumed the reader already knew the information on the Revolution based on the conventional attitudes expressed by early childhood educators when discussing the American Revolution, including Washington as a figurehead, and an emphasis on the war efforts in terms of its generic principled goals of freedom, liberty, and democracy.

The textbook with the most substantive British perspective on the Revolution was *By the People: Debating American Government* by James A. Morone and Rogan Kersh. This is a relatively new addition to the offerings in this subject matter, currently on only the second edition of publication, and both authors are established scholars in the area of American political development. While their account of the Revolution is ultimately positive in that it outlines the underlying principles that the colonists fought for and connects them to their influence on the design and evolution of the U.S. political system, the authors play both sides fairly and do give credence to the British standpoint, noting that “across the sea, the English authorities were incredulous about the violence. All they could see were ungrateful colonists who refused to pay for their own protection.”⁴³

In the 13th edition of *American Government: Power and Purpose* by Theodore J. Lowi, Benjamin Ginsberg, Kenneth A. Shepsle, and Stephen Ansolabehere, and *The Logic of American Politics, Seventh Edition* by Samuel Kernell, I also found a balanced perspective on the Revolution, both delving into the valid reasoning behind a British tax on the American colonies, as well as the Boston Massacre and how the event was used by radicals to gain support to an anti-British sentiment. The authors also present the colonists as driven by goals other than pure political principle, noting that most of the nation’s Founders, though highly educated, were not political theorists. They were, rather, hard-headed and pragmatic in their commitments and activities. Furthermore, they acknowledge that often political ideas are the weapons developed by competing interests to further their own causes, suggesting that the New England merchants who cried ‘no taxation without representation’ cared more about lower taxes than expanded representation. Interestingly, this volume also advances a view of those fighting for

⁴³ James A. Monroe, and Rogan Kersh, *By the People: Debating American Government* (Oxford University Press 2014), 64.

independence as an elite, reflecting the scholarship reviewed above; it notes that “southern planters, the New England merchants, and the royal office holders and patent holders - groups that together made up the colonial elite - were able to maintain a political alliance that held in check the more radical forces representing shopkeepers, laborers, and small farmers... after 1750... British tax and trade policies split the colonial elite.”⁴⁴

A somewhat balanced perspective can be found in *American Government: Institutions and Policies*, but only to a minimal degree. The British perspective provided is limited to an acknowledgment of the hardships faced by the colonists after the Revolution, with the authors conceding that “the 11 years between the Declaration of Independence and the signing of the Constitution were years of turmoil, uncertainty, and fear.” Furthermore, “though Britain lost the war, they were still powerful in North America.”⁴⁵ An alternative outcome is also represented indirectly, with the observation that because most colonists were self-employed, rather few people would have benefitted financially by gaining independence from Britain.

The two related texts, *American Government* and *We The People*, provided more conventional accounts of the Revolution, limiting themselves to a defense of the colonists’ fight for independence based on the alleged injustices perpetrated by the Crown and noble political principle. It also appeared that these volumes included fewer references and shorter accounts of this time period, but this requires more methodical analysis and comparison to the other volumes included in the study. For example, in the Patterson volume, the author barely goes into detail about the underlying causes of the Revolution and sums it all up in four pages, lending the impression that it might provide less sophisticated account of the rationale behind these events.

⁴⁴ Theodore J. Lowi, Benjamin Ginsburg, Kenneth A. Shepsle, and Stephen Ansolabehere, *American Government: Power and Purpose* (W.W. Norton & Company 2014), 36.

⁴⁵ James Q Wilson, John J. Dilulio Jr., and Meena Bose, *American Government: Institutions and Policies* (Cengage Learning 2013) 23.

Other articles that throw their weight behind colonial insurrection are Magleby's *Government by The People*, and Jillson's *American Government*. Both offer sympathetic perspectives when discussing the colonial argument for rebellion during the American Revolution. These articles gave the impression that it was the right of the colonists to rebel against Crown Authority. An example of this is evident when discussing the growing cry for revolution, "the colonists became determined to fight the British to win their rights and liberties."⁴⁶ The authors also make light of the colonial self-rule that had existed in the centuries prior to a tightening of British rule in the colonies during the latter half of the 18th century. Both authors seek validation for the colonial break with England.

A neutral stance on the American Government is palpable in *American Government and Politics Today* written by Barbara A. Bardes, Mack C. Shelly, and Steffan W. Schmidt. *American Government: Roots and Reform, Twelfth Edition*, written by Karen O. Connor, Larry J. Sabato, and Alixandra B. Yanus also explores the neutrality during the Revolutionary period. These textbooks do a very good job at avoiding bias in their writing. They are the closest texts that I have read that takes into consideration both sides of the Revolution and retells history through that lens. "Almost all of the colonists agreed that the king ruled by divine right, but British monarchs allowed the colonists significant liberties in terms of self government, religious practices, and economic organization⁴⁷." The first part of O'Connors quote shows respect to British authority over the colonies but also rationalizes the break in relations between the mother country and her North American colonies. The articles provides valid give-and-take arguments making them the best articles for bias-free information on the events leading up to the American

⁴⁶ David B. Magleby, Paul Charles Light, Christine L. Nemacheck, *Government by The People* (New York: Pearson) 34.

⁴⁷ Karen O'Connor, Larry J. Sabato, Alixandra B. Yanus, *American Government: Roots and Reform, Twelfth Edition* (New York: Pearson 2016), 16.

Revolutionary War.

A very critical analysis of the American Revolution is seen in *American Democracy Now, 4th Edition* by Brigid Harrison, Jean Harris, and Michelle Deardorff. This text provides material that offers support for British rule over her colonies. The segment on Colonial America displays multiple accounts of bias supporting British rule over its American subjects. The authors note that “Parliament again reaffirmed its right to tax the colonists.” This is a prime example of acknowledgement of a British right to tax recalling events that conspired during the French and Indian War. The article goes on to address, “The Sons of Liberty and Samuel Adams-an expert at “spinning” a news story - condemned the event as ‘The Boston Massacre.’”⁴⁸ This statement blatantly accuses Sam Adams of writing bias news stories to deliberately spur anti-British sentiment amongst the colonies. The textbook is also riddled with sayings such as, “rebellious acts” and “radicals” portraying a pro-British attitude. The article implies Britain had a right to intervene in the colonies.

In *American Government Eighth Edition*, Cal Jillson discusses the American Revolution and his writing portrays minor bias in terms of his overall tone concerning the colonial insurrection. The article outlines the manner in which the British government exercised political authority over her North American colonies and through this means provides the reasoning behind colonial rebellion. “Imperial administrators in London chose not to involve themselves deeply in the political and economic affairs of the colonies.”⁴⁹ Through this lens, Jillson argues that because of light control over her colonies, the Crown lost whatever foothold had existed prior to the events leading up to rebellion in 1776. His tone remains fair in its neutrality, however

⁴⁸ Harrison, Brigid, Jean Harris, and Michelle Deardorff. *American Democracy Now, 4th Edition*. (New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2016), 37.

⁴⁹ Cal Jillson, *American Government, Eighth Edition* (Taylor & Francis 2016), 28.

certain sections make it sound as if the author supports American rebellion.

Joseph Losco and Ralph Baker display their support for British authority in *American Government 2015-2016, Fourth Edition*. This textbook displays Pro-British sentiment evident with its use of vocabulary throughout the writing. The section on the Founding Era uses language such as, “rebellious colonists” and “Boston radicals.” Describing the events following the growing rebellion within New England, the authors go on to say, “The British responded paternalistically that colonial interests were taken into consideration by members of Parliament even if colonists themselves did not have a direct say.”⁵⁰ Much attention was paid to the word: paternalistically. The authors recognized British claims to the colonies and clearly showed it in their writing.

Book Title	Critical British Perspective	Sympathetic Colonial Perspective	Neutral Perspective
<i>American Government and Politics Today: The Essentials</i>		X	
<i>American Government : Roots and Reform, Twelfth Edition</i>		X	
<i>American Democracy Now, Fourth Edition</i>	X		
<i>American Government, Eighth</i>			X

⁵⁰Joseph Losco and Ralph Baker, *American Government 2015-2016, Fourth Edition* (New York: McGraw-Hill 2015), 18.

<i>Edition</i>			
<i>The Logic of American Politics, Seventh Edition</i>		X	
<i>American Government, Fourth Edition</i>	X		
<i>American Government: Power and Purpose</i>	X		
<i>Government By The People</i>			X
<i>By the People: Debating American Government</i>		X	
<i>We The People</i>		X	
<i>American Government, Fourteenth Edition</i>			X
<i>American Government: Institutions and Policies</i>	X		

The above graph outlines exactly what I found when examining biases that emerged from my readings of each textbook. Of the twelve textbooks, five textbooks, the majority, held information written through the lens of colonial sympathetic authors. These authors understood the motives for rebellion and presented them to promote patriotism among its readers. The ideas

presented by these textbooks portrayed the British as oppressive and tyrannical. These ideas are currently being implemented on grade-level students in elementary, middle school, and high school exposing them to bias views on the American Revolution and its founding. The college level textbooks I analyzed that offered this Pro-American viewpoint only delved deeper into the rationale and the motives behind Revolution rather than stating facts that did occur. The bias remained the same as it expanded on what was already taught to the students in their studies during grade school learning.

Of the twelve college textbooks analyzed, three of them, representing the minority in this study, offered a mostly neutral viewpoint on the American Founding Era. These textbooks offered strictly factual information without any bias leaning to one side or the other evident in the writing. These textbooks are important for scholars seeking factual information, however they lack in any form of critical thinking. They provide no perspectives on the Revolution and do little to promote diversity of ideas.

Lastly, four of the twelve textbooks promote the Critical British perspective and offer bias that is generated towards promoting the Crown agenda in the North American colonies. These textbooks offer the most substantial amount of information on the material and provide substantial amounts of critical thinking on this topic. Indeed, these textbooks proclaim the colonists fight for independence as unjustifiable and can advance the argument of an Elite-driven revolution not centered on revolutionary ideals represented in the Constitution. Bias is definitely evident in these textbooks but their rationale is sound to reassure the readers that they have a position that is defensible.

Conclusion

In summary, my study yielded evidence that not all accounts of the Revolution in our sample of

American Government textbooks are created equal. There is a wide gap in coverage, with some of our sample including a critical perspective and arguments that educate their readers on the British side of the events that surrounded independence, and others excluding any mention. What I learned from analyzing the textbooks that offered insight into the British side of the Revolution had a greater level of analysis and number of sources cited, providing a more substantive account of this time period for its readers. The textbooks that were limited to a conventionally positive account, on the other hand, either listed events in chronological order or skimmed the events leading up to the Revolution with little to no analysis backing up their arguments.

As stated earlier in this article, presenting material to a population's young adults that promotes the ideals and values of the nation is important for creating patriotic sentiments drawing public opinion towards overall nationalism. However, too much nationalism can hinder any critical thinking skills college-level students should be exposing themselves to during their academic studies. This research is important in understanding the way material is presented to college level students. Furthermore, this paper exposes the decisive one-sided bias presented to college level students hindering any critical thinking skills students should be developing at the collegiate level further ostracizing diversity presented to students, diversity that should be encouraged rather than not granted credence at all. As political science and history scholars increasingly challenge conventional accounts of the Revolution in their work, it is important to continue to examine coverage of this time period in the texts that serve as many Americans' gateway to the subject.

About the author

George Kotlik is a junior student majoring in Political Science at Keuka College, a small private school in upstate New York. George was born and raised in the Finger Lakes region of New

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