

## **Comments on *The Radicalism of the American Revolution***

**By Phillip W. Weiss**

**In *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, Gordon S. Wood argues that based upon the amount of change that resulted from the American Revolution, the revolution was a radical event, It was radical precisely because of the all the changes that occurred as a result of the revolution. These changes produced a new society that broke with the past.**

**Wood is wrong.**

**First, the American Revolution was a war, not a rebellion. The goal of the American Revolution was political independence, not the mobilization of the masses or the extinction of whole classes of people. The cultural bonds between the colonies and the mother country were not at issue. That is, the American fighters were not repudiating their cultural heritage. Rather, they wanted political independence, a far narrower and more concrete goal. On that basis alone, the revolution was not radical.**

**Second, transformation is not the same as radicalism. Radicals, such as the French revolutionaries, want to throw away the old slate and replace it with a new one. The Americans, however, wanted to keep the old slate, readjust the size and shape of the frame and draw a new picture. Wood devotes his entire book to showing how the revolution released a new set of social and political forces. Driven by these new forces, a new country was formed which promoted property rights and created a market-driven economy, thus fostering the emergence of a middle class. The country was new; its political structure was new and new social relationships replaced the old. Yet, none of that was radical. The cultural underpinning remained. These changes were inextricably intertwined with the past, which provided a foundation for the new nation. The new country continued to speak English, continued to do business with its former mother country, continued to keep key features of English law (e.g., trial by jury, common law),**

and continued to practice Christian religions. None of this was radical. In France a small clique of fanatics grabbed power and used the government as a tool to remake an entire country by force; in the United States, a political system based on the principals of separation of powers and limited government emerged. There was no revolutionary cadre trying to impose an ideology. Instead, political parties developed.

Third, the American Revolution did not result in regicide or some other similar violent gesture marking the start of a reign of terror, which is an inevitable byproduct of radicalism. It is doubtful that George Washington would have ordered Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette or any other monarch executed. Under the American system, former monarchs would have been afforded the opportunity to become citizens. They could become anything they wanted in a society driven not by political or religious ideology but by market forces. Marie Antoinette probably would have been a sensation in New York City. Her memoirs probably would have become a best seller. As for her husband, the ex-king, perhaps a seat on the Stock Exchange might not have been out of the question. It is too bad that in Paris the Committee, obsessed with trying to stamp out every vestige of the so-called *Ancien Regime*, had other plans for them.

Fourth, unlike the French Revolution, the American Revolution did not produce a counter-revolution or produce a Napoleon.

The French Revolution represented a perversion of those ideals that drove the Americans to declare their independence. Both professed to want the same things: liberty, equality, happiness. But whereas the French fanatics used this slogan as a justification to vent their rage and commit state-sponsored murder, the Americans used it as part of a framework for developing a comprehensive political system.

