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Robert J. Allison, *The American Revolution: A Concise History*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011. Pp. xx, 106. ISBN 978-0-19-531295-9.

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In just ninety-four pages, Robert Allison¹ (Suffolk Univ.) narrates the development of Revolutionary America from the end of the French and Indian War in 1763 to Thomas Jefferson's inauguration as president in 1801. His primary focus is on the transformation of the governing process. "The story of individuals protecting their rights in a system where the majority governs," Allison asserts, "begins in the Revolution" (xvii).

In the aftermath of the French and Indian War, Great Britain was responsible for vast new lands in North America acquired from France and Spain. These, combined with its colonies along the Atlantic coast, dramatically increased the area of British control to nearly all the lands east of the Mississippi River. Moreover, the war had approximately doubled Britain's national debt. Indeed, more than half the nation's annual budget would be required to pay just the interest on that debt. To increase revenue, the British government reorganized its empire, which calamitously redefined its relationship with the North American colonies. In the 1760s and early 1770s, the British enacted measures that hurt the colonial economies and threatened the relative self-rule of the colonists, triggering protests, boycotts, riots, and eventual rebellion in 1775. Although Allison synthesizes sources on the imperial crisis from several schools of interpretation, he stresses the consensus among Americans and says little about the Revolutionary movement's internal divisions or the strife between loyalists and patriots in the pre-independence years.

Within the evolving Anglo-American conflict, a generation of leaders eloquently voiced the colonial protest. Most influential was Thomas Paine, who had experienced frustration and failure in jobs and a marriage in England before coming to America in 1774 with a letter of introduction from Benjamin Franklin. In January 1776, Paine published *Common Sense*, a paper attacking the principle of monarchy and urging the American colonists to declare their independence and establish republican governments. This cause, he predicted, would set an example for people around the globe—"We have it in our power to begin the world over again." By the end of the year, the pamphlet, printed in a half million copies, had "changed the political dynamic in America" (27).

On 2 July 1776, after a month-long debate, the Second Continental Congress voted for independence. To explain this decision to the world, the Congress two days later adopted Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. "Jefferson's aim ... was not to break new philosophical ground, but to prepare a platform on which everyone in Congress, and in the states they represented, could stand" (32). But the manifesto was also a moving defense of freedom that would inspire future generations throughout the world.

Allison traces the War for Independence through its three major phases in New England, the Middle States, and the South.² But he fails both to account for changes in British strategy during the war and to explore the strategic and logistical problems posed by the long trans-Atlantic passage and the vast extent of Colonial America. Furthermore, Great Britain's situation worsened when France recognized American independence and declared war on Britain in 1778. Allison's study would have benefited from a more detailed analysis of how French actions affected Britain's strategy. He does, however, correctly evaluate George

1. His previous work includes *The Crescent Obscured: The United States and the Muslim World, 1776-1815* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1995), *Stephen Decatur, American Naval Hero, 1779-1820* (Amherst: U Mass Pr, 2005), *A Short History of Boston and Revolutionary Sites of Greater Boston* (Beverly, MA: Commonwealth Editions, 2004/2005).

2. He states that in 1777 Gen. Horatio Gates, the hero of Saratoga, and Gen. Thomas Conway, an Irish-born French officer, "schemed to replace Washington; but Washington had enough allies in Congress, and by this time in the army itself, to hold his position" (51). Many historians have cast doubt on Gates's involvement in this alleged "Conway cabal": see, e.g., Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789* (NY: Macmillan, 1971) and Paul David Nelson, *General Horatio Gates: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: LSU Pr, 1976).

Washington's most important accomplishment during the war: "Keeping the army together was Washington's greatest triumph" (69).

In the immediate postwar era, significant problems stemmed from the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation government, which took effect in 1781: "All centered on one point ... the states had too much power" (76). Most critically, the national government could not levy the taxes needed to pay off the national debt, fund regular governmental expenses, protect infant American industries from foreign competition, guard the nation's frontiers, or defend its overseas trade.³ Consequently, nationalists pushed for a new and improved government. At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, they devised what the delegates called "a more perfect Union." Allison clearly underscores the explicit and potential powers of the new national government thus created. Overall, he notes, the Constitution both established an effective government within a viable federal system and fashioned a scheme of representation that could become more democratic.

After the ratification of the Constitution, the nationalists split over the legacy of the Revolution and promoted conflicting visions of America's future. The 1790s witnessed the emergence of America's first political party system, as Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans vied for power. By 1800, the Jeffersonian beliefs emerged as the dominant political creed. "Limited government resting on informed opinion," Allison observes, "was the touchstone of Jefferson's political faith and the faith of the American Revolution" (89). Indeed, the Jeffersonians raised issues crucial for later American history. Despite failing to end slavery, establish universal male suffrage, or promote change for women, they maintained that political equality was a vital component of republican government, thereby laying the basis for future reform.

Allison's brisk overview of the Revolutionary era will particularly benefit those who know little about the founding generation. Highlighting the evolution of the governing process, he explains how the Revolutionaries embraced republicanism and began to work out its full implications.⁴

3. Allison does not discuss Shays's Rebellion (1786-87), an armed uprising in Massachusetts against an increase in state taxes. Although militia ended the uprising, many leaders throughout the country concluded that a stronger national government was needed to prevent anarchy.

4. A comparable book is Gordon S. Wood's, *The American Revolution: A History* (NY: Modern Library, 2003). But Wood spends less time on the war than Allison, detailing instead constitution-making and America's Revolutionary society. He also provides more insightful discussion of the roots, values, and development of Revolutionary republicanism.