



Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves & the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia

Woody Holton

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In this provocative reinterpretation of one of the best-known events in American history, Woody Holton shows that when Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and other elite Virginians joined their peers from other colonies in declaring independence from Britain, they acted partly in response to grassroots rebellions against their own rule.

The Virginia gentry's efforts to shape London's imperial policy were thwarted by British merchants and by a coalition of Indian nations. In 1774, elite Virginians suspended trade with Britain in order to pressure Parliament and, at the same time, to save restive Virginia debtors from a terrible recession. The boycott and the growing imperial conflict led to rebellions by enslaved Virginians, Indians, and tobacco farmers. By the spring of 1776 the gentry believed the only way to regain control of the common people was to take Virginia out of the British Empire.

Forced Founders uses the new social history to shed light on a classic political question: why did the owners of vast plantations, viewed by many of their contemporaries as aristocrats, start a revolution? As Holton's fast-paced narrative unfolds, the old story of patriot versus loyalist becomes decidedly more complex.

Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves & the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia Details

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Margaret Carmel says

I was assigned this book for my American History class. I liked how it showed another perspective on the common story of the American Revolution. Lots of interesting stories and background information. It was quite dry, but overall the information was very valuable and changed how I view historical events that I thought I knew.

Roy Rogers says

fantastic book. glad i finally got to read it in its entirety.

largely succeeds in reviving and revising the "progressive" interpretation (social divisions matter!) of the origins of the american revolution. stresses the most important elements of the coming of the revolution: the multiplicity of causal factors, division among patriots and the contingency of the revolutionary saga.

holton's prose is clear, even if at moments his argument is ham-fisted.

Kris says

I would have given this book 5 stars if the subject were one I was more interested in and the book was a bit more clearly written (he's inconsistent in the way he presents his arguments; the way he deals with groups and presents them in relation to the gentry could have been organized better). However, it was great. The author doesn't treat colonists as one monolithic entity, nor does he separate them out merely by region (although in the Epilogue he does address some of those differences between Chesapeake and New England colonists). Instead, he looks very closely at colonists, and has an excellent class analysis, focusing on the different interests of the gentry and everyone else (Native Americans, slaves, small farmers, small landowners). He treats Native Americans and slaves as actual human beings with actual motives and desires. Does not treat elite as patriots who were expelling British tyranny, but rather a class who were looking out for their own best interests.

His basic argument is that though the gentry were the greatest benefactors of the American Revolution (and the ones who declared Independence), a large part of the reason why they chose to secede from Britain was because they were pushed to in their relations with Native Americans, slaves, and small farmers. "[...] the thesis of this book has been that the Independence movement was also powerfully influenced by British merchants and by three groups that today would be called grassroots: Indians, farmers, and slaves" (p. 206).

Lesley says

Great look at the revolutionary war in Virginia! New perspective that is thoroughly argued. It challenges the

traditional beliefs and creates a voice for grassroots as well as other forgotten players. Very interesting!

Kristal says

An okay book in general.

Phil Ford says

Dry, but very informative perspective of the politics of the Revolutionary War era from the common peoples point of view in Virginia. Holton has managed to create an important and previously unrepresented piece of history. The most intriguing section to me was about Lord Dunmore and his emancipation of the slaves if they fought for Britain and the "coincidental" stealing of the gunpowder from the magazine in Williamsburg. Holton provides alternative motive, more of a symbolic (and threatening) gesture to the colonists than what general history has taught us. Interesting.

Soxfan3376 says

One of the best books on the myriad of factors besides patriotism that motivated the American revolutionaries.

Kelly says

I just re-read this book for one of my classes. I don't usually take the time to put books like this up on this site, but I thought since I paid such close attention to it I would. I really love his chapter on the Dunmore Proclamation. Most importantly, I love how he de-mystifies the founding generation in American history. He shows that the Revolutionary generation were moved as much by their personal stake in the economy and their desire to preserve their social status as political ideas. My students are always loathe to admit the the founders were anything but direct descendants of John Locke and idealists. But, I always feel good showing them that this was hardly the case.

Amber says

Good progressive history of the coming of the American Revolution that signals the important (if unintended) impacts of groups of Native Americans, indebted colonists, and enslaved people in placing a wedge between colonial revolutionaries and British loyalists.

Andee Nero says

I thought this would be a book about Indians, poor whites and slaves, but it was really another book about

white male anxiety. Which is fine. It makes the argument easy to buy.

Joshua says

Masterful! Expands the neo-progressive take on the revolutionary period to Virginia.

Richard Subber says

Holton offers a backstory to the drive by Virginia's elite political leaders to support rebellion against England and the Declaration of Independence. He argues that Indians, slaves, merchants and small farmers, each in their own sphere, exerted influence on Washington, Jefferson and other Virginia leaders that helped to motivate their advocacy for independence.

Holton provides rich detail as he explores the obvious and not-so-obvious relationships of these interest groups, and as he describes the not wholly successful effort of the powerful landowners (in many cases, they were also land speculators) to achieve and expand their control of the factors of production: land, capital and labor.

Holton is at his most persuasive when he details circumstances in which the interests of the elites were more or less congruent with the interests of the generally disenfranchised but nevertheless potent subordinate classes who occupied their colonial world. This book supports and enlarges our understanding that the so-called Founding Fathers were not a monolithic group motivated simply by patriotic fervor for independence.

Read more at

<http://richardsubber.com/>

Mathew Powers says

I'm surprised this book is receiving such high marks. There are several contradictions within this book and all too often he changes his mind on the connections between inter-colonial aspects of the revolution. On the one hand, he is adamant about how things going on in Massachusetts do not apply to Virginia (which I agree with!). On the other hand, he asserts that the gentry in Virginia needing to seize control of their government against fears of greater control and power from the lower classes worked its way into an overall argument in the Continental Congress. In some ways, I agree with both those arguments, but if true, then maybe Virginia isn't as unique as his thesis suggests? In saying that, he's basically established that there were unique occurrences in each colony (and for that matter, each city, farm, etc -- the revolution was a myriad of unrest and upheaval!).

He often uses quotes to establish arguments that could be interpreted in many ways. For example, when he uses the quote in the opening of chapter 6, "For God's sake, declare the Colonies independent at once and save us from ruin", I found myself asking .. "how does this define his thesis that the Gentry class needed independence due to pressures from lower classes?". Maybe this statement could be attributed to several things. I agree, that there were several bottom up pressures, and I agree the Gentry class certainly wanted to arise to be leaders which the British refused to give them, and so on and so on. But again, how is this a Virginia thing? And how does *this* quote prove anything?

When he mentions the British refusal to allow Colonists to trade with the rest of the world, as a reaction to

the Colonial boycott of British goods, Holton asserts this hurt Virginia more. How? Tobacco was almost solely sold to the British (and British Empire).

My negativity is mostly reactionary to the comments on here. However, all in all, it's a good book to read and there is quite a bit of good mixed in with the bad. I do think it is good to see how Virginia is unique and one of my favorite things about the book is the ability to convey how real people were affected by non-importation and non-exportation acts (allowing people to fix debts by spending less on fashion, etc). I truly enjoyed his analysis of the black population in Virginia, the ever present threat of a black revolt, and Virginia's Royal Gov. Dunmore's threat to emancipate them congruent with his removal of ammunition access to whites. That fear of a black revolt helped prove to Gentry that they needed to seize control rather than let the British keep meddling in their affairs -- they wanted to maintain their power and economic control. Also, the section on move to create duties on slave trade and the battle between merchants and gentry/tobacco land owners was exceptional -- but also displays another example of Britain vs Colonies and *not* a purely bottom up crisis (but that is a small point, to say the least).

So, I give it three stars. I like the premise and there certainly are good points to be made. The big picture of the book is a success despite the missteps and contradictions within the book.

Jack says

Holton is awesome! He teaches at the University of South Carolina. Also, he's the brother of the wife of US Senator Kaine, and the son of former VA governor Linwood Holton. Neat stuff.

As a writer of history - a historian - he's a lot of fun. He took what I thought was the way things were, a story neatly laid out on a table, and he flipped the table in the air. As the title indicates, Holton argued that the Founders were not actually interested in revolting against Britain. They were "forced" into it by the less powerful. Slaves, debtors, and native Americans, possessed agency and pushed for a better life, and the unintended outcomes of their actions forced the founders to demand more action out of the British government. But when the government didn't respond satisfactorily, the founders led the charge for independence. A neat argument.

Asa says

reads difficult at times, important history missing from other narratives
