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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE:

**A LOOK AT DESTINY: THE INFLUENCE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT, THE GREAT
AWAKENING, AND THE FRONTIER UPON THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: A LOOK AT DESTINY: THE INFLUENCE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT, THE GREAT AWAKENING, AND THE FRONTIER UPON THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Author: LCDR Douglas A. Marshall, USN

Thesis: The Enlightenment, the Great Awakening, and the frontier were tremendously strong forces in influencing the American Revolution. Acting in concert, these forces made a Revolution inevitable.

Discussion: The Enlightenment directly influenced revolutionary thoughts. Ideas of natural rights, sensibility, and equality stemmed from enlightened thought. The Great Awakening and religious revivals of the mid-eighteenth century brought hope and salvation to the commoner. This evangelical style religion upset the formal churches and institutions and undermined existing church authority. The frontier offered vast, seemingly unlimited resources, a chance for adventurous Americans to survive

often harsh journeys and developed a character that is uniquely American.

Conclusion: The forces of the Enlightenment, the Great Awakening, and the frontier acted in concert to produce an environment in which Revolution was imminent.

Introduction.

During the January 29, 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush called upon Americans to embrace the outstanding ideas of freedom, equality, and liberty in support of the global war on terrorism. Throughout the speech the President passionately spoke of America's responsibility and privilege to fight freedom's fight, and that whatever the cost to defend America and freedom, America would pay. The President spoke of liberty and justice as being right, true, and unchanging for all people everywhere. Stating that no people on earth yearn to be oppressed, the President described the unique character of Americans. This character he said was comprised of honor, bravery, generosity, sacrifice, courage, compassion, strength and resolve.¹

It was by no simple coincidence that the President spoke of these American character traits. Nor was it a coincidence that in times of crisis, that these character traits was heralded as the foundation of America. Some two hundred twenty-five years after the Declaration of Independence, the American character, born out of the Revolution, is alive and well. From the Revolution arose

the strong American ideas of equality, concern for the ordinary person, and a dedication to freedom. The Revolution gave Americans a sense of nationhood and purpose, and it convinced Americans of their destiny to lead the world to liberty.² This destiny remains true today. Like no other time in the course of American history have so many ideas and influences converged within the hearts and minds of Americans to create an unstoppable event - the American Revolution. What were these powerful ideas and how did they lead to Revolution?

The mere mention of the American Revolution to most conjures up romantic images that are taught in American schools from grade school to college. Who can forget Patrick Henry's 'Give me Liberty or give me death' speech? Or, King George III of Britain being portrayed as a tyrant of German descent who could barely speak the language of the empire over which he ruled? Indeed, the Revolution raises memories of America's first recorded experiences with martyrdom and rebellion. Textbooks are alive with Crispus Attucks' death at the Boston massacre and therefore being the first martyr of the Revolution. There exist well-documented accounts of the Sons of Liberty dressed up

¹ "Presidential State of the Union Address", 29 January 2002, ABC News (LIVE coverage).

as Indians, in 1773, dumping tea into the Boston harbor in what all Americans know as the Boston Tea party. This is one of the earliest and most well known American rebellions. Other images include the anonymity of the fellow who started the War for Independence at Lexington. 'The shot heard around the world' symbolizes the absolute end of colonial patience for Britain, and more importantly, the beginning of the Revolutionary War. Standing beside these broad images are the figures and personalities of the Revolution.

The most renowned persons of the Revolution are Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, and Thomas Paine. These men are remembered for their brilliant, genius thought and for crafting the very documents that were instrumental in espousing and spreading the revolutionary words. Documents such as the 'Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom', the 'Declaration of Independence', the pamphlet 'Common Sense', and the 'Poor Richard's Almanac' were just some of the many documents used to promote rebellion. While Americans remember and identify with these Revolutionary thinkers, perhaps the most memorable persons of the Revolution are George Washington and Paul Revere. For although

² Gordon S. Wood's, The American Revolution: A History, (The Modern

embellished over the years, Washington's 'crossing of the Delaware river' and his tossing of a silver dollar [coin] from one side to the other; Revere's 'midnight ride' throughout the countryside of New England shouting 'the British [regulars] are coming', both serve as timeless testimony to the American spirit and character of the Revolution. In thinking and recalling these important persons, another concept of the Revolution arises.

The words *Revolutionary America* awaken ideas and thoughts among men. Words like *liberty, freedom, pursuit of happiness, and natural rights* are synonymous in American minds with the intellectual thought feeding the Revolution. The previous paragraphs demonstrate the many ways to view the forces influencing the American Revolution. Unfortunately, these commonly shared images and memories fail to address the true influences of the Revolution and are simply pieces to a larger puzzle. Closer research reveals that the confluence of three powerful ideas, the Enlightenment, the Great Awakening, and the frontier combined to spawn the American Revolution.³ To personalize

Library, New York, 2002), XIII.

³ Definitions. Enlightenment: The ideas and thought in America of intellectual freedom, religious freedom, personal freedom, social freedom, and political freedom so heavily influenced by the European enlightened thinkers like Rousseau, Vattel, Locke, Voltaire and Adam Smith.

Great Awakening: In colonial America between 1730 and 1750, a religious energy and experience swept the colonies. This 'new birth'

these concepts, Benjamin Franklin will be an example of the embodiment of Enlightened ideas, George Whitefield as the embodiment of Great Awakening ideas, and George Rogers Clark as the embodiment of frontier spirit. A composite of these three people is an American imbued with enlightened thought, religious tolerance, and the frontier spirit.

In order to understand the powerful affects of the Enlightenment, the Great Awakening, and the frontier, and to place them in proper context, a basic understanding of Revolutionary times is required.

Background.

Revolutionary Americans rid themselves of aristocracy, and of British royalty.⁴ They brought into question and in some instances destroyed established religious or local church beliefs. Revolutionaries fought against organizations and institutions that constrained the body and mind. In short, the Revolutionary reforms were both internal and external.

of religion was the beginning of evangelicalism. Great Awakening preachers were itinerants who preached the 'word', removed the minister as the divined, chosen one, and promised salvation to ordinary people through each person's direct relationship with God.

Frontier: The meeting point between civilization and savagery. Hard to define, for this paper, the frontier is considered as the land inland from the coastal high water mark to the Allegheny Mountains.

⁴ Gordon S. Wood's, The Radicalism of the American Revolution, (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1993), 70-80. Woods considers this tearing down of

Some one hundred sixty years after the Jamestown settlement was established, the colonial population was approximately 2.5 million people with an estimated 1.6 million living along the Atlantic coast.⁵ America was a land of abundant resources, great harbors, navigable rivers and lakes. Surveyors and the French and Indian Wars removed much of the mountain restriction on expansion. Americans were a diverse group of farmers, lawyers, teachers, clergy, city dwellers, country folk, and frontiersmen.⁶ Despite these similarities, colonies were diverse in three distinct ways: First, there were religious differences; second, there were natural boundaries; and finally, there were socio-economic issues.⁷

The religious differences throughout the colonies occurred as follows: middle colonies - Presbyterian; Pennsylvania - Quakers, Mennonites, German-Dutch reformists; Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina - Anglican; New England - Methodists (formerly Puritans) and Congregationalists. Second, while land companies sought expansion, the Allegheny and Appalachian mountains impeded movement west and formed the boundaries that separated

the kinship and patronage of the old colonial monarchical society as one-half of the 'radicalism' of the Revolution.

⁵ The Great Republic: A History of the American People, (Little Brown and Company, 1977), 246. Jamestown was established in 1607.

colonies. Rivers such as the Monongahela, the St. Lawrence, and the Potomac formed natural boundaries. Lastly, social and economic issues divided the colonies. While the northern colonies concentrated on trade and finished goods, the middle and southern colonies tended more towards agriculture and extraction of raw materials. Socially, there existed elites and a lower class consisting of indentured servants, slaves, and a debtor class. But, the farmer or producer of a finished good represented a new class between these classes: the middle class. It is within this new class, taking advantage of the resources and self-determination offered in America that a sense of pride and American uniqueness is born.⁸

For example, in the 1750s, approximately ninety percent of Pennsylvanians made their own clothes. This was done not only out of necessity, but also out of a pride afforded by the availability of raw materials coupled with the initiative to make goods. A poem appearing in a

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 80

⁸ For a detailed description of this, read J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's, Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America, (The New American Library of World Literature, INC, New York, 1963) Letter III 'What is an American?', 60-99. De Crevecoeur asks many rhetorical questions about the nature of being American; is it being a farmer, craftsman, tradesman, etc. De Crevecoeur concludes that American is all these. But, the American uniqueness is derived from being able to rise from servitude to master, from serf to landowner, and to be free. This metamorphosis, argues de Crevecoeur, created an American, who extinguished his European prejudices and sought new ways to capitalize on being an American.

Pennsylvania gazette in the 1750s clearly shows this new pride.

Young ladies in town and those that live around
Let a friend at this season advise you.
Since money's so scarce and times growing worse,
Strange things may soon hap and surprise you.
First then throw side your high topknot of pride,
Wear none but your country linen.
Of economy boast. Let your *pride* be the most
To show cloaths of your own make and spinning.⁹

Common quilts in the 1770s used the colors of *independent green, federal blue* and depicted scenes of *Burgoyne surrounded* and the *Washington quilt*.¹⁰ However strong this nationalism and common feeling was, still "inventing a nation entailed giving definition to the character of the people, identifying their compatible qualities and common understandings, [and] cultivating a sense of moral community."¹¹

⁹ Patsy and Myron Orlofsky's, Quilts in America, (Abbeville Press, 1974), 56.

¹⁰ Orlofsky, 57.

¹¹ Andrew Burstein's, Sentimental Democracy: the Evolution of America's Romantic Self-Image, (Hill and Wang, 1999), 3.

The first step in this direction for America's founding fathers was to embrace the ideas of the so-called Enlightenment.

Discussion.

For a variety of reasons, beyond the scope of this paper, the era known as the Enlightenment began in the late 1600s and continued through the 1700s in Europe. The Enlightenment consumed writers, thinkers, scientists, and clergy. The products of Enlightenment naturally flowed to Americans and permeated American minds.¹² But this was no accident. The visionary leaders of the Revolution, men like Jefferson, Madison, Franklin, and Paine, realized that to make a republic of lasting moral and social order, led by men of integrity and enlightened ideas, meant spreading the 'light' to the masses.¹³ It is simply not enough to state that the pervasiveness of Enlightenment literature and rhetoric inculcated American minds. Through a brief study of representative literature and four powerful, enlightened figures, Franklin, Jefferson, Reverend Mayhew,

¹² Ibid., 6.

¹³ Wood's, Radicalism..., 190-195.

and Paine, it will be shown how enlightened thought was delivered to the masses.¹⁴

American Enlightenment clearly profited from the writings of European authors. These authors agreed that in order to espouse virtue in public and to be benevolent, one had to be engaged using the heart as well as the mind.¹⁵ The British novelists Samuel Richardson (1740-50), Lawrence Sterne (1760) and the Scottish novelist MacKenzie (1770's) provided the foundation for sensibility and its understanding, especially among the middle class.

Enlightened European academicians, philosophers and scholars influence included John Locke's "Essay on Human Understanding" (1640). This essay focused on words like *sensation, feeling, and minds* and argued that all men could expect from their rulers the protection of the natural rights of life, liberty, and prosperity. Furthermore, Locke stated that if a monarch violated these natural rights, rebellion by the people was justified. Rousseau's, The Social Contract (1762), focused on relationships within a class society, on the laws of nations, and on the laws of nature as applied to

¹⁴ Reverend Jonathan Mayhew was the influential pastor of Boston's North Church.

¹⁵ Burstein, 11.

government.¹⁶ Montesquieu, in his "Spirit of the Laws" (1748), called for men to use their natural genius to act freely and with purpose.¹⁷ In The Wealth of Nations (1776), Adam Smith codified enlightened economics. Smith, a British economist, produced in this work a study of economics divorced from political science, jurisprudence and ethics. Smith's thesis, that capital was best employed for the production and distribution of wealth without government interference, that the government's role in economy should be laissez-faire, and that free trade must exist, all supported the American contempt towards British meddling into colonial economic affairs.¹⁸ Men like Franklin, Jefferson, Reverend Mayhew, and Paine took these enlightened ideas and spread them to all Americans.

Benjamin Franklin's "Plan of Conduct" (1726) recognized moral virtue..."that the yearnings of the heart must give force to real progress in public affairs."¹⁹ In an April 1745 letter to a Gentleman, Franklin described the efforts to date to establish a philosophical society in Philadelphia. The society's members were a physician, a botanist, a "mechanician", a geographer, and a general

¹⁶ Ray Billington et al, The Making of American Democracy: Readings and Documents, (Rinehart and Co. Inc, 1950), 58-60.

¹⁷ Burstein, 13.

¹⁸ Billington, 61.

¹⁹ Ibid, 12.

natural philosopher.²⁰ Franklin spread enlightened ideas through his Pennsylvania Gazette and the Poor Richard's Almanac. Benjamin Franklin's daily life, his scientific experimentation, his intellectual role as an Ambassador abroad and as a key member of the Constitutional Convention truly represented the Enlightened man.

Thomas Jefferson's ideas encompassed all aspects of Enlightenment. For intellectual freedom, Jefferson called for a system of public education to teach ordinary people. Promoting religious freedom, Jefferson wrote the "Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom. As a testament to personal freedom, Jefferson built his home, Monticello, in the sprawling hills of Albemarle, Virginia. At this home, Jefferson cared for his grandchildren, and he practiced intellectual freedom through inventions, architecture, literature, gardening, and art. For social freedom, Jefferson formed the Republican Party, which was based upon the belief that private happiness was the foundation for a stable government. Jefferson lauded the social freedom in America as one in which any dissenter was free to express his ideas, thus ensuring that opposition was heard. Finally, regarding political freedom, Jefferson's drafting

²⁰ Benjamin Franklin's, 'Letter to Cadwallender Colden, (personal papers of Cadwallander Colden, Library of Virginia, 1744).

of the Declaration of Independence produced a document of such a great spirit and tone as to mark the beginnings of self-government in America.²¹ Clearly, Jefferson promoted Enlightenment. In a very direct manner, so did Mayhew.

Reverend Jonathan Mayhew was the pastor of Boston's West church. In what is considered by many scholars to be his best sermon, in January 1750, Mayhew espoused natural rights, freedom of worship, freedom of politics, and freedom of trade. Mayhew denounced the authority of the King to rule over men and stated that only God possessed such a right and power. Mayhew advocated the rebellion against the King of England and concluded that rebellion was so much supported by God, that if one did not rebel, he would suffer damnation.²²

Aiding in the spread of Enlightenment ideas were Revolutionary media and pamphleteers. In Bailyn's, Ideological Origins of the American Revolution, he accounts for over four hundred such pamphlets, assigning great

²¹ Peterson, 8-20.

²² Billington, 65-66. For another example of a pastor directly espousing Enlightenment consider the Reverend Davies (pp. 40-41). In a 1755 Hanover Pennsylvania sermon to volunteers about to fight in the Indian Wars. Davie's sermon strongly suggested that the volunteers would prevail because the Indians' 'despicable violence' had caused them to ignore and abandon human nature. He also appeals to the sense of need and helping others. "Brave men without the compulsion of authority, without the prospect of gain, voluntarily associated in a company, to march over horrendous rocks and mountains, into a hideous wilderness, to succor their helpless fellow subjects and guard their country."

importance to their contents as a whole. Bailyn states that Enlightenment references were "Everywhere in pamphlets of Revolutionary America."²³ Thomas Paine's, 'Common Sense', (1776) was the best known and this pamphlet represented enlightened Revolutionary thought.

Over one hundred thousand copies of Paine's 'Common Sense' were printed and distributed in 1776. It was read by all classes and was particularly liked by the French who would recall its contents some years later. Paine's pamphlet rapidly became a moral and intellectual touchstone for Americans desirous of independence from Britain. Paine called for representative government. He wrote, "There is something exceedingly ridiculous in the composition of monarchy...the state of a king shuts him from the world, yet the business of a king requires him to know it thoroughly."²⁴ Paine called to question the legitimacy of the exalted King over men and stated that such a relation defies God and nature. Throughout 'Common Sense', Paine clearly promoted enlightened ideas, and the pamphlet's popularity enabled these ideas to be spread across the colonies.

²³ Bailyn, 27-31. Despite this, Bailyn argues that the Enlightenment was not wholly determinative in the Revolution.

²⁴ Thomas Paine's, Common Sense, (Barnes and Noble, INC, 1995), 6.

In summary, the discussion of Enlightenment demonstrates that eighteenth century American minds were bombarded with enlightened ideas across a full spectrum of human experience. Whether it was in the arts, literature, science, philosophy, law, or religion, Enlightenment saturated eighteenth century minds.

By no coincidence did the discussion about enlightened ideas involve religion. This is because the Enlightenment and the Great Awakening enjoyed a symbiotic, if not complementary relationship. The Great Awakening set in motion powerful forces that dissolved the pre-existing social order and monarchical, aristocratic authority and as such provided an important element to American identity.²⁵

During the 1730s through 1750s, America experienced what has come to be known as the Great Awakening. As many Americans came to America to escape religious persecution, the tenets of the Great Awakening were readily accepted by most people. As described earlier, the colonies were different in their religious convictions. But, seventeenth and eighteenth century Americans defined themselves in Godly terms and sought ministers and churches as a central,

²⁵ Stephen Kurtz and James Hutson, ed., Essays on the American Revolution, (University of North Carolina press, Chapel hill, 1973), 199-200.

focal point of daily community life.²⁶ For Britain, the only recognized, established church was the Anglican Church. To the Anglican Church, the various religions practiced in the colonies represented an 'irreligion'. The Church of England clearly saw such diversity as a loss of its control and influence over the colonies. An attempt to convert this was made in the early 1700s when Anglican clergy came to America in unprecedented numbers. But, what these clergy sought to control arguably was uncontrollable. One cannot view the religious impact of the eighteenth century as a stand-alone event, but rather one complementary with enlightened thought. The Great Awakening emerged from two simple questions: "Are you God's servant or merely a man among men? And, are you saved?"²⁷

The Great Awakening revived a whole set of attitudes that remained long after 1750. Characteristics of this movement included: evangelical style religion, morality derived from God not society, a fervent belief in the second coming of Christ, and a disdain for rationalism or social attitudes espoused by humans instead of God.²⁸ As is clear from these characteristics, the Great Awakening was a

²⁶ Darrett Rutman's, The Morning of America 1603-1789, (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971), 96.

²⁷ Darrett Rutman's, The Great Awakening Event and Exegesis, (John Wiley and Sons, 1970), 2.

²⁸ Ibid.

challenge to the existing social order of the King, royal governor, and aristocracy. With its simple doctrine of "sin and repentance, conversion and salvation" and the ability of one to talk directly to God without an intermediary, the Great Awakening severely weakened the authority of established ministers and formal churches.²⁹ Preachers throughout the colonies delivered the Awakened message in varying forms.

New England minister Samuel Wigglesworth (1730s) embraced a loving and gentle God who was easily served. Wigglesworth's evangelical style was that "preachers should preach to their congregations until Christ be formed in them."³⁰ In Northampton, Massachusetts Reverend Solomon Stodders preached of a God who promised equal access to Him for all persons.³¹ Perhaps for the first time, one was able to see a clear path to salvation as a partnership between God and man. The Pennsylvanian Reverend Gilbert Tennet (1737), in a sermon, spoke of happiness as the "state of grace and glory that is to be found through Christ."³² Jonathan Edwards of Northampton, Massachusetts in his 1736 sermon, 'The Surprising Work of God', spoke of Gods' work as bringing people "out of the darkness into marvelous

²⁹ Rutman, The Morning..., 105.

³⁰ Rutman, Great Awakening..., 15.

³¹ Ibid.

light...to set upon a rock with a new song of praise to God in their mouths."³³ Perhaps Edward's most remembered sermon was the 1741 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God'. In this sermon, Edwards portrayed man as a spider hanging by a single thread of web over the pit of Hell and that only God had control of whether the web broke and the spider fell to the devil or whether God spared the spider from eternal damnation. Clearly, all of these ministers were integral to spreading the Awakened message; however, none were as influential as the Reverend George Whitefield.

In the late 1730s, Whitefield, an evangelist from England's Methodist Movement, arrived on the American religious scene. Born in 1714, he was a man in his mid to late twenties.³⁴ Whitefield's mannerisms, his oratory skills, and his young, slim, fit appearance helped him to convey his powerful sermons. An account from a farmer having heard Whitefield preach in 1740 was that Whitefield had convinced him to believe and accept the Great Awakening's sin, repentance, conversion, and salvation themes.³⁵ Whitefield was instrumental in amalgamating the smaller Awakening preachers, discussed earlier, into a religious revivalism that swept through the colonies.

³² Ibid., 21.

³³ Ibid., 32.

³⁴ Rutman, The Morning..., 105.

Filled with youth and exuberance, Whitefield was constantly on the move visiting throughout the colonies from 1738 to 1739. This earned him the nickname the 'Great Itinerant'. In 1740, Whitefield made a seventy-three day journey from New England to the southern colonies, delivering one hundred thirty sermons. During this timeframe, Franklin heard one of Whitefield's sermons.³⁶

Franklin stated that Whitefield preached in fields or wherever he could. During the sermon, Franklin observed that Whitefield pleaded for money to help build an orphanage in Georgia. Since Georgia's population was mostly indentured servants, debtors, and slaves, there was a great 'calling' for an orphanage. Franklin disagreed with the preacher and thought that the orphanage should be built elsewhere and the children brought to it. Franklin had copper, silver, and gold money in his pockets. As the sermon progressed, Franklin deposited some coppers into the collection plate. A little later, he put in some silver. As Whitefield preached, Franklin felt so ashamed and was so mesmerized by the energetic man, that at sermon's end, Franklin's pockets were empty, gold and all.³⁷ Indeed, the Great Itinerant was a powerful motivator. So powerful that

³⁵ Rutman, Great Awakening..., 43.

³⁶ Ibid., 35.

³⁷ Ibid., 37.

the clergy of the 'established' churches felt threatened and attempted to squelch Awakening preachers.

In 1741, the North Hartford (Connecticut) Association of fifteen ministers compelled a law to be passed condemning itinerant preachers as counter to good, recognized religious order and banning itinerants from preaching.³⁸ According to Franklin, this action was too little, too late. Whitefield and itinerant preachers continued their sermons whenever and wherever people would hear them.

The Great Awakening was not limited to towns, cities or specific geographic areas. It crossed all levels of American society. In a few short years this religious revival marked a significant major shift from the inherited European theological beliefs. It put an end to the "ecclesiastical exclusiveness"³⁹ of the Anglican Church and other Church institutions. The Awakening was the birth of religious liberty for man and for all churches. As Paine stated in 'Common Sense', it was the will of God that there should be diversity of religious opinions among men. This diversity enabled the spread of Christian kindness. Paine

³⁸ Ibid., 52-53.

³⁹ Paul Goodman's, ed, Essays in American colonial History, (Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1967), 550. Ecclesiastical exclusiveness is a term used to describe the stature of church ministers and church

wrote, "I look on the various denominations among us to be like children of the same family, differing only in what is called their Christian names."⁴⁰ As can be seen, the Enlightened, Awakened Americans formed a potent force with which to reckon. As a French traveler stated in 1772, the poorest Delaware laborer "thinks himself entitled to deliver his sentiments in matters of religion or politics with as much freedom as the gentleman or scholar..."⁴¹

In summary, the Great Awakening destroyed the traditional church structures and opened up salvation and religious opportunity to all classes.⁴² The Great Awakening promoted religious pluralism and nourished the idea that all denominations were equally legitimate. The Great Awakening fostered the separation of the church from the state. In so doing, once a variety of church denominations established legitimacy, it was impossible for any one church to dominate and to claim special privileges. As a final result, diversity within communities could not be prevented.⁴³

officials, who claimed to be divinely chosen to profess the word of God, and to act as intermediary between the ordinary man and God.

⁴⁰ Paine, 52-53.

⁴¹ Rutman, The Morning..., 96.

⁴² Wood's, The American Revolution, 132-134.

⁴³ Dr. Jack Matthews' lecture notes on the Great Awakening. Dr. Matthews is a professor and associate Dean at the USMC Command and Staff College.

In conjunction with enlightened ideas, the Great Awakening enabled ordinary Americans to express their thoughts, values, and emotions in a manner unlike before. The American character was taking shape and what contributed to its development was the particular fascination, a state-of-mind, that Americans of the time had for the frontier.

The frontier, as defined earlier, consisted of a physical boundary; however, the frontier also had an intangible quality resulting from the clash between civilization and savagery. The frontier thus must be thought of as a form of society instead of a mere geographic area. The frontier society was formed from the collision of older, civilized, enlightened ideas with the abundance of free land and opportunity that existed in the frontier regions. As the older, civilized ideas were applied, a new environment was created that broke from old customs and embraced new ideals, which in turn created a new society. Once this new society was formed, the savagery passed on to the next frontier, and the new society became civilized. However, the new society retained enduring and distinguishable qualities derived from its survival of the frontier experience.⁴⁴ It was

⁴⁴ Turner, 4-6.

within this new society that an evolution occurred from which the American character was born. In order to best understand the relationship between the frontier and the Revolution, the frontier will be studied in the following areas: the allure and fascination for the frontier, the unique character of frontiersmen, the spread of democracy by the frontier, and a Revolutionary leader who embodied the frontier spirit, George Rogers Clark.

By the end of the French and Indian Wars in 1763, names like Ticonderoga, Duquesne, Toronto, and Detroit had become household words that intrigued men. "The unsettled parts of America possessed an allure tempered by the prospect of peril and unprofitability."⁴⁵ The fighting with the Indians provided "spectacular personal mis-fortunes which all Americans [then] had of necessity to accept as among the inevitable facts of life."⁴⁶ Within this harsh reality Americans sought to explore the frontier.

Aiding in the American understanding of the frontier was the Mitchell map of 1755.⁴⁷ Mitchell produced the map for the Board of Trade and it is credited by scholars for providing a tremendous impact upon people being able to

⁴⁵ Burstein, 43.

⁴⁶ Dale Van Every's, Forth to the Wilderness: the First American Frontier 1754-1774, William Morrow and Company, 1961), 6.

⁴⁷ Mitchell was a cartographer hired by land companies to explore and document the frontier.

envision the expanse of the territory.⁴⁸ An excellent cartographer, Mitchell made a map that depicted with relative accuracy the courses of the Mississippi, Ohio, and St. Lawrence rivers, the Great Lakes shoreline and the tributaries of the Floridas. Yet even with this map, it was difficult for colonists of the 1750s and early 1760s to imagine what this new territory looked like. Fur traders offered little information, as to avoid competition, soldiers returning from the Indian war hated the land they had seen, and Dr. Walker's description of what would later be called the Cumberland Gap, West Virginia and Kentucky was that it was no land worth having.⁴⁹ So what did this land 'look' like? It did not take long to realize that the French had been in this territory before and soon Americans were in possession of French descriptions translated into English.

Marquette wrote of a beautiful country where prairies overflowed with all forms of livestock, of beautiful lakes abundant with fish, and of a fertile Ohio River valley.⁵⁰ Hennepin wrote of a land rich with soil that would grow every type of crop, of an abundance and variety of fruit bearing trees, of vast meadows ready for

⁴⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 26.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 27.

the plow and seed, and of extensive mines of coal, slate, iron and copper.⁵¹

Within these descriptions, the frontier territory seemed ready for settlers. The frontier sparked the imaginations of colonists. Perhaps greater than any other factor, imagination had the most impact to motivate frontiersmen. Dale Van Every states that indeed the settlers of the West leapt into the new territory with an enthusiasm fueled by imagination. Simply worded, if these new adventurers fully realized what lie in store, these pioneers may have stopped not leapt.⁵²

A continual push to expand the frontier came from land companies like the Virginia Land Company and the Ohio Land Company. These companies were comprised of families with names of Washington, Lee, Carter, Mason, and Fairfax, who were landed families. Plantations and large land equated to more control of resources and people and was key to prestige and wealth. One should not misconstrue from this that key figures of the Revolution like George Washington, George Mason, and Richard Henry Lee, all of whom share these family names, were thoughtless or corrupt. Simply stated, their families were conducting business within the land companies as status quo.

⁵¹ Ibid., 28.

As expansion occurred, the true frontier character began to emerge. These settlers were made unpredictable, uncontrollable and unreasonable by over ten years of war and bloodshed. Arguably, the first time savage Indians were encountered, the settlers were either paralyzed in awe or retreated. The ones who were not killed gave hope to the other settlers that people could survive the Indians. In the next encounter there would be no paralysis, no retreat but there would be a fight.⁵³ These frontiersmen welcomed the hope of the new territory and accepted this promise over the risk.

These men were hardened and tough and were in their element in the wilderness. Capable of hunting, fishing, trapping, and making their own wears and goods, these frontiersmen, like portrayed by the character Natty Bumppo in James Fennimore Cooper's novels, were self-sufficient. The influx of redemptioners, indentured servants and laborers to the frontier added another dimension. These people were obstinate, "resentful of class, of legal or social authority and predisposed to any form of rebellion."⁵⁴

⁵² Ibid., 29.

⁵³ Ibid., 259.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 56.

These pioneers were against restraints and zealously sought freedom. This unique character was deemed by Turner as the "really American part of our history".⁵⁵ The frontier offered seemingly endless resources from which America could gain economic independence and the frontier provided a tough, harsh environment in which a unique American character was made.

Turner credits the frontier for creating a composite nationality for American people. As such, in the frontier, "immigrants were Americanized, liberated and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics."⁵⁶ The frontier was important as a "military training school, keeping alive the power of resistance to aggression, and developing the stalwart and rugged qualities of the frontiersmen."⁵⁷ But the frontier influence on the Revolution was more than the American character, the resources, the nationalism, the testing grounds for rebellion and aggression. The frontier promoted democracy.

Turner stated, that to the frontier, the American intellect owed its characteristics of inquisitiveness, strength, pragmatism, invention, restless and nervous

⁵⁵ Turner's, The Frontier in American History, (Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1962), 4.

⁵⁶ Turner, 22.

energy, individualism, and the exuberance and well being which were derived from freedom.⁵⁸

In 1676, Bacon's Rebellion occurred in Virginia. The root of its cause was that small landowners saw their power being usurped by wealthy landowners (land companies), who in turn controlled both the Church and government. In the later 1700s, Virginia Governor Spotswood would encounter a clash between frontiersmen, small landholders, immigrants, indentured servants and the wealthy, powerful land companies.⁵⁹ Throughout each colony, the line where the frontier met civilization created a unique democratic experiment. It pitted the pioneer against the wealthy, dominant classes of the coast.

Such contests generated petitions, public outcries, and a call for fairness and equality. A well-known example of this clash is Shay's Rebellion, which was the result of an ongoing struggle between New England agrarians and the coastal merchants and landholders.⁶⁰ Throughout these frontier struggles, the seeds were planted for a unique form of government. Another important aspect of this antagonism was the linkage to the Church. While beyond the scope of this paper, the Church's influence of the coastal, wealthy

⁵⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 248-249.

merchants and landholders created tremendous discontent within the frontier.⁶¹ Taken to its conclusion, the frontier directly influenced the democratic view of the separation of Church and State. This tenant of democracy, so influenced by the frontier, would become a key concept in the United States' Constitution.⁶²

In a letter to the committee of merchantmen in London 1766, George Mason succinctly tied together these democratic ideals with the American frontier. Mason questioned how the British, as 'sensible men' could think that Americans; who were not lacking in courage or genius; who knew of liberty first-hand; who lived in a country that doubled its population every twenty years, in an abundant country that provided necessity items and the 'conveniences and delicacies of life', how could the British have thought that for one second Americans would tolerate oppression.⁶³

The North Carolinian James Iredell, in describing the relationship of America as a British colony underscored the

⁶⁰ Ibid., 249.

⁶¹ The Church influence was spread by members of the church congregation. Particularly, the Anglican Church, with its longstanding, traditional ties to Britain, had a congregation of affluent colonists. Most of these members were merchants, wealthy landholders, politicians, and upper class. The line separating these people's interest from the church's was very fine, almost non-existent. Thus, as these Congregationalists transacted business, exploration, and trade, the church's interest and often direct guidance was involved. This caused great upset among commoners and frontiersmen.

⁶² Ibid., 114-116.

⁶³ Rutland, 70.

frontier's impact on democratic ideas. Although, this was not Iredell's intent, his observation still was true. [The Colonists] "Almost entirely raised a fine country from an uncultivated desert at their own expense, and flattered themselves each increasing year would add to their happiness, and improve their security."⁶⁴ Frontier expansion promoted democracy through common wills, self-preservation, social covenant, and basic law.⁶⁵

By 1776, Paine described the Frontier as "the mere land that is not occupied can be used to settle, to support people and the new American government."⁶⁶ An example of the embodiment of the frontier character, a mixture of enlightened ideas and savage impulse, was George Rogers Clark.

In 1778, Lieutenant Colonel Clark was twenty-six years old, stood six feet two inches tall, and he was tough. As skilled an orator as he was a marksman, Clark's organization and leadership of the Kentucky militia was

⁶⁴ Don Higginbotham's, War and Society in Revolutionary America: The Wider Dimensions of Conflict, (University of South Carolina press, 1988),

⁶⁵ Frederick Merk's, Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History A Reinterpretation, (Alfred A. Knopf Inc and Random House, 1963), 4-5.

⁶⁶ Paine, 50.

exemplary and had earned him the mission to defeat the British in the Mississippi, Wabash, and Ohio river area.⁶⁷

Clark drove his men with an unbridled passion. In turn, his men, already tough frontiersmen, became even tougher enabling Clark to defeat the British and to spread democracy to the frontier. Clark was a living, breathing example of the type of man created from the convergence of the wilderness with civilization. During the siege of Kahoskia, Clark professed to the French inhabitants that Americans would respect the French religious, personal, and intellectual freedoms, and on this basis, almost all of the indigenous French signed an oath of allegiance to America.⁶⁸ Clark wrote, "I took every step in my power to cause the people to feel the blessings enjoyed by an American citizen."⁶⁹ Clark's actions were indicative of the major impact that the frontier had on America.

In summary, whether enabling the American character to be developed, providing vast resources and raw materials, or promoting democracy, the strong, undeniable influence of the frontier is clear. Having discussed the Enlightenment, the Great Awakening and the Frontier in detail, it is

⁶⁷ Robert C. Albert's, "George Rogers Clark and the Winning of the Old Northwest", (National Park Service Office of Publications, Washington, DC, 1975), 2. For detailed information on Clark's expeditions into Kahoskia, Vincennes, and other sites in this region, this pamphlet is excellent.

readily apparent that each force was influential in multiple ways. But how did they tie together? And, more importantly how did the confluence of these ideas spawn the American Revolution?

Conclusion.

The American Revolution was indeed more than an organized rebellion. The Revolution was a response, emanating from the hearts and minds of Americans, to the sudden thrust of Britain invading everyday colonial life. In a 'Discourse Concerning unlimited Submission', Reverend Mayhew discredited the British monarchy and blamed the King for causing tyranny, for stifling the generosity and thoughts of men, and for ruining virtue and humanity.⁷⁰ But, the difference in how Americans reacted in 1765 versus how Americans may *not have* reacted in 1700 to British intervention was directly attributed to the influences of the Enlightenment, the Great Awakening, and the frontier experience. After almost one hundred fifty years of American colonial life with minimal British intervention, when the British attempted to control Americans in the 1760s, the British had to contend with this new American

⁶⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁷⁰ Burstein, 24-25.

character. Previous discussions have focused on the concepts of the Enlightenment, the Great Awakening, and the frontier, and have provided some examples of how people represented each concept. However, these people, the embodiments of the American character, were the critical links tying all three major concepts together.

The synergy created from the convergence of the Enlightenment, the Great Awakening, and the frontier had a profound effect on the hearts and minds of the colonists. While examples already discussed focused on leaders and great men who enabled the Revolution, the uniqueness of the times permitted ordinary people to contribute to the Revolutionary cause in their own best ways.

As an example, imagine a silversmith who resided in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1770. As a skilled craftsman, the British imposition of taxes and involvement in government directly affected his livelihood. Perhaps left to his own, this silversmith may have tolerated such obtrusiveness. However, as the silversmith closed up shop and headed to the tavern, news of the British actions at the Boston Massacre was shouted out by the town crier. At the tavern, the evening's discussion was not only about the massacre. The silversmith met a young surveyor who had just returned from the Susquehanna River valley area, and a

mutual friend who had fought with Colonel Washington in the 1750s frontier campaign joined the two. After an evening of discussing the massacre and the frontier, the silversmith headed home. Once home, he read a copy of the Virginia Gazette, which had been posted in his shop, earlier that day. The second page contained an insightful article from the well-respected George Mason. The article addressed natural rights and freedom from oppression. The next morning, the silversmith awoke and headed to the cobbler's shop to have his boots repaired. Along the way, an older man who was an itinerant preacher stood on a step of the courthouse. The preacher denounced the Anglican Church and offered salvation to each man, woman, and child as long as their relationship with God was wholesome, pure, and followed the Bible instead of adhering to some man-made church rules. On his way home, the silversmith pondered the last few day's occurrences. On his own volition, the silversmith stopped by the magazine and joined the militia. He offered up profits from his trade to assist in arming and clothing the militiamen and made his craftsman skills available to all who denounced tyranny. Although this example was fiction, what it depicted was not. It demonstrated how ordinary people were influenced daily by the forces of Enlightenment, the Great Awakening, and the

frontier, and how these people rose to embrace and support the Revolution.

In conclusion, the American Revolution was born from great and average men whose hearts and minds were imbued with a special spirit and character. The nature of this spirit and character was generated from the confluence of the Enlightenment, the Great Awakening, and the frontier. This is best exemplified with the statement from the Declaration of Independence that ties together portions of all three. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."⁷¹ These words are testament to the synergistic and unstoppable power of the forces of the Enlightenment, the Great Awakening, and the frontier. From these three profound influences spawned the genetic composition of an American. A person imbued with an acceptance for new ideas and thoughts (Enlightenment), with religious tolerance and a special, personal relationship to God (Great Awakening), and with an unbridled enthusiasm for adventure and wilderness (Frontier). It was within this American's being and fiber that the American Revolution was imminent.

⁷¹ Billington, et al, 534.

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