

The Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution by Robert G. Parkinson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016). Pp. 768. \$45.00.

In *The Common Cause*, Robert Parkinson takes on the challenge of explaining how thirteen separate colonies joined together to fight a war for independence. Parkinson persuasively demonstrates how colonial leaders effectively used an expanding newspaper network to disseminate stories of British cruelty. However, these stories, which depicted British agents as instigators of slave uprisings and Indian raids, also created a new nation with deep-seated racial anxieties.

For over a century, scholars have turned to newspapers to understand and explain the American Revolution. While previous authors have mined these sources repeatedly, Parkinson has unearthed new insights from these well-read documents by taking into account the printing process itself. As Parkinson notes, scholars have tended to focus on the ideological and political expositions of the front page and the advertisements for consumer goods on the back page at the expense of the “succinct paragraphs, the extracted accounts, [and] the mundane details” of the “interior of the newspaper, where the bulk of the actual news appeared” (14). As Parkinson explains, this seemingly odd placement of important news stories was a consequence of the eighteenth-century printing shop’s weekly workflow. Maximizing efficiency, printers prepared the expositions and advertisements of the outer pages first, and after these pages dried, they printed the timeliest news and information on the interior pages. Thus, it is necessary to recognize the important communicative role that the entire newspaper played in America’s creation.

Parkinson accomplishes this task by tracing how the burgeoning print industry helped the American colonies coalesce around a common cause that could overcome inter-colonial quarrels and differing interests. As Parkinson explains, the “bundles of weekly sheets that emerged from those few dozen print shops were as powerful as any cannons the colonists might deploy against the British army” (11). For Parkinson, newspapers played a central role in defining the common cause as patriotic leaders carefully crafted or selected messages for dissemination up and down the Atlantic Seaboard by a vast newspaper network that shared and reprinted stories.¹

Eighteenth-century publishers carefully selected excerpts from correspondence and anonymous writings that linked barbarous Indian behavior, slave insurrection, and Hessian atrocities to British instigation. In doing so, these newspapers helped patriot leaders vilify their own British cousins by “associating them with resistant slaves, hostile Indians, and rapacious foreign mercenaries” (20). These decisions would have a profound impact on American history for “the totality of these printed stories created a convincing interpretation: these groups [Indians and African Americans] opposed the nation, and they were not eligible for any of the benefits of American independence” (22). As Parkinson argues, “the nation-making, constitution-making side of the Revolution cannot be overlooked in our histories of the race-

¹ Ryan Cordell has recently detailed a similar process of news circulation taking place among 19th century newspaper printers. See Ryan Cordell, “Reprinting, Circulation, and the Network Author in Antebellum Newspapers,” *American Literary History* 27, no. 3 (September 1, 2015): 417–445.

making” for colonists achieved unification and forged a new nation at the expense of Indians and African Americans (22).

Whereas Woody Holton saw colonial elites being forced to declare independence in order to diffuse pressure from Indians and slaves, Parkinson details how these leaders used the fear of slave revolt and Indian violence to create the common cause necessary for a successful revolution.² In this way, Parkinson’s argument builds upon the work of Peter Silver on the coalition-building capacities of fear by expanding his geographic and topical focus beyond the middle colonies and Indians.³

The book is comprised of nine chronological chapters, two interludes, and three appendices that cover the creation of the common cause from the early 1770s through the 1780s. In chapter one, Parkinson uses two subscription books for the *Pennsylvania Journal* to demonstrate the reach of just one of the thirty-six different nodes that comprised the Revolutionary era newspaper network. By retracing the delivery routes of unsung patriots and identifying important subscribers, Parkinson recreates part of this eighteenth-century information web that was necessary to foster the common cause.

After establishing how the newspaper network functioned, Parkinson then examines how the messages contained within the news stories “galvanized support for the common cause” (76). The final eight chapters chronologically trace the discourse surrounding the proxy enemies (Indians, slaves, and foreign mercenaries) paying close attention to the military conflict itself. Newspapers continuously printed stories of the king sending “his emissaries to raise the savages of the wilderness to war” that caused “defenseless frontiers” to become “the seat of savage fury” (438). Supplementing the newspaper reports and essays with personal correspondence and other publications, Parkinson details how politicians and printers played a crucial part in maintaining public support for the war; military commanders and patriot authors frequently coordinated efforts to preserve the common cause.

As Parkinson demonstrates, the narrative fostering the common cause shifted in response to changing political and military developments. For example, politicians removed German mercenaries from the list of proxy enemies following the Battle of Trenton after the colonists no longer viewed them as a threat. In contrast, the negative discourse concerning African Americans and Indians continued as the war progressed and patriot leaders struggled to hold the union together in the face of military setbacks. To the disappointment of individuals such as Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens, their efforts to enlist black soldiers were continuously blocked. As Parkinson illustrates throughout the work, when leaders faced pressures to enlist the aid of slaves and Indians in the fight for liberty “unity trumped natural rights” (457).

While there is little to critique in this work, a more significant discussion of loyalists could have added an important dimension to understanding the effectiveness of these messages and networks. How does one account for the large number of individuals who read the same

² Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1999).

³ Peter Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).

stories of British atrocity as their neighbors but remained loyal to the crown? Additionally, while Parkinson briefly alludes to the work of other historians such as Bernard Bailyn and Timothy Breen, who focus on the ideology of the front pages and the commercial business of the back pages of newspapers, respectively, a more in-depth discussion of how this work complements and/or challenges other interpretations would be welcomed.⁴ How did each section of these newspapers work together to foster a common cause? A final critique of this work is its length. At over 750 pages, the sheer size of the book will limit its practicality in the classroom. Given the importance of Parkinson's argument, this book would be an excellent candidate for an abridged version tailored to an undergraduate audience.

Complicating our understanding of the American Revolution, this book is a must read for scholars of early America. The comprehensive appendices that detail the publication of newspapers during this period will be of particular interest to researchers. Individuals interested in information networks, printing, propaganda, and discourses surrounding race will also find this work informative. *The Common Cause* is a troubling reminder of how even our earliest political leaders wove white supremacy into the nation's fabric from its very beginning.

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⁴ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).