

Zoe Detsi-Diamanti

## **Robert S. Allison, The American Revolution: A Concise History**

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## Robert S. Allison, *The American Revolution: A Concise History*

- 1 Allison's well-written account of the American Revolution traces the essential transition of the United States from a group of isolated colonies to a new nation born in the aftermath of a successful revolution and guided by the principles of social and political liberalism. Although this volume does not represent the first attempt toward an analysis of the causes and consequences of the American Revolution, its significance lies in Allison's ability to combine broad coverage of the events of the Revolution with targeted commentary. In this book, Allison sets out to provide an understanding of the political decisions of the revolutionary period that were intended, on the one hand, to knit thirteen separate colonies together into a new nation and, on the other, to redefine the United States' position in international affairs. The book's opening chapter "The Revolution's Origins" sets the stage for an exploration of the varying causes that led to a gradual transformation in the mentality of the North American colonists and the realization of their collective potential. Allison draws the distinct profile of each one of the thirteen British colonies underlining their geographical locations as a powerful factor determining their commercial opportunities and agricultural development. With different economic systems, social structures, and with almost non-existent transportation network joining them, the colonies prospered simultaneously but independently, while in some cases there were intense conflicts over land and control of Indian trade. Even the imminent threat posed by the encroaching French could not smooth over their differences and particularities. Allison carefully delineates the changing attitude of the colonies toward mother-England as well as the emergence of a collective political consciousness due to Parliament's arbitrary attempts to regulate colonial trade and impose a series of revenue laws. He also succeeds in encapsulating the complexities of that historical moment into a framework of political resistance and ideological redefinition of the colonies' status and role in relation to the British Empire. Allison points to the concerted effort on the part of the printed media of the time to mobilize all citizens across the colonies regardless of class, gender, and race "to unite against the empire that sought to govern them" (15). In chapters two and three, "Rebellion in the Colonies" and "Independence," Allison continues his interpretive account of the spreading of a "rebellious contagion" in the colonies caused by the Parliament's "intolerable" acts and facilitated by a new rhetoric that justified the necessity of armed conflict. Allison's detailed discussion of military events and political decisions is consistently highlighted by the changing "political dynamic in America" (27) bringing the reader's attention to the arduous process of denouncing the old regime and instituting a republican form of government. The "self-evident" truths of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence opened the way for the establishment of a constitutional order that safeguarded liberty and the people's right to rebel against unjust political authority and corrupt rulers. The Declaration not only framed the political identity of the newly-born nation but also set forth an ideology of human rights and liberty that was meant to give the American revolutionary cause a universal resonance. However, as Allison pointedly argues, the spirit of republicanism that animated the Americans' political decisions and underlined the rhetorical promises of social regeneration concealed a number of glaring limitations especially when attempting to put theory to practice. For example, despite Abigail Adams' entreaty to her husband to "Remember the Ladies" (30) when framing the Constitution, women were left with no political rights. The slaves were also excluded from their "inalienable rights" as human beings while property-less white males were denied the right to vote. Allison touches upon the challenge that the complex task of declaring independence posed both in terms of transforming the colonies into a nation and blurring the paradoxical nature of republicanism which, on the one hand, promoted the pursuit of individual happiness and, on the other, asserted the essential need for self-denying communal responsibility. Chapter four, "War," provides a detailed description of

the armed conflict, the American defeats and victories, the contribution of women to the war of independence, the Franco-American alliance, and the emergence of George Washington as war hero.

Allison closes his account of the American Revolution with a chapter entitled “Was America Different,” posing the question of whether Americans had it in their power to start the world anew, as Paine had forcefully asserted, of whether the country would be different from every other nation in the world. Allison focuses on “religious diversity and government institutions” (74) as distinct features that flourished in the process of nation-making. Both were inextricably linked to the wider tendency to reform the American political and social system based on republican principles. Fundamental to American thought was the urge to protect the people from legislative tyranny and, at the same time, ensure that the power of the people would not degenerate into anarchy, while who “we, the people” actually involved was vague and open to interpretation. The status of the slaves within the American republic remained an issue of heated debate while the Native Americans were blatantly excluded from the body politic. Although the Declaration of Independence had provided the ideological basis of the new American political thought, as the new nation was transforming itself into an industrial power, the essential inconsistencies of republicanism were difficult to conceal. Allison provides a brief analysis of the complexity of the early national politics – especially after the events of the French revolution – that soon led to the emergence of the two rival political parties, the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans, whose differing visions of the nation’s destiny were becoming increasingly vehement.

In conclusion, Allison’s is a recommendable book, of interest to scholars of American studies and accessible to the general but interested public. A study of the American Revolution is always timely as it offers useful insight into the core values that shaped the American political profile as well as their continued impact on the nation’s rhetorical strategies and political practices throughout the years. In my mind, Allison’s book could be used as textbook in courses on early American history and politics. The book’s brief but lucid approach to the American Revolution marks a wide space for further exploration and more in-depth research into the period’s political antagonisms, the discrepancies between the political ideology of republicanism and the exclusionary practices of the new nation, the social conflicts, and tensions.

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### **References**

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