“The Unpleasing Part of the Drama”: Fear, Devastation, and the Civilian Experience of the Revolutionary War

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Mercy Otis Warren wrote one of the earliest histories of the American Revolution. Although Great Britain had threatened “terror, servitude, or desolation, to resisting millions” she wrote, “the mind now willingly draws a veil over the unpleasing part of the drama, and indulges the imagination in future prospects of peace and felicity.” Many historians of this conflict, indeed, have similarly obscured the terrifying nature of the Revolutionary War. Dubbed a “limited war” in the midst of the “Age of Reason,” the War for American Independence is said to occupy a relatively gentle lull between the horrors of the Thirty Years War and the French Revolution. Furthermore, the Continental Army came to represent new ideals of voluntarism, fearlessness, and restraint in the hopes of setting a positive example for the world. Hardly a tale of terror, the Americans’ own narrative of the Revolution rests upon a carefully crafted legacy of bravery and heroism.1

The American Revolution involved several types of conflict: it was a brutal partisan civil war, an anti-imperial uprising, an eighteenth-century “limited war” of siege, pitched battles, and naval maneuvers, and an “unlimited” extirpative imperial war, depending on the time and place. Faced with a mixed populace of staunch Whigs, outright Loyalists, and reluctant neutrals, America’s Revolutionary leaders hoped to inspire their neighbors to feats of valor and encouraged them to face the attendant hardships with stoicism. For

reasons that were practical as well as idealistic, they enjoined their army to show restraint – rather than inspire fear – among white soldiers and noncombatants. These leaders also sought to maintain their local dominance and expand the zone of white settlement into Indian lands. Patriotic Americans disclaimed fear – and encouraged a fearless ideal – in the service of their political, ideological, and emotionological goals. By drawing a veil over fear, however, they made it more difficult to contend with the real fears that the Revolution unleashed across the American continent.

Yet fear stalked the Revolution. By the eighteenth century, Americans appreciated that fear might grow out of misunderstandings or subjective interpretation of an opponent’s motives. It grew from passion rather than reason, and therefore it might need careful management. Reasonable fears might give way to panic, or paralytic timidity, and these in turn might undermine rational thinking, decisive action, and political unity. Horror was also inherent in warfare. Excessive violence – the most frightful kind – might be beyond the broadly accepted “rules of war,” but these rules were not always obeyed, and white Americans defined Native Americans (for instance) as being outside the sphere that those rules governed.

Revolutionary War soldiers on both sides suffered and died from privation, disease, injury, and death at the business end of ordnance, small arms, and edged weaponry, as did civilians. Noncombatants were raped, assaulted, and murdered. Soldiers, sailors, robbers, and saboteurs destroyed, plundered, and appropriated property, while authorities confiscated civilian buildings.

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