



The American Revolution and the Politics of Liberty

Robert H. Webking

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In recent years historians of the American Revolution have become increasingly convinced that political ideas, rather than material interests, were what ultimately led American colonists to fight for independence from Great Britain. During the years preceding the Revolution, Americans explained their resistance to British rule in principled terms. They understood liberty to be something real, valuable, and seriously threatened by British actions that were not merely impolitic but fundamentally unjust. American statesmen contended that certain basic principles had to rule governments, and they developed careful, complex arguments to persuade others, in the colonies and in Britain, that the British government was violating these principles to an extent that prudent, well-informed citizens could not allow.

The American Revolution and the Politics of Liberty is a systematic account of the political thought of the leaders of the American Revolution. In his first six chapters, Robert H. Webking analyzes in turn the ideas of James Otis, Patrick Henry, John Dickinson, Samuel Adams, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. Webking examines the political contributions of each of these men and explicates the assumptions and implications of their arguments against the British. He explains their ideas about the goals of American politics, the methods that ought to be used to reach those goals, and the circumstances that would make revolution just and prudent. In the ensuing chapters Webking presents an overview of the political thought behind the American Revolution based on his analysis of these six political leaders. He addresses the average colonial American's level of political sophistication, the American conception of liberty and its importance, and the American perception of the British threat to that liberty.

The thinkers that Webking studies are recognized now, as they were in their time, as the major figures in American Revolutionary thought. The principles that they discussed, refined, and implemented continue to serve as the foundation for American government. The American Revolution and the Politics of Liberty offers a complete and sophisticated understanding of the contribution these leaders made to American politics.

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