The shot heard round the world

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On April 19, 1775, 250 years ago today, the first battles of the American Revolution took place at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. The day of fighting, itself the outcome of a gathering revolutionary crisis, presaged the outcome of the war: the victory of the revolution over what was then the world's greatest power, Great Britain, and the establishment of the world's first major modern democratic republic.

By the spring of 1775, the upheaval in the British North American colonies had reached an advanced stage, especially in Massachusetts, where "the flames of sedition had spread universally throughout the country beyond conception," in the words of Thomas Gage, the Commander-in-Chief of British North America and the recently appointed Governor of the Province of Massachusetts Bay.

On April 14, 1775, General Gage received his orders to extinguish those "flames of sedition" directly from Lord Dartmouth, secretary of the state for the colonies in the government of Prime Minister Lord North. "Seize and destroy all military stores," Dartmouth wrote, and "arrest the principal actors." Gage was told to put down the colonials lest their rebellion mature to "a riper state."

The British plan of attack depended on surprise. Gage ferried 21 companies, comprising 700 soldiers in all, across the Charles River and away from their Boston garrison in the dark night of April 19. At midnight the reassembled light infantry and grenadiers began their march from just east of Cambridge toward Concord, where intelligence had indicated that two leaders of the revolution in Massachusetts, Sam Adams and John Hancock, could be found. The pair would be arrested and likely deported to face trial for sedition in Britain. Weaponry collected by colonial militia was also to be seized and destroyed.

The British had their spies, but Gage was soon to discover—as so many other occupying armies have learned over the years—that the revolution had eyes and ears of its own. The patriots were informed of the movement of the British soldiers before they had even started, and, famously, Paul Revere was dispatched on his "midnight ride" to alert the countryside and to warn Adams and Hancock, who reluctantly left Concord ahead of the British forces under the command of Colonel Francis Smith and Major John Pitcairn.

The alarm had been raised. Throughout their march to Lexington, writes historian Merrill Jensen, "the British had [been] accompanied by the ringing of church bells, the firing of alarm guns, the beating of drums, and in sight of burning beacons." By the time the redcoats arrived in Lexington, still before first light, they found waiting for them 80 "Minutemen"—so-called because these Massachusetts militia rank and file would be ready to muster in a minute's notice on word of the approach of the redcoats, as the colonials called the British regulars. The militia commander, Captain John Parker, recognized the superiority of the British forces and ordered his men to step aside on Pitcairn's order.

At that moment, someone—it was never determined who—fired a shot at Lexington Green. Discipline broke in the British ranks, who opened fire on the colonials. When the shooting stopped, eight colonials lay dead and dying, the first to find "patriot graves" among tens of thousands that would follow in the eight years, four months and 15 days of fighting that culminated in the Treaty of Paris and the independence of the United States. (Counting for deaths as a share of the population, the American Revolution was the country's second bloodiest after the Civil War and its longest until Vietnam.)

Having swept aside Parker's men, the British advanced on Concord, arriving at 7:00 a.m. Finding the town deserted of rebel soldiers, the occupiers started a bonfire to torch munitions. Patriot militia in the hills nearby believed the British intended to burn the town, and descended, engaging in a firefight at North Bridge that killed three British soldiers and two colonial militiamen. Sensing the danger, Colonel Smith at noon ordered retreat back to Boston. A mile from Concord, at Miriam's Corner, his men came under fire from a new wave of militia.

Proceeding back to Lexington, where the day's fighting had begun, Pitcairn's exhausted troops were joined by an even larger relief force of 1,400 under the command of General Lord Hugh Percy, and the evacuation continued on the road back to Boston. The combined British force of some 2,000 faced constant fire from militia shooting from behind stone fences and barns. It is estimated that roughly 4,000 New Englanders joined in this guerrilla fighting. By the time the British made it back to Boston, 273 soldiers had been killed or wounded, and 26 had gone missing. The Americans suffered 95 dead or injured in the day's fighting.

In the days that followed, Minutemen poured in toward Boston from throughout New England. They coalesced into the first army of the revolution, laying siege to the city of roughly 20,000 which was then the major base of British operations in North America. It was not a professional army, but, warned Gen. Lord Percy, "whoever looks upon them as an irregular mob, will find himself much mistaken." Other New Englanders, including Ethan Allen's "Green Mountain Boys" of Vermont, moved north toward Lake Champlain, capturing Fort Ticonderoga along with its 78 cannons on May 10. In a feat of practical engineering, militia commanded by the Boston bookseller Henry Knox hauled Ticonderoga's largest cannon overland all the way to Boston, where it helped compel the British evacuation on March 17, 1776, after an 11-month siege.

Gage failed in his mission to rebuild colonial authority in Massachusetts and throughout the colonies. Indeed, the actual exercise of imperial power had already begun to break apart and dissolve in the colonies well before Lexington and Concord—nowhere more so than in Massachusetts. A proliferation of organizations independent from the Crown had first created a situation of dual power in Massachusetts' small cities—town meetings, committees of correspondence, political caucuses, militia companies and taverns. But by 1774 royal authority had largely been subordinated to militia, or driven off. That year, the monarchy's sanctioned courts of justice disbanded or were forced to take oaths of loyalty to militia in the towns of Worcester, Springfield, Great Barrington and in Plymouth, Essex, Norfolk and Middlesex counties.

Also driven away were "the best men" of New England who occupied posts that had been handed down, in monarchical fashion, as property over the generations. One of these clans was the Chandler family of Worcester, which had ruled over the town for the better part of a century. Later, writing from his exile in England, John Chandler IV recalled the moment when the revolution swept him aside, still half a year before Lexington

and Concord:

> In September A.D. 1774 a mob of several thousands of Armed People drawn from the neighboring Towns assembled at Worcester for the purpose of Stopping the Courts of Justice then to be held there which having accomplished they seized your memorialist who in order to save himself from immediate death was obliged to renounce the aforesaid Protest and Subscribe to a very Treasonable League and Covenant.

Comments historian Ray Raphael, "With this humiliating submission, all British authority, both political and military … disappeared forever from Worcester County." Sensing his powerlessness before these events, Gage appealed to Dartmouth for more soldiers. "In Worcester, they keep no Terms, openly threaten Resistance by Arms, have been purchasing Arms, preparing them, casting Ball, and providing Powder," he wrote, "and threaten to attack any Troops who dare to oppose them…"

Such events substantiate historian Carl Becker's contention that the American Revolution was not just about home rule, but who would rule at home.

The British had intended to make an example of Massachusetts, cutting the head off the colonial snake, as the colonies had been occasionally depicted in cartoons since Benjamin Franklin's 1754 "Albany Plan" of union. Gage's punitive expedition instead had the opposite effect. Up and down the colonies, patriots made preparations for war, for the simple reason that the majority of the colonists shared Massachusetts' grievances.

In New York City on April 29, roughly 1,000 residents, "shocked by the bloody scene acting in the Massachusetts Bay," swore "to carry into execution whatever measures may be recommended by the Continental Congress ... [for] opposing the arbitrary and oppressive acts of the British Parliament." Patriot committees seized the city's arsenal, shut down all shipping to Boston and closed the British custom house.

In Pennsylvania the "news from Massachusetts speeded up a movement already under way," as Jensen puts it. As in New England, militias had already formed in the western part of the state. In Philadelphia, the legislature, still then controlled by a conservative faction, voted to raise 4,300 men for defense against the mother country. They were responding to the clamor from below and a new radical caucus grouped around Tom Paine and Thomas Young. On April 25, 1775, thousands thronged outside of the statehouse and formed 31 militia companies, based on city neighborhoods.

Virginia very nearly beat Massachusetts for the first battle of the revolution. There Lord Dunmore on April 20 ordered the removal of gunpowder from the Williamsburg magazine, the so-called "Gunpowder Incident," days before news of the bloodshed near Boston arrived. Militia under Patrick Henry, famous for the revolutionary slogan "Give me liberty or give me death!," then marched on Williamsburg. Battle was avoided when Virginians were paid restitution for the powder. But militia continued to arm in the wake of Lexington and Concord, forcing Dunmore and his family to flee on June 8, 1775 to the safety of the British warship, the *HMS Fowey*, anchored in the York River.

The reaction was similar among individual leaders of the revolution. "News of the bloodshed at Lexington," said Edmund Randolph of Virginia, "changed the figure of Great Britain from that of unrelenting parent to merciless enemy." When Tom Paine, who had arrived in Philadelphia in November of 1774, learned of the battle, he "rejected the hardened, sullen-tempered Pharaoh of England forever." John Adams wrote that Lexington and Concord meant that "the Die was cast, the Rubicon crossed."

Yet the battle was itself the outcome of a chain of antecedent events that can be traced back at least to the Stamp Act Crisis of 1765, when colonials had revolted against the imposition of a duty applied to all paper products. Parliament responded to that upheaval by repealing the tax but asserting in the Declaratory Act that it maintained exclusive power to impose taxes on the colonies, even if they were not directly represented in the House of Commons.

From that point on, each successive British attempt to assert authority over the colonies brought forth a new wave of protests: the Townshend Duty Acts of 1767; the occupation of Boston in 1768; the Boston Massacre of 1770; the Tea Act of 1773; and the Coercive or Intolerable Acts of 1774. These events caused a change in the consciousness of the people, as John Adams later observed.

> What do we mean by the Revolution? The war? That was no part of the Revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it. The Revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen years before a drop of blood was drawn at Lexington.

The "imperial crisis" intensified throughout this period, with Boston as its epicenter. In a formal political sense, the dispute was characterized by a legalistic debate over taxation and representation. But behind that there lurked a much larger issue revolving around the questions of sovereignty and equality. If King George III and Parliament made concessions to the colonists over taxation, did this not undermine their sovereignty in all other respects? Did it not imply an equality of station that had never been conceded to the inhabitants of overseas possessions, few of whom could be counted in even in the lowest ranks of the British aristocracy?

Except for the most radical figures in British politics, such as John Wilkes, lord mayor of London, the answer from all British political factions to these most fundamental questions of power in the realm was that there could not be compromise.

"We [are] reduced to the alternative," Lord Mansfield told Parliament "of adopting coercive measures or of forever relinquishing our claim of sovereignty to dominion over the colonies. … [Either] the supremacy of the British legislature must be complete entire, and unconditional, or on the other hand, the colonies must be free and independent." Perhaps Parliament and the Ministry had made mistakes, Mansfield admitted, but it was "utterly impossible to say a syllable on the matter of expediency, till the right was first as fully asserted on one side, as acknowledged on the other."

In fact, King and Parliament could never accept such an outcome as American independence. The loss of its colonies threatened British commercial supremacy, which had been achieved over the European powers at enormous cost in the period of capitalist development that Marx called primitive accumulation. Lord Camden explained:

> ... without commerce this island, when compared with many countries on the continent, is but a small insignificant spot: it is from our commerce alone that we are intitled to that consequence we bear in the great political scale. When compared with several of the great powers of Europe, England, in the words of Shakespeare, being no more than a "bird's nest floating on a pool."

As Adams explained, the colonists had been ideologically prepared for revolution over the preceding years. They saw their struggle in the first

place as the continuation and deepening of the British revolutions of the 17th century. The population was roused to a heightened level of democratic consciousness through a torrent of tracts, pamphlets and speeches by figures, such as James Otis, accompanied by serious revolutionary organization by figures such as Samuel Adams. They understood the issues in contest not to be merely about relations between the metropolis and the colony but universal principles that were to provide safeguards for liberty and the principle of human equality for generations to come.

Yet the American leaders who would later come to be called "the founding fathers" were not so clear-eyed before Lexington and Concord as were their British adversaries. By implication, the patriot leaders' thought veered in a revolutionary direction—from the standpoint of the Ministry, it was at the very least seditious. But right down to 1774 they shied away from drawing the necessary revolutionary conclusions. They could not contemplate the overawing implications of revolution, and accordingly had sought means of compromise with Parliament, before moving to the conclusion that King George might be invited to rule the colonies as a separate realm, the position reiterated in the Second Continental Congress's Olive Branch Petition of July, 1775. But George, too, had made up his mind for war as early as September, 1774: "[t]he die is now cast, the colonies must either submit or triumph," he wrote to Lord North.

The British move on Lexington and Concord, as each act of Parliament had done before, altered the political situation in the colonies in favor of the more militant leaders and those ready to draw revolutionary conclusions from the logic of events. Figures prone to compromise, such as the conservative John Dickinson of Delaware, whose *Letters from a Pennsylvania Farmer* had articulated the American position on taxation and representation, were living political lives on borrowed time.

Those with a more radical frame of mind began to turn the discussion at the Second Continental Congress—which convened in Philadelphia on May 10, 1775 in the shadow of the events in Massachusetts—in a leftward direction, with figures coming to the fore, such as John Adams of Massachusetts, Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, and Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, who was in the middle of the ocean when the battles took place having finally departed Britain under the conviction that independence was the only viable course of action.

The American Revolution was indeed a radical event in history, as historian Gordon Wood has argued, no less radical in its own time than the great revolutions that followed. Whatever all of the initial motivations involved, emerging out of the logic of events and the fog of war, it soon came into the clear that the American Revolution was not waged to rectify the British constitution but to establish an entirely new framework of government and even an entirely new society based on the theoretical conquests of the Enlightenment, of which it was very much a product. Nor was the American Revolution merely a national event. It drew all the Great Powers of Europe into the maelstrom of the war. And it raised up, as Marx put it, "the idea of one great Democratic Republic [as]… the first impulse given to the European revolution of the eighteenth century," feeding directly into the great French Revolution of 1789.

While the ideology driving the first bourgeois democratic revolutions often obscured individual and class interests—even to those involved—those from the propertied classes believed they represented "the people" when drafting the Constitution of 1787. Similarly, in 1789, their French counterparts claimed to speak for "the nation." Across the Atlantic world, the rhetoric of bourgeois republicanism proclaimed equality, fraternity and the rights of man. Yet, in practice, these revolutions consistently replaced old forms of class domination with new ones. In the US the most obnoxious of these was, until the Civil War, the existence in "the land of liberty" of chattel slavery, which grew in tandem with the expansion of the plantation economy of the South, in spite of the misgivings and efforts of the founding generation to end "the peculiar institution."

Notwithstanding the limitations imposed on it by its own time, there is no doubt that the American Revolution was a progressive event of a world-historic character. It raised a question mark over slavery, which now, for the first time in world history, was thrown on to the defensive. The revolution abolished monarchy in the US, along with the remnants of feudal conceptions of property, such as primogeniture, entail and inheritance of public offices. It laid out in its great founding documents, the Declaration of Independence (1776), the Constitution (1787) and the Bill of Rights (1789) the basic principles of democratic society—including basic rights such as freedom of speech, right to a jury trial and the prohibition of arbitrary imprisonment, torture and deportation. It proclaimed these rights to be the inherent or "natural" property of all people—not something that is "bestowed" or can be taken away by tyrannical government. Most crucially, as the Declaration spells out, it is the right and duty of the people to abolish a government when it "becomes destructive of these ends."

The Trump administration's counterrevolution only serves to magnify the importance of the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution. Little wonder that today's ruling class approaches it with a palpable sense of anxiety. Whatever steps it does take to "remember," it will certainly seek to "forget" the genuine history of the revolution—preferring the mythological right-wing patriotic interpretation favored by Trump or that myth's demonic inversion advanced by the *New York Times* 1619 Project.

The colonists rose in 1775 against "a long train of abuses and usurpations" by King George that King Donald is now reviving—and going far beyond it. While Trump supports a war of genocide in the Middle East and prepares for world war with China, and while he wages a trade war on the whole planet reminiscent of the violent commercial wars and out-and-out piracy of the great mercantile empires of the 18th century, the current occupant of the White House is trampling over all the most fundamental rights laid out in America's founding documents: the police abduction of people, including lawful residents, without trial and their deportation to prison camps in other countries; his repeated threat to do the same to American citizens; his monarchical assertion that whatever he himself claims is in the interest of national security is *ipso facto* lawful; his threat to suspend the Constitution altogether through the invocation of the Insurrection Act.

The appeal to these basic principles is the means by which the democratic revolution in America succeeded. It required clarity of purpose, iron resolution and an understanding that every political struggle contains within it universal principles.

Basic democratic rights are incompatible with the malignant levels of social inequality that prevail today, and, as has been made clear with the crackdown on protests against the Gaza genocide, they are also incompatible with the waging of imperialist war. As was the case with the British ruling class of the 1770s, there is no mood for compromise in its American equivalent 250 years later. It is a ruling class that brooks no impingement on its wealth and accepts no limits on the violence necessary to defend its riches. In the manner of the old monarchies, it is a ruling class, with Trump at its head, that demands to be approached on bended knee.

But it is America's working class that is the true inheritor of the first two revolutions, of the 1770s and 1860s. Workers must be alert to the extreme danger posed by Trump and his cronies. They must be able to do what Edmund Burke said of the colonists in March 1775: that they "snuff the approach of tyranny in every tainted breeze." This is indeed a historic necessity. There is no constituency for the defense of democratic rights in the ruling class. The preservation of "these truths" and their expansion to include social rights, such as jobs, peace, education, healthcare and a clean environment, have themselves become revolutionary tasks.

On the most fundamental level the American Revolution and its first

battles of Lexington and Concord teach that revolution, which seems impossible one day, becomes the most logical course of events the next, and that it is tyrannical power that itself seeds the winds of revolution.

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