

British-American Contrasts, Revolutionary War Period

As an American, I am deeply concerned by several avenues of present-day United States governmental policies, both foreign and domestic. I feel that the following articles address at least some aspects of these concerns. Human nature does not change, and the anguish and despair felt by our citizens 230 some-odd years ago are just as relevant today in 2006.

The following is from *The Rockwell Family Foundation Newsletter, August 1999, Newsletter No. 29*:

“A Visit to My Grandparents” is the title of a handwritten text found in a notebook in Rockwell Hall, Colebrook, Connecticut. It was written by Louisa Rockwell Bass, daughter of Reuben Rockwell and Rebecca Beebe. Rebecca was the daughter of Col. Bezaleel Beebe, a member of Rogers’ Rangers, and a Revolutionary War officer captured at Fort Washington and imprisoned at the “sugar house” in New York City. [And the lady whose portrait hangs in the Colebrook Historical Society’s rooms.]

“How our blood would boil with indignation at the insolence and cruelty of the British officials when he with the men under his command were marched as prisoners of war from Fort Washington to New York. As he would tell us how they knocked off the hats of the poor soldiers into the water and left them exposed to a hot sun with no protection, and their sufferings, in their wretched quarters in New York in the old sugar house with scanty, miserable food; sick and dying from disease produced by their hardships. And he told us that he went to the British commander and said to him ‘[that] his poor soldiers were dying from want of nourishment, and that a short time previous, the fortunes of war placed British soldiers as prisoners in his care, and they were well provided for, [and had] all their wants supplied, and now I demand the same treatment from you.’ ‘Did you get it?’ we eagerly asked. ‘No, children’, he said, ‘I got no relief from him, but I sent to your grandma then, and she left her little children and rode many weary miles on horseback to get money – hard money – for no other would pass, and sent it with blankets and clothing for their relief. But it came too late for many of them, and but few lived to reach their homes,’ Oh how we abhorred the British and felt we could not be required to love all mankind while the British nation was in existence.”

Contrast this with the following:

From *Baroness von Riedesel and the American Revolution, Journal and Correspondence of a Tour of Duty, 1776-1783*. University of North Carolina press, 1965.

“It seems clear that the treatment of the Convention troops as prisoners of war was mild. Jefferson pointed out that ‘General Riedesel alone laid out upwards of £200 [approximately \$1,100.00] in garden seeds for the German troops only.....their poultry, pigeons and other preparations of that kind presented to the mind an idea of a company of farmers rather than of a camp of soldiers. In addition to the barracks built for them by the publick and now very comfortable, they have built great numbers for themselves in such messes as fancied each other; and the whole corps, both officers and men, seem now happy and satisfied with their situation.’

The following is a letter from Thomas Jefferson to Patrick Henry, March 27, 1779:

[The presence of more than 4,000 British and German troops, guarded by only 600 American soldiers, created some uneasiness in the Charlottesville [Virginia] area, and rumors circulated that the additional demand for food might lead to such scarcity that starvation might result. Governor Patrick Henry and the Virginia Council discussed the possibility of redistributing the troops, an option that the Continental Congress left to the state executive. When the troops protested against another move only three months after getting situated, Jefferson wrote Governor Henry, pleading that humanitarianism and self-interest argued against uprooting the troops again.] ‘Is an enemy so execrable’ [Utterly detestable; abominable; abhorrent] he asked, ‘that tho in captivity his wishes and comforts are to be disregarded and even crossed? I think not. It is for the benefit of mankind to mitigate the horrors of war as much as possible. The practice therefore of modern nations of treating captive enemies with politeness and generosity is not only delightful in contemplation, but really interesting to all the world, friends, foes and neutrals. Let us apply this.’

The troops and the Riedesels were not removed.”

This statement by Jefferson should be read and reread by all Americans, especially by those in elective office in Washington in these troubled times. I cannot give the exact response of President George W. Bush when he was recently asked if our government condoned the use of torture on our prisoners in this current War on Terrorism, but he left the door open on the question, which is a tacit admission of giving his administration’s leaders the green light for the use of torture.

I wonder if Jefferson would classify the United States today as “a modern nation”?

Historic Bytes

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