

THE WHITES OF THEIR EYES

The Tea Party's
Revolution and the
Battle over

American History

JILL LEPORE

author of Pulitzer Prize finalist *New York Burning*



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The Public Square Book Series

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

Ruth O'Brien, Series Editor

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PRINCETON AND OXFORD

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Published by Princeton University Press,
41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press,
6 Oxford Street, Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1TW
press.princeton.edu
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lepore, Jill, 1966–

The whites of their eyes : the Tea Party's revolution and the battle over American history / Jill
Lepore.

p. cm. — (The public square book series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-691-15027-7 (hardcover : acid-free paper) 1. United States—History—Philosophy. 2.
United States—Historiography—Social aspects. 3. United States—Historiography—Political aspects.
4. United States—History—Revolution, 1775–1783—Influence. 5. United States—History—Errors,
inventions, etc. 6. Tea Party movement. 7. Fundamentalism—United States. 8. Evangelicalism—
United States. 9. Right-wing extremists—United States. I. Title.

E175.9.L46 2010

973.3'115—dc22

2010030251

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

Parts of this book were originally published in *The New Yorker*.

The spelling, capitalization, and punctuation of eighteenth-century writing have been left, whenever
possible, as they were in the original.

This book has been composed in Sabon

Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my sons

I do not mean to say, that the scenes of the revolution
are now or ever will be entirely forgotten;
But that, like everything else, they must fade
upon the memory of the world, and grow
more and more dim by the lapse of time.

—Abraham Lincoln, 1838

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FOREWORD

Ruth O'Brien

Recalling the soldiers at Bunker Hill who, facing the British, were told to get close enough to see “the whites of their eyes,” Jill Lepore’s magnificent book takes a very close look at both the founding of the United States and its legacy—the unending battle over American history. In artful and vivid prose, Lepore takes readers the distance between past and present, and then back again, sometimes all in the space of a page, to explain, for instance, how the Revolution could spawn both the conservative Tea Party, in the twenty-first century, and its ideological opposite—the liberal Tax Equity for Americans (TEA) Party, in the 1970s and, finally, to offer a thoughtful meditation on history itself. The study of history, she argues, is always “controversial, contentious, and contested,” but the Tea Party Revolution was antihistorical, tangling together originalism, evangelicalism, and fundamentalism. Lepore, deftly navigating between history, culture, and politics, also offers a caution about her own profession. In the 1970s, she argues, academic historians belittled the Bicentennial as “schlock” because it “didn’t offer an answer, a story, to a country that needed one.” “That left plenty of room,” she suggests, “for a lot of other people to get into the history business.” And they did.

Beginning in 2009, one month after the election of Barack Obama, the Tea Party charged the new administration with imposing “taxation without representation,” as if health care legislation, passed by Congress in 2010, were like the Stamp Act, imposed by Parliament in 1765. Lepore shows us, though, that this kind of maneuver was not new. “Americans have drawn Revolutionary analogies before,” she writes. “They have drawn them for a very long time.” To reveal how historians think about the past, Lepore carries readers on a journey, her journey, as she scrambles onto a replica Revolutionary ship, sits in dimly lit Revolutionary taverns, and attends Revolutionary reenactments. By musing on how the past can better inform the present and on how historians might play a civic role, this book enters the public arena—and the Public Square.

THE WHITES OF THEIR EYES

PROLOGUE

Party Like It's 1773

One morning last March,
I pressed against the new barbed and galvanized
fence on the Boston Common.

—Robert Lowell, “For the Union Dead,” 1960

Lashed to a dock in the oldest working shipyard in America, the Boston Tea Party Ship, or what was left of her, sat in a dozen feet of brackish water in Gloucester Harbor. I went to see her one rainy winter's morning in March. Her bones creaked when the wind blew, but no halyards clanged: she had no masts, no rigging, and hardly any decking. She was not open to the public. To clamber aboard, I had to climb down an iron ladder, cross two floating docks, crawl under a stretch of ropes, and walk a narrow plank, barefoot. Topsides, it felt like being inside a greenhouse, if a greenhouse were a houseboat and the air was haunted: plastic sheeting stapled to a tented frame of two-by-fours sheltered the ship from gale, sleet, rain, snow, and every other act of God to afflict the rocky coast of Cape Ann, the site of twenty-seven shipwrecks before John Hancock convinced the Massachusetts legislature to raise money to build a pair of lighthouses, whose whale-oil lights were first lit on December 21, 1771, Forefathers Day, a holiday commemorating the arrival of the *Mayflower*'s first landing party in Plymouth, a century and a half before.¹ Americans love an anniversary.

Beaver was the name carved, ornately, in her stern. She was a replica. No one knows what became of the original *Beaver*, one of three ships whose cargo of East India Company tea was dumped in Boston Harbor on December 16, 1773, which pleased Hancock, who had been making a great deal of money by smuggling Dutch tea into the colonies. That *Beaver* was long gone; like many another old boat, she sank or burned or was junked for parts, a derelict on a distant shore. In 1972, three Boston businessmen got the idea of sailing a ship across the Atlantic for the tea party's bicentennial. They bought a Baltic schooner, built in Denmark in 1908, and had her rerigged as an English brig, powered by an anachronistic engine that was, unfortunately, put in backwards and caught fire on the way over. Still, she made it to Boston in time for the hoopla. After that, the bicentennial *Beaver* was anchored at the Congress Street Bridge, next to what became the Boston Children's Museum. For years, it was a popular attraction. In 2001, though, the site was struck by lightning and closed for repairs. A renovation was planned. But that was stalled by the Big Dig, the excavation of three and a half miles of tunnel designed to rescue the city from the blight of Interstate 93, an elevated expressway that, since the 1950s, had made it almost impossible to see the ocean, and this in a city whose earliest maps were inked with names like Flounder Lane, Sea Street, and Dock Square. (Boston is, and always has been, a fishy place.) In 2007, welders working on the Congress Street Bridge accidentally started another fire, although by then, the *Beaver* had already been towed, by tugboat, twenty-eight miles to Gloucester, where she'd been ever since, bereft, abandoned, and all but forgotten.²

On the day I went to Gloucester, the *Beaver* was a skeleton, a ghost ship, but the Tea Party was the

talk of the nation. It had started on February 19, 2009, one month after the inauguration of a new president, Barack Obama. Rick Santelli, a business commentator on a CNBC morning news and talk show called *Squawk Box*, was outraged by the economic policies of the new administration. “This America!” he hollered from a trading room floor in Chicago, surrounded by cheering commodity brokers. “How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor’s mortgage?” He was sure about one thing: “If you read our Founding Fathers, people like Benjamin Franklin and Jefferson, what we’re doing in this country now is making them roll over in their graves.” He wanted to dump some derivative securities in Lake Michigan. He wanted a new tea party.³

Within hours, Santelli’s call to arms was dubbed “the rant heard round the world,” a reference to a poem written by Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1836—

Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world

—on the occasion of the erection of a statue memorializing the men (including Emerson’s grandfather) who faced the British in Concord in 1775.⁴ Almost overnight, Tea Parties sprang up across the country. The Chicago Tea Party adopted the motto “Revolution Is Brewing.”⁵

On April 15, Tax Day, the day Americans file their income tax returns, Tea Party protests were held in hundreds of cities and towns. Everywhere, people told stories about the Revolution. On Boston Common, a gently sloping patch of grass set aside for pastureland in 1634, four years after Puritans founded their city on a hill, state senator Robert Hedlund, a Republican from Plymouth County, addressed a few hundred people gathered around a tree. “The history books in our public schools,” he said, had failed to teach that what happened in 1773 “was about a collection of interested citizens afraid of seeing their economic success determined by the whim of an interventionist government body.”⁶ Michael Johns of the Heritage Foundation, believing that the United States was founded as a Christian nation, wanted to send this message to the White House:

Mr. Obama, every historical document signed in Philadelphia, every founding document in this nation, has cited our creator. That is the basis on which we distinguish ourselves in the world. And it is the foundation of our liberty and our God-given freedom.

David Tuerck, an economist from Suffolk University, wore a George Washington tie: “In case there are any people here with Obama’s picture in their living room, they can see what a real patriot looks like.” The problem wasn’t just in DC, Tuerck said. “Right here in Massachusetts, we have a Supreme Judicial Court that thinks it can redefine marriage without a thought to the will of the people.” (In 2004, same-sex marriage became legal in Massachusetts when the state’s highest court ruled that its restriction was unconstitutional.) “It’s time for us to rally around a new cause,” Tuerck said, “which is to return America to the principles for which our forefathers fought and died. It’s time for a new American Revolution. And I can think of no better place to start that revolution than right here.”

Shawni Littlehale from Smart Girl Politics agreed. “Two hundred and thirty-three years ago,” she said, “the silent majority got together in Boston, fed up with taxation without representation, and held a tea party.” (The silent majority did no such thing. “Silent majority” used to be a euphemism for the dead. The phrase’s meaning didn’t change until about 1969, when Richard Nixon used it to refer to Americans who, he believed, quietly supported the Vietnam War.)⁷ Kris Mineau, an evangelical minister who heads the Massachusetts Family Institute, invoked the sage of Monticello: “I want to give you all a little history lesson. Thomas Jefferson, our third president, from that Oval Office, I

wrote, ‘It is only in the love of one’s own family that heartfelt happiness is known.’” (Given the Hemingses, Jefferson’s children by Sally Hemings, one of his slaves, this was a particularly striking choice.)⁸ Wearing colonial garb from head to toe was a Pentecostal minister named Paul Jehle, executive director of the Plymouth Rock Foundation, an organization founded in 1970, on the occasion of the 350th anniversary of the *Mayflower*’s voyage, “to preserve, rehearse and propagate the rich Christian heritage of the United States of America, beginning with the Pilgrims.” Jehle preached that “God gives rights; governments don’t” and urged people to form something like Bible study groups. “Our little organization, Plymouth Rock Foundation, we publish materials, where you can study the Constitution line by line, from its original intent, and what was meant by the founders. You can study in small groups. You can study all kinds of things, because we need to reeducate ourselves, because the present education system won’t.”

Elsewhere, activists stapled Lipton tea bags to their hats, like so many fishing lures. “Party Like It’s 1773” read one sign.⁹ Newt Gingrich spoke at a Tea Party in New York. In Atlanta, where Fox News celebrity Sean Hannity broadcast from a rally attended by some fifteen thousand people, the show opened with a white-wigged reenactor dressed as an eighteenth-century minister—black green coat, ruffled white shirt—who, in front of a backdrop of the Constitution and a flag of thirteen stars, said, before introducing “Citizen Sean Hannity”: “The United States of America was formed by common people, risking all they had to defy an arrogant regime, taxing them into submission. And now that arrogance has returned, threatening the very foundation of our republic. My name is Thomas Paine.”¹⁰ (I guess this wasn’t the same Paine as the man who wrote, “All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolise power and profit.”)¹¹ In Washington, someone threw a box of tea bags over the fence that surrounds the White House. All over the country, people turned up wearing tricorns and periwigs, cuffed shirts and kersey waistcoats, knee breeches and buckled shoes, dressing as the founders, quoting the founders, waving copies of the Constitution, arguing that the time for revolution had come again.¹²

At the time, I happened to be teaching an undergraduate seminar on the American Revolution at Harvard, reading monographs and articles in scholarly journals; visiting archives; transcribing letters and diaries; touring graveyards and museums; and grading papers on the Stamp Act, the Boston Massacre, the Intolerable Acts, the Battle of Lexington and Concord, the Siege of Boston, and the Battle of Bunker Hill. Meanwhile, at home, my nine-year-old was busy memorizing Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s 1860 poem, “Paul Revere’s Ride,” an assignment given, every year, by a masterful teacher in a public school in Cambridge, arguably the most liberal city in the most liberal state in the nation. In my house, we couldn’t sit down for dinner without one or another of the under-tens clearing his throat and reciting

Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five;
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year.¹³

Every generation tells its own story about what the Revolution was about, of course, since no one is alive who remembers it anymore. But the Tea Party’s Revolution wasn’t just another generation’s story—it was more like a reenactment—and its complaint about taxation without representation

followed the inauguration of a president who won the electoral vote 365 to 173 and earned 53 percent of the popular vote. In an age of universal suffrage, the citizenry could hardly be said to lack representation. Nationwide, voter turnout, in November of 2008, was 57 percent, the highest since Nixon was elected in 1968.¹⁴ Something more was going on, something not about taxation and representation but about history itself. It wasn't only that the Tea Party's version of American history bore almost no resemblance to the Revolution I study and teach. That was true, but it wasn't new. People who study the Revolution have almost always found the speeches people make about it to be something other than "true history." In 1841, George Ticknor Curtis, a Boston lawyer and constitutional historian, wrote *The True Uses of American Revolutionary History*. He was hopping mad about the tea partiers of his day. "The age for declamation about the American Revolution has passed away," he insisted. He was sick of people invoking the Revolution to advance a cause. He didn't want to be misunderstood, though. "Do I propose to forget the past? Would I cut loose from the great sheet-anchor of our destiny, and send the political and social system to drift over the wide waters of a boundless future, or on the turbulent waves of the present, careless of the great dead, the principles, their deeds, their renown, their splendid illustration of the great truths of man's political and social state?"¹⁵ No. He just wished people would study the Revolution instead of using it to make political arguments. Curtis called this kind of thing declamation. The word "blather" also comes to mind. What was curious about the Tea Party's Revolution, though, was that it wasn't just kooky history; it was *anti* history. In May of 2009, a month after the Tea Party's first Tax Day protest, Hannity began lecturing about the Sons of Liberty. "In 1765, Parliament passed the Stamp Act," he said on his show one day. He told of the protests under the Liberty Tree, in Boston. Then he unveiled a new Fox News graphic: a liberty tree.

In the spirit of our Founding Fathers, with our liberties once again threatened, we introduce our own Liberty Tree. Now as you can see, our tree is built upon the roots of life, liberty, pursuit of happiness, and freedom. They support the trunk of the tree, which is made of we the people. And the trunk supports the branches and the fruits of our liberty represented by the apples. It is those apples, the fruits of our liberty, that this administration is now picking clean.

He concluded, "It took more than two hundred years, but it now looks like we are headed back where we started."¹⁶

In antihistory, time is an illusion. Either we're there, two hundred years ago, or they're here, among us. When Congress began debating an overhaul of the health care system, this, apparently, was very distressing to the Founding Fathers. "The founders are here today," said John Ridpath of the Ayn Rand Institute, at a Boston Tea Party rally on the Common on the Fourth of July. "They're all around us."¹⁷

To the far right, everything about Barack Obama and his administration seemed somehow alarming, as if his election had ripped a tear in the fabric of time. In August, the Department of Education announced that the president would be making a speech addressed to the nation's schoolchildren, about what a good idea it is to stay in school and to study hard. The speech would be made available to public schools, on C-SPAN, educational channels, and the White House's website. Jim Greer, then chairman of the Republican Party of Florida, said: "As the father of four children, I am absolutely appalled that taxpayer dollars are being used to spread President Obama's socialistic ideology." Hannity said, "It seems very close to indoctrination." A pundit named Michelle Malkin, appearing as a guest on Hannity's show, added, "The left has always used kids in public schools as guinea pigs and as junior lobbyists for their social liberal agenda." Glenn Beck, a former talk-radio host who launched a show on Fox News the day before Obama was inaugurated, compared the

president to Mussolini. Some schools refused to show the speech. Some parents kept their kids home that day. Here is the pith of the speech they missed: “No matter what you want to do with your life, Obama said, “I guarantee that you’ll need an education to do it.”¹⁸

That fall, a little-known Massachusetts Republican state senator named Scott Brown launched a campaign for the U.S. Senate seat vacated by the death of Ted Kennedy, who had held it since 1962. Kennedy had been a staunch advocate of health care reform. Brown pledged to defeat passage of the health care bill. In a special election held on January 19, 2010, Brown defeated the Democratic Massachusetts attorney general Martha Coakley, by a seven-point margin, a victory for which the Tea Party took credit. Fox News called Brown’s triumph the “Massachusetts Massacre,” a reference, I guess, to the Boston Massacre, although what the 2010 election and the 1770 shooting share begins and ends with the word “massacre.”

On February 18, 2010, a fifty-three-year-old software engineer named Joseph Andrew Stark set fire to his house and then flew a one-engine plane into an office building in Austin, Texas, where some two hundred IRS employees work, killing himself and an IRS manager, a man with six children. In a suicide note that Stark posted on the Internet the morning he died, he wrote,

Sadly, starting at early ages we in this country have been brainwashed to believe that, in return for our dedication and service, our government stands for justice for all. We are further brainwashed to believe that there is freedom in this place, and that we should be ready to lay our lives down for the noble principles represented by its founding fathers. Remember? One of these was “no taxation without representation.” I have spent the total years of my adulthood unlearning that crap from only a few years of my childhood.

Stark, who had been feuding with the IRS for years, had no connection to any political organization. He was not a Tea Partier. He was alone and adrift, but he also seems to have been caught up in something, something bitter and terrible, about the Founding Fathers and about innocence lost.¹⁹

On March 5, 2010, the 240th anniversary of the Boston Massacre, Glenn Beck issued a special Fox News report on “Indoctrination in America”: “Tonight, America, I want you to sit down and talk to your kids and hold your kids close to you,” he began. “Get the kids out of this indoctrination or our republic will be lost.” He was talking about environmentalism and about a lot of other things, too. “Our kids are being brainwashed with the concept of—I’ve shown it to you before, earth worship. Earth worship. I pledge allegiance to the earth. Social justice. What is social justice? God is being eliminated from the equation entirely.” He found occasion to reach back to the Revolution: “Let me give you the words of George Washington, ‘It is impossible to rightly govern a nation without God and the Bible.’ ” Like Hannity, Beck had begun giving history lessons. He outfitted his studio with chalk and a blackboard and even old-fashioned oak school chairs and desks, as if from a one-room schoolhouse. What our children are learning, Beck warned, darkly, is nothing short of learn-to-hate America lunacy.²⁰

That was a Friday. The next morning, I rode a rumbling Red Line subway car from Cambridge over the Charles, a river named after a king, to watch the annual reenactment of the Boston Massacre in front of the Old State House, built in 1713, the oldest public building in the United States.²¹ A scrum of rambunctious kids jostled for position on a narrow and cramped walkway along the brick building’s southern face. A burly British Army reenactor playing Captain Thomas Preston recruited ten grenadiers, outfitting them with gold-rimmed tricornered hats, brass-buttoned red coats, and wooden muskets. He lined them up and, feigning sternness, commanded his pint-sized soldiers to shout, “God save the king!”

They giggled.

Preston glared at them. He growled. “Would you rather be French?”

“My mom speaks French!” said Isaac Doherty, a six-year-old from Quincy.

“I know karate!” another kid piped up.

Then they all started clobbering each other with their muskets.

Preston sighed.

A National Park Service ranger handed out Styrofoam balls to the rest of the kids in the crowd who gleefully playing an angry mob, hurled the fake snowballs at the soldiers.

“Bloody redcoats!”

“Go back to England!”

“Stinking lobsterbacks!”

Every year, this gets a little out of hand. Madeline Raynor, age ten, got pelted in the eye. It looked like it smarted. She took it in stride. “I learned it’s really hard to be a Redcoat,” she told a reporter from the *Boston Globe*.²² I decided I wasn’t worried about anyone getting indoctrinated.

The next week, in Austin, the Texas School Board convened to discuss amendments to the state social studies curriculum. A review of the curriculum, from kindergarten through high school, had been under way for some time. It made national news because of its national implications. The state of Texas is one of the largest buyers of textbooks in the country; its standards wield considerable influence, nationwide, on publishers’ content, since publishers do not generally provide different editions for different states.²³ Conservative board members, who, during an earlier revision of the state’s science curriculum, had fought for the teaching of creationism, stated their belief that liberals had contaminated the teaching of American history. “I reject the notion by the left of a constitutional separation of church and state,” said one board member, a real estate agent, who added, “I have \$1,000 for the charity of your choice if you can find it in the Constitution.”²⁴

Beginning with the rise of the New Left in the 1960s, women’s history, labor history, and the history of slavery and emancipation—the study, in one way or another, of ordinary people, of groups, and, especially, of conflict—dominated the academic study of American history. (Every school subject is taught differently than it was in the 1950s, and American history is no exception.) In word-by-word amendments to the existing curriculum, the Texas School Board proposed rejecting the scholarship, replacing “ordinary people” with “patriots and good citizens”; dispensing with “capitalism” in favor of “free enterprise”; and calling the “slave trade” the “Atlantic triangular trade.” The amendments also included some striking adjustments to the teaching of twentieth-century history: a defense of McCarthyism, for instance (in studying the House Committee on Un-American Activities, students were to be responsible for explaining “how the later release of the Venona Papers confirmed suspicions of communist infiltration in U.S. government”), and an emphasis on “the conservative resurgence of the 1980s and 1990s, including Phyllis Schlafly, the Contract with America, the Heritage Foundation, the Moral Majority, and the National Rifle Association.” But what proved most controversial, as the press picked up the story, were changes to the teaching of the founding era of American history. Thomas Aquinas was added to a list of thinkers who inspired the American Revolution; Thomas Jefferson (who once wrote about a “wall of separation between Church & State”) was removed. The United States, called, in the old curriculum, a “democratic society,” was now to be referred to as a “constitutional republic.” Biblical law was to be studied as an intellectual influence on the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitution. Kids in Texas, who used to study Locke, Hobbes, and Montesquieu as thinkers whose ideas informed

the nation's founding, would now dispense with Hobbes, in favor of Moses.²⁵

The week the Texas School Board was meeting in Austin, a chapter of the Tea Party was holding its regular monthly meeting in Boston. I decided to go. In the weeks that followed, I went to more Tea Party meetings and rallies. I also visited historic sites, places I'd been many times before, and interviewed museum curators, people I'd known, and worked with, for years. Meanwhile, I dug in the archives. And I drove up to Gloucester. Reading, watching, listening, and even scrambling over the ship, I came to believe, and this book argues, that the use of the Revolution by the far right had quite a lot to do with the *Beaver*, which sailed across the Atlantic, nearly sank on the way over, and dropped anchor in Boston Harbor just in time for Watergate, at a moment in American history when no one could agree on what story a country torn apart by war in Vietnam and civil rights strife at home ought to tell about its unruly beginnings.

This book also makes an argument about the American political tradition: nothing trumps the Revolution. From the start, the Tea Party's chief political asset was its name: the echo of the Revolution conferred upon a scattered, diffuse, and confused movement a degree of legitimacy and the appearance, almost, of coherence. Aside from the name and the costume, the Tea Party offered an analogy: rejecting the bailout is like dumping the tea; health care reform is like the Tea Act; our struggle is like theirs. Americans have drawn Revolutionary analogies before. They have drawn them for a very long time. When in doubt, in American politics, left, right, or center, deploy the Founding Fathers. Relying on this sort of analogy, advocates of health care reform could have insisted that since John Hancock once urged the Massachusetts legislature to raise funds for the erection of lighthouses, he would have supported state health care reform, because, like a lighthouse, health care coverage concerns public safety. That might sound strained, at best, but something quite like it has been tried. In 1798, John Adams signed an "Act for the relief of sick and disabled Seamen": state and later federal government officials collected taxes from shipmasters, which were used to build hospitals and provide medical care for merchant and naval seamen. In the 1940s, health care reformers used this precedent to bolster their case. Government-sponsored health care wasn't un-American, these reformers argued; Adams had thought of it.²⁶

That political tradition is long-standing. But the more I looked at the Tea Party, at Beck and Hannity as history teachers, and at the Texas School Board reforms, the more it struck me that the statement at the core of the far right's version of American history went just a bit further. It was more literal than an analogy. It wasn't "our struggle is like theirs." It was "we are there" or "they are here." The unanswered question of the Bicentennial was, "What ails the American spirit?" Antihistory has no patience for ambiguity, self-doubt, and introspection. The Tea Party had an answer: "We have forsaken the Founding Fathers." Political affiliates are, by nature, motley. But what the Tea Party, Beck and Hannity, and the Texas School Board shared was a set of assumptions about the relationship between the past and the present that was both broadly anti-intellectual and, quite specifically, antihistorical, not least because it defies chronology, the logic of time.²⁷ To say that we are there, or that the Founding Fathers are here, or that we have forsaken them and they're rolling over in their graves because of the latest, breaking political development—the election of the United States' first African American president, for instance—is to subscribe to a set of assumptions about the relationship between the past and the present stricter, even, than the strictest form of constitutional originalism, a set of assumptions that, conflating originalism, evangelicalism, and heritage tourism, amounts to a variety of fundamentalism.

Historical fundamentalism is marked by the belief that a particular and quite narrowly defined past—"the founding"—is ageless and sacred and to be worshipped; that certain historical texts—"the founding documents"—are to be read in the same spirit with which religious fundamentalists read, f

instance, the Ten Commandments; that the Founding Fathers were divinely inspired; that the academic study of history (whose standards of evidence and methods of analysis are based on skepticism) is conspiracy and, furthermore, blasphemy; and that political arguments grounded in appeals to the founding documents, as sacred texts, and to the Founding Fathers, as prophets, are therefore incontrovertible.²⁸

The past haunts us all. Just how is a subject of this book. But time moves forward, not backward. Chronology is like gravity. Nothing falls up. We cannot go back to the eighteenth century, and the Founding Fathers are not, in fact, here with us today. They weren't even called the Founding Fathers until Warren G. Harding coined that phrase in his keynote address at the Republican National Convention in 1916. Harding also invoked the Founding Fathers during his inauguration in 1921—"Standing in this presence, mindful of the solemnity of this occasion, feeling the emotions which no one may know until he senses the great weight of responsibility for himself, I must utter my belief in the divine inspiration of the founding fathers"—in what is quite possibly the worst inaugural address ever written. ("It reminds me of a string of wet sponges," H. L. Mencken wrote. "It reminds me of tattered washing on the line; it reminds me of stale bean soup, of college yells, of dogs barking idiotically through endless nights. It is so bad that a sort of grandeur creeps into it.")²⁹ The Founding Fathers haven't been rolling over in their graves for very long, either. Not one was roused from his eternal slumber with any regularity until about the time that Harding called the founders our fathers (and, more particularly, his) and said they were divinely inspired (which had the curious effect of granting to his presidency something akin to the divine right of kings). Dead presidents and deceased delegates to the Constitutional Convention only first got restless in 1868, in a play called *The Spirit of Seventy-Six*, published in Boston and set in a fictitious, suffragette future, where women voting and holding office were said to be "enough to make George Washington turn in his grave!"³⁰

If that sounds old-fashioned, that's because it is; we don't say that people turn in their graves anymore. We say they "roll over." That expression came into use in 1883, the year after Ralph Waldo Emerson died.³¹ Maybe it was Emerson who was rolling over in his grave. In American history, all roads lead to the Revolution: if Emerson had rolled over in his grave (miffed about the "rant heard round the world"), that would have to have happened in Concord's Sleepy Hollow, a cemetery over whose dedication Emerson presided in 1855, calling it a "garden for the living," and where he was buried in 1882; Sleepy Hollow borrows its name from a story written by Washington Irving, who, born in 1783, the year the Treaty of Paris was signed, was named after George Washington; "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," published in 1820, is set in 1790 in a town haunted by the ghost of a Hessian soldier who had his head blown off, by cannonball, during some "nameless battle during the Revolutionary War":

Certain of the most authentic historians of those parts, who have been careful in collecting and collating the floating facts concerning this spectre, allege that the body of the trooper having been buried in the churchyard, the ghost rides forth to the scene of battle in nightly quest of his head, and that the rushing speed with which he sometimes passes along the Hollow, like a midnight blast, is owing to his being belated, and in a hurry to get back to the churchyard before daybreak.³²

I'd have worried about Emerson, wriggling, rotted, and miserable in his worm-ridden coffin in Sleepy Hollow, except that, of course, people don't roll over in their graves any more than headless horsemen ride forth through the night. Emerson rests, undisturbed. But the battle over the Revolution rages on.

This book is an account of that battle, over the centuries. It is also, along the way, a history of the

Revolution—an archival investigation into the relationship between the people and their rulers, between liberty and slavery, between learning and ignorance, and between irreverence and deference. Each of this book's five chapters is set in one place—Boston—but each travels through time: each begins with the rise of the Tea Party, in 2009 and 2010; moves backward to iconic moments in the coming of the American Revolution, in the 1760s and 1770s; and then skips forward to the Bicentennial of those events, in the 1960s and 1970s. Just as faith has its demands and its solaces, there are, I believe, demands and solaces in the study of history.³³ My point in telling three stories once is not to ignore the passage of time but rather to dwell on it, to see what's remembered and what's forgotten, what's kept and what's lost.

Standing on the *Beaver* watching sea-weedy waves slap the ship's hull, I thought about how sailors on ocean-faring vessels once measured depth. They would drop a rope weighted with lead into the water and let it plummet till it reached bottom. I like to sink lines, too, to get to the bottom of things. This book is an argument against historical fundamentalism. It makes that argument by measuring the distance between the past and the present. It measures that distance by taking soundings in the ocean of time. Here, now, we float on a surface of yesterdays. Below swirls the blue-green of childhood. Deeper still is the obscurity of long ago. But the eighteenth century, oh, the eighteenth century lies fathoms down.

CHAPTER 1

Ye Olde Media

CONTAINING REFLECTIONS ON NATIONS FOUNDED IN
REVOLUTIONS—AN INTRODUCTION TO OUR CHARACTERS—A
HISTORY OF THE STAMP ACT—THE BIRTH, DEATH, AND
RESURRECTION OF THE NEWSPAPER—ITS DIRE FATE, OF
LATE—AND A VISIT TO THE GREEN DRAGON TAVERN

“Everybody, anywhere I go, always asks me, ‘Where did you get that hat?’ ” Austin Hess told me when we first met, beside a statue of Samuel Adams in front of Faneuil Hall. Hess, a twenty-six-year-old engineer and member of the steering committee of the Boston Tea Party, was wearing a tricornered hat: not your ordinary felt-and-cardboard fake but the genuine article, wide-brimmed and raffish. In April of 2009, two months after Rick Santelli, outraged by the Obama administration’s stimulus package, called for a new tea party, Hess showed up at a Tax Day rally on the Boston Common. He was carrying a sign that read “I Can Stimulate Myself.” He was much photographed; he appeared on television, a local Fox affiliate. He was wearing his hat. He got it at Pli-moth Plantation. It was made of “distressed faux leather.” You could order it on-line. It was called the Scallywag.¹

The importance of the American Revolution to the twenty-first-century Tea Party movement might seem to have been slight—as if the name were mere happenstance, the knee breeches knickknacks, the rhetoric of revolution unthinking—but that was not entirely the case, especially in Boston, where the local chapter of the Tea Party bore a particular burden: it happened here. “Everybody in the movement is interested in the Revolution,” Hess told me. He took his debt to the founders seriously: “We believe that we are carrying on their tradition, and if they were around today, they would be in the streets with us, leading us, and they’d be even angrier than we are. I imagine we’d have to politely ask them to leave their muskets at home.”²

“Who shall write the history of the American revolution?” John Adams once asked Thomas Jefferson. “Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?” “Nobody,” was Jefferson’s reply. “The life and soul of history must forever remain unknown.”³ The records were murky, the course of events astonishing, the consequences immeasurable. Nobody could write the history of the Revolution, but everyone would have to try; it was too important not to. There was also this dilemma: a nation born in revolution will always eye its history warily, and with anxiety. It’s good that it happened once; twice could be trouble. The Revolution’s first historian, Peter Oliver, was a Loyalist from Boston. Consumed by bitterness, regret, and rancor, he wrote the “Origin & Progress of the American Rebellion” in 1781, from exile in England. He didn’t think the Revolution should have happened even once.⁴ The first patriot historian of the Revolution, David Ramsay, a physician who had been a delegate to the Continental Congress from South Carolina and whose two-volume history was published in 1789, stated the problem as well as anyone. “The right of the people to resist their rulers when invading their liberties, forms the corner stone of the American republic,” Ramsay wrote in *The History of the American Revolution*, but “this principle, though just in itself, is not favourable to the

tranquility of present establishments.”⁵ Ramsay appreciated the acuteness of the difficulty of celebrating the birth of the nation, and carrying on in its spirit, risked promoting still more revolutionary unrest, impermanence, and instability, when what the new nation needed was calm. “A little rebellion now and then, is a good thing,” Jefferson wrote from Paris in 1786, on hearing word of Shays Rebellion, an armed uprising by farmers from Massachusetts struggling to stay out of debtors’ prisons. “The Tree of Liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants,” Jefferson wrote then.⁶ (This menacing line sometimes appeared on Tea Party paraphernalia, but it was far more popular in the 1990s, among members of that decade’s militia movement. On April 19, 1995, the 220th anniversary of the Battle of Lexington and Concord, Timothy McVeigh, who liked to wear a Tree of Liberty T-shirt, blew up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people, including 19 very young children.)⁷ But aside from Jefferson, whose enthusiasm for revolution did not survive Robespierre, most everyone else came down in favor of order. “In monarchies the crime of treason or rebellion may admit of being pardoned, or lightly punished,” Samuel Adams wrote, during the Shays crisis, “but the man who dares to rebel against the laws of a republic ought to suffer death.”⁸ James Madison believed America’s was a revolution to end all revolutions. And the Constitution, of course, sought “to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessing of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” Domestic tranquility was what was called for. The Constitution helped contain the unruliness of the Revolution. So did early accounts of the nation’s founding, which tended to emphasize that a revolution had to know when to stop. For the sake of the nation, revolution needed to be a thing of the past.

Meanwhile, though, the Revolution was so brilliant and daring—and, of course, so original and definitive and constitutive—that everyone wanted to claim to have inherited it, especially when running for office or starting a movement or pushing through a piece of legislation. Beginning even before it was over, the Revolution has been put to wildly varying political purposes. Federalists claimed its legacy; so did Anti-Federalists. Supporters of Andrew Jackson’s Democratic Party said they were the true sons of the Revolution. No, Whigs said: we are. The Union claimed the Revolution, so, just as fervently, did the Confederacy.⁹ In the 1950s, southern segregationists insisted that they were upholding the legacy of the Founding Fathers by adhering to the Constitution. “There is nothing in the United States Constitution that gives the Congress, the President, or the Supreme Court the right to declare that white and colored children must attend the same public schools,” said Mississippi senator James Eastland. Advocates of civil rights countered that their movement carried the banner of the Revolution. “Our nation in a sense came into being through a massive act of civil disobedience,” Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, “for the Boston Tea Party was nothing but a massive act of civil disobedience.” A lot of people talked about the 1964 Civil Rights Act as realizing, at long last, the promise of the Declaration of Independence. Lyndon Johnson compared Selma to Lexington and Concord. The 1965 Voting Rights Act was said to be an end to taxation without representation. “Black people are rebelling in the same way Americans did in the Boston Massacre,” Stokely Carmichael said in 1966.¹⁰ That same year, when Johnson signed into law a bill establishing an American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, he used the opportunity to argue for American involvement in Southeast Asia. “Today, the Vietnamese people are fighting for their freedom in South Vietnam. We are carrying forward our great heritage by helping to sustain their efforts.”¹¹ One year later, at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta, King said, “We still need some Paul Revere of conscience to alert every hamlet and every village of America that revolution is still at hand.”¹² What all the people meant by “revolution,” of course, was different.

“What do We Mean by the Revolution?” Adams asked Jefferson. “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 1760–1775, in the course of fifteen Years, before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington.”¹³ Adams, like many people, had no doubt that the Revolution had begun in Boston. Oliver thought Massachusetts was “the *Volcano* from whence issued all the Smoak, Flame and Lava, which has since enveloped the whole British American continent.”¹⁴ Adams believed the Revolution began in 1760 because, in August of that year, Massachusetts’ new, royally appointed governor, Francis Bernard, arrived to find a city in ruins, ravaged, just months before, by the worst fire in any colonial American city, ever. But the city was suffering from worse than fire. Massachusetts had sent more men to fight in the French and Indian War than all of the other colonies combined. Known in Europe as the Seven Years’ War, the fighting had started in 1756. Many Massachusetts men had fallen; many more were still to die, buried in unmarked graves, far from home. Boston in 1760 was a city of widows and orphans and wounded soldiers, of struggling artisans and smuggling merchants. Its newspapers were filled with notices of runaway apprentices, of slaves for sale, of bankrupted estates.¹⁵ That December, Boston’s James Otis Jr., a thirty-six-year-old lawyer and the most brilliant legal mind of his generation, agreed to take a case arguing against Bernard that the government had acted with arbitrary authority in using an instrument known as writs of assistance to search and seize city merchants’ property as part of a campaign against illicit trade.¹⁶ (Otis had another beef with Bernard, who had passed over his father, James Otis Sr., to appoint Thomas Hutchinson as chief of the colony’s Superior Court.) The following February, Otis argued the writs case, which is why Peter Oliver, who also served on the Superior Court, and who was Hutchinson’s brother-in-law, started his history in 1761. The showdown took place in Boston’s Town House (now the Old State House), a three-story Georgian whose east-end gable was topped with gilded statues of the lion and the unicorn, mythical symbols of the British Crown. The Town House sat in the middle of King Street (now State Street), in the heart of the city. The case was heard in the Governor’s Council Chamber, on the second floor, a room that boasted an elegant prospect, a wondrous view straight down the Long Wharf and across the harbor, looking wistfully and a little desperately back toward London. John Adams, who was, at the time, an assistant of Otis’s law partner, sat among the spectators, in a room tricked out with every trapping of luxury—red velvet-covered mahogany chairs and even ornamented brass spittoons—and of royal authority: Bernard had brought with him full-length portraits of George II and George III to hang alongside the king’s arms and a vast map of London.¹⁷ Of Otis’s fiery performance that day, Adams later wrote, “American independence was then and there born.”¹⁸

Meanwhile, an ocean away, the *Phillis*, a two-masted, square-rigged ship piloted by Peter Gwin, was cruising the Guinea coast of Africa. After trading English goods for African slaves, Gwin prepared to head to New England. He had sailed to Boston before. He knew how to navigate through the perilous entrance to Boston’s harbor, dotted with rocks and shoals and more than thirty islands, tiny and treacherous. Once he got past Castle William, the water would be calmer and the hazards fewer. And then, what beauty, what depths. Wrote one traveler, “within the harbor there is room enough for five hundred sail to lie at an anchor.”¹⁹ A sea captain’s paradise.

The *Phillis* reached Boston in July of 1761, dropping anchor alongside the Long Wharf, the longest wharf—and the biggest commercial structure—in all of America: 150 feet wide and an audacious 2,000 feet long. On eighteenth-century maps, it looks like a finger pointing across the ocean, pointing home. Gwin’s first order of business was to carry his bill of lading the length of the wharf, covering

with ware-houses and shops, and up the hill to the Customs House, built of rough-hewn stone. To get there, he had to make his way through the dockside bustle of sailors and shipwrights, hawkers and shopkeepers, fishwives and whores, artisans and merchants, the sons and daughters of Europe, Africa, and America. In a city of fifteen thousand people, about a thousand were black, and of that thousand only eighteen were free.²⁰ The day Gwin's *Phillis* cleared customs, twenty-two other ships had dropped anchor offshore or tied their leading ropes to the town's fifty-seven wharves. They had sailed from the north: Newfoundland, Quebec; from the south: Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, Philadelphia, Maryland, Virginia, St. Kitts, Nevis, Bermuda; and from the east, all the way across the wide water: Liverpool and London. Gwin went to the print shop of Benjamin Edes and John Gill, on Queen Street, next door to the town jail, to place an ad in the *Boston Gazette*:

JUST Imported,
From *AFRICA*.

A Number of prime young *SLAVES*, from the Windward
Coast, and to be Sold on board Capt. *Gwin* lying at
New-Boston.

This notice caught the eye of a tailor named John Wheatley, who kept a shop on the corner of King Street and Mackerel Lane. Wheatley and his wife, Susanna, took a chaise to the wharf, boarded the ship, and inspected the cargo, men, women, and children brought out of the fetid obscurity below decks to squint against the sun glinting off the water. The girl had lost her two front teeth. That put her at about seven years old. Maybe eight. She was skinny and sick and nearly naked. She was half dead. The captain wanted her off his hands. Wheatley bought her "for a trifle." His wife named her after the ship.²¹

That girl would one day chronicle the birth of the United States:

Columbia's scenes of glorious toils I write. . . .

And nations gaze at scenes before unknown!²²

Phillis Wheatley's revolution began in 1761.

The French and Indian War ended in 1763. The imperial coffers were empty: half of Britain's revenues went to paying interest on the war debt. The colonies cost us this war, and the colonies should at least help pay for it, was the logic of George Grenville, the new prime minister. The next year, Parliament passed the Sugar and Currency Acts and warned of a Stamp Act to come. That's what David Ramsay, in his *History*, dated the beginning of the Revolution to 1764. So did Mercy Otis Warren, James Otis's sister, in her three-volume *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*, published in 1805. Mercy Otis, born on Cape Cod in 1728, was three years younger than her brother. Like most girls, she had no formal schooling; instead, she read her brother's books and soaked up his Harvard education. She married James Warren in 1754; they settled in Plymouth. Between 1757 and 1766, she gave birth to five sons. When she wrote her history, she apologized for writing at all—this was man's work—but assured her reader that writing history hadn't hardened her: "The historian has never laid aside the tenderness of the sex."²³

Warren sited the Revolution's beginning in a room in Boston's Town House just across from the Governor's Council Chamber, Representatives Hall, where her brother, behind the oak speaker's desk, declared taxation without representation to be tyranny. To be governed without consent, to be taxed without representation, Americans liked to argue, "is worse than Death—it is SLAVERY!"²⁴ This wasn't simply a rhetorical flourish. It was, instead, something between a metaphor and a definition: taxation without representation is slavery.²⁵ Stephen Hopkins, the governor of Rhode Island, wrote, "those who are governed by the will of another, or of others, and whose property may be taken from them by taxes, or otherwise, without their consent, and against their will, are in the miserable condition of slaves."²⁶ In *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved*, published in 1764, Otis followed the implications of this argument. "Are not women born as free as men? Would it not be infamous to assert that the ladies are all slaves by nature?" And then he argued, at length, on hypocrisy:

The Colonists are by the law of nature free born, as indeed all men are, white or black. . . . Does it follow that tis right to enslave a man because he is black? Will short curl'd hair like wool . . . help the argument?

No, was Otis's unequivocal answer:

Nothing better can be said in favor of a trade, that is the most shocking violation of the law of nature, has a direct tendency to diminish the inestimable value of liberty, and makes every dealer in it a tyrant, from the director of an African company to the petty chapman in needles and pins on the unhappy coast. It is a clear truth, that those who every day barter away other men's liberty, will soon care little for their own.²⁷

At the time, not everyone could see that as well as Otis did.

Despite colonial opposition to the Sugar and Currency Acts, Parliament passed the Stamp Act the next year, requiring government-issued stamps on pages of printed paper—on, that is, everything from indenture agreements to bills of credit to playing cards. It infuriated many colonists, who were outraged at Parliament's tyrannical reach. "We won't be their negroes," John Adams wrote. The Stamp Act cost lawyers and merchants a few farthings, but it hit printers very hard, requiring them to affix stamps to the pages of their newspapers and to pay stamp collectors a halfpenny for every half sheet—amounting, ordinarily, to a penny for every copy of every issue of every newspaper—and, as that weren't burden enough, a two shillings' tax on every advertisement. The first cost would drive away subscribers; the second would daunt advertisers. No paper could survive.²⁸

Understanding the Stamp Act requires knowing a bit about the history of newspapers. Newspapers date to the sixteenth century; they started as newsletters and newsbooks, copied by hand and sent from one place to another, carrying word of trade and politics. Venetians sold news for a coin called *gazetta*. Germans read *Zeitungen*; the French perused *nouvelles*; the English paged through *intelligencers*. The word "newspaper" didn't enter the English language until the 1660s. The *London Gazette* began in 1665. Its news was mostly old, foreign, and unreliable, so unreliable that, in English, the word "gazette" meant, well into the eighteenth century, "rumor-monger." Because early newspapers tended either to arm or to take aim at people in power, they were also sometimes called "paper bullets." In early America, printers were also the editors of the newspapers, and, often, the chief writers. They tended toward irreverence. The first newspaper in the British American colonies, *Publick Occurrences*, was printed in Boston in 1690. It was shut down after just one issue for reporting, among other things, that the king of France had cuckolded his own son. Propping up power

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