Historian Jack Rakove on American history writing and the falsifications of the 1619 Project and its defenders

Tom Mackaman
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Jack Rakove, William Robertson Coe Professor of History and American Studies and professor of political science, emeritus, at Stanford University, is a leading scholar of the American Revolution and the framing of the Constitution, whose books include the Pulitzer Prize-winning Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution, *and* Revolutionaries: A New History of the Invention of America. *He recently spoke to the* World Socialist Web Site *about his work, the controversy surrounding the 1619 Project and trends in American history writing.*

Tom Mackaman: Could you tell us something about your background, intellectual development, and your work?

Jack Rakove: I was born in Chicago. I'm one day older than the Marshall Plan, which means everybody knows my birthday is June 4, 1947. My father was Milton Rakove, [1] who was a well-known professor of political science, who taught mostly at what eventually became the University of Illinois Chicago. He went to college at Roosevelt University thanks to the GI Bill. He went on to the University of Chicago but had to drop out for a few years to make a living. He went back in 1954 when we moved from the west side of Chicago down to Hyde Park, near the University of Chicago. He was a student of Hans Morgenthau, [2] and was very close to Morgenthau, who lived about a block and a half away. From kindergarten to eighth grade, I went to five different public schools. When I finished the last year of Chicago public schools, my dad wanted me to go to Evanston High School, which was then one of the elite public high schools in the country.

I went on to Haverford College, and spent my junior year abroad at the University of Edinburgh, which was actually quite an interesting year, intellectually. There were a bunch of faculty at Edinburgh with ties to the journal *History and Theory*; they taught a course on the Theory and History of History so they got me thinking about philosophy of history questions, and not historiography in the narrow sense, but history as an analytical discipline. Are there covering laws in history for example? I think this is actually significant these days because I think few historians think deeply about issues of causation. As my mentor Bernard Bailyn argued, many of these philosophical and epistemological questions are not particularly interesting for what he called "working historians" when they set out to solve particular problems, what Bailyn called "anomalies." But when one is thinking about a big problem like the origins of revolutions, including our own, causal explanations do become important. In general, the social scientists work much harder on this than historians do, but there are times when trying to think as they do is helpful.

Anyhow, from my undergraduate years at Haverford and Edinburgh I went on to grad school at Harvard in 1969, delayed by four months of active duty at Fort Knox and another half year working for the ACLU in Chicago. My undergraduate mentor, Wallace MacCaffrey, [3] was actually very close friends with Bernard Bailyn, but I was not an early Americanist when I started out. I had a general interest in the relationships between politics and political ideas. I came from a political household. I mentioned my father's friendship with Hans Morgenthau, but in the early '60s he got politically active. He became a speechwriter for Chuck Percy, [4] who was a liberal Illinois Republican who chaired the party's platform committee in 1960, ran for governor in 1964, and became a senator. But my father was kind of a classic New Deal Democrat. We were just conventional liberal Democrats, and with the Goldwater boom, he wound up working instead for Otto Kerner, [5] who became governor, and then a federal judge.

So at the start I was interested in 20th century politics. But I was advised to take Bud Bailyn's seminar, and that was transformative, just because Bailyn was far and away the most interesting person to work with.

TM: Tell us about Bailyn's seminar.

JR: It wasn't about American history per se. For example, he had us read a book by E. H. Carr [6]—you probably know the book, called *The Romantic Exiles*, which is about Alexander Herzen and his friends who were Russian émigrés.

TM: It's interesting that Bailyn would assign that.

JR: Well, that's because the Early American History seminar had nothing to do with early American history. We read all sorts of things. We read Lord Denning's report on the Profumo scandal, which in Bailyn's seminar had to do with the use of adjectives. We read David Cecil's *Melbourne*, because of his use of transitional sentences. It all came down to the question of how it is you frame a narrative where you have lots of people doing lots of different things.

I became interested in Sam Adams, [7] whom I like to call America's Trotsky. At lunch one day, Bailyn said to me that if one could figure out what Samuel Adams is up to, you could explain 30 percent of the revolution. So, I started thinking about his career. Of course, Sam Adams spent a lot of time in the Continental Congress, and I started thinking of the Massachusetts delegation to the Continental Congress, and that it might be interesting to look at that group to try to think about how politics changed over time after the revolution. There really wasn't a good history on this subject. The historian who edited the original version of what's called *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, eight volumes published between 1921-36, Edmund Cody Burnett, had written the narrative history but it had no analytical or interpretive aspect.

One of the things we learned from Bailyn was to ask the question, how do you define a good analytical problem? There had been this presupposition among the neo-Progressives [8] that, in viewing the Continental Congress you would see radicals and conservatives—or radicals, moderates and conservatives—kind of battling for power. One historian, James Henderson, came out with a roll call analysis based on

party politics in the Continental Congress. But I had a very different understanding of how the Congress worked. You are dealing with a revolutionary body whose members came and went. I mean, they came and went with such frequency that they barely knew one another. The idea that you had some embedded struggle for power just struck me as being wrong-headed.

One of the first things Bailyn did with me in his seminar was to give me as a topic the early uses of the Federalist Papers. I have been working on that text ever since. It is an old-fashioned topic in some ways, but, as I like to say, my epitaph should read, "He tried to make the old history respectable again." I am not a great innovator methodologically. I just happen to think I have learned how to ask better questions. I see questions that other people have strangely neglected, for example, the history of the concept of Constitutional "original meanings."

TM: If you had to recommend one of your books, that best sums up what you have done in your career…

JR: I have three big books and a variety of lesser books. My eighth book, on the free exercise of religion, was just published, [9] and I'm working on a ninth. *Original Meanings* is obviously my best-known book, and my most important book. For *Original Meanings* it helps to be invested in some of the big debates about Constitutional interpretation, and especially to know something about originalism. The original idea for that book emerged out of a long article I wrote on the Treaty Clause back in the early 1980s, but I had first started thinking about the subject a decade earlier, mostly in conjunction with the Nixon impeachment and the adoption of the War Powers Resolution. Because people were asking, "How did the Framers think about the question?" I started thinking that is an interesting question. Those were historical questions. So I set out to figure out a serious historical method to address them, which is what *Original Meanings* does.

For general readers, *Revolutionaries*, [10] which came out in 2010, may be a better book. The idea there was to write a narrative history of the American Revolution, with biographically themed chapters, which is also an idea that came out of Bailyn's seminars. The first chapter is on Adams and the moderates, which actually ties in with the 1619 Project controversy, there is one on Washington, one on George Mason and Constitution making, one on Henry and John Laurens, the South Carolinians, and then there is a chapter on the diplomats, John Jay, Franklin, and Adams overseas. The final third of the book deals with Jefferson, Madison—who is my main man—and Hamilton.

TM: In an email you pointed out that we are coming up on the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, and that called to mind that some of these anniversaries have come in explosive times. The 100th anniversary came in 1876, a decade after the Civil War and in the middle of a huge depression, and on the cusp of the great strike of 1877; and then at the 200th anniversary, that comes right after Vietnam and Watergate and within the crisis of the 1970s. But now as we approach the 250th, there is the question as to whether democracy will survive, coming after the January 6, 2021 sacking of the Capitol by Trump's fascist supporters, and the mass death caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is difficult to overstate the dimensions of the crisis.

JR: I am trying to write a political history of the Constitution to the present. Recent events have actually made this a problematic exercise. I keep telling friends that as an author, you never know exactly how a book is going to end until you finally end it, but usually you know what the conclusion is going to be. But I no longer know what the conclusion will be since who now knows what the fate of our constitutional system will be?

But I have a more general theory on the way we remember the Revolution, which has two aspects. The lesser aspect asks, why are all the great historical movies about the Civil War, and none of them about the Revolution? The problem with the Revolution is that, unless you take the politics, political ideas, seriously, it is hard to dramatize. It is very difficult to do; in fact, probably impossible.

We have this pretentious term for the Revolution, "the Founding." But the Revolution has indeed served as a vehicle for national unity in a way that the Civil War, rightly or wrongly, cannot or has not. Even today, over 150 years after its conclusion, the Civil War remains the source of division. We do have the removal of the Confederate memorials and the renaming of army bases. That is probably two steps forward. But then we have a resurgent white nationalism which is rooted in deeply racist attitudes. I think of January 6 and that guy carrying the Confederate flag inside the Capitol as a symbolically horrifying moment.

It is not a profound observation on my part but it does seem to me that the Revolution has long remained a point of unification. The Declaration, the Constitution—where would we be without them? We speak sometimes of Reconstruction after the Civil War as a "second founding," but nobody thinks it ended well, much less that it set the right course in Southern culture.

TM: I agree with you that it has been hard for Hollywood to imagine the American Revolution as a revolution, or in fact to imagine it at all. But this gets me to another question. I suppose you could say that the difficulty in appreciating the American Revolution has, so to speak, been there from the beginning. I think of the correspondence between Adams and Jefferson, where Jefferson asks Adams what was this revolution to which they staked "our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor," and Adams writes back that the war "was no part of the Revolution. It was only an effect and consequence" of a change in the minds of the people during the imperial crisis. I'm sympathetic to that interpretation. But let me ask you: what was the American Revolution, and why is it so hard to fathom it as a revolution?

JR: I have written about this in different places. Keith Baker and Dan Edelstein, two of my colleagues, edited a book called *Scripting Revolutions*. Revolutions have their own scripts, you know. So, they asked me to participate and I did. Mine is called "Constitutionalism: The Happiest Revolutionary Script."

It is an open question. Does the American Revolution fit the revolutionary story or not? You have the problem of declaring independence in 1776, and then forming a truly national polity in 1787. How do you get from the one to the other? Those are two interesting questions in themselves. If you are a political historian, you have to explain why certain political actions were taken at particular moments in time.

Of course, a lot depends on how you define revolution. In one sense the explanatory problems you are going to solve do not really depend on whether or not you have a general theory of revolution. Having one may help you, it may inspire you, but in the end, as a historian you focus on specific problems, those things Bailyn called "anomalies." We had a 50th anniversary conference, actually at Yale of all places, on the *Ideological Origins*. [11] There is an issue of the *New England Quarterly* dedicated to it. The first essay is Bailyn's, with his reflections on how the book was written, and the next essay is mine, called "Ideas, Ideology, and the Anomalous Problem of Revolutionary Causation."

TM: You mentioned it before, and we will need to turn to the 1619 Project, whose central claim was that the American Revolution was launched to defend slavery. That assertion has drawn support from a few historians, most notably Woody Holton, who has placed overriding emphasis on the Dunmore Proclamation.

JR: My response to Woody Holton is that the basic story that gets you to 1776 is British provocation and American reaction. Americans never, even on their more radical days—they are not out there fomenting incidents trying to force the British to drive the Americans into revolt. There is a letter from Samuel Adams I love quoting, from April 30, 1776, in which he says, "We cannot make events. Our business is wisely to improve

them."

The Americans do mobilize, and as Pauline Maier's first book [12] points out, they do have a whole ideology of resistance. And not just ideology, but this whole kind of strategy about what acts they are justified in doing. I think it has been a weakness in American scholarship, including Woody Holton's, but not only Woody's, to not appreciate the fact that the British provide the engine driving all this. Americans see themselves as reacting. I think when you get to 1770, most American leaders hope, think, may even have expected, that the British, having gone through these two big crises over the Stamp Act and the Townshend Duties, will say, okay this policy is not working. I think Franklin or Cushing [13] says, let's just let all these issues lie asleep or fall asleep.

That is why Bailyn's book on Hutchinson is so important, [14] because events then take place in Massachusetts where things spin out of control. When the Patriots dumped the tea into the harbor, the British government decided it had to make an example of Massachusetts to discourage the others. The government makes that decision in 1774, and it produces a political disaster. Punishing Massachusetts is what creates what Americans called "the common cause." But then the British doubled down on this strategy in April 1775. And they immediately wind up with two military defeats. [15] So at that point the British should have recognized that the underlying assumptions of their strategy were mistaken. But they don't, and then we get the Dunmore Proclamation in November, 1775. Even if the Dunmore Proclamation matters, the basic logic of the decision emerged out of the same failed strategy that had already produced the war. I wrote on this in one of my first articles. [16]

My basic argument is that once you get to the summer of 1775, once the Second Continental Congress convenes on May 10, they actually did have a big debate on their objectives: What is our policy now? Do we need to rethink our objectives? And people like Dickinson [17] and the other moderates say, maybe we should do more to encourage conciliation. But in the end, they don't alter anything. They said maybe we should send a delegation to London, but they didn't. They said maybe we should alter our terms, but they didn't. They do send another petition, the Olive Branch Petition. It doesn't change anything. The British are in the same position. So once you get to the mid-to-late summer of 1775, both sides are committed to ultimatums presented to the other side. The American moderates, people like John Jay—who is very active though still a very young man—James Duane, Robert Morris, Gouverneur Morris, James Wilson and a couple other names I am probably leaving out—these moderates are desperately hoping that the British will send a peace commission over and it will have actual authority to negotiate.

That doesn't happen. What does happen is the British pass the Prohibitory Act, which makes all American commerce subject to confiscation. They declare the Americans to be traitors. The king starts negotiating treaties with the various German states, the Hanoverians and others, to start bringing Hessians—that is, hiring mercenary armies.

The question became, are we going to have negotiations, or are we going to continue to escalate this confrontation? Dunmore's Proclamation just fits inside that story. It's not that it is a fresh grievance, in itself, that ratchets up what is at stake—much less that Americans have to go to war to defend slavery against a non-existent threat. It's one thing to encourage slave uprising as part of war, to encourage runaway slaves. It's another to say you are actually going to have emancipation under the British Empire. I mean it's complete and utter nonsense.

TM: Which raises the question of British slavery in the Caribbean…

JR: You might read a book by a historian named Michael Taylor called *The Interest*. [18] It is about abolition in the West Indies. One of the interesting things about this book is that it shows that what makes the passage of British abolition possible when it was ratified in 1832, and enacted in 1833, is really the first Reform Act. I have been discussing with a couple of my English historian colleagues about the attack on the old representational system of Parliament—with rotten boroughs and pocket boroughs [19] and so on—how this pivots, or depends upon, the American Revolution and the whole debate over representation that it entailed. But what makes the passage of emancipation possible in the West Indies is actually the political reforms that start significantly affecting English politics with the first Reform Act, because they really break up the sugar interest. That's why Taylor calls the book *The Interest*. The sugar riches remained a formidable force in British politics until the Reform Act began shifting the whole calculus of parliamentary governance.

In a lot of ways the 1619 Project—I think their position on the Dunmore Proclamation and independence being over defending slavery—I think it's completely nuts. It's easily falsifiable, including owing to the fact that British emancipation in the West Indies takes another 50 years. Dunmore is trying to govern Virginia from a ship cruising up and down the Chesapeake.

TM: Perhaps this takes us to some of the work you have done on ideology and interest in history. We could consider that from the vantage point of the Constitutional Convention, as it pertains to the question of slavery. There has been a lot of literature on that that has been coming out. What do you make of it?

JR: Chapter four of *Original Meanings* addresses this. There are two big, quote-unquote, "compromises" over representation: the misnamed Connecticut compromise, which I think did not have that much to do with Connecticut to begin with, and then the one over the three-fifths clause. [20] The Connecticut compromise over the Senate was not a compromise in the proper sense of the term. In the crucial vote of July 16, 1787, one side won and the other lost. The final vote was five states to four, with Massachusetts divided—and had the Bay State actually voted, it still would have been a tie. The Federalists started calling this a compromise only later, not because they supported it in principle, but simply because they wanted the Constitution ratified.

The real compromise is the one over slavery, in that it was a compromise and was understood as such in its time. There was some serious discussion of it. The theoretical definition of representation that the framers used is that it is a substitute for what's become physically impossible. The people, collectively, cannot deliberate. So, representation is a substitute for popular deliberation. But slaves would never deliberate under any circumstances. They have no legal, much less civic, identity. So, the idea that that form of property should be represented as property, theoretically, makes no sense. And it is easily attacked. This is a great question to ask students of American history. If you are anti-slavery, which fraction do you prefer: five-fifths, three-fifths, or zero? The genuine anti-slavery position is 0/5, because that will reduce the political influence of the slave states in national governance. So that is the compromise. But the real question is, do you want to have a union with the South or without it?

I think the equal state vote was a disaster then and remains one today. The political theory of the Constitution tacitly or effectively presumes that the size of the populace of a state—whether you live in a large state like California or Texas or an itty-bitty one like North Dakota or Wyoming—defines the interests of voters and legislators. But if you are a thoroughgoing Madisonian, as I am, you know that this factor has no effect—none!—on the real interests that define our actual political preferences. That is what the framers were arguing about in Philadelphia, and the Madisonians lost.

Slavery, unfortunately, was an interest demanding explicit recognition and protection. And unlike other kinds of interests, which Madison imagined being scattered across the land, it was geographically concentrated in one region of the country, the South. The Missouri Crisis [21] of 1819-21 became the great disproof of Madison's theory. Jefferson understands this as well, and I am sure they talked about it privately when they visited. And the disproof is this: if you have an interest that is

concentrated in one particular region, and not just concentrated, but dominant, you have a problem. Madison's notion of multiplicity of factions presupposes, or assumes, some scattering of interest across the landscape. That is why religion is such a good model for him. Turn Protestants loose to read the Bible, prevent the state from interfering with their opinions or enforcing orthodoxy, and denominations and sects would continue to be fruitful and multiply, to the net advantage of all. But the presence or absence of slavery worked politically in very different ways.

TM: Was it predictable in 1789 that slavery would ultimately ruin the union? Did anyone foresee civil war at the time of the framing of the Constitution?

JR: I am working on this question in my new book. I have spent a lot of time with the 1790 debates over slavery, the ones generated by the two sets of petitions, from Quakers and from the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, which Franklin led. The 1790 debate on slavery in the House goes on much longer than anyone might have expected, given that the Senate never took the petitions seriously in the first place. But the House keeps pushing the issue. Southerners try to shut the debate down, but they cannot. They managed to minimize the resolutions, which the Senate was never going to approve anyway. You do see this escalatory rhetoric on the part of the South Carolinians.

You certainly see it by 1819. I have actually just been reading Rufus King's [22] letters this morning. King was a major player in the second round of the Missouri controversy. He plays a major role in mobilizing public opinion between the original debate over the Tallmadge amendment, which takes place in late February and very early March 1819. Then the 15th Congress adjourned and the 16th Congress met for the first time in early December, 1819. Remember, a whole year would elapse between the election of a new Congress and their actual assembly, because members had to take time to plan their trip to Washington. You could not just pop into a national airport or whatever. King says very explicitly that the Northwest Ordinance was "an ancient settlement" in 1787; it had been a compromise then, but not one that the Union had to enforce endlessly.

And then there is the issue of free blacks. And the slaves also pick up information, intelligence, as they are bound to do, about what is going on politically, whether it is in Washington or London, through the rumor mill. Some of this is raised in the work of the recently deceased historian Julius Scott. [23] So southerners were always freely imagining possibilities of slave revolt, and any political discussion of slavery would contribute to that fear. Even during the 1790 debates, one South Carolinian says we should not talk about this because there are a couple of free African Americans up in the gallery right now. If they hear we are discussing this, word will spread and that is going to create trouble.

My late colleague, Don Fehrenbacher, who also came as I do from the Land of Lincoln, has this great line in his Dred Scott book, [24] where he says slavery is a kind of concentrated, testy, aggressive interest, while anti-slavery was a sentiment. Slavery is defensive, it is aggressive, it wants recognition, it bridles at any threat or insult. There are ambiguities in the nature and the depth of what anti-slavery sentiment means right through the antebellum. So, to answer your question, they did not see the threat of civil war, but it was there in some vague sense.

TM: Could you say something about trends in historical writing on the American Revolution and the Constitution?

JR: You asked about Bailyn and ideas. The neo-progressive historians, and I think Woody Holton is one, or if you read Michael Klarman's book *The Framers Coup*—I have a long review of it in *Reviews in American History*—they do not take political ideas very seriously. And sometimes I think they want to conflate ideas with ideals, which are very different. Ideals are to some extent part of civic society. They will call ideas "so much philosophical music." They have no capacity to discuss ideas. Bailyn, Gordon Wood, Pauline Maier, and I have taken ideas seriously. To think about how they are generated, and how they are disputed, and which parts matter, and so on. The intellectual and the political sources of modern democratic-republican regimes is itself a significant problem, and you have to take the ideas seriously. People care about them. In my view there are significant developments in the history of constitutional thinking, and constitutional development that emerge from the American Revolution. We do not have to be happy with all the results. The equal state vote is terrible in the Senate, as is its replication in the Electoral College. I think Madison understood this at the time. But their thoughts about everything from equality to constitutional government have significant implications for world history.

Notes:

[1] Milton L. Rakove (1918–1983), noted political scientist and commentator on Chicago politics.

[2] Hans J. Morgenthau (1904–1980), German-born legal theorist and founder of the field of international relations, Morgenthau was author of the book *Politics Among Nations*.

[3] Wallace T. MacCaffrey (1920–2013), historian of Elizabethan England.

[4] Charles H. Percy (September 27, 1919–September 17, 2011), Republican US Senator from Illinois, 1967–1985.

[5] Otto Kerner Jr. (1908–1976), Democratic governor of Illinois, 1961–1968.

[6] E.H. Carr (1892–1982), British scholar and historian of the Russian Revolution.

[7] Samuel Adams (1722–1803), leading American Revolutionary War figure from Boston, and a distant cousin of John Adams.

[8] A school of contemporary historical writing, the neo-Progressive historians have carried over from the Progressive historians such as Charles Beard (1874–1948) an overriding emphasis on immediate material causes in history.

[9] *Beyond Belief, Beyond Conscience: The Radical Significance of the Free Exercise of Religion*, Oxford, 2020.

[10] *Revolutionaries: A New History of the Invention of America*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011.

[11] Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Belknap Press, 1967.

[12] Pauline S. Maier (1938–2013), a leading historian of the American Revolution and student of Bailyn. Her first book was *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765–1776*. Knopf, 1974.

[13] Thomas Cushing (1725–1788), statesman and merchant from Boston.

[14] *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*, Belknap Press, 1974.

[15] Rakove is referring to the battles fought in Massachusetts in the spring and early summer of 1775, the Battles of Lexington and Concord, on April 19; and Bunker Hill, on June 17.

[16] Jack Rakove, "The Decision for American Independence: A Reconstruction," *Perspectives in American History*, Volume X, 1976, Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History.

[17] John Dickinson (1732–1808), leading moderate figure of the American Revolution, author of the influential pamphlet *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*, published in 1767.

[18] Michael Taylor, *The Interest: How the British Establishment Resisted the Abolition of Slavery*, Bodley Head, 2020.

[19] Rakove is referring to British constituencies that were depopulated or dominated by large landholders but were still represented in Parliament.

[20] The "three-fifths clause," part of Article 1, Section 2, Clause 3 of the Constitution, held that slaves be counted as three-fifths of a person for the purposes of taxation and representation.

[21] Popularly known as the Missouri Compromise, the crisis emerged over Missouri's entrance into the union as a slave state.

[22] Rufus King (1755–1827), Federalist from Massachusetts whose political career lasted from the American Revolution to the 1820s.

[23] Julius Scott (1955–2021), was author of the *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution*, published in 2018.

[24] Don Fehrenbacher (1920–1997), his book, *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics*, 1978, won the 1979 Pulitzer Prize in History.