

“From a small spark, kindled in America, a flame has arisen not to be extinguished”

Ken Burns’ *The American Revolution*

Tom Mackaman
24 November 2025

“WhatdowemeanbytheRevolution?Thewar?Thatwasnopartofthe Revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it. The Revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected, from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen years before a drop of blood was drawn at Lexington.” – John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 24 August 1815.

Ken Burns’ new documentary series *The American Revolution* is a six-part, twelve-hour account of the eight-year war through which the thirteen British colonies fought for independence and created the United States. Premiering on November 16, 2025—with all episodes simultaneously available for streaming on PBS’s website and app—the series traces the conflict from the deepening imperial crisis of the 1760s through the military turning points at Saratoga and Yorktown to the unsettled postwar landscape, weaving together high politics, battlefield strategy, and the experiences of Indigenous nations, enslaved and free Black Americans, Loyalists and rank-and-file soldiers.

Directed by Burns with longtime collaborators Sarah Botstein and David Schmidt and scripted by Geoffrey C. Ward, the film features Peter Coyote’s familiar narration alongside a large voice cast. Prominent voice actors include Josh Brolin as George Washington, Paul Giamatti as John Adams, Jeff Daniels as Thomas Jefferson, Matthew Rhys as Tom Paine, Claire Danes as Abigail Adams, and Meryl Streep as the diarist Mercy Otis Warren.

In place of the abundant historical photography available to Burns’ earlier projects, most memorably in his landmark *The Civil War* series (1990), *The American Revolution* leans on revolutionary-era paintings, engravings, maps, documents, and large-scale but de-centered reenactments, deploying the trademark slow pans, zooms and musical cues across canvases, portraits and landscapes to create visual continuity in a world where most individuals never sat for a portrait.

The American Revolution is above all else timely. As the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence fast approaches amid the gutting of American democracy by the would-be dictator Donald Trump and the billionaire oligarchy he represents, audiences cannot help but sense the relevance of a population revolting against tyranny and despotism in the name of equality and inalienable rights. Appropriately, the series begins with a quote from Tom Paine and his *Rights of Man*, which suggests this, the ongoing legacy of the Revolution:

From a small spark, kindled in America, a flame has arisen not to be extinguished. Without consuming, it winds its progress from nation to nation, and conquers by a silent operation. Man finds himself changed and discovers that the strength and powers of

despotism consist wholly in the fear of resisting it, and that, in order to be free, it is sufficient that he wills it.

It is as if these events and people, slumbering for a quarter millennium, must now be awakened with things urgent to tell the present. Whatever its limitations—and these must be discussed—it is certain that Burns’ effort will contribute to renewed interest in the American Revolution. This is all to the good.

It is also significant that Burns’ series rejects the central thesis of the *New York Times’ 1619 Project*: That the American Revolution was actually a counter-revolution waged to defend slavery against the enlightened British Empire’s plans to free the slaves. The utterly bogus “reframing” by the flagship publication of American liberalism was refuted by the *World Socialist Web Site* and prominent historians it interviewed. The *Times* and 1619 Project “creator,” Nikole Hannah-Jones, had set out to cover the American Revolution in mud and to defame its key figures. One manifestation of this was lynching-style attacks on statues to Washington and Jefferson, toppled and defaced with “1619” scrawled on them. These attacks took place amid the George Floyd protests in 2020, but their meaning was diametrically opposed to the ideas about equality that inspired millions at that time.

In this vein, it is of no small significance that none of the historians most closely associated with the 1619 Project and Hannah-Jones appear in Burns’ series, which took nearly a decade to produce, stretching back to 2015. Not a single contributor to the original *New York Times* magazine edition or to the dismal, expanded book version is interviewed (e.g., Ibram Kendi or Martha Jones). Nor does Burns include any of the historians featured in the 1619 Project documentary (e.g., Woody Holton or Seth Rockman), or those who led public denunciations of the WSWS and the scholars it interviewed (e.g., David Waldstreicher and Nicholas Guyatt). This can hardly have been accidental.

Not that the series shies away from slavery. Thousands of slaves seized freedom offered by the British when they fled their colonial masters. Some Patriots also emancipated slaves for military service. The role of free blacks in the Patriot armies is discussed as well. However, *The American Revolution* makes it clear—supported by historians Christopher Leslie Brown, Annette Gordon-Reed and Vincent Brown—that Britain’s promises to slaves were driven by self-interest and not benevolence, and the Empire itself depended heavily on slavery across its Atlantic domains. Instead of depicting the Revolution as a pro-slavery event, the series presents it as the moment when slavery first emerged as a major public issue; Bernard Bailyn, interviewed prior to his death in 2020, notes that it had not occupied such a place before 1776. The Revolutionary era pushed the “peculiar institution” into national debate, laying the groundwork for the antebellum crisis and the Civil War.

The series gives even greater attention to the war's impact on Native nations. Drawing on commentary from Philip J. Deloria, Colin G. Calloway, Kathleen DuVal, Alan Taylor, Maggie Blackhawk, Darren Bonaparte, Michael John Witgen and Ned Blackhawk, *The American Revolution* situates Native decision-making within the longer history of maneuvering among British, French, and Spanish empires—relationships that, for generations, had allowed Native nations to play competing powers against one another to preserve a fragile balance. With the French defeated in 1763 after the Seven Years War (called The French and Indian War by Americans), and settlers pushing westward, that balance collapsed. Most Native nations consequently aligned with the British, judging that a distant crown was the lesser evil. Yet there was no single “Indian” response. Native peoples, the film explains, were internally divided over how to confront the crisis. Nor does the film shrink from the consequences of this encounter, depicting the Revolution as a continental civil war marked by brutal violence—from the destruction of Cherokee towns to scorched-earth campaigns against the Haudenosaunee peoples—that left Native homelands shattered.

The series offers something of an international focus. A view from the Empire's standpoint is provided by historian Stephen Conway, a specialist on the British army. We see the imperialist logic that led King George III and his ministers to an extraordinary, massive intervention to hold onto the colonies—with enormous losses in lives and treasure. Iris de Rode gives a glimpse into the French encounter. France was drawn into the maelstrom to avenge previous defeats, but the American victory soon inspired an even greater revolution against the French monarchy itself. Friederike Baer tells the story of the German “Hessian” mercenaries sent to pacify the colonists, many thousands of whom wound up melting away into the German-speaking towns and villages of Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York. Harvard historian Maya Janisoff provides keen insights into the bitter experiences of the Loyalists, some 20 percent of the colonial population, many of whom wound up fleeing to Canada and the Indies after the war.

One of the unexpectedly timely themes in Burns' series is its treatment of smallpox inoculation in the Continental Army. Under Washington's direction, inoculation became a decisive public-health measure that saved the army from collapse and helped make victory possible. In an era when Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and other anti-vaccine crusaders sow distrust of basic immunization, the documentary offers a pointed reminder that early Americans embraced scientific intervention not out of naïveté, but out of hard experience with deadly disease.

The story of the inoculation forms part of the film's overriding emphasis on the fighting—the strategies of war planning, the movements of armies, the battles, all the way down to battlefield tactics. Here Burns is in his element. George Washington is the star, successive rival British generals his nemeses, and Benedict Arnold his treacherous “son.” This attention to war gobbles up the lion's share of the episodes, and it is the focus of most of the expert commentary ably provided by Rick Atkinson, Edward G. Lengel, Joseph Ellis, Stacy Schiff and Nathaniel Philbrick.

What winds up emerging out of all of it is a dark, ominous, and, above all else, violent Revolution. And indeed the American War for Independence, as it is also called, was sanguinary: As a share of the population, more Americans died in it than in any other war except the Civil War. The series, indeed, lays special stress on the “civil war” aspect of the Revolution, a war of “brother against brother,” Burns' script tells us.

But what does it all mean? Janisoff sums it up. “The United States came out of violence,” she solemnly intones.

This is one of those statements that sounds profound but actually explains very little. If the American Revolution had failed, whatever would have taken its place would also have “come out of violence.” The British Empire itself “came out of violence,” as the histories of the

Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and Middle East can richly attest—to say nothing of Ireland, Scotland and the English countryside. Indeed, as Marx so memorably put it, the whole modern capitalist world came “dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt.”

What is unfortunately missing from Burns' work is any sustained attention to what all the fighting was *about*, what this American Revolution *was*. The documentary excels at narrating the war, yet it rarely pauses to explore the political and social upheaval that actually constituted the Revolution, that which made it possible for colonists to believe Paine when he said “we have it in our power to begin the world over again.” John Adams, for his part, was sure the war was “no part of the Revolution” but was only “an effect and consequence” of a radicalization that took place “in the minds of the people.”

Burns has it just the other way around. The war is almost everything. The series races through the “Imperial Crisis” of 1763-1775, which Adams thought so crucial, in about 45 minutes. Discussion of the Declaration of Independence lasts for about eight minutes. The enormous debate that engulfed the new country over the Constitution is dealt with in even more cursory fashion. While the series notes the influence of the Haudenosaunee “Iroquois Federaton” on Franklin's abortive Albany Plan of Union, which foreshadowed the Continental Congress, somehow the series manages to say absolutely nothing about the immense influence of the Enlightenment on the thinking of the Founding Fathers and, indeed, the population as a whole.

Burns has resisted the tendency pushed by the 1619 Project and much of what passes for scholarship to reduce history to a morality tale that, to quote Engels, divides “history into noble and ignoble and then finds that as a rule the noble are defrauded and the ignoble are victorious.” But Burns does not escape another, stronger tendency in contemporary scholarship: to minimize the political, the conscious part of the historical process, and how that was in turn rooted in deep-going material changes.

What conditions created a world in which something so seemingly timeless as monarchy could, in the space of a few short years, be overthrown? Why did most colonists gravitate to what Washington called “the Glorious cause?” How did their beliefs sustain them in fighting a long and bloody war? How did the American Revolution become not only a war over home rule, but over who would rule at home, as historian Carl Becker long ago put it? How could the Americans, having overthrown one social order, “constitute” a new? How did the revolution transform the former colonial society? How did it lead so quickly to the great French Revolution of 1789? These questions are barely asked.

Nonetheless, even in its unfortunately brief treatment, the importance of ideology to the Revolution makes itself known. Viewers less interested in military history will be rewarded for their wait. There is important discussion in the first episode of Tom Paine. In the second episode, historian Gordon Wood reminds viewers that “All men are created equal,” is “the most famous and important phrase” in American history. “Lincoln knew that,” Wood adds, “and that's why he said, ‘all honor to Jefferson.’”

The historian Alan Taylor points out the bulk of the Declaration is a “list of crimes allegedly committed by the King,” that announced he had “forfeited his just authority.” The narration that follows, taken from the Declaration, could just as easily indict Trump: “unfit to be the ruler of a free people,” guilty of “injuries and usurpations” against “the rights of the people,” and of sending forth “swarms of officers to harass” them, all of it meant to establish “absolute tyranny.”

Its limitations notwithstanding, *The American Revolution* deserves the wide audience it will undoubtedly reach. The present crisis demands a search for perspective that the present alone cannot supply. “These are the times” that will turn masses of people to history with fresh eyes and with new questions.

If Burns' focus on the war sometimes obscures the deeper Revolution

that unfolded “in the minds of the people,” the series nonetheless will encourage viewers to look beyond the cannons and battlefields toward the world-transforming ideas that animated the Revolution—its defiance of tyranny, its assertion of popular sovereignty, and its radical claim that all are created equal—a “self-evident” truth that is more explosive in 2026 than it was when Jefferson put the thought to paper in 1776. Burns will then have performed a service most worthy of his subject.



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