

April 1776: When America opened ports to the world

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As the Trump administration imposes the military closure of the ports of Iran, part of its wider neo-colonial war against the peoples of the Middle East, it is notable that 250 years ago last week, on April 6, 1776, the Continental Congress, the revolutionary government of the American colonies, announced that its ports would be open to world trade rather than just to the ships and merchants of imperial Great Britain.

It was a declaration as consequential as any battle of the American Revolution, and one that speaks with unexpected directness to the present.

By opening the harbors to all nations except Great Britain—against which the colonies were already at war, and three months before the formal declaration of independence—Congress repudiated the Navigation Acts. This century-old body of law required colonial commerce to flow exclusively through British merchants and ports, securing to the mother country a permanent balance of payments surplus. This doctrine, that colonies existed to enrich the Crown and the monopolistic, courtier interests surrounding it, was central to the larger mercantilist economic system in which global commerce was seen as a zero-sum contest where one empire’s gain, measured in the inflow of gold and silver, required another’s loss.

But the American struggle against the mercantilist system was more than an episode in the emergence of the modern, capitalist world, as foundational as that has been to all subsequent history. The Revolution advanced popular claims to political and economic self-government, and challenged the entire system by which empires justified their dominion over colonies and, at least implicitly, over their laboring populations at home.

Leading imperial theorists and officials had spelled out the mercantilist system of subordination with remarkable frankness. As the 1663 Staples Act openly declared in its preamble, the aim was to impose “firmer dependence” and to “vent” English manufacturers on the colonies. In the view of the 18th century economist Malachi Postlethwayt, the very purpose of the subject colonies was “to be immediately dependent on their original parent and to make their interest subservient thereunto.” And in the words of Lord Cornbury, “all these Colloneys which are but twigs belonging to the main Tree ought to be kept entirely dependent and subservient to England.”

With this overriding logic in mind, Parliament strictly legislated the colonial trade. Only British-flagged ships could carry American goods, and such vessels had to have a majority of British sailors. Laws designated a long list of “enumerated items” that had to flow exclusively to England, or else first to arrive there before, after a tax imposition, they might be carried on to other European destinations. Other laws forbade colonists from issuing paper currency, selling finished iron products, harvesting prime timber for market sales, exporting woolen goods, and even shipping hats across colonial boundaries.

Trade and communication among the colonies flourished, facilitated by Benjamin Franklin’s development of the postal system, as did overseas commerce, some of it illegal under the Navigation Acts. Among the

Founding Fathers were many whose fortunes chafed against the restrictions of mercantilism—merchants who stood just outside of core patronage networks, including John Hancock of Boston and Robert Morris of Philadelphia; Virginia tobacco planters entangled in a credit system that left them chronically indebted to British merchant houses, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson; and even Franklin himself, who served as colonial postmaster general under the Crown and spent nearly two decades in London as a colonial agent, yet realized he could rise no further in a system of inherited privilege.

Far wider sections of the population were constrained by mercantilist laws, including the burgeoning ranks of urban artisans and the growing numbers of farmers drawn into the Atlantic market. Everywhere these Americans seemed to hunger after money, “the universal leveller” as Marx would later call it, whose scarcity owing to mercantile restriction favoring sterling led colonists to improvise a web of locally issued bills of credit and private notes—often of dubious legality—that skirted imperial monetary controls.

In the face of just this sort of colonial obstinacy, Parliament and the Ministry embarked on an ever more aggressive defense of its mercantilist system in the 1760s, setting into motion the Imperial Crisis, in which England issued forth a series of acts and taxes designed to not only shore up imperial finance but to reaffirm colonial subordination—among them the Stamp Act, the Sugar Act, the Currency Act, the Tea Act and the Declaratory Act—and the colonists reacted with ever greater storms of protest. In this escalating contest Parliament upheld mercantilism to the bitter end, even among liberal English statesmen. As Sir William Pitt put it in 1766, British sovereignty over the colonies should be “made to extend to every part of legislation whatever, that we may bind their trade, confine their manufacture, and exercise everie power whatsoever,” before conceding “except that of taking their money out of their pockets without their consent.”

The Continental Congress’ April 6, 1776 resolution opening the ports was aimed squarely at this system. It stated:

Resolved, That any goods, wares, and merchandise ... may be exported from the thirteen United Colonies, by the inhabitants thereof, and by the people of all such countries as are not subject to the King of Great Britain, to any parts of the world which are not under the dominion of the said King ... That any goods ... may be imported from any other parts of the world to the thirteen United Colonies, by the inhabitants thereof, and by the people of all such countries as are not subject to the said King.

John Adams and other revolutionists debating the measure in the Continental Congress hoped for more—a declaration of independence. But they recognized that opening the ports would be a decisive step in this

direction, and would perhaps help secure the support of the great European powers against Britain. Americans, Tom Paine reassured readers, “will always have a market while eating is the custom of Europe.” One immediate, practical effect was that foreign merchants were invited to treat American harbors as independent entrepôts, gaining for Washington’s Continental Army access to the arms and gunpowder of Europe.

Of greater historical significance is what the measure did for the anti-colonial struggle. It granted American merchants the freedom to trade wherever they wished, unbounded by the Navigation Acts and the exclusive prerogatives of British crown-chartered monopolies, such as the Hudson Bay Company, the South Sea Company, the Royal African Company and of course the odious East India Company, which had been the target of the Boston Tea Party in 1773. In this sense, the resolution is inseparable from the revolution’s broader assault on monarchy and its property relations, an attack that reached deep into colonial society.

The revolution was, as has often been said, not a war only over home rule, but over who would rule at home. The great families that long dominated trade and politics in the colonies—for example the Hutchinsons of New England, the De Lanceys of New York, the Allens of Pennsylvania, and the Wraggs of South Carolina—lost their positions and power. The revolution shattered the patronage networks radiating outward from the Crown through these grandees. Such patronage systems had provided the social basis of Toryism in the Revolution. Some 80,000 of these Loyalists, as they were also called, fled the colonies during the war, a greater per capita share of the population by a factor of six than the number of emigres that fled the Great Terror of the French Revolution a decade later. Many of these families saw their properties confiscated. Aristocracy and feudal relics were more thoroughly annihilated in the US than in France after 1789 or anywhere else prior to the Russian Revolution of 1917.

But the damage inflicted on mercantilism in the colonies was only the tip of the iceberg. So intricate was the mercantilist system that “[w]hen, at the outbreak of the American Revolution, the link between England and her colonies was broken, the whole system, insofar as it affected the colonial merchants, was destroyed,” wrote Bernard Bailyn. The consequences were fatal even for the merchant interests in Britain’s richest colonies, the sugar slave-labor islands of the West Indies, where, as Eric Williams put it, “American independence marked the beginning of [an] uninterrupted decline” that led to the end of slavery. “[I]t was a current saying at that time,” Williams went on, “that the British ministry had lost not only thirteen colonies, but eight islands as well.”

The blow the Revolution dealt to slavery was not merely an unintended side effect of commercial disruption. In fact the very same resolution that opened the ports to the world simultaneously drew a line around one commodity which could not cross into American harbors: slaves. The resolution declared “Resolved, That no slaves be imported into any of the thirteen United Colonies.” This stipulation reaffirmed the position earlier taken by the Continental Congress in 1774 banning American involvement in the slave trade. The prohibition was overwhelmingly supported and observed, even in the slave-dependent colonies. Virginia, indeed, had already passed such a ban in 1773, and Jefferson’s condemnation of slavery in his Summary View of the Rights of British America, published the following year, had been widely circulated and read. In it, Jefferson stated:

The abolition of domestic slavery is the great object of desire in these colonies where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state. But previous to the enfranchisement of the slaves we had, it is necessary to exclude all further importations from Africa. Yet our repeated request to effect this by prohibitions and by imposing

duties which might amount to a prohibition have been hitherto defeated by his Majesty’s negative, thus preferring the immediate advantage of a few British corsairs to the lasting interest of the American states, and to the rights of human nature, deeply wounded by this infamous practice.

That the Opening of the Ports included only one exception, against the slave trade, may appear surprising, especially given the argument, promoted by the *New York Times* 1619 Project and some unprincipled historians, that the revolution was a racist venture launched to defend slavery against British plans for emancipation.

Among the many historical facts that can be marshaled against such distortions is the observation by Washington biographer Ron Chernow, citing historian Joseph Ellis, that thousands of black soldiers served in the Continental Army “making it the most integrated American fighting force before the Vietnam War. At various times, blacks would make up anywhere from 6 to 12 percent of Washington’s army.”

It was already evident to the generation of 1776, even among the slaveholders, that the monstrous trade in human beings was central to the broader colonial system. The British mercantilists were equally aware of this, having fought a great commercial war against the Dutch for control of the slave trade. The aforementioned Postelwayt, for example, wrote tracts with titles such as *The National and Private Advantages of the African Trade considered, &c.*

In an awakening Enlightenment world still groping for the answers to the human origins and operation of political power, the Crown’s control of the slave trade and its domination of its colonies appeared to express two facets of the same evident reality. This is why slavery provided the prime metaphor through which Patriots framed colonial oppression. Liberty, not protected from tyranny, would give way to slavery, they said again and again. There were, indeed, “but two sorts of men in the world, freemen and slaves,” John Adams concluded. For the first time in world history, slavery became conspicuously wrong, requiring therefore a defense, an explanation that ultimately created racism as a modern ideology.

Mercantilism and its abominable slave trade had itself emerged gradually out of the political economy of feudalism, a system whose beneficiaries felt little need to question the origins of their power and wealth, whether taken from peasants, serfs, servants, corvée or slaves. To be sure, labor in this ancient regime was not mystified as the operation of individual free will, as it is in our time. Labor was everywhere visible in the miserable, compulsory toil carried out by those “unwashed masses” on the bottom rungs of society. But it could not be understood as the source of wealth. Labor was associated with necessity, poverty, degradation. Wealth appeared as something given, by God and by inherited right. It was unchanging prerogative, fixed in title and the very land where the labor was bound, so that one lord’s gain seemed necessarily to come at another’s expense.

Mercantilism, which Marx also called the age of “primitive capitalist accumulation,” had carried this feudal logic onto a larger stage “with the globe for a theater.” Shifting attention from land to trade, the landed barony were weakened in favor of the centralizing monarchies and aristocratic merchant houses that in turn competed over bullion, colonies, favorable balances of trade and domination of the slave trade.

No firm line was drawn between the king’s private interests and his public office, so that the enrichment of the monarch and his court, the swelling of the royal treasury, and the financing of dynastic wars all appeared as aspects of the same project. War was the key. It was the means of seizing markets, resources and trade routes from rival powers. The Navigation Acts and related imperial regulations merely gave legal form to the assumption that global commerce was a fixed prize and that

one nation's enrichment must come at another's loss.

But the very expansion of global trade had created a new world that eroded feudal property relations and its political world. "American independence," wrote Williams in *Slavery and Capitalism*, "destroyed the mercantile system and discredited the old regime. Coinciding with the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, it stimulated the growing feeling of disgust with the colonial system that Adam Smith was voicing." Indeed, it is not coincidental that Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, often considered the founding text of modern bourgeois political economy, was first published on March 9, 1776, just one month before Congress' opening of the ports, and four months before the Declaration of Independence drafted by Jefferson.

It was becoming apparent that the exchange among peoples of "commodities"—a word that then retained a close approximation to its original Latin meaning of "those things that give comfort"—was "felicitous," another commonly used term. The Enlightenment's search for the obscure forces that seemed to bind society together—the mirror of those natural scientists who sought out the hidden forces that connected the natural world—now found an answer in the exchange of goods. "A nation is not rich by the abundance of gold and silver, but by the abundance of the necessaries and conveniences of life," Smith concluded.

Moreover, it was also becoming apparent that wealth itself arose from a still more ancient and original right—the right to the fruits of labor arising from one's self-ownership. Perhaps labor was not simply God's curse on fallen man, but might actually be the true source of wealth. "It was not by gold or by silver, but by labour, that all the wealth of the world was originally purchased," Smith thought.

Smith and other advanced thinkers of his time could not yet grasp that value is not a "natural" measure but a historically specific social form—that beneath the surface of market price lies abstract, socially necessary labor-time, that workers sell not their labor but their capacity to labor, and that profit is simply surplus value: the portion of that capacity the capitalist takes without paying for it.

The Founding Fathers were even further from these insights than Smith. Theory could not run ahead of reality in a society where the features of modern capitalism remained only embryonic. In the British North American colonies there was no industrial development, and "manufactures" also remained true to its Latin root, to do by hand. There was no working class in the modern sense under conditions where well below 10 percent of the population was engaged in wage labor. The largest city in 1770, Philadelphia, had a mere 30,000 inhabitants. Over this primitive but rapidly growing society there ruled an antiquated strata of courtier interests with monarchical pretensions. But even these were small men compared to the giants of the British aristocracy and French nobility.

Trotsky once wrote of the world imperialist system that with the Russian Revolution "the chain broke at its weakest link." "But," he added, "it was the chain that broke, and not only the link." A similar observation could be made about the American Revolution in 1776. It destroyed the mercantile system and monarchical world where it was weakest, at its very outer edge. But the results were nonetheless momentous. As Marx wrote to Lincoln in 1864, "the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class," giving birth to "the idea of one great Democratic Republic." It was then and there that "the first Declaration of the Rights of Man was issued, and the first impulse given to the European revolution of the eighteenth century."

It seems that the conflicts that shaped one era have a way of resurfacing in another. The tyrannical power that the revolutionary generation of 1776 confronted in monarchy and its mercantile system has, in our own time, reappeared in new and grotesque forms. The Trump administration has erased the line between public office and private enrichment with a brazenness that would have impressed even the most predatory of the old Crown monopolists—a government in which the president's family openly

profits from tariffs he imposes, from cryptocurrency ventures he promotes by executive decree and from foreign governments seeking access to his favor. US "trade policy" now reproduces features of the mercantile logic the Revolution dismantled: that slices of the world are to be seized through war for the personal enrichment of the American oligarchy, or else be destroyed so no one else can have them.

Behind all of this lurks the attempted resurrection of something the Founders would have recognized immediately—the aristocratic principle: the claim that public office is simply an extension of private property, that wealth confers the right to rule, that inherited and accumulated fortune is its own justification, and that the distinction between the great man and the commoner is natural and permanent. It is a system that once again holds labor, the working class, in contempt.

These attributes are not the personal qualities of Donald Trump, but the characteristics of a diseased and exhausted social order that has long outlived its historically progressive role. Just as the monarchical system of the 18th century had become an intolerable fetter on the development of society—and was swept aside not by the wishes of great men but by the objective logic of history—so too the decayed capitalism of our own time is creating the conditions for revolutionary upheaval. The force that will carry this forward is the international working class, the true heir to the emancipatory traditions of 1776, 1789, 1865, 1917, and indeed all that is progressive in history. It is a powerful weapon in the hands of the working class.



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