

The American Revolution and Its Place in History: From the War Against Monarchy to “No Kings”

David North
25 June 2026

These are the introductory remarks delivered by David North, chairman of the WSWs International Editorial Board, to the webinar “The American Revolution and Its Place in History: From the War Against Monarchy to ‘No Kings,’” held to mark the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence.

This anniversary unfolds amid an escalating assault on democratic rights and the foundations of American democracy. The president has spoken openly of dictatorial rule. After losing the 2020 election, he attempted to overturn its result and block the peaceful transfer of power. His return to office in 2024, despite this criminal act, is a sign of not only a breakdown of democratic institutions but also a profound erosion of democratic consciousness.

Under these conditions, the American Revolution assumes immense contemporary significance. These are times, as Tom Paine said, that try men’s souls.

We are not only commemorating a national anniversary. The American Revolution was never merely an American event. From its earliest days, it was understood to have world-historical significance. When Paine wrote that “the cause of America” was “the cause of all mankind,” he expressed the fact that the struggle in the colonies posed universal questions: monarchy or republicanism, inherited privilege or popular sovereignty, colonial subordination or self-government.

The Civil War, which arose out of the first Revolution, likewise had world-historical significance: it destroyed slavery and posed anew whether the democratic principles proclaimed in 1776 could be made real. As the most thorough bourgeois democratic revolution in history, it created the conditions for the explosive development of capitalism and the emergence of the United States as the dominant world power. It also gave rise to a massive working class and a history of violent class conflict, with which the development of the great civil rights movement of the last century was inseparably linked.

Today, however, the political attack on democracy is accompanied by a repudiation of the revolutionary and democratic legacy itself. Within academia, and within much of what describes itself as the left, the American Revolution is presented not as a world-historical advance, but as a reactionary event. All the documents and political structures that prepared and emerged out of the Revolution are dismissed.

The Declaration is treated not as a statement of universal principles whose implications exceeded the intentions of its authors, but as hypocrisy and deception.

But to claim that all the brilliant political work produced to justify the revolution—from the vast opus of the European Enlightenment that provided the intellectual-philosophical inspiration for the revolution and the Declaration of Independence itself—was nothing more than an attempt to cover over the counterrevolutionary aims of the American struggle for independence is akin to claiming that Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel to cover up a crack in the ceiling of the Vatican.

Conflict over the meaning of historical events is legitimate and unavoidable. No serious history can proceed through patriotic mythmaking. The American Revolution was born in contradiction: its promises were denied to enslaved people, women, Indigenous peoples, propertyless laborers, and many others. It was, to define the event in appropriate historical and socio-economic terms, a bourgeois democratic revolution.

The revolution did not accomplish all that it promised. Life and liberty, to say nothing of happiness, are increasingly problematic in the United States. And given the massive concentration of wealth that characterizes contemporary society, what rules today in Washington is not by a long shot what Lincoln had in mind when he spoke of government of, by and for the people.

But history cannot be understood through moral denunciation. A moralizing attitude toward the past has no

explanatory power, least of all in the study of revolutions. To say that the founders were hypocrites does not explain why a revolution occurred, why the Declaration acquired force beyond their intentions, or why its language was taken up by abolitionists, enslaved people, workers, socialists, and civil rights fighters. And it does not explain how the world we live in came into being.

A theory of history must explain more than one selected event. It must account for broad historical processes: the American Revolution, the Civil War, the French Revolution, 1848, the rise of socialism, industrial unions, the Russian Revolution, anti-colonial struggles, and the social movements of the twentieth century.

This is why the replacement of class conflict with racial theory has such far-reaching implications. If racial conflict is made the central axis of history, the working class is reduced in significance as a world-historical force. Socialism is severed from the democratic revolutions, whose unfulfilled promises it sought to carry forward. The October Revolution becomes inexplicable on its own terms—as a product of war, class conflict, state collapse, socialist consciousness and the struggle for workers' power.

Slavery, colonialism and racial oppression have played a major role in American history. But they cannot be understood apart from property, labor, class power, imperialism and the state.

The Declaration was revolutionary not because its authors were morally pure, but rather because it indicted the existing social and political order and called for its overthrow in the most sweeping and universal terms. It provided the political and ideological impulse for the subsequent extraordinary economic development, territorial expansion and social transformation of a colonial outpost into an independent and increasingly powerful capitalist nation state.

At the same time, the democratic principles that it evoked transcended the objective limitations imposed upon it by its own time. Herein lay the great and enduring power of the Declaration. It was both of its time and of the future.

The Declaration expressed in the most profound sense the dialectic of history. As Marx explained: “Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.” In 1776 the conditions for the abolition of slavery were only beginning to emerge. By 1861, the conditions for the completion of that task were at hand.

And the transition from the first to the second stage of the bourgeois democratic revolution proceeded rather rapidly. The first revolutionary era was not all that distant to those who played major roles in the abolition of slavery. Thaddeus

Stevens, the greatest of the radical Republicans, was born in the early years of George Washington's presidency. When Abraham Lincoln was born, Thomas Jefferson still occupied the newly-constructed White House.

The American Revolution accelerated the movement against slavery. Relative to our own time, four-score and seven years—the distance in time between the Declaration of 1776 and the Gettysburg Address of 1863—takes us back to 1939, the start of World War II. Does that event seem so distant?

In the discussion of the Revolution, what is at stake is not only the interpretation of the past, but the political consciousness and perspective required for the future. If the left abandons the revolutionary-democratic tradition, if it treats equality, rights, popular sovereignty and universal emancipation as rank deception, it risks surrendering that tradition to reaction. And that is what is happening.

The precondition for serious debate must be a scrupulous attitude toward facts. The twentieth century has shown the catastrophic consequences of historical falsification, above all in the falsification of the Russian Revolution, where lies justified betrayal, repression and mass murder. We have not reached that point in the United States. The bloated orange colossus who imagines that he bestrides the Potomac has feet of clay. Social opposition is steadily growing. But the opposition of workers and youth must be armed with a knowledge of history and its lessons.

This important anniversary should be an opportunity to ask what was revolutionary in the Revolution, what was limited, what was betrayed, what was carried forward, and what remains unresolved.



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