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Introduction

"AND FOR THE SUPPORT of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor." So ends the document that began the United States on July 4, 1776. Its revolutionary authors were not only declaring a separation from the British empire. They were also making a personal commitment to each other, and to the new nation. They really were risking their fortunes and their lives. But what did they mean by "sacred Honor"? The American Revolution was led by men who set themselves above the ordinary, common man. They understood themselves as gentlemen. That status was a form of power, but it also relied on a set of rules that governed the actions of anyone who claimed it—a code of honor that helped draw the line between who was a gentleman and who was not. When the signers of the Declaration pledged their "sacred Honor" to the cause of independence, they were laying on the line one of their most valued possessions: their status as gentlemen.[1]

What exactly it meant to be a gentleman changed over time. It also depended on place and social context. A gentleman in Boston might not be one in London, and a gentleman out on the western frontier—where there were few if any to be found—might not be one in Philadelphia. The status of gentleman relied on being recognized by others. Rather than an innate quality, it was a kind of performance done in front of different, more or less discerning audiences.[2] At the same time, not everyone could act like a gentleman. By definition, gentility was restricted to an elite minority. In seventeenth-century England, gentlemen were landowners who got their income from rent. Doing any kind of work for money, even investing in commerce, was seen as beneath their dignity. Yet in the American colonies, almost nobody could fit that definition. By the middle of the eighteenth century, especially in the colonies, the requirements of gentility were beginning to adapt to different economic and social conditions.

Rather than disdaining work of any kind, the standards in place by the eve of the American Revolution separated manual work from work of the mind and the pen. Those who relied on the labor of their own hands, whether on farms, in workshops, or on board ships, could not be considered gentlemen. But merchants, lawyers, doctors, clergymen, and scholars could also lay claim to elite status. As the transatlantic consumer economy developed, even those who did not get their income from landed estates—or, like the gentlemen of the southern colonies, from slave plantations—could purchase the kinds of fashionable clothes, furniture, and accoutrements that were needed to make a performance of gentility. Using the advice in conduct books and the examples in English magazines like *The Spectator*, wealthy professionals learned how to behave, and how to recognize each other, as gentlemen. They could sometimes cement their status by marrying into the families of the landed gentry. Ambitious men signaled their rise by adopting, as much as they could, the markers and attitudes of gentility.

Before the revolution began, then, the idea of the gentleman was already in flux. American gentlemen could not rely on maintaining their status without effort. For southern planters, the need to signal their place in society through conspicuous consumption often meant getting deep in debt to the British merchants who sent them luxury goods in exchange for cash crops.[3] And the performance of gentility involved more than buying and wearing the right things. It also required adherence to the gentlemanly code of honor. While the expectations and behaviors that made up the code were slightly different in different parts of the colonies, there were some things that were supposed to characterize gentlemen everywhere. Most important, a gentleman was someone who could be trusted—who always dealt honestly and kept his word. If he was accused of breaking this code, it was expected that a gentleman would defend his honor, by fighting a duel if necessary. Maintaining the status of a gentleman could end up costing not just one's fortune, but one's life.[4]

There were some elements of the gentlemanly code of honor that fitted in particularly well with the new forms of wealth that came from commerce.[5] Merchants relied on building up a reputation for meeting their obligations—paying their debts and delivering goods according to agreement. The more solid their reputation, otherwise known as their credit or character, the more likely people were to deal with them, and the better terms they could secure. A merchant who possessed the character of a gentleman could use his respectability to gain a commercial advantage; and in turn, he could use the wealth he generated through trade to put on a convincing performance of gentility. When merchants began to be recognized as gentlemen in the American colonies, they also began to transform the meaning of the gentlemen's code of honor. The landed wealth of the old English gentlemen had set them above society because they never needed to depend on anyone. By contrast,

merchants used gentility to secure mutually beneficial relationships with others. Where gentility had once implied independence, it could become a valuable element in the interdependent world of commerce.[6]

It was the revolution that finally gave American merchants access to the uppermost circles of society and power. Sweeping away royal officeholders and their loyalist allies, the revolution was the platform that launched a new national elite. Especially in the north, where there were few major landowners among the patriots, it was merchants and lawyers who made up this new cadre of gentlemen revolutionaries. Even in the south, elite planters were far from the old ideal of independent English gentry. They were intimately involved with the trade in their plantations' products, and with the organization of their local economies. Many had been trained as lawyers at London's Inns of Court. Up and down the new nation, the leaders of the revolution represented a new kind of gentleman. Eager to establish and keep hold of their elite status, these men saw the revolution as an opportunity to reconstruct the idea of gentility in their own image, replacing aristocratic traditions with their own conceptions of reason, merit, and justice.

This book argues that, in the wake of the Revolutionary War, a new national elite created itself through a process of debate and struggle over these gentlemanly ideals. They transformed the code of honor, and its demand for strict obedience to promises, into an ideology that animated political conflict and formed the basis of the new federal constitution. If we return to the Declaration of Independence, we find more than just an announcement to a candid world—we find a contract drawn up between a set of individuals, pledging their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor, and signing their names at the bottom. It was the sanctity of contract that defined the code of gentility Americans adopted during the 1780s, that they fought for in the political struggles of that decade, and that they sought to weave into the fabric of the new nation. For good and bad, their efforts helped determine the course of the United States and the emergence of an interdependent, commercial world. We owe the pattern of our modern lives, in part, to the eighteenth century's gentlemen revolutionaries.

The transformation of the American elite was deeply bound up with the creation of the new republic. Here, too, ideas about the gentlemanly code of honor played an important role. Once they had made the commitment to independence, the genteel revolutionary leaders linked their own reputations to that of the United States. They understood the republic as a metaphorical person, a child that was now coming of age, and taking its own separate place in the world. Their aim was to make sure it would become not just a man, but a gentleman. If the gentlemanly code of honor was meant to regulate the interactions between equal individuals, there was a similar set of rules to govern the relations between sovereign countries. The law of nations, like the code of

honor, was unwritten, but it was the subject of a great deal of interpretative writing. It was a powerful tradition, but it was also contested and unstable, subject to the shifts of power and ideas.

In recent decades, as global and transnational connections in the modern world have come to seem more important than ever, historians have emphasized the role of international context and the law of nations in the founding of the United States. Some have argued that the relationships between the new United States and the other empires and nations of the world—and between the individual states that made up the union—were more important to the political struggles of the revolutionary era than social conflicts *within* the republic. The national elite that stood behind the federal constitution from 1787 were concerned first and foremost, these historians say, with creating a powerful central government that could prevent the union from breaking apart, secure the republic against external attack, and make the new nation respectable to its rivals. It was important to these men that the United States was recognized as an equal among nations, just as the code of honor depended on a similar recognition among gentlemen. Their own sense of identity was tied to the character of the republic.[7]

This book takes these insights in a different direction. Rather than giving the international context priority over questions of social order and conflict, I consider the international dimension of politics in the new republic as an extension of Americans' concerns about justice and power. Through commerce, almost all Americans belonged to an Atlantic and global economy that had enormous impact on their lives. International commodity prices affected the livelihood of even the smallest farmers, while the flows of goods and money through America's port cities and market hubs supported artisans and professionals as well as the merchants who directed those flows. The wealth and influence of the revolutionary elite was a product of this commercial economic order. After the enormous disruptions of the revolution, it was vital for them to reconstruct an international network of trade and investment. International law, and later the federal constitution, promised to do that by providing a stable environment where the sanctity of contract was enshrined. Securing the power and status of the United States also meant protecting their own long-term interests.

As the capitalist economy developed through the eighteenth century, people began to understand the forces of production, consumption, and trade in new ways. Adam Smith's *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, helped change the way they thought about competition between countries and individuals. Rather than sealing themselves off and keeping trade within imperial boundaries, Smith argued that all nations would benefit more from opening trade to each other. Like gentlemen, countries would have to become less independent, and more interdependent. At the same time, this international commercial system relied on a shared set

of rules to be enforced by national governments. Free trade did not get rid of the need for powerful states. Most important, these states were needed to protect property rights. For commerce to work properly, merchants needed to be confident in keeping hold of their profits, wherever they were—and for that, they needed laws and courts that acted in their favor. These needs led to ideas about universal justice and natural law that became powerful ways of thinking about right and wrong.[8]

But these ideas were only some of the ways in which people conceived of justice in the late eighteenth century. In the wake of the American Revolution, struggles broke out across the new nation over the way republican society should be organized. As with the international context, our understanding of these struggles has benefited from recent work by historians. Elite ideas were shaped by Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, by the requirements of transnational commerce, and by gentlemen's own sense of hierarchical superiority. By the middle of the 1780s, however, they faced an important challenge from democratic and egalitarian movements that interpreted the principles of the revolution quite differently. Primarily based among rural communities in the middle and northern states, but also drawing on the urban and maritime working classes that had helped to drive the revolution, popular political movements made use of the expanded role given to many white men by the revolutionary state constitutions. At times, their activism also took the form of both violent and nonviolent resistance, for example shutting down courts and refusing to obey government officials. They demanded, in essence, that the power of the state be used to benefit all men equally, rather than prioritizing the property rights of the wealthy.[9]

The sense of justice that animated postrevolutionary popular movements was not based on the gentleman's code of honor, but on Christian and republican traditions of equity that had deep roots in communities across the English-speaking Atlantic world. They also drew on long-established race and gender divisions that generally excluded women, black people, Native Americans, and others from their notions of egalitarianism. Rather than disavowing hierarchy and property relations altogether, the populist movements of the 1780s rested on the equal rights of white men to possess the land on which they worked and to exercise dominion over their own families. On the frontier, this included a demand for government support in expropriating Indian land. Especially in the south, it went along with calls for the expansion of slave ownership. It was rarely these issues, however, that emerged as the principal contentions between the populists and their genteel opponents. What was central to the conflict was a struggle over the extent and limits of democracy.[10]

In the late eighteenth century, the word *democracy* still had primarily negative connotations. For gentlemen schooled in classical history and politics, democracy meant the rule of mobs and demagogues, an upturning of proper social and moral order. By the time of the Philadelphia Convention in 1787,

such gentlemen were blaming their political failures on an "excess of democracy" in the state governments. What they opposed was not a clearly defined theory of democracy, but a set of practices and ideas that put the collective will of local communities above the universal laws of property and contract. This book is about how different, overlapping groups of gentlemen understood the danger of democracy, how they came up with ways to fight it, and how that affected their own ideas about justice and power. It looks at conflicts between groups of gentlemen, as they argued with each other about how best to respond to the democratic threat. And it argues that this process of formulating a collective response was central to the making of a national ruling class—a class that would be capable, in the years 1787–1789, of once more transforming America.[11]

Every gentleman who supported independence risked his fortune and his life—but not all did so in the same way. One division that arose between gentlemen in the early 1780s was between the army officers and their allies, and those who served the revolution in other capacities, as merchants, politicians, and diplomats. When the officers formed a national organization, the Society of the Cincinnati, in 1783, it sparked a heated controversy that played out in public debates, pamphlets, newspapers, and private letters. The tumult over the Cincinnati revealed differences between gentlemen's ideas that had previously gone unexamined. It also threatened to break apart friendships and political networks. At its heart was the question of how social order should be preserved and reproduced in a republican country. What role, for example, should inheritance play in the transmission of privilege and power? If almost all Americans agreed that the revolution had done away with monarchy and aristocracy, they still needed to work out what would replace those things as sources of stability and leadership. This debate is the subject of chapter 1.[12]

Other lines of thought were emerging at the same time about similar issues. How would the new nation distinguish itself from the old colonies without falling prey to licentiousness, a kind of social chaos that gentlemen thought of as the very opposite of freedom? For some, especially the representatives of New England's Congregationalist establishment, the colonies' religious and educational traditions could find a new and central role in the republic. Public schooling and public religion would teach Americans not to abuse their new independence. It would help maintain the sober order and hierarchy necessary for national greatness. But not every gentleman thought alike on matters of education or religion. For some young men, especially those who had come of age during the war, the revolution offered the chance to break out of the crushing embrace of old traditions. Chapter 2 tells the story of their attempts to develop new and revolutionary approaches to education and literature. Like the arguments over the Cincinnati, these debates were not about *whether* to impose new forms of hierarchical power, but just how that could

be achieved. Both chapters, then, describe elite experiments in building a republican society that would accord with their own ideas about justice, status, and power.[13]

In the following three chapters, the focus shifts to American gentlemen's conflicts with alternative political movements and ideas. Chapter 3 looks at how they developed arguments against the confiscation of loyalist property after the war was over. The popularity of confiscation policies—which not only punished the enemy and those deemed to have been enemy sympathizers, but also helped replenish state coffers and redistribute land to those who had supported independence—posed an important challenge to the sanctity of property rights, one of commercial gentility's most fundamental principles. So when gentlemen came to the defense of their former enemies, against the will of ordinary citizens, it was an important moment in the formation of an American ruling class. Cosmopolitan ideas of natural law and universal rights came face to face with the democratic potential of the revolution. The result was a series of compromises and reverses that left gentlemen increasingly frustrated with the power of popular legislatures, especially when confiscation and related policies seemed to threaten the United States' diplomatic and commercial relationships.

By the middle of the decade, American trade was suffering as a result of exclusion from trade with the British empire. National leaders in and out of Congress looked to western lands expropriated from Native Americans as a source of future profit and the foundation of national credit. But they also argued over the specifics of sale and settlement, balancing the benefits of quick sales to speculators against the requirements of security and social order on the frontier. While thousands of would-be settlers demanded access to the land, and government aid in their war against the Indians, politicians and financiers in the east struggled over the creation of new property rights and the distribution of the spoils of conquest. Banking establishments were central to this process, especially the Bank of North America in Philadelphia, set up in 1781. When the bank came under attack from Pennsylvania's rural egalitarian movement, gentlemen were again put on the defensive. Capitalist economic development seemed to be incompatible with democratic power. Chapter 4 recounts how this conflict played out between 1784 and 1786—setting the stage for more violent and dramatic events soon to come.

Chapter 5 tells the story of the year that led up to the Constitutional Convention at Philadelphia in the summer of 1787. In western New England, rural unrest finally reached the point of armed rebellion by the autumn of 1786, leading American gentlemen to a new pitch of anxiety about the future of the republic. Meanwhile, in Rhode Island, the popular majority pursued an inflationary paper-money policy that quickly led to violent clashes between the regime and its opponents. Refusing to accept the rule of the state government, merchants and their allies pursued their struggle in print, in court, and in the

streets. The two situations combined to create visions of complete social breakdown in the minds of anxious elites. A group of Connecticut poets produced *The Anarchiad*, a vicious satirical attack on rural insurgents and popular legislators alike. And in Massachusetts, Boston merchants combined with the Society of the Cincinnati to raise an army that would put down the rebellion. It was during these turbulent months that a network of leading gentlemen developed a radical strategy for reasserting control of the new nation, a last-ditch effort to establish the limits of American democracy.

By focusing on the years leading up to that summer in 1787, this book offers a quite different account from those that are dominated by the Constitutional Convention and the resulting ratification struggle. The men who gathered in Philadelphia had a unique perspective on what was going on in America, one that differed significantly from most of their countrymen. When they emerged from their sealed chamber to present their Constitution to the public, taking the name of Federalists, these gentlemen largely succeeded in reframing the political contest in their own terms. If we see only the battle between Federalists and Anti-Federalists, however, we miss a good deal of what really went on during the 1780s. We miss the democratic, egalitarian movements that so frightened American gentlemen. But we also miss the diverse ways those gentlemen tried to impose their own visions of justice before 1787. Removing the Convention from center stage allows us to uncover the social conflict that lay behind it, and to see the Constitution itself not as the product of a timeless wisdom, but as a move in that ongoing struggle. This book argues that the Constitution represented a dramatic tactical shift, a desperate gambit by which gentlemen hoped to turn the tables and restore their own authority.[14]

Through the story of these early years in the new republic, we may come to better understand what was at stake in that struggle. It was not a contest between progress and backwardness, a traditional society and its modern successor. Nor was it a battle between good and evil. Rather, it was a contest over different visions of the future. Was progress a matter of democracy, the triumph of popular will over the old rule of hierarchy and concentrated power? Or was it about the rise of the commercial economy and the legal order on which it depended—the sanctity of property and contract? Would progress bring greater equality, or less? Would it empower privileged elites, or undermine them? The United States began as a battleground between these different possibilities. That battle is not yet over. By giving an account of the historical formation of ideas and power, this book aspires to more than antiquarian interest. It aims to ask questions about justice, how it comes to be defined, and how it might be implemented, not only two hundred years ago, but in our own time. Many books about the founders create mirrors of the present. My hope for this one is to reflect not a motionless monument to imagined ideals, but a living struggle for the future of a revolution.

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