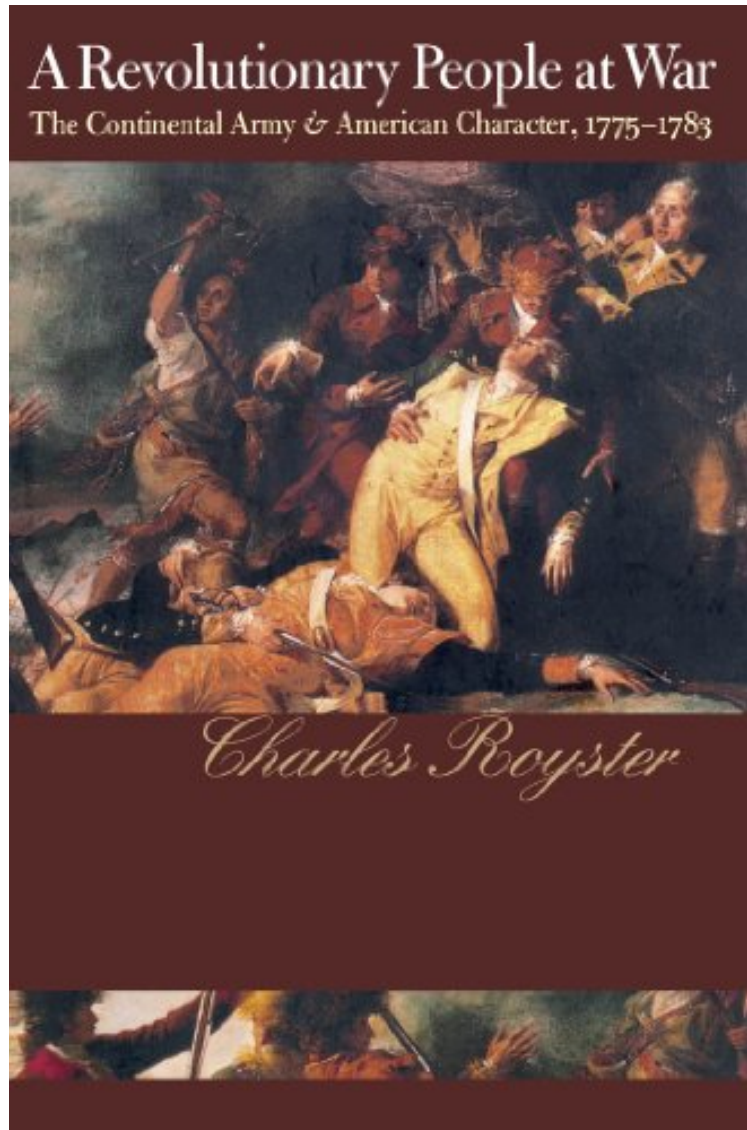


## A Revolutionary People At War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783

*Charles Royster*

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**Charles Royster : A Revolutionary People At War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783**  
before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Revolutionary  
People At War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Despite a love of libertyBy Seth HerchenbachFrom beginning to  
end, Charles Roysters A Revolutionary People at War is an analysis of Americans and their revolutionary ideals in

relation to the war to defeat the British army and secure independence from 1775 to 1783. This comparative study takes an in-depth look at what those ideals were and how they applied to waging a war as colonists against their mother country. Important to this struggle was how freedom and liberty could be maintained without succumbing to the evils of a standing army. The revolutionary zeal of Americans in 1775 and both their fear and hesitancy to allow a standing army even during wartime is the central theme. The revolutionary citizens were much more in favor of volunteer militias, which in reality were support pieces to the Continental Army. It was important from their point of view for there to exist civil supremacy over the military. The *rage militaire* of 1775 sparked the Revolution, but did not have the steam to last more than a year into the war. Although most people understood that a national army was necessary to defeat the British, they didn't want an army commanded by a dictator that might turn against them after the war was won nor did they want to be slaves of the army by having to support it with taxes. Americans expected to win the war because they had faith in the virtue of their philosophy pitted against tyranny and oppression. This outlook led to a lack of desire to join the army, support it and a nonchalant style of soldiering to those who did join the fight. Despite a love of liberty, there was a significant gap between the revolutionaries' ideals and their conduct, which was narrowest and blurred in the Continental Army. Commander in Chief George Washington's balance of militiamen and Continental Army regulars is briefly covered, but unfortunately the author spends more time on the general public's negative opinion of the army. The war could have been won years earlier had more men joined the cause simultaneously. Instead, enlistments expired after one or three years, soldiers deserted and state governments struggled to fill draft quotas. Soldiers also went unpaid and understandably had to leave the army to rejoin their starving families at home. These are just a few of the many issues the Continental Army faced off the battlefield. A highlight of the book is the coverage provided to Washington's Fabian strategy to keep the army intact at the expense of the cities and fortified positions. This concept is key to understanding the Revolution because public opinion and support was influential and inseparable to the battles fought between the two armies. Although Philadelphia and other cities fell to the enemy and Congress had to migrate to a new location, the Continental Army stood intact in order to not only fight the British elsewhere, but also to bolster the public's confidence in the struggle for independence. There isn't much about the battles and fighting in the book, which is a major omission when writing about a war. Royster arbitrarily includes a lot of information and anecdotal stories that often detract from the main story, which although is generally linear in time frame, seems to jump from one main point to another. Although the book follows the conflict in a linear fashion, it is more a blend of topical coverage of main points concerning everywhere but on the battlefield. This style, while appropriate for the author's thesis, can at times become confusing to a reader whose comprehension of the American Revolution does not include a thorough understanding of the war. As a result, the book is best read by those who have a solid background of the conflict and can easily conceptualize key figures and events without explanation and preface. Royster assumes much from the reader, which is unfortunate because this approach alienates most readers and thus places his book on a different level than historical texts that seek to reach a wide audience. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. *The Continental Army: Vanguard of the Revolution* By T. Graczewski. Doctoral dissertations rarely make interesting reading. Fewer still win the Parkman Prize. "A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783," based largely on Charles Royster's University of California PhD dissertation, is a notable exception. Royster argues that a number of issues motivated the American soldiers who fought the Revolution, but above all was the belief that they were fighting for God and posterity. He says that they sincerely believed that their actions would be remembered and revered for centuries, a powerful source of motivation heading into a conflict against great odds. He also describes the centrality of religion to the cause; indeed, he makes the Revolution sound a lot like a jihad. The colonists were all too aware of British strength and their own weakness, but felt that success was assured because of God's grace and goodwill. In this spirit of godly sacrifice, Royster writes that some specific words resonated most with the soldiers of the cause: benevolence, disinterestedness and virtue. These concepts would be severely tested during the long conflict. At the heart of the friction and discord was the relationship between the men, particularly the officers, of the Continental Army and the citizens of the American colonies at large. Citizens tended to think of a standing army as generally abhorrent in theory, but recognized its necessity in meeting the overwhelming British threat. This dichotomy -- the simultaneous fear and need of a standing army -- forms the axis upon which Royster's historical narrative turns. After the initial glow of resistance, the author writes that heading into the 1780s the hostility and mistrust between the officers of the Continental Army and the public grew to fever pitch. At issue was the realization among many military leaders that the public was putting private, personal interest ahead of the army, which the officers saw as the center of gravity of resistance against the British occupation. Many American colonists, even those claiming to be true patriots, avoided the draft, continued to trade with the British army when opportunity presented itself, sent local convicts to fill the enlisted ranks, and made precious little effort to supply the myriad logistical needs of the Continental Army. By the time of Yorktown, Royster continues, the Continental Army had become quite disciplined and effective, far more professional than many contemporary Americans recognize -- and was almost completely isolated from the society it served. The army increasingly saw itself as the true embodiment of the revolutionary ideals of 1775; they had all earned special claims to being the vanguard of the Revolution and the new US republic. Thus, they were entitled to a privileged place in

society and due the pension they lobbied (and threatened) for. Meanwhile, Royster writes, the general population felt they all had shared equally in the victory and that the army represented the very vices they had just collectively defeated -- tyranny, hierarchy, placemen, class privilege, nobility, force, confiscation, etc. The author credits George Washington with smothering the Newburgh crisis when the army in New York essentially threatened Congress with force if their demands on pensions, once promised, weren't met. Washington's deference to civil authority was critical and the fact that there was a yawning chasm between officer and enlisted meant that even if the officers tried something rash they likely wouldn't have had an army to command. At the center of the debate and crisis was that to one significant group in American society a standing army based on discipline and social hierarchy and led by a powerful central government were the prerequisites for achieving and maintaining the victory of the Revolution, not the very antithesis of the Revolution as many others claimed. The whole controversy over the continental officers was best expressed by the debate over pensions. On the one hand, there was fear that the US would set up a new community of placemen -- the exact model they had hoped to defeat in the Revolution. But Royster says the crux of the issue was that a pension for officers in the continental army, no matter how small or short-term, in itself seemed to confirm that their effort toward the achievement of independence was somehow greater than everyone else's. They would be sanctified as the true founding fathers, and that struck many people the wrong way. In short, the people were reclaiming the war and victory from the army -- the army that really had won the battle with great sacrifice and against all odds, according to Royster. Of course, the Society of the Cincinnati only added to the controversy, especially that they wore special badges, had titles, and that membership was hereditary to first born sons. Royster notes that the dispersement of the continental army was a sad affair. No pomp or celebration. Many just went home, poor and begging for food along the way. The crisis was over, pensions and the Society of Cincinnati quickly abated. It was a mini-revolution of the public over the army, the author writes. For their part, the army's claim to preeminence wasn't due to any inclinations to European despotism, but rather was grounded in the moral absolutism of the Revolution itself. In the end, Royster claims, the Revolutionary generation authored a phony history of their generation, one that focused on a whole society built on virtue and honor. It was an unrealistic, almost fatuous vision, intentionally created, that lasted for over 150 years. It's a verdict Royster desperately wants to overturn with this book, and I think he's succeeded.

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. America's True Feelings During the Revolutionary War

By M. P. Procter Sr. Charles Royster attempts to dispel some of the many myths and legends of the American Revolutionary War in his book, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775 -1783*. While many Americans were raised with the notion that the "Spirit of '76" was prevalent throughout the sixteen colonies at the start of the Revolution, Royster shows the reader there were many conflicts within the revolutionary movement itself, like lack of desire for a standing army; theft by, for, and in the name of the army; proper use of discipline and executions; and many others. The book's timeline covers the entire war, from its birth in 1775 to the war's end in 1781. The text details stories not read in many history books: the drudgery of the soldier's life, the animosity the general population held towards the military and some of their tactics, and the general malaise of the American people regarding the length of the war. *A Revolutionary People at War* is well researched with over 30 pages of artwork, including portraits of some of the key figures of the time period. It does lack a bibliography and list of other noted works, which would assist the reader wanting to do further research.

Early in the struggle for independence, the American people experienced what Royster referred to as "...Rage Militaire...[what] the French call a passion for arms..." This was the result of perceived British injustices long before the battles of Lexington and Concord when American militias began mobilizing and training. This training did not reflect a mere duplication of the British model of warfare with parade and ceremony, but a uniquely American style that was adapted from "...Lewis Nicola's *Treatise of Military Exercise* and Thomas Pickering's 'easy' plan...[which] emphasized simplicity, not show..." Most Americans believed the Continental Army could defeat the British quickly through courage and the perception that right was on their side. While most of the populace held the belief of *Rage Militaire*, they still feared having a standing army to fight the war. The British Monarchy's army still loomed large in their minds. The tyranny associated with a dictator is what most Americans feared and is addressed thoroughly throughout the early chapters. Interestingly, the seamier side of the war is explored in great detail. While the cause of the Revolution and the Continental Army was noble, many soldiers and private citizens alike used the "cause" for profit. Soldiers turned to theft for many reasons, "...[they] argued that, since property would soon fall under British control, they might as well take it." Of course, there was plenty of crime amongst the soldiers while in camp or on guard duty, with crimes that ranged from petty theft to assault. Moreover, there were those who donned something that resembled a uniform, and since "...the Continental Army used a wide variety of uniforms, and officers had theirs privately made.... Consequently, no one was surprised to find [officers] in varied but impressive military dress, riding around the countryside making arrangements for the army..." These "officers" bought and sold provisions to the army and in the name of the army at high markups making huge profits. Not only was theft a problem, but so was the use of profanity, poor personal and camp-wide hygiene, relationships between officers and their men, and general relations with the local population. Further still, the debate raged regarding proper punishment. Flogging was popular (usually via the cat-o'-nine-tails), but the argument over how many lashes one received pitted George Washington against Congress. He believed the

standard one-hundred lashes too lenient, and Congress asserted that Washington's recommendation of five-hundred too severe. Further, Washington resorted to execution for the most serious of offenses, like treason or desertion. The problem lay with Washington's ploy of granting last minute pardons, resulting in the death sentence losing much of its sting as a deterrent to crime. Even with the surrender of British General John Burgoyne at the Battle of Saratoga, the Continental Army had few victories. The other major win, although not against the British directly, was the victory at Trenton on Christmas 1776. Throughout 1777, most Americans believed victory and the end of the war was near. Throughout the harsh winter at Valley Forge, after poor performances at the Battles of Brandywine and Germantown, the morale of the army was at an all-time low. Criticism of General Washington ran rampant and the Rage Militaire that possessed the country in 1775 was all but gone. Many believed if he had achieved victory like Horatio Gates did at Saratoga, the war might have already been won. Washington, of course, weathered the storm to bring the army out of Valley Forge better trained (with the help of Baron von Steuben) and faced 1778 with optimism. Royster's text continues with an even more gloomy assessment of the war. "Between May and October 1780, the popular expectation of imminent victory received three sharp blows: the surrender of Charleston, South Carolina...; the rout of Horatio Gates' southern army at Camden, South Carolina...; and the defection of General Benedict Arnold..." These challenges were overcome, of course, beginning with the appointment of General Nathanael Greene to the position of commander of the southern army in early 1780. The defection and betrayal of Arnold was harder to swallow, especially amongst Washington and his general staff. As Greene lamented of him, "How black, how despised, loved by none, and hated by all. Once his Country's Idol [sic], now her horror." Despite these setbacks, the Continental Army did prevail, effectively ending the war at the Battle of Yorktown in 1781. When the fighting ended, Royster's final chapter describes the feeling of exhilaration felt by most of the country. As John Murray, a Newburyport, Massachusetts preacher was quoted, "Joy dances in every eye. Pleasure beams in every countenance; and every bosom beats high with the emotions..." However, lest the reader thinks *A Revolutionary People at War* will have an uplifting ending, he goes on to describe many other pressing issues, like paying the army. "The prosperity that the soldiers hoped for did not begin with their receiving back pay or even current pay. Washington tried to get Robert Morris [Congress' wartime financier] to obtain three months' back pay..." The author brings to light in *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775 -1783* the darker side of the war. He is successful in bringing into focus how desperate the war years were. Yet despite the hardships and turmoil associated with the period, the Continental Army still overcame a formidable opponent and cleared the way for a federation of independent states. The reader could be nonplussed by these negatives because the outcome is known. If this were a novel rather than an historic overview, the ending surely would be different. It was with the hope and the perseverance of those involved that victory was attained.

In this highly acclaimed book, Charles Royster explores the mental processes and emotional crises that Americans faced in their first national war. He ranges imaginatively outside the traditional techniques of analytical historical exposition to build his portrait of how individuals and a populace at large faced the Revolution and its implications. The book was originally published by UNC Press in 1980.

"Represents a quantum leap in our understanding of the Revolution. Edmund S. Morgan, "New Republic" "It is a work of art. . . . No student of early American history should miss it." *Journal of Southern History* "Represents a quantum leap in our understanding of the Revolution. Edmund S. Morgan, "New Republic" Represents a quantum leap in our understanding of the Revolution. . . . [The book] is social history, intellectual history, institutional history, political history, and not any single one of them, which is to say that it is good history.--Edmund S. Morgan, *New Republic* To a far greater extent than is true of most historical monographs, it is a work of art. . . . No student of early American history should miss it.--*Journal of Southern History* From the Back Cover In this highly acclaimed book, Charles Royster explores the mental processes and emotional crises that Americans faced in their first national war. He ranges imaginatively outside the traditional techniques of analytical historical exposition to build his portrait of how individuals and a populace at large faced the Revolution and its implications.