The Unfinished Revolution: Inequality

Captain Daniel Shays was a good soldier in the Revolution, and he received a ceremonial sword as a gift from the French General Lafayette in recognition of his service. Shays was also a poor man, with a wife and children back on his small farm in Massachusetts. Figuring the sword would be worth more in barter than in battle, he traded it away. Some of his senior fellow officers were outraged at what they considered an insult to their French ally, but Shays was a practical Yankee. He did what he had to do to. Most other soldiers might well have done the same thing and for the same reason. The war was a poor man's fight, and ordinary soldiers struggled to survive economically as much as militarily.

By the time the War for Independence came to an end, the underlying economic conditions created conflict that soon overshadowed the euphoria of victory. Ordinary people, who had long listened to the Revolution's rhetoric about equality, became increasingly disenchanted with the post-war settlement that seemed to favor financiers and urban merchant interests over common folk. In state after state, as more and more people began to feel the pressure of debt, high taxes, and other burdens of economic uncertainty in the still-unstable economy, voices of protest arose against the apparent unfairness of the post-Revolutionary result.

Those voices became especially widespread in Massachusetts in 1786, where farmers facing the frightening prospect of losing their land, joined together in community and county meetings to petition the state government for relief. When Massachusetts leaders seemed indifferent, even disdainful, toward their pleas, many rural people did what they had done scarcely a decade earlier to protest the British menace: they took up arms to challenge the power that threatened to oppress them, even if, this time, it was their own elected government.

As the Massachusetts insurgency began to spread and gain strength, ex-soldier Daniel Shays was one of the men who wound up at the front of the rural forces in the armed showdown against the state. This time he gained notoriety raising his sword, not for selling it. Indeed, he came to be blamed for masterminding what some opponents soon came to call 'Shays's Rebellion.' Shays always insisted, though, that he was just one man in a much larger movement, a leader pushed to the fore by the mass of people aroused in protest.

In Massachusetts and elsewhere in the new nation, the Revolution left not just a legacy of liberty, but of inequality as well. As people confronted that contradiction, they realized that the struggle against Great Britain, in which Shays and so many others had served so selflessly, now seemed only the prelude to a larger struggle to make sure the benefits as well as the burdens of the war would be spread more broadly throughout American society.

That struggle still continues in the twenty-first century. As in Daniel Shays's day, military service gives us a useful initial insight into the enduring question of inequality. Today's all-volunteer armed forces recruit largely among the poor in America, and while the military provides some young people with valuable opportunities for education and technical training, it also calls on them to sacrifice for a society that offers much broader economic opportunities to others. Since there is no longer a draft that affects young people of all classes, college graduates can anticipate moving immediately into a wide variety of career options, and some of them will become the most prominent and prosperous financial and political leaders of the future. Our understanding of the past, however, might remind us that the growing distance between rich and poor runs against one of the Revolution's most profound promises, the principle of equal opportunity and social justice for everyone. Failing to fulfill that promise continues to engender the sort of social antagonism that swept post-Revolutionary America and has remained another part of our past for over two centuries.

References