

together, the contributions to *The Other Missouri History* force us to expand our viewpoint and to look beyond the words and deeds of the rich and powerful. By assuming the perspective of ordinary people, this volume helps us to gain a richer interpretation of historical events in Missouri and elsewhere.

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Language and Political Meaning in Revolutionary America

By John Howe

(Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004. Pp. xii, 281. Illustrations, notes, index. \$39.95.)

There is little doubt of the substantial role played by vocabulary in determining the outcome of public events. Whether deployed in the service of great historical struggles or of fleeting political squabbles, language can produce deadlock, or it can reframe the very manner in which citizens understand the questions at issue.

Professor John Howe devotes considerable effort to recounting the evolution of language in late colonial America, and to investigating its influence on the political struggles of the era. His book does not attempt to create an overarching theory of language during the several decades of the Revolutionary period, but it does provide useful insights into the interplay of language and politics.

Modern readers easily forget, for example, that during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the English language was still very

much in flux. Conventions of spelling, punctuation, and grammar (not to mention definitions of words) now so familiar to Englishmen and Americans alike were still matters in play during the decades preceding the Revolution. Samuel Johnson's 1755 dictionary became the leading achievement of a fifty-year movement to prescribe standard language. The respectability that such standardization brought to the English language fit nicely with the ambitious goals of Great Britain's political leadership.

Howe observes that the movement toward standardization, still a work in progress on the eve of the Revolution, complicated the political debate that ultimately led to schism between the mother country and her colonies. The conflict with the British during what Howe calls "the imperial crisis" was exacerbated by the fact that the two sides possessed different definitions of common terms like

“liberty” and “the rights of Englishmen.” Language might even be said to have played a role during a last-ditch effort to avoid war, when General Howe received a delegation from the Continental Congress in the winter of 1777. This effort foundered when the parties disagreed over whether the colonials should be called a group of individuals or representatives of the colonial congress.

Howe also helpfully traces changes in the means of political discourse during the Revolutionary decades. These middle decades of the eighteenth century witnessed an explosion of political expression through the use of broadsides (frequently issued anonymously). The number of regular newspapers in the colonies expanded rapidly during the fifteen years after 1775, creating an alternative mode of political expression. By the time of the Constitutional Convention, newspapers had become the leading means of propagating political doctrine.

Howe also casts disagreements over the ratification of the Constitution in linguistic light. In opposing ratification, the Anti-Federalists tended to express their views as though language were a fixed commodity, taking the same approach as the prescriptive creators of the dictionaries. They insisted that greater precision

in language could provide a safer future for the country. Their demand for a bill of rights to protect the people and the states from overreaching by the new government aligned with this view of language. The Federalists, seeing both language and the constitutional document as possessing the capacity to develop new meanings and purposes over time, spoke to the politics of the age in language characterized by studied ambiguity.

Professor Howe’s book fits nicely alongside the several works over the last decade that have explored colonial language and politics. This book is not aimed at the popular reader, nor even at the regular student of history. This relatively slender volume contains nearly fifty pages of endnotes, and its paragraphs are filled with inside references to other writers and critics. The book contains useful observations and lots of source material, but most readers will find it more valuable as a reference volume than as a casual read.

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