Navigating the Age of Revolution

By William Anthony Hay

REVOLUTION AND WAR have defined the experience of most European countries from the mid-18th century, but Britain stands apart in having avoided revolution and fought its wars abroad. Britain's evolutionary narrative contrasts sharply with the story of other countries traumatized by revolution, civil war, or conquest and occupation. Europe's *ancien regime* faced a profound general crisis as institutions failed to meet demands they faced, and the French Revolution in 1789 marked the most prominent instance of a wider pattern. China followed a parallel trajectory with revolts that pushed it into a spiral of decline and vulnerability over the coming century. Even the fledgling United States faced challenges to its cohesion from the 1780s through 1830 that adumbrated the catastrophe of the 1860s. So what made Britain different?

Boyd Hilton offers a sophisticated answer in the latest volume of the New Oxford History of England series focused on Britain's perilous journey through the age of revolution. As a distinguished specialist in the history of finance and economics who has also written on the relationship between religion and public culture, Hilton is well placed to explore the period in context. His title draws on the famous description of Byron by his lover Lady Caroline Lamb—wife to the future Prime Minister Lord Melbourne—as "mad, bad, and dangerous to know." Britain's elite at this time lived atop a fault line that threatened to produce the kind of earthquake seen in France, and the Whig cler-

gyman and wit Sydney Smith captured the spirit of the age when he remarked in 1840 that "the old-fashioned, orthodox, hand-shaking, bowel-disturbing passion of fear" underlay the political reforms of the era.

Instability went beyond fear of the mob. Technology and developments in industrial organization brought unprecedented growth, but cycles of boom and bust heightened risk and unease. Economic depression threw angry workers onto the streets without unemployment provision to prevent utter destitution. Change benefited some while leaving others dispossessed, and economic policy created a zero-sum game with political consequences. New interest groups in the provinces demanded a voice with greater urgency and challenged established interests with metropolitan ties. War with France from 1793, with the threat it brought of invasion and subversion, imposed heavy strains that peace after 1815 did not immediately raise. It shifted patterns of demand and investment while leaving a financial hangover of debt.

Hilton makes a strong case that the absence of a shared civic culture marked the defining characteristic of the age. At the time when pubic opinion first became a national phenomenon, neither the public nor elites shared a common idiom for expressing it. Political, religious, and intellectual disputes cut deeply enough to create almost unbridgeable divides with opposing sides viewing each other as agents of anarchy or despotism. Rivalry between Whigs and Tories revived party politics, and religious dissenters clashed with defenders of the Church of England's authority. Some Englishmen sympathized with revolutionary movements abroad, but loyalists viewed them as an assault on Christian civilization.

Britain had emerged from the Seven Years War in 1763 with an enviable posi-

tion of strength that collapsed in the crisis of the American Revolution, which undermined Britain's position in Europe and overseas—risking a defeat far worse than losing the 13 American colonies—and had serious consequences at home. Opposition Whigs led by Charles James Fox sided with the Americans, accusing George III and his ministers of trying to revive Stuart absolutism and subvert English liberties. Friends of the crown attributed the conflict to an alliance of infidels, religious dissenters, republicans, and Whigs seeking to overthrow kingly government. One Tory clergyman, William Jones, invoked the Puritan legacy by labeling the conflict "a Presbyterian war." The anti-Catholic Gordon Riots in 1780, which caused more damage to London than the French Revolution later did to Paris, marked a symbolic loss of control. Repealing laws against Catholics in 1788 had aroused Protestant fears of foreign subversion and royal absolutism, and a crowd that had gathered to accompany a petition to parliament degenerated into a mob that sacked embassies and churches, opened the Fleet Prison, and terrorized London for five days. By 1783, George III had been forced to accept a coalition government led by Fox and Lord North.

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"new conservatism" as a backlash against these developments, but it might better be understood as the revival of older trends submerged by the Whig supremacy. England's landed interests and Anglican clergy had been politically marginalized until George III ended their exclusion in the 1760s. Tory squires and parsons, whose sentiments prefigured the militant loyalism stirred by the French Revolution, joined politicians like Charles Jenkinson to drive out the Fox-North coalition and install William Pitt the Younger as prime minister in 1784. Pitt's skill pushed the Foxite Whigs to the political wilder-

ness, and his financial policies revived British fortunes. Prosperity in Britain contrasted with the "political frenzy or dread of it" found across the English Channel—but war and revolution shattered that calm by 1793.

War strained Britain to the breaking point, with the compromise Peace of Amiens in 1802 providing only a brief pause between the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Ideological conflicts sharpened at home: Whigs and plebeian reformers alike labored under charges of being crypto-Jacobins or lackeys of Napoleon. The government rallied patriotic support, while its critics seemed to prefer foreign ways to those of their countrymen. If Britain ruled the waves, especially after Nelson's 1805 victory at Trafalgar, seapower and commercial wealth could not defeat France in Europe. Forming a coalition against France proved futile until 1813, and Napoleon's economic warfare combined with American embargoes damaged Britain's trade. Unprecedented spending had wider consequences for public finance and the general economy. Even if a return to pre-war conditions could have been made after 1815, it would have created disruptions of its own. Any government policy hurt as many vocal interests as it helped.

and successfully handle peacetime crisis, stands out as a leading statesmen of the era. The collapse of the Tory government after his untimely stroke in 1827 only underlines his achievement.

Where Liverpool found a solution in political management, his Whig counterpart, Henry Brougham, pioneered a new style of popular mobilization to break out of opposition. He linked provincial reformers and business interests with the Foxite Whigs in Parliament to force Liverpool's government to abandon controversial economic measures such as the postwar income tax in 1816. Limited early success gradually forged a coalition for systematic reform that made the Whigs a viable governing party by 1830.

An avalanche of reform in parliamentary representation had begun in 1828 and 1829 with the repeal of laws excluding non-Anglican Protestants and Roman Catholics from political participation. Since representation in the House of Commons had been unchanged since the 1600s, the system became unbalanced as major towns lacked representation while declining villages had too much. Piecemeal changes in the allocation of parliamentary seats to reflect current population trends before long gave way to demands for a wholesale reform. Tories like John Wilson Croker feared England

strengthened the landed interest by giving more seats to the counties. Although the Reform era may have dismantled the structure of the ancient regime and displaced the paradigm of patrician culture that sustained it, Croker's apocalypse never came to pass.

Reforms that standardized local governments and reorganized town corporations soon ensued. These developments involved a change within the political class following on the struggle for power between Whigs and Tories along with a perceived need to accommodate important groups beyond the old metropolitan elites. Chartism, a working-class movement in the late 1830s and '40s, was a challenge to the new political class that never gained the traction to win or force concessions. Its demands for universal suffrage, annual parliaments, and payment for MPs had precedent among radicals in the 1810s but lacked middle class support. Hard times and unemployment gave Chartism working-class support, but that constituency evaporated with growing prosperity and meliorist social reform. Hilton also discusses at length the religious revival that brought a revolution in manners across society. Victorian respectability antedated Victoria's accession in 1837, and it tamed that mad, bad, and dangerous people whose volatility posed such a threat.

Lord Shelburne likened Europe in the 1780s to the difficult period between winter and summer in cold climates where the spring thaw made terrain impassable. Society risked slipping into the morass created by perpetual change, and Shelburne lamented the failure to reconcile old institutions to new circumstances. Turbulence defined an era, but Britain, as Hilton's fine book recounts, found its way through the storm to set the paradigm for modern, liberal government. Its story shows that evolution, not revolution, provides the surest path to a stable and prosperous order. ■

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These tensions defined the postwar era. Lord Liverpool—prime minister from 1812-1827—whose reputation Hilton justly revives from obscurity, was painfully aware of the limits to what his government could do and relied on prosperity to solve the problems of social tension. His dismantling of mercantilist policies and the patronage networks reviled by critics as "old corruption" helped trade and deflected criticism, but reducing the patronage that made 18th-century government work smoothly presented more difficulties of management. Liverpool, the only prime minister to win a major war

would now follow the sorrowful path France had trod from 1789 with the meeting of the Estates General. Feckless Whig aristocrats and intellectuals like Brougham would soon lose control to the radical mob as their predecessors across the channel had done. Indeed, Croker described the situation leading to the 1832 Reform Act as "a revolution gradually accomplished by due form of law."

That revolution, however, actually reduced the number of voters and linked suffrage more closely with property. Appeals to the middle class masked the consequence of provisions that

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Not So Clean Break

Israel bombed southern Lebanon on July 12 in response to the capture of two Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah fighters. But the Israelis were said to have planned a military campaign weeks before the soldiers were kidnapped. According to Dr. John Pike, head of the Washington-based think tank Global Strategies, and my friend Arnaud de Borchgrave, editor at large of the *Washington Times* and UPI, Israel had briefed Washington about its concerns, and the U.S. had given Israel a green light to attack Hezbollah and push its troops into southern Lebanon. There was an agreement between Israel and Uncle Sam that Iranian nuclear plants would eventually have to be bombed. Once this was done, Iran would most likely order Hezbollah to attack Israel. Thus the U.S. and Israel agreed in secret that at some point before the attack on Iran, Hezbollah would have to be disarmed and that as soon as a pretext became available, Israel should use force.

Elementary, my dear Watson. As everyone who does not live in a cave knows, whenever there is a glimmer of stability in the region, the state of Israel orders a targeted assassination. (Just before the Hezbollah kidnapping, there were targeted assassinations in Gaza.) On June 17, the former Israeli prime minister and chief hawk, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Likud Knesset member Natan Sharansky met with Vice President Dick Cheney. Speaking to the London *Spectator* recently, Netanyahu suggested that President Bush had assured him Iran will be prevented from going nuclear. I take him at his word. Netanyahu seems to be the main mover in America's official adoption of the 1996 white paper "A Clean Break," authored by him and American fellow neocons, which aimed to aggressively remake the strategic environments of Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Iran. As they say in boxing circles, three down, two to go.

The trouble, of course, is that the three are not down. The U.S.-sponsored assault on Lebanon is looking a lot like the ill-fated Iraq invasion. In both cases we were told smart bombs would accomplish miracles. Not so. Stiff resistance on the ground and outrage throughout the world is the result. The Bush doctrine of creating democracy in the Middle East with bombs will go down in history as the cruelest and craziest ever. A war on terror, as Bush calls everything he doesn't agree with, cannot be won by a democratically elected government acting like a terrorist organization. Killing civilians, especially children, is wrong. As Talleyrand cynically pointed out, "It is worse than a crime, it's a mistake."

The truth is that even friends of Israel—and there are many—do not believe for a moment that Hezbollah, Syria, or Iran really threaten Israel's existence. Only a propagandist like John Podhoretz—"we should have killed many more Sunnis age 15 to 35"—and his bloodthirsty ilk of neocons believe such rubbish, and being a betting man I'd bet the farm that even they don't. Normal, decent, sophisticated countries that claim the moral high ground, as Israel does, do not kill thousands of civilians and destroy the infrastructure of their neighbors because three soldiers were kidnapped. It was a set-up from day one.

Both sides, needless to say, claim victimhood. The U.S. and its allies invoke 9/11, Madrid, and London. The Arabs underline 1967, 1982, 2003, not to mention Der Yassin in 1948 and last month's bombing of Qana. Yet we have three Arab territories today where American bombs and policies have played a major role in promoting chaos and mass death: Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon. Now we hear that the neocons want Syria and Iran to disintegrate next. Is there no one with any brains left in the White House? Don't any of them understand that if any means were acceptable to fight one's enemies, then the people who have bombed children in Israel and killed innocents at the World Trade Center would have been right? Not only were they morally wrong, we are doubly wrong to follow their example.

And speaking of lack of brainpower, isolating the Syrian ambassador to Washington cannot be the smartest thing to do. 18,000 Lebanese lost their lives when Israel attacked that miserable country in 1982, but Americans wonder why there are so many people who would spend six years building tunnels or sending suicide bombers. "We do not talk with terrorists" is the Bush mantra. He keeps repeating it like those mechanical monkeys who say "Howdy" one buys for children at a zoo. The collective punishment dealt out by Israel against innocents in Lebanon is bound to have repercussions. Netanyahu was and always will be a thug. The neocons ditto. The global loathing for the United States and Britain has helped corrupt the minds of a generation of young Muslims. Nightly scenes of slaughter and devastation on their television screens rouse them to blind bitterness against those they hold responsible—Uncle Sam and Israel. Is there no one to knock some sense into the morons who have turned us all into pariahs? This is America's nadir. ■