**Classicism and the American Revolution**

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*The symbols, slogans, ideas and architecture of the Founding Fathers were saturated in the world of Ancient Greece and Rome.*

In 1778, the year of Saratoga, the grammar school in Norwich, England, received a new set of ordinances containing this requirement: 'That no Language he taught in the said School but Latin and Greek'. A generation later, in the Leeds Grammar case of 1805, Lord Eldon ruled that the headmaster of an endowed grammar school could not legally be compelled to teach anything but Greek and Latin. It is not always remembered that the American Founding Fathers, though educated on colonial soil, were similarly grounded in the classics.

The curriculum at eighteenth-century Harvard required freshmen to 'review the classic authors learned at school', while the first-year course at Princeton was described by its President, John Witherspoon, in 1770 as 'Latin, Greek, classical antiquities and rhetoric'. Five years earlier, Dr John Morgan, in his inaugural address at the University of Pennsylvania, commended the study of 'Greek, in which were the original treasures of medical science, Latin as the common language of physicians and scholars, and French, as needed for current professional literature'. The influence of France on Revolutionary America is well known; the influence of Greek and Roman traditions on the shaping of the new republic deserves to be more carefully documented.

Almost half the signatories of the Declaration of Independence (twenty-seven out of fifty-six) had received a college education, and the political propaganda of the revolutionary period is steeped in classical allusions – to a greater extent than the rhetoric of contemporary European politicians. William Pitt the Younger, educated at home because of delicate health and required by his father to translate the Latin and Greek authors, appealed only sparingly to classical examples when addressing the House of Commons. In his thirty speeches on the war with France, there are barely half-a-dozen classical quotations – all from the Latin.

Robespierre's 'Republic of Virtue' more self-consciously drew its images from classical times, naming its children after Brutus, Solon and Lycurgus, and providing the members of the Committee of Public Safety with chairs designed by David on the basis of antique models. The French Republic also adopted the early neoclassical church of Sainte Genevieve, built by Soufflot in the 1750s, as its pantheon for revolutionary heroes.

Meanwhile Robespierre's speech on the abolition of the death penalty cited the compassionate prayers of the citizens of Argos; the first of his three famous speeches opposing the war against Austria and Prussia recalled the example of Sparta; and his speech in defence of the Revolutionary Government (Christmas Day 1793) commended the republican virtues of Themistocles and Scipio. Yet even Robespierre did not resort to classical allusions as readily as did the orators of the American Revolution.

Thomas Jefferson may have been exaggerating when he said that 'American farmers are the only farmers who can read Homer'. But in the disputes over the Writs of Assistance in the 1760s, James Otis, after threatening the Governor of Massachusetts with the fury of Juno (Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo: If I cannot win over the gods above, I shall raise the powers of Hell) went on to invoke the example of the Greeks. They were, he claimed, somewhat unhistorically, 'kind, humane and just towards their colonies' whereas the Romans were 'cruel, barbarous and brutal towards theirs'. He points to Caesar as an instance of the danger of standing armies, to Aristotle in defence of the people's right to reform their government, and to the Law of Nature as expounded by Cicero.

John Dickinson also drew on Cicero in his letter from Congress in 1774 to 'The Inhabitants of the British Colonies in America'. His series of letters under the general title of Letters of a Farmer in Pennsylvania were a forceful statement of colonists' rights and a plea for united action. He quoted with approval Tacitus on the ancient Britons: 'Against these very powerful tribes, there was no circumstance more useful than their failure to plan in common'. Meanwhile a Boston town meeting sent Dickinson a vote of thanks for his 'Spartan, Roman, British Virtue, and Christian spirit joined'.

It was Sam Adams, 'the Cato of New England; who looked for the establishment of a 'Christian Sparta' in Boston. He provided his Sons of Liberty with Latin slogans – Vis unita fortior (power is made stronger by unity.) He incurred imputations of treason when he wrote that 'the times were never better in Rome than when they had no kings and were a free state'. And, as Candidus in the Boston Gazette, he warned that the principle embodied in the murder of Caligula 'may prove as destructive to men who take the lead in a Commonwealth as to absolute monarchs'.

The pamphleteers made frequent use of classical pseudonyms. Tom Paine wrote under the name of 'Atlanticus' or 'Aesop', when not using the title that won him fame – 'Common Sense'. Joseph Galloway's letters to Charles James Fox were entitled Letters from Cicero to Catiline the Second, and contained frequent quotations from the Roman orator. Alexander Hamilton and Gouverneur Morris went so far as to use classical names as a political cipher: Washington was 'Scaevolo', Jefferson 'Scipio' and Madison 'Tarquin'.

Washington did not himself receive a classical education, but he gave his slaves Roman names, and he ordered for his library at Mount Vernon busts of Sallust, Terence, Horace and Erasmus; while an invoice from his English dealer included: 'A Groupe of Aeneas carrying his father out of Troy, neatly finished and bronzed with copper – three pounds, three shillings...' In 1774 Jefferson had favoured the adoption of a classical motif to symbolise American resistance: a father presenting Aesop's bundle of rods to his sons (the thirteen colonies) with the motto: Insuperabiles si Inseparabiles.

The events of 1'774 and the calling of the first Continental Congress inspired John Trumbull to write his 'Elegy on the Times':

*Now meet the Fathers of the Western clime,   
Nor names more noble graced the rolls, of fame,   
When Spartan firmness braved the wrecks of time,   
Or Latin virtue fanned the heroic flame.   
Nor deeper thought the immortal sage inspired   
On Solon's lips when Grecian senates hung;   
Nor manlier eloquence the bosom fired   
When genius thundered from the Athenian tongue.*

And Trumbull's farcical anti-Tory satire McFingal, for all its classical allusions, became (like Paine's pamphlets) morale-raising reading matter for Washington's armies in the field.

Trumbull's namesake, John Trumbull the artist, had prepared for his professional career by laying a literary foundation that embodied Virgil, Cicero, Horace, Juvenal and the Iliad. His paintings depict such classical themes as Brutus condemning his sons, the rape of Lucretia, and Belisarius reduced to beggary. The theme of Helisarius begging was given a satirical twist by Francis Hopkinson who, in his poem Date Obolum Belisario, portrays Britannia as a beggar by the roadside. Hopkinson, a signatory of the Declaration of Independence and later a member of Congress, was also the author of a volume of songs dedicated to Washington. Earlier and somewhat unprophetically, he had greeted the accession of George III with a welcome to 'the Roman boast, the Generous Titus, joy of human kind'. In a poem celebrating a successful Indian treaty, he wrote approvingly of the Indians' power of debate – 'See from the throng a painted warrior rise, A savage Cicero...' – and went on to borrow comparisons from the Olympic games and the antics of Delphic priestesses to embellish his description of an Indian war dance. In 1788 he would offer his 'Ode in Celebration of the Constitution'.

A more substantial poet, Philip Freneau, of French Huguenot stock and a graduate of Princeton, was hailed by Washington as the 'Tyntaeus' of the American Revolution'. His 'American Liberty' (1775) contains the lines:

*Virtue disdains to own tyrannic laws,   
Takes part with Freedom, and assumes its cause.   
She stood with Romans while their hearts were true,   
And so she shall, Americans, with you.*

And, drawing on the experience of his temporary incarceration in a prison hulk when his ship Aurora was captured by a British frigate, Freneau described the prisoners' fate:

*Here wastes away Autolycus the brave,   
Here young Orestes finds a watery grave.   
Here young Aleander, gay, alas, no more,   
Dies far sequestered from his native shore.*

He hailed the signing of peace with 'Mr Peale's Exhibition, with its Ionic pillars in the style of' architecture used by the Romans', and greeted the establishment of the United States with a Latin poem on 'The Pyramid of the Fifteen American States', adapted from Martial's poem on the wonders of Old Rome.

When the Constitutional Convention met at Philadelphia, classical comparisons were a constant theme of its debates. It was natural for the draughtsmen of the new constitution to refer to historical examples. But in the eighteenth century, history meant, for most purposes, Ancient History. When Jefferson wrote from Paris in 1785 to his nephew, Peter Carr, with advice on reading, he urged him to 'begin a course of ancient history, reading everything in the original and not in translations'. The reading list he drew up in 1790 for his cousin John Garland Jefferson did include Kennet's three-volume history of England, Bishop Burnet's History of My Own Times, Voltaire's historical works (presumably those on Louis XIV, Peter the Great and Charles XII of Sweden) and Robertson's history of Scotland. But the history that influenced the constitution-makers was found in the writings of Montesquieu – his Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline (1734) and his more famous Spirit of Laws (1748).

The delegates to the 1787 Constitutional Convention had done some preliminary reading by way of preparation. From Paris, Jefferson arranged for copies of Polybius and sets of other ancient authors to be shipped to Madison (a Princeton man) and to George Wythe (Jefferson's old law tutor). The importance of Polybius was that he was the leading authority on the Greek city-state. And in Polybius, no less than in Montesquieu, were to be found the doctrine of the separation of powers and the system of checks and balances. Polybius, in praising Rome in the heyday of the Republic, commented: 'The purpose of the one part can be counter-worked and thwarted by the others; none of them will excessively outgrow the others or treat them with contempt... any aggressive impulse is sure to be checked'. This would, Polybius claimed, make for 'an equilibrium like a well-trimmed boat'.

The constitutional debates at Philadelphia revolved round the contrasting Greek and Roman models for colonial rule. In the 1760s and 1770s these classical models had been applied to the question of the thirteen colonies' relationship to Britain. Now the Convention was charged with the task of constructing a tighter relationship between the states than was afforded by the Articles of Confederation, which had held the colonies together during the war. The Articles represented the loose alliance of Greece: the new constitution would conform to the more centralised Roman pattern.

Alexander Hamilton, who as 'Publius' in an essay of 1778 had argued that 'the leagues among the old Grecian republics were constantly at war with each other, and for want of union fell a prey to their neighbours', came to the Convention armed with a memorandum in favour of what he called a 'mixed' government.

In the Convention debates of May 1787 Madison pointed to 'the beauties and defects of the ancient republics'. He described in detail the Lycian confederacy, with its 'weighted' system of voting: three votes to the largest towns, two to those of average size, and only one to the smallest. Luther Martin of Maryland preferred the example of the Amphictyonic League, in which each city 'however different in wealth and strength sent the same number of deputies with an equal voice in everything that related to the common concerns of Greece'. It was Franklin's common-sense view which at length prevailed: that it was pointless to follow the example of 'those ancient republics which contained the seeds of their own dissolution'.

But the Roman model had its dangers too. James Wilson expressed the fear that, if the central control were strengthened, they might produce 'a General Government as despotic as even that of the Roman emperors'. George Mason of Virginia was fearful that an army commander might 'surround the senate with 30,000 troops' while Thacher of Massachusetts asked, 'Will not some Sulla drench the land in blood, or some Cromwell or Caesar lay our liberties prostrate at his feet?' The presidency was nevertheless conferred on ex-General Washington, though the only federal army was to be a state-chosen militia under congressional control.

Hamilton, looking further ahead, cited the law of Sparta which forbade the post of admiral to be conferred twice on the same man, yet did not prevent Lysander from being recalled as vice-admiral with full admiral's powers. Hamilton's advice in No. 25 of the Federalist Papers was that 'wise politicians will be cautious about fettering the government with restrictions that cannot be observed'.

The Federalist pamphlets, written by Hamilton in conjunction with Madison and Jay to influence opinion while the Constitutional Convention was sitting, invariably cited classical instances in appealing to their readers. In No. 6 Hamilton had criticised the supposedly democratic Pericles for attacking Samos and Megara, and thus ultimately causing the Peloponnesian War. In No. 55 Madison, too, criticised Athenian democracy: 'Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob'. What Athens needed, Madison later argued (No. 63), was a senate like Sparta, Carthage and Rome.

The bicameral solution embodied in the Constitution awoke echoes of Rome – too loudly for Patrick Henry's liking, who feared a rich Senate and a subordinate popular House. He commended the role of tribunes and ephors, and the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 had indeed instituted 'censors' to oversee legislation and administration. In the event none of these officials was incorporated into the federal system. The new republic was given its Senate and would soon have its Capitol.

The Constitution had been drawn on a tabula rasa, with attention to classical models. The new centre of government, the city of Washington, would be built on virgin ground – and according to the canons of classical architecture. The American Revolution had happily coincided with the neo-classical revival in architecture. Renaissance classicism in the Palladian style had been a feature of the colonial landscape since the seventeenth century, but classical styles of the revolutionary period harked back beyond the Renaissance.

A new enthusiasm for archaeology, stimulated by excavations at Herculaneum and Pompeii and by Winckelmann's Observations on the Architecture of the Ancients (1762), encouraged architects to use architectural forms in the way in which the Greek and Roman architects had used them – and not just for decorative effect. According to Winckelmann, 'the only way to become great and, if possible, inimitable is by imitation of the ancients'. And he characterised the marks of antique art as 'noble simplicity and calm grandeur'.

Winckelmann probably had more impact on writers than on architects. His History of Ancient Art (1764), the most influential of his writings, was not translated into English until the nineteenth century, though a French translation appeared in the 1760s. But the archaeological activity of the mid-eighteenth century did provide the first accurate drawings of Greek temples. Philadelphia, the home of the Constitutional Convention and the seat of the federal government from 1790 to 1800, was one of the most important centres of the Greek revival in America – though its principal monuments date from the 1820s and 1830s. The Second Bank of the United States was completed in 1824 with a Doric portico based on the Parthenon, while the Merchants Exchange (1834) has a lantern based on the Choragic Monument of Lysicra tes in Athens. By the 1820s the Greek struggle for independence from the Turks had given a new impetus to neo-classicism. Yet as early as 1787, Jefferson was writing to George Wythe: 'I cannot help looking forward to the re-establishment of the Greeks as a people, and the language of Homer becoming a living language.'

The design of the new city of Washington was entrusted to a Frenchman, Pierre Charles l'Enfant, who had come to America in 1777 when he volunteered for George Washington's Army. After the war he returned briefly to France, but came back in time to remodel New York City Hall for the inauguration of the President and the opening of the first session of Congress. On the strength of his architectural work in New York, l'Enfant applied in 1789 for the commission to plan the new capital city.

The next year saw not only the move of the federal government from New York to Philadelphia, but also the Senate bill, signed in July, which provided for three commissioners to survey an area not exceeding ten miles square on the banks of the Potomac, with a view to having the necessary government buildings ready for occupation by the first Monday in December 1800. L'Enfant promptly designed a city for 800,000 inhabitants, the size of eighteenth-century Paris. It was I'Enfant who chose the sites for the principal buildings – the White House and the Capitol – which were (in his words) to be connected by 'a public walk and…on this place of general resort, play-houses, room of assembly, academies and all such sort of places attractive to the learned'. This part of I'Enfant's vision would begin to materialise in time – the Smithsonian Institution now stands in the Mall within sight of the Capitol – but in February 1792 l'Enfant quarrelled with the commissioners and was dismissed.

When Jefferson wrote to l'Enfant in April 1791, enclosing the plans of a dozen European cities and expressing his happiness 'that the President has left the planning of the town in such good hands', he had added: 'Whenever it is proposed to prepare plans for the Capitol, I should prefer the adoption of some of the models of antiquity, which have the approbation of thousands of years...' After l'Enfant's dismissal, a competition was held for the design of the Capitol building, and in 1794 the winner was announced. It was Marc Isambard Brunel, Chief Engineer of New York and father of the more famous Bristol engineer, who would one day create the S.S. Great Britain and the Great Western Railway. The elder Brunel's design for the Capitol, with its two-tiered colonnaded rotunda and four Grecian porticoes, combined the pure lines of Greek classicism with the grandeur of imperial Rome.

But it was too expensive to build, and the first Capitol was constructed to the Palladian design of William Thornton. Its interior effects were more authentically classical. The first Senate chamber, designed by Benjamin Latrobe, exhibited the classical mathematical precision of the half-cylinder supporting a quarter sphere – the Roman Pantheon cut in half. Latrobe's capitals were not quite classical, however: the pillars in the first-floor vestibule of his old Supreme Court chamber are crowned with corn-cobs. After the British bombardment in the War of 1812, the Capitol building was remodelled, and its famous exterior owes most to Charles Bullfinch though it was Charles Walter who finally completed the project in 1865.

Charles Bullfinch had also designed the State House, Boston, completed in 1798. It was perhaps a more tentative exercise in neo-classicism than some of the London models on which it was based. But the capitol buildings of the individual states that made up the Union are a convincing index of the dominance of classical ideals. The giant Doric portico of the state capitol of Montpellier in Vermont, built in 1838, was based on a reconstruction of the Thesion in Athens. The state capitols of Springfield, Illinois, and Columbus, Ohio, of about the same date, also display the Doric order.

It was Jefferson himself who designed the oldest state capitol, that of Richmond, Virginia, started in 1785 and based on the Roman model of the Maison Carree at Nimes. In his autobiography Jefferson describes the enterprise thus:

Thinking it a favourable opportunity of introducing into the State an example of architecture in the classic style of antiquity, and the Maison Quarree of Nismes, an ancient Roman temple, being considered as the most perfect example existing of what may be called cubic architecture, I applied to M. Clerissault, who had published drawings of the antiquities of Nismes, to have me a model of the building made in stucco, only changing the order from Corinthian to Ionic, on account of the difficulty of the Corinthian capitals.

And in a letter to James Madison in September 1785, while explaining that 'much time was requisite, after the external form was agreed to, to make the internal distribution convenient for the three branches of government', Jefferson also expressed his belief in the educative value of the new style: 'How is a taste in this beautiful art to be formed in our countrymen unless we avail ourselves of every occasion when public buildings are to be erected, of presenting to them models for their study and imitation?'

In the University of Virginia, designed by Jefferson down to the last window-pane, the ideals of rational education and classical architecture were fused. The 'lawn' of the University's 'academical village' was constructed in accordance with the Jeffersonian plan:

... a small and separate lodge for each professorship, with only a hall below for his class, and two chambers above for himself; these lodges to be joined by barracks for a certain portion of the students, opening into a covered way to give a dry communication between all the parts, the whole of these arranged around an open square of trees.

The overall plan, which owed much to the advice of Latrobe, lent itself to a pattern of classical porticoes and colonnaded walk-ways, thus forming what must be the most harmoniously uniform university campus in the world. And at one end stood the Rotunda, closely modelled on the Pantheon in Rome. It is no surprise to find that a thorough knowledge of Latin was required of all graduates.

Jefferson thought of himself as a Roman in the unblemished days of the republic. He was (as he himself implies) a sort of Virginian Cincinnatus – though the term was more aptly applied to Washington. At Monticello, his Virginian home, a blend of Palladian and Doric, Jefferson described to his friends his simple rural existence. As he told M. de Meusnier in April 1795: 'In our private pursuits it is a great advantage that every honest employment is deemed honourable. I am myself a nailmaker'.

The neo-classical style was not confined to republican patrons. Charles Cameron, the Palladian architect commissioned by Catherine the Great to extend her palace at Tsarkoe Selo, provided Ionic columns for the Cameron gallery, where Catherine placed busts of the ancient Greek philosophers. Meanwhile in the grounds of the Grand Duke's palace at Pavlovsk, Cameron designed a Temple of Friendship in the Greek style, with a low dome and sixteen Doric columns, enclosing a statue of Catherine portrayed as Ceres. And in Napoleon's Paris, neo-classicism became le style empire, though by now it had lost its high-minded ideals and had become decorative political propaganda.

George Washington's America looked back to republican rather than imperial Rome. Washington himself, having had Addison's Cato performed for his troops at Valley Forge, resigned his post as commander-in-chief within a few weeks of the formal signing of peace in 1783. He vetoed the idea of being depicted in his Richmond statue clad in a toga, wearing a laurel wreath and with a truncheon in his hand. He nevertheless frequently appears sculpted in classical poses and painted in Greek or Roman settings.

The symbols, slogans, political ideas and architectural forms of the American Revolution are an impressive tribute to the power of classical literature in moulding the minds of men of action. For all their hard-nosed determination to safeguard the economic prosperity and political independence of' the new republic, the Founding Fathers never lost their sense of the sublime.