

Robert K. Landers

# Patriots & Vandals

## American Tempest

How the Boston Tea Party Sparked a Revolution

Harlow Giles Unger  
Da Capo Press, \$26, 288 pp.

## Defiance of the Patriots

The Boston Tea Party & the Making of America

Benjamin L. Carp  
Yale University Press, \$30, 311 pp.

In the curious spectacle of avowed conservatives drawing inspiration from an eighteenth-century mob's illegal destruction of valuable commercial property, we can see that the American Revolution has lost none of its power to confound conventional political categories. Two recent books offer fresh views of the fateful action in Boston harbor on the night of December 16, 1773.

The "Boston Tea Party" did not acquire its name until some fifty years after the event, and much about it remains unknown. Most of the men, many disguised as Indians, who boarded the three trading ships at Griffin's Wharf and dumped into the harbor 342 chests of East India Company tea—valued at £9,659 (about \$1 million today)—kept their participation secret for many years. They mainly feared, even after independence, that they could be held liable for the destruction of private property and face civil or criminal charges.

Just how many men took part in the Tea Party is uncertain: Benjamin L. Carp, an academic historian in his mid-thirties, calculates in *Defiance of the Patriots* that about a hundred did; Harlow Giles Unger, a prolific popular historian who turns eighty this year, puts the number at "six to seven dozen" in *American Tempest*. Carp offers a list he carefully compiled of likely participants; Unger reproduces others' lists.

The most familiar name is that of silversmith Paul Revere, but the lists' value is less in the names themselves than in their associated characteristics. The Tea Party "patriots," most under thirty, "hailed from all walks of life," Carp says. "Men with strong backs and hard Yankee accents, they were a mix of young merchants, craftsmen, apprentices, and workers." Most were skilled craftsmen, Unger says. "Clearly, the majority of Tea Party patriots emerged from a moderate segment of Boston society—literate, skilled, often well educated, and nonviolent."

What were these young men so upset about? The tax on tea that Parliament had imposed in the Townshend Act in 1767, and then retained three years later when the Townshend taxes on other commodities had been lifted, was, as Unger points out, "negligible—a mere three-pence per pound...of a beverage consumed largely by women as 'a sign of politeness and hospitality.'" After the partial repeal of the Townshend Act in 1770, the movement to boycott English goods largely collapsed, and (outside of radical circles) so did active concern about the tax on tea from England. Bostonians then, like Philadelphians and New Yorkers, mostly drank cheap Dutch tea smuggled from the continent anyway.

What changed in 1773 was that Par-

liament, seeking to increase its revenues and to prop up the ailing East India Company, granted the company a tax rebate on tea shipped to America and also the right to select its own agents to sell the tea there directly. "In the past," Carp notes, "English and American merchants had been able to compete for the right to buy cargoes of tea in London and ship them to America for a healthy profit." Now, with the rebate and the elimination of those middlemen, the company would be able to offer its tea to Americans at a price *lower* than that of the cheap smuggled tea, even though Parliament would continue to collect the three-pence duty on each pound of tea. A nice solution all around, except that, as Unger writes, it "would drive untold numbers of small colonial merchants and shopkeepers out of business"—and into the camp of the rebels who passionately objected on principle to being taxed without their consent.

Samuel Adams, who'd been advocating independence since 1765, and other radicals led the Boston opposition to the 1773 Tea Act. Adams's Committee of Correspondence and the North End Caucus (Adams, Dr. Joseph Warren, William Molineux, and fifty-seven other activists) "were particularly well suited to organize the townspeople behind the resistance," Carp writes. Even so, he seems not to hold Adams and his radical faction chiefly responsible for the Tea Party, but instead to disperse the responsibility much more diffusely. Adams's committee and the North End Caucus, he contends, acted with "the newspapers, the Boston Town Meeting, and the crowds [to form] a flexible, overlapping coalition to protest the Tea Act." It is "unknown" just who the actual "planners" of the very orderly Tea Party were, Carp says. And, in his view, most participants in the Tea Party were not mere cat's paws: the younger



ones, to be sure, may have simply relished “the visceral thrill and excitement of destroying so much valuable property,” but many participants “well understood the constitutional objections to the Tea Act.” Indeed, Carp claims that “what made [the Tea Party] truly revolutionary was that it demonstrated the ability of ordinary men to engage in defiant, democratic protests.”

Carp, who characterizes Adams only as “Boston’s foremost dissident politician,” notes that he has been roughly treated by some biographers, “who represented him as a Machiavellian manipulator.” And that is precisely how Adams appears in *American Tempest*. Citing *Sam Adams* (1936) by John C. Miller, Unger reports that testimony at the trials of the British soldiers charged in connection with the 1770 Boston Massacre “unmasked Sam Adams as a sinister, power-hungry plotter willing to sacrifice innocent lives and destroy the city, if necessary, to further his designs.”

Unger also draws heavily on the testimony of Adams’s enemies Thomas Hutchinson and Peter Oliver (the last royal civilian governor and chief justice of Massachusetts respectively) to help him show that “the Lenin of the American Revolution” (as Adams has been called by Joseph Ellis and other historians), was indeed more responsible for the Tea Party than any other single individual. And it was this illegal destruction of valuable property that so infuriated the British (who previously had been given to appeasing the American protesters, as in the repeal of the 1765 Stamp Act and the lifting of all the Townshend duties save the mild tax on tea) that it led to closing the port of Boston and other coercive measures, and then to the war, revolutionary and civil.

The Boston lawyer John Adams had not yet completely given up hope of reconciliation with Britain, but, opposed to the tea tax, he praised the Tea Party the next day as “the most magnificent Movement of all. There is a Dignity, a Majesty, a Sublimity, in this last Effort of the Patriots, that I greatly admire.”

Not all the future Founders, however, were so admiring. George Washington, who also objected to the tea tax, “condemned the Boston Tea Party as vandalism and wanton destruction of private property,” Unger notes (but Carp, surprisingly in a valuable work that apparently aspires to be comprehensive, does not).

Carp, whose book has forty-three pages of endnotes, seems a meticulous researcher. I checked all eleven of his citations to *Peter Oliver’s Origin & Progress of the American Rebellion*, and all of his representations were accurate. The same, alas, cannot be said of the journalist-historian Unger (whose book has only sixteen pages of endnotes): of his thirty-one citations to the same source, I found at least three that appeared to egregiously misrepresent Oliver’s or others’ words. Whether these misrepresentations and various other lapses I detected are the result of Homeric nodding or a pattern of somewhat slapdash scholarship in the interest of rapidly crafting a dramatic story would require a thorough examination of all the book’s endnotes to determine. But it is clear that Unger knows a great deal about his subject. His book passed muster with the esteemed historian Thomas Fleming, who gave it a blurb, and it appears likely that his scholarly derelictions are not so extensive as to badly undermine what seems a passionate, provocative, and insightful narrative history. Unger displays a keen understanding of power, of how it is amassed and exercised, of move and countermove. He knows the difference between leaders and led. And he knows that interpreting the facts requires imagination and even a little daring. Indeed, Carp might have done well to take a lesson from the older historian and been a bit less cautious and “balanced” in his appraisal of the momentous event.

The Tea Party’s legacy, Carp concludes, has been dual. On the one hand, it has become “a formative expression of liberty, independence, and civil disobedience, representing the finest human tradition of nonviolent resistance to tyranny.” On the other,

it seems to justify the bullying nullification of any law that an outspoken group dislikes—whether it is slavery, damage to the environment, racial discrimination, legal abortion, court-ordered busing, taxation of any sort, or illegal immigration. The Tea Party opens up Pandora’s box—out comes chaos, but also hope. In this way it exemplifies an ongoing struggle in America between law and order and democratic protest.

That analysis seems plausible—except for the fact that it ignores the one thing that separates the Tea Party from the civil disobedience of Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, and Thoreau: the willingness to accept responsibility for one’s illegal actions. King may have cited the Tea Party (as Carp notes) as “a massive act of civil disobedience” in his famous 1963 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” but in the preceding paragraph in the same letter, King stated: “One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty.” That was something that the Tea Party participants, with their “Mohawk” disguises and decades of silence, were unwilling to do.

Whatever their motives, Unger says, the Tea Party patriots “unleashed social, political, and economic forces” they couldn’t control, leading to turmoil in Boston and other American cities, and to the war. And when the war was over, he adds, independence “produced few immediate benefits” for most Americans—and new burdens for the former colonies.

The states collectively had a new central government to prop up, Unger observes, and the newly independent state governments, having to support themselves and their armed militias without British help, had “to tax more heavily than the British had proposed or would ever have conceived of proposing.” In short, irony of ironies—and “to the consternation of many Tea Party leaders”—independence brought Americans *heavier* taxation. ■

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