

The Representational Value of America: The Mystery behind the Female Native American Illustrations during the American Revolution

Jewan Attallah
History Department
Valparaiso University
1700 Chapel Dr,
Valparaiso, IN 46383 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. David Western

Abstract

As part of a larger research project addressing ethnic and gender identities in eighteenth century America, this paper analyzes two political cartoons one from 1774, and the other from 1780, used by American federalists for propagandist purposes. The cartoon's images raise the question: Why did federalists represent themselves as a weak, violent Native American woman in relation to Great Britain? Where it comes to questions of America's justifications for the American Revolutionary War, the literature tends to focus on how political or economic factors led to it. An analysis of these cartoons with a focus on gender and ethnicity, however, reveals more about the way pro-Revolutionary federalist propagandists were seeking to justify the war. At the time colonists were split between federalists, who wanted to break away from Great Britain, and loyalists, who wanted to support their monarchical government and continue to identify themselves as British. Federalists needed to justify the revolution they wanted to engage in; federalists needed to prove that Great Britain was oppressing its colonies in order to gain the needed support to justify the revolution the federalists wanted to engage to break away from Britain. Thus, federalists turned to political cartoons for propaganda, depicted themselves as a female Native American Indian in violent situations with Britain. The paper argues that Native American women were an ideal choice for portraying America because the political cartoons suggested that America was violently suppressed by Great Britain. These illustrations gave the federalists the support needed to convince the colonists of Britain's oppression and violence.

Keywords: American Revolution, Native American Women, Political Cartoons

1. Introduction

The 1765 Stamp Act changed everything. The Stamp Act led to the first rioting event from the colonists. Colonists grew angry that a government had the jurisdiction to tax the colonies for the tremendous amount of debt resulting from the conclusion of the Seven Year's War. It was necessary to reach a resolution. Most American polemicists reached a consensus for the need to construct an imperial union in order to safeguard what John Dickenson termed "the common good for all."¹ American colonists knew that Britain no longer had the colonies' best interest. It was evident for the colonies to come together to protect themselves from Britain's un-just acts.

However, many colonists admired Britain. They adored their constitution and its monarchical government. They were content to pay the tax in order to support the British crown. John Dickinson articulates these sentiments in his public letter to the farmers in Barbados. He articulates, "Every drop of blood in my heart is British." Ben Franklin advances American admiration for Britain by declaring to the House of Commons how Americans regarded the British constitution as the "best in the world:"

They submitted willingly to the government of the crown, and paid, in all their courts, obedience to acts of representation....They had not only a respect, but an affection for Great-Britain, for its laws....²

The problem arises here. Many colonists witnessed the attempted exploitation from Britain to pay a tax that did not represent them. The Stamp Act of 1765 became the initial attempt for Great Britain to oppress its colonist's unalienable right of representation in government. The colonists separated into two distinct categories, federalists versus loyalists. Loyalists maintained their loyalty to the British crown while federalists rebelled against the crown for liberty. The federalists needed supporters in order to effectively break relations with Great Britain. Thus, it was suggested that satirical works in the method of political cartoons circulated the civilians as a median of propaganda. They appeared in pamphlets, editorials, and newspapers. They became accessible to the entire population; yet, resulting in controversy. Across the Atlantic, America was represented as the weak, innocent state controlled by Great Britain.³ Federalists took advantage of this personification by continuing to depict America as a female Native American.

This is important for consideration because many studies understand America's justifications for war in political or economic terms. However, this study suggests that artistic representations enabled America to justify war with reference to both gendered and ethnic ideologies that were shared on both sides of the Atlantic. Thus, Native American women were an ideal choice for portraying America because they suggested that America was violently oppressed by Great Britain.

2. Social Contexts of Women and Native Americans

Before examining the political cartoons that support the argument, it is necessary to know something about the social and political contexts within which women and Native Americans were expressed and received during revolutionary America. During the eighteenth century, women were portrayed in a distinctive manner. They were associated with a specific ideology. Women composed the majority of the population; however, society defined them as the population's minority. They were viewed as the oppressed minority because of the few rights they carried in comparison to men. They were restrained to domestic roles as mothers, daughters, and caregivers. If some women were dissatisfied with their limited opportunities, they naturally adjusted to their placement and resisted any efforts in changing it. It was common to think that women were excluded from positions of power, both economic and political.⁴ The rationale behind this notion was women were additionally perceived as weak, pure, and lacking the intelligence in order to make reasonable decisions. They could not understand political events because they lacked the capacity to rationally think. They needed men, belonging to them. When a woman weds, an act of coverture under the British common law occurs. A married woman's property was absorbed into her husband's control during the span of their marriage. It was thought that the property owner carried the capacity to practice free will. Married women were not defined as the property owner, translating in their lack of independent political capacity.⁵ Simply, they were oppressed not only by society but also by their men. They were prevented from political participation and the right to exercise their freewill. Society viewed them as mentally incapable to comprehend the significance of revolution. Women were limited to domestic roles. The populace's narrow perception of them has been linked to that of slaves, oppressed ethnic or racial minorities, or economically deprived groups such as Native Americans.

Similar to women, Native Americans were oppressed by their eighteenth century society. They were characterized as "indigenous people" to the American people. The fact that they were solely identified in this perspective proves that they were outside the populace scope. They were different and did not fit the ordinary, American civilization. One could conclude that they were oppressed and exploited by this identification. Native American culture was perceived as threatening, necessary to eliminate or assimilate. They were pushed toward colonization by the whites. Indians were pressured to abandon their indigenous manners and culture in order to fit society's common populace. Their land was confiscated, stolen, or damaged. Native Americans were constantly reminded that their vast cultural differences presented many problems for them and their dominant culture. In comparison to women, Indians were perceived as passive, uneducated, and unable to hold the mental capacity to reason. They were believed to be untamed, lovers of nature who were, yet, murderers and savages. The stereotype of the "silent Indian" echoed the eighteenth century. In social situations, Indians "usually sit or stand quietly, saying nothing [until they seem to] disappear into the background, merging with the wall fixtures."⁶ This social example validates the claim that they are uneducated, non-reasonable beings. They did not defend or express themselves in words; instead, they escaped these types of situations. They were believed to lack the mental capacity in order to carry a logical conversation with other civilized people. This explains society's response to the Indians, preventing them to progress their culture and customs within the civilized population.⁷

Native Americans and women share many commonalities in what they wanted from their eighteenth century society. They were oppressed by society's perceptions and characterization of them. Their judgments limited women and Indians in their political and economic freedom. The belief that they were both uneducated, unreasonable beings prevented them toward social progress with the colonial population. After examining the community's common ideology toward women and Native Americans, it appears they wanted equality. Indians wanted equality in their cultural independence.⁸ Women wanted to be identified as equals with men, have the same opportunities and rights as them. Native American Indians and women encompassed the majority of the population, yet categorized as the population's minority. By examining the political cartoons during the revolutionary war, one could comprehend the rationale and significance behind depicting America as a female Native Indian.

3. Native Americans in Political Cartoons

Paul Revere's engraving "The Able Doctor, or, America swallowing the bitter draught" illustrates America as a female Indian sexually assaulted by British officials. The cartoon shows Lord North, with the "Boston Port Bill" extending from his pocket. He forces tea down the partially draped Indian female character. The tea symbolizes the tea act part of the Intolerable Acts. America's arms are restrained by Lord Mansfield while Lord Sandwich, known as a womanizer, restrains her feet and looks up her skirt. Britannia, the other female character representing Great Britain, stands behind "America" in shame. She turns away and shields her face with her left hand.⁹ There is an ideological connection between women and Indians in the political image. America lies helpless. She is physically incapable to help herself. Britain takes advantage of her, punishing her with the Intolerable Acts. This cartoon comes from the federalist perspective. The federalists wanted to be viewed in this light. Utilizing the female Indian justifies how America is oppressed similar to the eighteenth century women and Native American.



Figure 1. "The Able Doctor, or, America Swallowing the Bitter Draught" (1774). Engraving by Paul Revere. Courtesy of *The Library of Congress*. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/97514782/>

Revere demanded his depiction to be utilized as propaganda. He wanted the colonists to regard how Britain treated its colonies. It appears he engraves the "truth" between American and Britain relationship. America does not have

control of its colonies. Great Britain's exploitation of America is symbolized by the depicted "gang rape."¹⁰ Britain will always be there to restrain America from political or economic progress. Also, this validates how America was physically and mentally oppressed by Britain. They were physically forced to tackle the Tea Act, yet, mentally oppressed in the way Britain perceived its colonies. Their relationship was compared to one between a mother and a daughter, mother Brianna and daughter America. The political cartoons that passed across the Atlantic continued to depict the metaphorical domestic relationship between the two countries.

The following cartoon accompanied with a poem, "Britania and Her Daughter. A Song," shows daughter America gaining momentum in her relationship with her mother Great Britain. She confronts her "mother" about her parenting and nationhood. The stanzas that caption their relationship combine "metaphorical justifications for the revolt against England-that England is a "bad mother" and that America has "grown" and should now be independent..."¹¹ The cartoon shows America, represented as a female Indian, prepared to fight Britain with Spanish and French allies. The poem mentions America urging to break away from her mother, in an excerpt:

"Britania behold her with tears in her eyes,
 O! Daughter return to your duty she cries,
 But she replies no I'm a Woman full grown,
 And long for to keep a good house of my own"¹²



Figure 2: "Britania and Her Daughter. A Song" (1780). Etching by I. Mills. Courtesy of *The Library of Congress*. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004673374/>

This proves that America no longer needs Britain; she wants her independence. America, now in a position of power, utilizes her Spanish and French allies to leave Britain. The poem's excerpt validates how Britain attempts to keep America. Figure 2 illustrates Britain, a roman soldier, prepared to fight America's allies with her sphere pointed toward the Spaniard. On the other hand, America, France, and Spain weapons are pointed toward Britain prepared to defend America. The justification behind America's departure from Britain suggests America's knowledge of their oppression from Britain. It appears that America knew they belonged to Britain. They no longer admired this idea. They wanted liberation and tried their best to achieve it.

4. Conclusion

Many individuals may ask the question why turn to these images to illuminate the origins of violence? It was believed that war was rooted in longstanding political and economic tensions. While the standard story of a political and economic break holds merit on many levels, it fails to comprehend how ideas about gender and ethnicity helped inform that break. Many colonists turned to political cartoons to express the importance of war because cartoons possessed a power that letters and speeches fail to exhibit. Cartoons were printed in pamphlets, newspapers, and journals. They were widely accessible and read by women, men, and children. The message behind the political cartoons were naturally exposed and spread across the colonies.¹³ Also, political cartoons drove controversy. They tended to define the social and political atmosphere of the time. The controversy drawn from the images was necessary in order to drive the emergence of the American Revolution.¹⁴

In conclusion, Native American women were an ideal choice for representing America because it suggested that America was violently oppressed by Britain. British pamphleteer William Cobbett describes the ideology of the American Revolution by stating, “that the people were, as to numbers, nearly equally divided in their opinions, concerning that war.”¹⁵ Colonists were split concerning the ideology behind the war, federalists versus loyalists. America knew they were weak in comparison to Britain, but they took advantage of this perception. Both sides of the Atlantic utilized political cartoons as a median for propaganda with the intention of justifying revolution. Depicting America as a female Indian allows readers to comprehend the progressive theme echoed throughout the war. America was oppressed and needed to liberate from Great Britain. This is imperative for consideration because it explains the rationale in why America wanted to be personified in this manner. The political cartoons during the eighteenth century illuminate an ideology that is hidden behind the appearances of women and Native Americans. Thus, by examining the cartoons during revolutionary America, one could witness the oppression behind Native American women.

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