Bunker Hill

But the most interesting lesson was that, even though the American Revolution might have been partly kindled by social networks, it was taken over and won by militias. Those who pamphleteer and blog, talk and tweet, cannot control the course of events as handily as those who are willing to put their lives on the line. The revolution will not be tweeted.

Philbrick, a respected maritime and military historian, does not, to his credit, make these comparisons overtly, other than in a paragraph in his preface. Instead, like a masterly chronicler, he has produced a tightly focused and richly detailed narrative that just happens to resonate with leadership lessons for all times.

Histories of America's birth tend to glorify the founding fathers, those august state-crafters and orators who gathered in a stately hall in Philadelphia to debate whether to declare independence. But Philbrick's focus is on Boston, where that decision was sealed a year earlier by passionate rebels and trigger-happy rabble-rousers. The city - "known for its love of liberty, its piety, and its prostitutes" - is the book's main protagonist.

The tale begins with that town's famous Tea Party in December 1773. In the Old South Meetinghouse one evening, Gov. Thomas Hutchinson tried to defend the decision of the British ministry to impose a small tax on tea. The audience included staunch loyalists who supported him as well as eloquent orators in opposition. But as they debated, the street was rising in rebellion; a group of men disguised as Indians was heading to the wharves to dump chests of tea into the harbor.

From the outset, Philbrick makes it clear that, unlike many other popular historians of the Revolution, he plans to be even-handed rather than merely to glorify the colonial rebels. He says that "for the lack of a better word" he will refer to them as "patriots", but he often uses less-glamorous terms for them, such as "provincials" and "militiamen". He questions the sincerity of the Tea Party activists, writing, "Rather than propose a means of raising revenue that they deemed fair, the colonials were more than happy to direct their considerable energies toward opposing whatever plan the British ministry put forward."

He portrays the town's preeminent rebel, John Hancock, as being largely motivated by commercial considerations; he had tried to corner the whale oil market, but he was thwarted by Nantucket rivals who happened to own two of the ships carrying the tea. "For Hancock it must have been a form of sweet revenge", Philbrick writes.

And he is deeply sympathetic to the conflicted British commander Thomas Gage. "While Gage had honored the civil liberties of the patriots", Philbrick writes, "the patriots had refused to respect the rights of those with whom they did not agree".

Philbrick is, however, also very sympathetic to many of the rebel leaders, most notably Joseph Warren, a beloved doctor and president of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, who had ambitions to be a military hero. He stayed in Boston when many of his friends, who were later to be famous, fled the city or rode off to Philadelphia to attend the Continental Congress. He was the one who directed Revere and Dawes to make their midnight ride, which resulted in the rousing of an impromptu militia, poorly organized, possibly alcohol-debilitated that confronted a British force heading toward Lexington and Concord, thus starting the revolution earlier than more deliberative colonists wanted.

Warren understood the need to bring discipline and order to the militiamen, and he helped to do so by declining to serve as a medical officer and instead becoming a front-line general in the Battle of Bunker Hill. Had he not been killed at the end of that bloody skirmish, waving a sword as he tried to rally his troops, Warren would probably have become one of the nation's most revered founders.

Philbrick is at his most vivid in conveying scenes of battle, both on the road between Boston and Concord and on the ridges of Bunker Hill. But what adds depth to the narrative is his fine sense of the ambitions that drive people in war and politics. For Hutchinson, Gage and other loyalist leaders, getting ahead meant earning honors and peerages by being deferential to a distant ministry and crown. "It was a fundamentally different approach to life from what was emerging in America", Philbrick writes, "where the absence of a deeply-rooted aristocracy meant that ambition had replaced deference as the way to get ahead".

As Warren understood, this American form of ambition had its advantages. It could be harnessed to forge a new type of government in which, as he wrote Samuel Adams, "the only road to promotion may be through the affection of the people", and therefore "the interest of the governor and the governed will be the same". That was the beauty of the “we the people” republic that the American Revolution eventually created, and it is the struggle still being waged around the world.

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