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Donald Livingston
Northern Illinois University

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Hume and America

Donald Livingston

Of all men that distinguish themselves by memorable achievements, the first place of honour seems due to Legislators and founders of states, who transmit a system of laws and institutions to secure the peace, happiness, and liberty of future generations.

—David Hume

I

Modern philosophy began in the seventeenth century as a reflection on the epistemological and metaphysical problems to which the new science of mathematical physics gave rise. But by the eighteenth century attention began to shift away from man as a knower of nature to man as a maker of and as an agent in civil society. By the end of the century the scientific study of social and political order was well advanced. The American Constitution was ratified in 1789 at the high tide of the Enlightenment, and the framers were and saw themselves to be thinkers who were applying the theoretical results of social and political philosophy to the practical problems of fixing the proper limits of liberty, authority, and justice. In this they were influenced by the works of Locke and Montesquieu. But the most important work done in the social sciences during this period was in Scotland, in what has come to be known as the "Scottish Enlightenment." The works of Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Thomas Reid, Adam Smith, Lord Kames, and Adam Ferguson served as standard texts in American colleges in the latter half of the eighteenth century and played a crucial role in molding the intellects that came to the Constitutional Convention in 1787.

The greatest thinker of the Scottish Enlightenment was David Hume. His monumental History of England (1754-1762) and his Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary (1741-1752) were familiar to the revolutionary leaders and exercised a decisive influence on the greatest of the Federalists, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton. More will be said about this influence later. In the meantime, it is a
matter of some curiosity to ask how Hume himself viewed the conflict with America. He died in August 1776, and so was unaware of the Declaration of Independence. But the conflict which eventually led to independence had been brewing for over a decade and had reached a state of war a year before Hume’s death. About the conflict Hume had definite opinions, the main one of which was that an independent America was both just and inevitable. This was Hume’s opinion as early as 1768, and he was virtually alone among British and American critics of colonial policy in holding it at that time. As late as 1775 Edmund Burke, a vigorous supporter of the American cause, in his speech “On Conciliation with America,” treated the idea of giving up the colonies as “nothing but a little sally of anger; like the frowardness of peevish children, who when they cannot get all they would have, are resolved to take nothing.”

In what follows, I would like to explore Hume’s reasons for advocating total independence. We shall find that they follow from his lifelong reflection on the unresolved tensions in the British constitution of 1689. These same tensions, though altered by the different historical context, confronted those who—only recently emancipated from the British polity—sought to resolve them by the “more perfect union” ratified in 1789.

One barrier to understanding Hume’s early support for American independence is that it seems inconsistent with his political philosophy, which is generally recognized as a form of conservatism. Leslie Stephen called it a “cynical conservatism.” And Caroline Robbins in her magisterial study of eighteenth-century British liberal thought omits any discussion of Hume on the ground that he was a “Tory,” and so no part of the liberal republican tradition. This interpretation of Hume’s conservatism is, I think, profoundly mistaken, but it is a popular one and leaves us with a picture of Hume as a revolutionary in epistemology and metaphysics but a timid conservative or even a reactionary in politics, with no feel for the aspirations of men to a just extension of liberty.

There are, of course, reasons for this interpretation. To mention just a few: Hume’s rejection of the social-contract theory of political legitimacy, the thesis in “Whether the British Constitution Inclines More to Absolute Monarchy or to a Republic” (1741) that the British constitution should develop into an absolute monarchy, and his sympathetic treatment of Charles I and his criticism in the History of England of the Whig interpretation of the English civil
war and the constitutional settlement of 1689.

It was these elements in Hume's thinking that led Thomas Jefferson to suppress Hume's History at the University of Virginia because of the corrupting effect its alleged Toryism would have on the young republic. Writing to his publisher William Duane in 1810 he observed that "it is this book which has undermined free principles of the English government, has persuaded readers of all classes that there were usurpations on the legitimate and salutary rights of the crown, and has spread universal toryism over the land." 2 "This single book," he wrote John Adams in 1816, "has done more to sap the free principles of the English Constitution than the largest standing army." 3

But nowhere does Hume appear more Tory and reactionary than in his letters from 1768 to his death in August 1776. Prior to 1768, Hume's letters are virtually silent on political matters. This would be strange in any case but is even more so in one who had worked out a political philosophy and whose History of England was largely a political history. But after 1768, in connection with the American crisis, the Wilkes and Liberty riots, the Bill of Rights movement, and the general inchoate demand for more democratic representation expressed through the popularity of Pitt, Hume let loose with a purple stream of political invective that ceased only with his death. Given the later triumph of republican institutions in Britain, it has been easy, looking back, to view Hume's response to Wilkes and Liberty and the popular sovereignty movement as the hysterical, mean-spirited reaction of a timid conservatism to legitimate aspirations for a greater extension of human freedom and dignity.

We may learn, however, from Herbert Butterfield's masterly little book, The Whig Interpretation of History, that a historiography which interprets past events through the manichean categories of progressive and reactionary is doomed to illusion. But if we are determined to play the game this way, Hume presents us with a problem, for his opposition to a further extension of republican institutions in Britain must appear reactionary, whereas his surprisingly early support of American independence must appear revolutionary in the extreme. But, as I shall try to show, the conflict is only apparent. Hume's reasons for both are coherently connected and are grounded in a conception of political affairs that in many ways was too progressive and cosmopolitan for most of his British and American contemporaries. 4
Hume's unique and paradoxical position regarding American independence and British liberty is due to his political philosophy and his historical study of the British constitution. Hume considered himself a philosopher and historian above the party factions of his time, and he was. This is not to say that Hume had no prejudices or no point of view; rather, it is that his mind worked on a plane removed from that of most of his contemporaries. Hume is after all the greatest British philosopher and one of the great modern historians. His philosophy enabled him to work toward a scientific and cosmopolitan point of view concerning British policies which was different from the moralistic and provincial framework that housed the contending parties of country and court or Whig and Tory. Hume perceived British politics to be in a pathological state, the result of a profoundly disordered historical and philosophical imagination. Much of his career was spent in providing the philosophical and historical therapy for this disorder. The violent outburst in Hume's letters during the constitutional crisis of the late 1760s through the 1770s is not the peevish outrage of the reactionary but more the frustration of a scientist observing the spread of an epidemic that could have been prevented had his advice been heeded.

Let us consider two examples of the political invective from the letters of this period. In July 1768, concerning the conflict with the colonies, Hume wrote: "These are fine doings in America. O! how I long to see America and the East Indies revolted totally & finally, the Revenue reduc'd to half, public Credit fully discredited by Bankruptcy, the third of London in Ruins, and the rascally Mob subdu'd. I think I am not too old to despair of being Witness to all these Blessings."5 A little over a year later in a letter to William Strahan, a fellow Scot in London, he sounds the same theme:

You say I am of a desponding Character: On the contrary, I am of a very sanguine Disposition. Notwithstanding my Age, I hope to see a public Bankruptcy, the Total Revolt of America, the Expulsion of the English from the East Indies, the Diminution of London to less than a half, and the Restoration of the Government to the King, Nobility, and Gentry of this Realm. To adorn the Scene, I hope also that hundreds of Patriots will make their Exit at Tyburn, and improve English Eloquence by their dying Speeches.6
It is clear from these passages that Hume's support of an independent America is an inseparable part of a comprehensive criticism of British social and political order. But what do the American crisis, Wilkes and Liberty, the national debt, the London mob, government by king, nobility, and gentry, and the poor state of English eloquence have in common? Our problem is to uncover the background assumptions in Hume's thinking that unite these strange and diverse elements into a coherent criticism of the British social and political world of which the American colonies were a part.

II

Hume complained in 1776 that throughout most of the century "the Whig party were in possession of bestowing all places, both in the State and in Literature..." From this powerful rostrum the Whigs hammered into the national consciousness a certain view of the political world which Hume considered not only to be false but destructive as well: (1) England had emerged after the settlement of 1689 with a constitution the end of which is liberty, the most perfect system of liberty the world has known and by comparison with which the constitutions of France and Italy are "Turkish" and the people under them "unthinking slaves." (2) The British system of liberty is not something new but an immemorial part of the English character, and can be traced back to the Saxon forests. (3) The history of England has, therefore, been largely the story of defending the "ancient constitution" against usurpation by monarchs, papists, and antipatriotic factions of all kinds but especially in recent times by the Stuart monarchy. (4) With the de facto abdication of James II and the Glorious Revolution, a Protestant, liberty-loving constitution was restored: a modern reconstitution of the ancient constitution. (5) But a new threat to the constitution has arisen in the form of court corruption. The right of the king to appoint ministers has resulted in a corrupt system of court patronage which has increased enormously the court magistracy, has corrupted the members of Parliament, and threatens to undermine the constitutional balance between Crown and Parliament.

This Whig picture of the British polity was an infectious one, flattering national vanity and satisfying the noble passion for liberty. Hume originally accepted much of it, but as he worked
through the history of the constitution, he sought to emancipate himself from the "plaguy Prejudices of Whiggism, with which I was too much infected when I began this Work [The History of England]." Hume did not think that the errors in the Whig picture were idle. Given the precarious state of British politics, they were potentially explosive. I shall now briefly explain how Hume could think this was so.

By the first quarter of the eighteenth century, Britain had emerged from the political chaos of the seventeenth century as a stable, populous, rich, and powerful nation. Most agreed that this success was due entirely to her constitution, the end of which was liberty. Nor was there any mystery as to how this had been achieved. Everyone understood that British liberty owed its success to the balance of three estates: king, lords, and commons, representing in Parliament the three classical forms of government: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. This unity was seen as a special achievement unique in the world because of a widely held thesis in classical republican theory—that republican constitutions of liberty are possible only in small states such as Sparta or Geneva. Large states require monarchies and so necessarily suffer the effects of arbitrary power. Britain, a large nation-state, had solved the classical problem by a balance of republican and monarchical elements.

Beneath the surface of national confidence and pride lurked the darkest fear and suspicion. Everything depended on the precarious balance of the constitution, but eighteenth-century British politics contained within it the hostility and suspicion of over a century of civil war and political chaos. Professor J.H. Plumb observes that by 1688 "conspiracy and rebellion, treason and plot, were part of the history and experience of at least three generations of Englishmen." Such fears, though not as violent, continued up to the American crisis. The administration of longest duration, that of Sir Robert Walpole (1721-1742), lived in constant fear of the government's being overthrown. Walpole, his biographer says, was obsessed with Jacobitism: "He saw it everywhere. Just beyond his grasp the conspirators were at work. Jacobite agents lurked in the most unlikely places. Every suspicion, every hint needed to be tracked down. . . Year after year Walpole built up a vast web of counterespionage with his own spies in all the capitals and ports of Europe." Walpole was not paranoid. A Jacobite uprising had occurred in 1715 and another was to occur as late as 1745, and
there were always rumors and rumblings of one sort or another that had the appearance of probability.

But if Walpole feared an overthrow by malcontents in the opposition party, the opposition feared a conspiracy on the part of the ministry to engross the whole power of the government in its hands. Moreover, this mutual fear was not peculiar to the Walpole administration; in one form or another it plagued most ministries and constituted the mentality of British politics. Nor was it an entirely groundless fear. Its possibility was built into the very nature of the constitution. The balance of king, nobility, and commons was thought of not so much as the unity of three functions of government: executive, judicial, and legislative, but, rather, in medieval terms, as three estates possessing different orders of property and interests. The balance, however, was a fiction. The interests, property, and constitutional functions of all three intermeshed. Moreover, the Crown, through the offices and patronage it could dispense, was able by an elaborate system of informal "influence" to control the whole government with a few short interruptions throughout the century.

So the very nature of British politics was in conflict with the established interpretation of it: it was thought that Britain was free and strong because of a balanced constitution of three estates, none of which encroached on the others, but the very nature of the constitution made this impossible. Thus men disposed by a long experience of conspiracies and rebellions to interpret politics in terms of conspiracies had ample data to work on. Given the way the constitution had to work it could always appear that there was a definite conspiracy on the part of the ministry or opposition to overthrow the constitution.11

The conspiratorial outlook was not confined to British politics but was part of a metaphysical view of history which interpreted the modern world as moving toward decay and decadence. The growth of large nation-states with standing armies and absolute monarchs was interpreted as part of a great wave of authoritarianism spreading across the globe and now threatening the last fortress of liberty. Britain was in a virtual state of siege. Some went so far as to hold that the world itself was physically slipping into senility and that the sexual power of generation and much else besides had diminished since the ancient world. Hume found it necessary as late as 1752 to publish an essay, "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," in which he argued that there is
no evidence to think that the world is running down, that the modern world is, in fact, much more populous than the ancient.

Another part of this antimodern outlook was the fear that society was becoming corrupt. "Corruption" here has a technical meaning in classical republican theory as appropriated from the ancients by the moderns and is not to be confused with Christian or Aristotelian theories of vice and virtue. Republican theorists like Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Franklin, and Jefferson agreed that a republic could flourish only if the citizens were motivated by public spirit rather than by private gain. But it was believed that great wealth, especially wealth that does not come from working the land, produces faction, which is incompatible with public spirit. So a republic had to be, if not poor, then frugal and of modest wealth. The favorite classical images of an austere, rustic, and virtuous republic were Sparta and pre-imperial Rome. The growing wealth of Britain, however, was not gained by working the land but by her increasing command of commerce and manufacturing. Such wealth was made possible by the constitution of liberty, but, ironically, this very success threatened to undermine the Spartan virtue necessary for the republican element of the constitution and so threatened to undermine the constitution itself.

Hume considered the unhistorical Whig picture of the British social and political order to be overly moralistic, backward looking, chauvinistic, and barbarous. I shall take these themes in turn.

(1) The Whig mentality orders the social world exclusively in moralistic and legalistic categories. To understand social reality is to understand who is oppressed and who are the oppressors, who is right and who is wrong. In place of this, Hume offered a causal, evolutionary view of social and political order which forces perception beyond the categories of good and evil. To understand human affairs, it is not enough to apply moral and legal rules; we must also understand the rationale of the rules and the social utilities they frame. The rules emerge from the logic of social situations which are largely the unintended result of conflicting human passions. When the logic of the situation changes, so do the rules. Armed with this insight, Hume argued in the History of England that the contemporary British constitution of liberty was not the restoration of an ancient constitution against the attempted usurpations of wicked Stuart kings. The constitution was a modern occurrence in large part the unintended result of social and
economic changes which neither the royal nor parliamentary antagonists understood. And so Hume could speak of the "wisdom of the constitution or rather the concurrence of accidents."12 The Whig party had mistakenly read the liberal values of the present constitution into the motives of the Puritan revolutionaries who overthrew the monarchy. The Puritans were motivated not by contemporary notions of civil liberty (those were ideas that would come later) but by the ugliest sort of theological fanaticism. Ironically, but happily, it was the driving force of Puritan fanaticism that jarred events into the unintended shape of the contemporary liberal constitution.

(2) The Whig view of the constitution is backward looking. For Hume the constitution of liberty is a fragile, precious instrument washed up by the interplay of universal propensities of human nature and contingent historical forces. Hume agreed that it was the most nearly perfect constitution of liberty known in history, but he saw it as a progressive instrument which if protected and cultivated made possible an unprecedented development of liberty, commerce, manufacturing, and consequently a surplus of wealth that could be turned into culture. These values were only dimly perceived by Whigs who had not achieved the perspective of viewing the constitution as an historical process having social utility. Rather, the present constitution was conceived as the sacred reenactment of an immemorial constitution. Consequently, the task of politics is the negative one of protecting a sacred object from decay and desecration rather than the positive one of perfecting a social instrument for activity in the present and future.

(3) The Whig view of the constitution is chauvinistic. Viewed as an historical process, the British constitution is not the unique possession of the English but part of a larger civilizing process of economic and social forces at work in Europe. These liberalizing forces have established the ideal and much of the practice of civil liberty in even absolute monarchies. The tendency to strong central government is characteristic of the modern world and, far from being evil, has rendered modern republics as stable as absolute monarchies. Nostalgia for ancient republics such as Sparta is absurd since they were oppressive, barbarous, chaotic, and short-lived. Modern republics and mixed governments with a republican element, such as Britain's, are superior and for the same reason that modern absolute monarchies are more liberal. The danger to the British constitution is not creeping authoritarianism (French
“slavery”) but the historically false and paranoid belief that Britain is the last bastion of liberty left over from the ancient world. The metaphysical fear which demands an ever increasing degree of liberty at the expense of authority may so weaken the necessary ingredient of authority in the constitution as to make liberty impossible.

(4) The Whig mind is barbarous. From the end of the war in 1713 until the American crisis, the greatness of Britain in warfare, commerce, and liberty was the constant theme not only of state pronouncements, political essays, pamphlets, and orations, but of literature as well. It would be difficult to exaggerate the extent to which letters were captured by these nationalistic and political themes. Throughout his career Hume bitterly complained about the politicization of English literature. In a letter to William Strahan of October 1769, Hume despaired of ever having his works appreciated in England: “My Ambition was always moderate and confined entirely to Letters; but it has been my Misfortune to write in the Language of the most stupid and factious Barbarians in the World; and it is long since I have renounced all desire of their Approbation, which indeed could no longer give me either pleasure or Vanity.” More than once Hume seriously considered moving to France. Instead he stayed in his native Edinburgh, far from the “barbarians on the Thames,” and worked to cultivate letters in the relative calm of the “Scottish Enlightenment.” English Whig chauvinism and conspiratorial fears about the constitution spawned an outlook which made it difficult to learn from the polite cultures of authoritarian countries such as France and Italy. Catharine Macaulay, for instance, complained that the education of British youth was mainly a matter of studying Greek and Latin literature and was finished off with “what is called the tour of Europe, that is a residence for two or three years in the countries of France and Italy. This is the finishing stroke that renders them useless to all the good purposes of preserving the birthright of an Englishman [the ancient constitution].” Being uneducated about the principles of a free government, they “are caught with the gaudy tinsel of a superb court, the frolic levity of unreflecting slaves, and thus deceived by appearances, are riveted in a taste for servitude.”

The Whig errors and the factionalism they bred, which threatened to tear the constitution apart, were more or less safely contained, Hume thought, until the late 1760s. We shall now examine how Hume conceived this change.
III

In 1741 Hume published "Whether the British Constitution Inclines More to Absolute Monarchy or to a Republic." He argued in this essay that the constitution is strong in liberty and weak in authority and that liberty can flourish only on the bedrock of authority. He observed, however, that conditions were at work which tended to strengthen the monarchial part of the constitution. He predicted that Britain would and should develop into a civilized absolute monarchy. His reason was that, given historical conditions, the only sort of republic that Britain could reasonably expect would be of the oppressive Cromwellian type. Hume's argument for absolute monarchy, then, is on behalf of liberal values, not in opposition to them. "Such Fools are they," Hume wrote his nephew in 1775, "who perpetually cry Liberty: and think to augment it by shaking off the Monarchy."

By the late 1760s it seemed to Hume that the frenzy over liberty had tilted the mixed constitution dangerously to the republican side, contrary to his prediction of 1741 that the constitution should develop into a civilized absolute monarchy. Central to this change in Hume's thinking is what one might call the phenomenon of William Pitt. The policies Pitt pursued during his administration of 1757-1761 left the British with the concept of empire. The defeat of the French in Canada and the East Indies placed a profound check on French imperial power, especially sea power, from which it was never to recover. It spawned a sense of nationalism and seemed to open the door to unlimited prospects of trade and wealth. Samuel Johnson said that whereas Walpole was a minister given by the king to the people, Pitt was a minister given by the people to the king. It was not that Pitt's policies were backed by the people as represented in Parliament. Pitt was the first minister to rule by virtue of a public opinion not represented in Parliament; namely, the commercial interests centered in London. Pitt's imperial wars were financed by public credit, a policy to which Hume was implacably opposed: "Either the nation must destroy public credit, or public credit will destroy the nation."15 The creditors to the national debt were the commercial interests in London.

It was this group, Hume thought, that in 1768 turned the otherwise trivial Wilkes affair into a constitutional crisis. Parliament had refused to seat the scandalous representative from Middlesex who had been convicted of a breach of parliamentary
privilege. Four times he was elected and four times rejected by Parliament. The Wilkes riots continued off and on for three years (1768-1771), and the government seemed to lack the authority necessary to deal with the situation. “Our government,” Hume wrote in 1770, “has become a Chimera; and is too perfect in point of Liberty, for so vile a Beast as an Englishman, who is a Man ... corrupted by above a Century of Licentiousness. The Misfortune is, that this Liberty can scarcely be retrench’d without Danger of being entirely lost. . . .”

The political events beginning with the first Pitt administration and continuing with the Wilkes and Liberty affair, both of which constituted merely the tip of the iceberg of the popular sovereignty movement, confirmed Hume’s worst fears. Britain seemed to be plunging headlong toward a pure republic and that meant anarchy and the inevitable tyranny required to restore authority. In the History Hume had shown that the Puritans justified their rebellion against the Crown as a defense of the liberties of the people. After having won the war they imposed a tyranny more severe than any that had been known in England. In the fiery speeches of Pitt, in the popular nationalistic passions they aroused, and in the ritualistic chants of Wilkes and Liberty, Hume could hear the metaphysical rantings of the Hambdens, the Holises, the Pyms, and the Cromwells. Nor was the fear hysterical. Horace Walpole observed in October of 1769 that England “approaches by fast strides to some great crisis, and to me never wore so serious an air, except in the Rebellion.”

We must keep in mind that, throughout, Hume’s criticism of further extensions of liberty in Britain was not reactionary but was based on a lifetime study of the origins and limits of British constitutional order and was made in the interest of liberal values. And so he could wish in a letter of 1772 “that People do not take a Disgust at Liberty; a word, that has been so much profaned by these polluted Mouths, that men of Sense are sick at the very mention of it. I hope a new term will be invented to express so valuable and good a thing.”

We are now in a position to decipher Hume’s outburst in the two letters quoted early in this essay. Hume hoped for the revolt and total independence of America and the East Indies colonies to undo the imperial policies of Pitt and the unenfranchised London commercial power. This group, which supported Pitt and Wilkes, also supported the Americans in their quarrel with the government on taxation and representation. In a speech to Parliament (14
January 1766) on the Stamp Act, Pitt exclaimed: “I rejoice that America has resisted.” Hume observed in a letter of May 1766 that Pitt’s declaration in their favor encouraged the “general assembly of the Provinces” to pass resolutions of virtual independence. But Pitt and his supporters typically did not have independence in mind when they applauded American resistance. That would be to abort the budding empire, which is precisely what Hume wished would happen. A loss of the colonies would cut off the possibility of an imperial Britain and would serve to restore government to “the King, Nobility, and Gentry of this Realm.” That is to say, the movement toward popular government pushed by the London commercial interests who were creditors to the public debt would end. Hence, the fantasy of “the third of London in Ruins, and the rascally Mob subdu’d.”

Pitt’s imperial wars, which had given birth to imperial passions, had caused the national debt to soar and provoked Hume’s complaint about “the continual Encrease of our Debts, in every idle War, into which, it seems, the Mob of London are to rush every Minister.” Hence the fantasy of a public bankruptcy which might shock the nation into recognizing the threat to liberty that an empire and, consequently, an ever increasing public debt poses. Moreover, a constitutional monarchy which does not have the authority to discipline a Wilkes cannot expect to administer a colonial empire without taking on an arbitrary authority incompatible with liberty: “Arbitrary Power can extend its oppressive Arm to the Antipodes; but a limited Government can never long be upheld at a distance, even where no Disgusts have interven’d: Much less, where such violent animosities [as with the American colonies] have taken place.”

The fantasy of English eloquence being improved by the dying speeches of hundreds of Whig patriots hanged at Tyburn reflects the inability of a politicized Britain to allow a polite social and political order friendly to the cultivation of letters. The rustic and rude characteristics of ancient republics, along with their tendency to faction and collapse into arbitrary government, was being played out, Hume thought, on a modern stage by the hysterical republican factionalism of late eighteenth-century Britain.

IV

Hume’s support for an independent America, as we have so far
discussed it, was for the sake of restoring constitutional liberty in Britain before it was too late. But the American colonies were more to Hume than a troublesome temptation to imperial passions that must be eliminated. He seems to have had a genuine regard for the kind of order that had been developing there for over a century. Concerning their political founding, Hume wrote in the History:

What chiefly renders the reign of James memorable, is the commencement of the English Colonies in America: colonies established on the noblest footing that has been known in any age or nation. . . . The spirit of independency, which was reviving in England here shown forth in its full lustre, and received new accession from the aspiring character of those who, being discontented with the established church and monarchy, had sought for freedom amidst those savage deserts.23

Not only were the colonists working out a social order of independence and industry; their founding governments were animated from the first with the spirit of political autonomy. In his early Memoranda, written during the years 1729-1740, Hume observed that “the Charter Governments in America are almost entirely independent of England.”24 Hume thought that the social and political forces at work in America would inevitably lead to independence, quite apart from vacuous questions about the legal or moral right to independence. Speaking of the importance of trade with the colonies, he wrote in 1771: “Our Union with America . . . in the Nature of things, cannot long subsist.”25 This passage reveals Hume the social scientist observing the necessary course of events, a perspective which is beyond abstract moral or legal right and wrong. Against the background of this historical process, Hume must have considered frivolous the question whether Parliament had a right to tax the colonies. According to Hume’s theory of justice, present possession and long possession are sufficient to bestow a title of right. Hume seems to have thought that the virtual independence granted by the colonial charters, along with a century of virtual self-government, had established a presumption of political autonomy which the British government ought to recognize and in the end must recognize. In a letter of 1775 Hume recommended that all troops and the fleet be withdrawn from America and total independence granted: “I shou
have said, that this Measure only anticipates the necessary Course of Events a few Years. . . "26 And he adds the by–now–familiar criticism of Pitt’s imperial policy: “Let us, therefore, lay aside all Anger; shake hands, and part Friends. Or if we retain any anger, let it only be against ourselves for our past Folly [vision of empire] and against that wicked Madman Pitt; who has reducd us to our present Condition.”27

In October 1775 Hume received a request from his good friend Baron Mure of Caldwell asking him to draft a loyal address to the king from the freeholders of Renfrewshire recommending military measures against the Americans. Hume replied: “Oh! Dear Baron, you have thrown me into Agonies and almost into Convulsions by your Request. You ask what seems reasonable, what seems a mere trifle; yet I am so unfit for it, that it is almost impossible for me to comply.”28 Hume reports that he has already refused to be party to a similar address sent from Lord Home, and then responds:

Besides, I am an American in my Principles, and wish we woud let them alone to govern or misgovern themselves as they think proper. . . . If the County of Renfrew think it indispensably necessary for them to interpose in public Matters, I wish they woud advise the King first to punish those insolent Rascals in London and Middlesex, who daily insult him and the whole Legislature, before he think of America. Ask him, how he can expect, that a form of Government will maintain an Authority at 3000 Miles distance when it cannot make itself be respected or even treated with common Decency at home. Tell him, that Lord North, tho in appearance a worthy Gentleman, has not a head for these great Operations, and that if fifty thousand Men, and twenty Millions of Money were entrusted to such a lukewarm Coward as Gage, they never coud produce any Effect. These are Objects worthy of the respectable County of Renfrew, not mauling the poor infatuated Americans in the other Hemisphere.29

Hume’s position regarding the colonies was disappointing to many of his friends. William Strahan, for instance, who believed strongly that the empire should and could be preserved by coercive methods against the Americans as well as against “domestic Traitors, from whence the Evil originated,” exclaimed to Hume in October 1775, “I
am really surprised you are of a different opinion. . . .”

Where, owing to political faction, the English had failed to develop a polite society in which letters could flourish, Hume hoped America could succeed. Lamenting the state of letters in Britain, Hume wrote to Benjamin Franklin in February 1772: "So factious is this country! . . . I fancy that I must have recourse to America for justice," and he reminded Franklin of his promise to see about publishing an American edition of his works. Hume's belief that the future of English letters lay with America is expressed in a letter to Edward Gibbon of October 1767. Gibbon had sent Hume the beginning of a history of the Swiss revolution written in French. Hume advised writing in English rather than French, notwithstanding the fact that French was the most cultivated and diffused language both in literature and in diplomacy. Hume compared his advice to that of Horace, who urged composition in Latin rather than the more cultivated and widely diffused Greek. Latin, though vulgar, was the language of what promised to be an expanding and solid social and political order. A work composed in that language would have a longer duration and a greater influence. The same is true of English in relation to French, not because of the future order of Britain but because of what is likely to be the future order of the American colonies: “Let the French, therefore, triumph in the present diffusion of their tongue. Our solid and increasing establishments in America, where we need less dread the inundation of Barbarians, promise a superior stability and duration to the English language.” Gibbon took Hume's advice and when, nine years later, he presented him with the first volume of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Hume was forced to mitigate somewhat his usual complaint about English cultural barbarism: “I own, that if I had not previously had the Happiness of your personal Acquaintance, such a Performance, from an Englishman in our Age, woud have given me some Surprize. You may smile at this Sentiment; but as it seems to me that your Countrymen, for almost a whole Generation, have given themselves up to barbarous and absurd Faction, and have totally neglected all polite Letters, I no longer expected any valuable Production ever to come from them.”

Preparations for war began a year before Hume's death. He condemned this as he had other imperial ventures as serving only to weaken the constitution further and to increase the public debt, both of which were threats to British liberty. But the folly that he
especially stressed was the belief that the war could be won. In November 1775 he wrote to William Strahan: "I am sorry, that I cannot agree with you, in your hopes of subduing and what is more difficult, of governing America. . . ." To John Home he wrote in February 1776: "I make no doubt, since you sound the trumpet for war against the Americans, that you have a plan ready for governing them, after they are subdued; but you will not subdue them, unless they break in pieces among themselves—an event very probable. It is a wonder it has not happened sooner." Since it had not happened, the war promised to be a long one. To Adam Smith, who was holding up the advertisement of *The Wealth of Nations* until the American crisis blew over, he wrote in the same month: "If you wait till the Fate of America be decided, you may wait long."

V

Hume did not speculate about the sort of government that would be best for America after independence. But he did foresee problems. The factious character of British politics had spread to the colonies, and Whig paranoia about liberty was to be found there in full strength. Hume's friend and colleague Benjamin Franklin was, Hume had to admit, in a letter of February 1774 to Adam Smith, "a very factious man, and Faction, next to Fanaticism, is, of all passions, the most destructive of Morality." Franklin's zeal for the colonists, however, did not, Hume thought, corrupt his character: "The factious Part he has all along acted [in relations between Britain and the American colonies] must be given up by his Friends: But I flatter myself there is nothing treacherous or unfair in his Conduct. . . ." Still it was faction that drove Franklin to seek an emancipation of the colonies that Hume thought was premature and not in their best interests: "The Colonies are no longer in their Infancy. But yet I say to you, they are still in their Nonage; and Dr. Franklyn wishes to emancipate them too soon from their mother Country." While early emancipation would benefit Britain, it would most likely not benefit the colonies.

In a way Hume was right. The first attempt at government, the constitution of the Continental Congress, failed. Five years after Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown, the young republic was in difficulty, inflation had run away, and the states were pulling the union apart with cutthroat competition and virtually independent
foreign policies. Many wondered about the wisdom of independence and some talked seriously about some sort of reunion with Britain. What was needed if there was to be a republic at all was a “more perfect union,” a stronger central authority. But this seemed impossible because of the widely received maxim of political philosophy that republics are possible only in a small territory where the government can maintain its authority over the inevitable factions to which a republican constitution of liberty gives rise. Large countries with so many diverse interests to be reconciled require the unity and authority which only a monarchy can provide. Most everyone took it to be a theorem of political science that so large a territory as America must, in the end, have some form of monarchy. But this proposal struck the fear, equally well grounded, that a monarchy with power sufficient to govern so vast an empire must eventually be despotic.

Here was the constitutional problem Hume had explored in the History and in the political Essays of reconciling liberty and authority, but now presented on a grand and unprecedented scale. Hume too had thought that republics originate most easily in small territories. But he did not consider this a law of political philosophy locked into human nature. Hume advocated monarchy in Britain only because, given its historical context, he thought a republican regime in Britain would be oppressive. In December 1775 he observed to his nephew:

Republicanism is only fitted for a small State: And any Attempt towards it can in our Country, produce only Anarchy, which is the immediate Forerunner of Despotism. Will he [John Millar, professor at Glasgow and a radical republican] tell us, what is that form of a Republic which we must aspire to? Or will the Revolution be afterward decided by the Sword? One great Advantage of a Commonwealth over our mixt Monarchy is, that it woud considerably abridge our Liberty, which is growing to such an Extreme, as to be incompatible with all Government. Such Fools are they, who perpetually cry Liberty: and think to augment it, by shaking off the Monarchy.⁴⁰

Hume’s case for monarchy in Britain was tied entirely to practical constitutional considerations. He never abandoned the republican ideal of government. In a remarkable essay, “Idea of a
Perfect Commonwealth” (1752), he argued for “the falsehood of the common opinion, that no large state, such as France or Great Britain, could ever be modelled into a commonwealth, but that such a form of government can only take place in a city or small territory.” Indeed, Hume went so far as to argue that “the contrary seems probable. Though it is more difficult to form a republican government in an extensive country than in a city, there is more facility when once it is formed, of preserving it steady and uniform, without tumult and faction.” Hume then laid out a federal hierarchy of electoral bodies ordered from the local to the national level, where each local unit is “a kind of republic within itself” having a certain degree of autonomy and the power to elect representatives to the higher levels. At the top would be a chamber of magistrates who would have the legislative power and a chamber of senators who would, among themselves, constitute an executive branch with a presiding chief executive. The higher magistrates would be indirectly elected by the people through their elected representatives. Such a government could claim consent of the people and so could command popular loyalty and authority.

Hume went out of his way to stress that the very size of the republic, which at first had seemed the greatest barrier, was, given the carefully graded hierarchy of magistrates and the fragmentation of electoral districts, its best guarantee of stability: “In a large government, which is modelled with masterly skill, there is compass and room enough to refine the democracy, from the lower people who may be admitted into the first elections, or concoction of the commonwealth, to the higher magistrates who direct all the movements. At the same time, the parts are so distant and remote, that it is very difficult, either by intrigue, or prejudice, or passion, to hurry them into any measures against the public interest.”

Douglas Adair has shown how James Madison, the architect of the United States Constitution, used Hume’s political essays, in particular “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth,” to argue in the tenth Federalist that a federal constitution could be constructed in the large territory of America which could reconcile factions and conflicting interests without sacrificing liberty and justice. The influence is similar to one in science: mathematicians idly construct formal systems which a generation or so later are used by physicists as conceptual frameworks for interpreting the world. Yet there is a difference. Hume was not constructing the idea of a commonwealth for its own sake. Hume’s perfect commonwealth was a theoretical
abstraction from his historical and philosophical study of ancient and modern political order. It is not a utopia, but takes men as they are with the full range of virtues and vices: “All plans of government, which suppose great reformatons in the manners of mankind, are plainly imaginary.” Moreover, Hume’s ideal of a perfect commonwealth was a self-conscious solution to political problems of the modern age. Hume compared his model of government to Huygen’s model of the form of a ship which is the most commodious for sailing.

Why did he choose the apparently counter-intuitive model of a large republic for the ideal constitution for the modern age? The answer is that Hume believed the civilizing social, economic, and political forces at work in Europe (“modern manners”) held open unlimited possibilities for the development of liberty, commerce, and culture. This trend had introduced republican elements in most European countries. But though Hume embraced the republican ideal, he was no ideologue. As we have seen, he resisted republicanism in Britain because of historical circumstances just as he pointed out the growth of republican values in the absolute monarchies of France. Still the modern trend was toward large nation-states and republican commercial empires, and the question must eventually arise of how to reconcile liberty and authority in a commercial republican empire. Hume’s “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth” is an answer, indeed the first answer, to this question.

Hume’s model republic, then, is an idealization of the civilizing forces at work in Europe. But no large country in Europe comes close to approximating it, nor were there any prospects in the near future. It is as if Huygen’s model of the most efficient sailing vessel were available, but the technology and materials available for building a ship in close approximation to it were not. Hume’s hope was that by articulating the concept of a commercial republican empire, already immanent in the conversation of the learned world, discussion would ensue and perhaps a consensus would be reached on a model of government that could guide political activity. The hope lay not in Europe but in “some distant part of the world,” and not in the present but “in some future age [where] an opportunity might be afforded of reducing the theory to practice, either by a dissolution of some old government, or by the combination of men to form a new one.”

Hume’s attempt to quarantine the instantiation of his model...
republic as far away in space and time from contemporary Europe as possible is no doubt due, in part, to the desire not to arouse revolutionary passions. But one wonders if Hume did not have in mind, at least dimly, the application of the model to the new world. Very early in his career he had thought that "the Charter Governments in America" were "almost entirely independent of England" and that the American colonies were already a commercial empire of virtually self-governing republics. In any case, as Douglas Adair has shown, Madison wrote the tenth Federalist under the guidance of Hume's "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth." Looking upon the disordered political scene that had prompted the Constitutional Convention through the lens of Hume's essay, he was able to see what most of his republican-loving contemporaries could not. Hume had turned the republican theory inside out. Though more difficult to establish in a large territory, once established a republic would work best there. A monarchy, then, was not necessary after all, and what had appeared as the main obstacle to a republican America could now be seen as its chief support. Moreover, the corporate aggressiveness of the states and local unities which seemed to require either control by oppressive monarchy or a system of totally independent republics could be a positive asset if ordered through a carefully graded hierarchy of liberty, authority, and indirect elections. Madison did not use Hume's theory of an ideal republic as a utopian scheme to be imposed upon practice but, as Hume intended it, as a guide to correct and render more coherent an already established practice. Hume's theory enabled Madison to see that America had already developed a quasi-federal order in which each local political body was, to use Hume's expression, "a kind of republic within itself."

Gerald Stourzh has discussed the decisive influence Hume had on Alexander Hamilton's political thought. Here we need mention only that Hamilton learned from Hume not only that a republic need not be confined to a small country but also that it need not be frugal as taught by the ancients and early moderns. If properly ordered a republic could flourish best in a large territory and under conditions of great commercial wealth. Henceforth modern republican virtue would be an appendage of expanding commercial wealth, not of rustic frugality.

To conclude: Hume's criticism of republican institutions in Britain was based on a scientific, historical understanding of politics
which enabled Hume to perceive in the modern world an emerging order of large commercial republics, the ideal of which he sketched out in “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth,” which in turn inspired the Federalists Madison and Hamilton. The stability of the large American republic was confirming evidence for Hume’s thesis about the ideal form of a republic under modern conditions, and before the century was over the French nation had ordered itself on the model of the American experiment. The political world today is an order of large nation-states that think of themselves as republics and, indeed, of legitimacy itself as republican. We may think of Hume not as a reactionary but as the first truly modern republican theorist.

NOTES

1 Edmund Burke, Burke’s Speech on Conciliation with America, ed. F.G. Selby (London: Macmillan, 1964).
4 That Hume’s political thought is forward looking and not reactionary is discussed in depth in Duncan Forbes, Hume’s Philosophical Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), especially chapters 5 and 6. Forbes, however, is concerned mainly with Hume’s understanding of politics in the British Isles. Little is said about Hume’s thought regarding the American colonies.
6 Letters of David Hume 2:210-11.
7 Letters of David Hume 1:5.
8 Letters of David Hume 1:379.
Harvard University Press, 1965–). It is remarkable how much of the point of view Bailyn takes on British politics was already adopted by Hume. Much of Hume’s political thinking is designed to emancipate Britons, especially the English, from the conspiratorial outlook by pointing out that much of their political order is the unintended result of historical conditions.


16 Quoted in Letters of David Hume 2:216.


18 Quoted in Letters of David Hume 2:42n.

19 Letters of David Hume 2:42.

20 Letters of David Hume 2:237.

21 Letters of David Hume 2:300.


24 Letters of David Hume 2:237.

25 Letters of David Hume 2:300.

26 Letters of David Hume 2:301.

27 Letters of David Hume 2:302.

28 Letters of David Hume 2:303.

29 Letters of David Hume 2:301n.

30 Letters of David Hume 2:258.

31 Letters of David Hume 2:171.

32 Letters of David Hume 2:179-10.

33 Letters of David Hume 2:304.


35 Letters of David Hume 2:308.

36 Letters of David Hume 2:286.

37 Letters of David Hume 2:287.

38 Letters of David Hume 2:288.

39 Letters of David Hume 2:306.


42 Douglas Adair, "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science: David Hume, James Madison, and the Tenth Federalist," in Hume: A Re-
Evaluation.