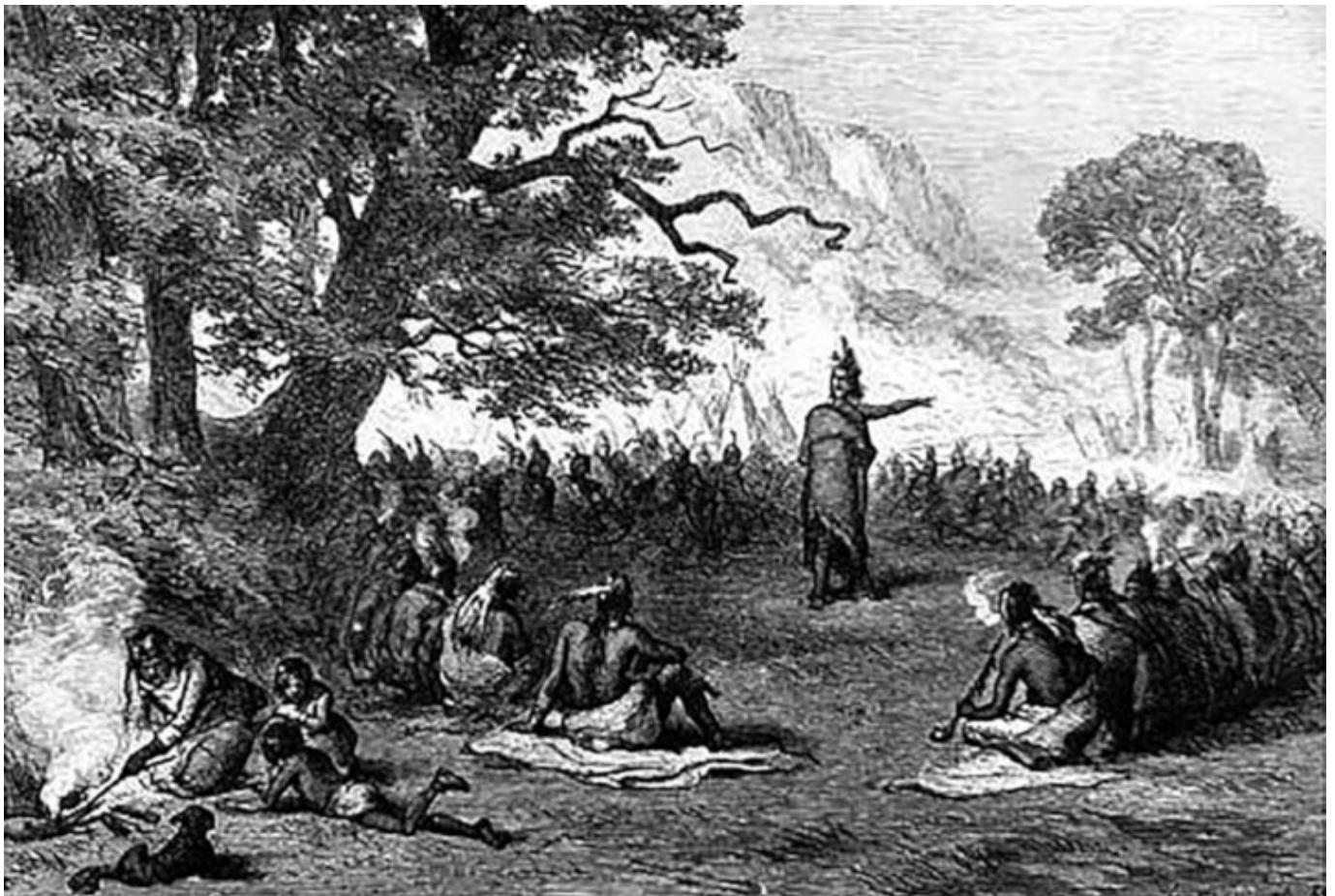


# The rule of the rich is not democracy

written by Gary Wilson  
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This nineteenth-century engraving by Alfred Bobbett shows an April 28, 1763, war council. Pontiac is urging the members to unite and rise up against the incursion of colonial settlers.

The U.S. was established as a republic in 1787 and remains so to this day. It is a republic, but not a democracy.

The American Revolution was not a bourgeois democratic one, like the great Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804, where the ownership of the land was turned over to the formerly enslaved. Democracy, as Aristotle explained, means the rule of the poor.

Aristotle, describing the democracy of his day in Greece, was quite explicit about the fact that democracy means rule by the poor. Rule by the rich is oligarchy. Aristotle says that the real distinction between oligarchy and democracy is in fact the distinction between whether the wealthy or the poor rule, not whether the many or the few rule.

In the U.S., the wealthy rule, not the poor. It is an oligarchy, not a democracy.

The American Revolution — as the War of Independence by the 13 North American colonies is called — had a republican and anti-monarchy character. But republicanism is the political ideology of a landlord class defending itself from the encroachments of the king, not anything democratic.

In the 13 colonies, the leadership of the American Revolution consisted of men of wealth and land; [34 of the 47 signers](#) of the Declaration of Independence were slaveholders, perhaps the most conservative leadership of any revolution in history.

Not until the Civil War and Black Reconstruction was there a democratic revolution in the U.S., but the Reconstruction revolution was drowned in blood. Pro-slavery terrorists murdered tens of thousands of Black people in the South from 1867 to 1877, burying the Reconstruction revolution.

## **Independence for bankers and slaveholders**

The 1776 Declaration of Independence was a call to revolution written by bankers and plantation owners. It includes in its list of violations by the King of England Lord Dunmore's Proclamation in 1775, also known as the First Emancipation Proclamation, that freed all enslaved peoples in the Royal Colony of Virginia.

Another grievance against the king cited in the declaration was the Royal Proclamation of 1763, a decree prohibiting settlers moving into any land west of the Appalachian Mountains and recognizing the rights of the Indigenous peoples living there.

John Adams says that the American Revolution did not start in 1776 but in 1760, at the end of the Seven Years War (also known as the French and Indian War), a war that was led by the commander of the Virginia militia, the wealthy plantation owner George Washington. With their victory, the 13 colonies took control of all the Native land from the East Coast to the Mississippi River. Washington, one of the biggest slaveholders in Virginia, was given 20,000 acres of land in the Ohio region for his services in the war.

The British crown borrowed heavily from British and Dutch bankers to bankroll the war, doubling Britain's national debt. King George III declared that since the French and Indian War was for the benefit of the colonists, they should contribute to paying down the war debt. To defend this newly won territory from future attacks, King George III also decided to install permanent British army units in the Americas, which required additional sources of revenue. These are the taxes that the colonists objected to and rallied against.

Taxes, however, weren't the only objection. One of the offenses cited by the colonists against the King of England was the decree prohibiting settlers West of the Appalachians. In May 1763, Pontiac, an Ottawa leader, led a number of Native nations

in the area of the Great Lakes in an uprising against British forces and settlers along the frontier, commonly called Pontiac's Rebellion. The Royal Proclamation [served as a peace treaty](#) with the Indigenous nations who were battling to defend their homeland.

Today, the Royal Proclamation of 1763 is recognized under international law as establishing the legal precedent that the Indigenous population had rights to the lands they occupied.

The colonists considered the entire territory West to the Mississippi to be their own conquered land and refused to recognize the Royal Proclamation.

### **War against the British and Native nations**

The War of Independence (1775-1783) was fought not just against the British, but also against the Native peoples. At the end of the war, victory was declared not just over Britain but also over the Indigenous nations.

The newly formed United States and the Iroquois signed a treaty in 1784 under which the Iroquois ceded much of their historical homeland to the U.S., followed by another treaty in 1794 in which they ceded even more land. The governor of New York state, George Clinton, was constantly pressuring the Iroquois to turn over their land to white settlers. At the same time, European settlers continued to push into the lands beyond the Ohio River, leading to a war between the Western Confederacy and the United States. The war against the Native nations continues to this day.

Because the leaders of the War of Independence were the landowners and slaveholders, merchants and bankers, shippers and lawyers, the enslaved peoples and tenant farmers tended to side with the British against the revolution. That was behind British Gov. Lord Dunmore's proclamation liberating all enslaved peoples. The British raised several Black regiments during the war. The proclamation also

absolved all tenant farmers of their feudal rents, which were owed to the local landlords.

After the War of Independence was won, each of the 13 former colonies had separate governments run by the landowners and slaveholders, merchants and bankers, shippers and lawyers. They had led the rebellion, but the soldiers who fought the war were all from the laborers and small farmers who were promised “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” in the Declaration of Independence’s call to revolution. They were also promised pay for their service. They got none of it.



Painting depicting Shays’ Rebellion, a thousand armed farmers stormed the courts to stop evictions. Gen. Knox wrote to Washington: These farmers believed that since

the revolutionary war had been fought “by the joint exertions of all, therefore [the land, etc.] ought to be the common property of all.”

## **Shays' Rebellion**

Shays' Rebellion has been relegated to obscurity in the U.S. history books seeking to glorify the rule of slaveholders like George Washington and James Madison and financiers like Alexander Hamilton. (See “Whose Constitution is it?” by Gary Wilson, 1987)

Daniel Shays was a poor farm laborer who had joined the Continental army when the War of Independence broke out. He fought at Lexington, Bunker Hill and Saratoga and was wounded in action. By 1786, Shays had resigned from the army since he hadn't been paid. Back at home, he found himself in court for nonpayment of debts. Army veterans were given certificates of promise instead of pay.

Farmers, many of them veterans, began to organize and form committees. It was a poor people's mobilization. In Vermont and New Hampshire as well as Massachusetts, rallies were held against the heavy taxation and debt burden. The uprisings in Western Massachusetts were more foreboding. Taxes were high and the poor had no money to pay what they owed. Farmers with guns began to show up at court hearings to prevent their land from being taken away. Even the state militia, when it was called out to put down the farmers, split its ranks between those supporting the farmers and those opposed.

At Great Barrington, Mass., a militia of a thousand was called out to put down the armed crowd. The militia would not move when ordered. When the chief judge suggested that the militia divide with those supporting the court going to one side of the road and those opposed to the other, over 800 went against. The court adjourned and the crowd cheered.

What brought Shays onto the scene was the indictment of 11 leaders of those



farmers' protests. Shays organized a thousand armed farmers, most of them army veterans, and led them to Springfield, where the court was sitting. As they marched through the square their ranks grew. The judges postponed the hearings. The poor people's army closed the courts for several months. Shays' Rebellion was serious.

The upper classes throughout the 13 states were thoroughly frightened at this armed uprising of poor people. There was no money to pay the veterans what they were owed, but they had the money to raise a new army to put down Shays' army.

Gen. Henry Knox, who became the first secretary of war of the United States, wrote a letter to George Washington at the time, warning of the dangerous ideas of the Massachusetts farmers. These farmers believed that since the revolutionary war had been fought "by the joint exertions of all, therefore [the land, etc.] ought to be the common property of all."

A call went out immediately for a strong central government to, in the words of the preamble of the Constitution, "insure domestic tranquility."

The Constitutional Convention, secretly assembled in Philadelphia in 1787 right after Shays' Rebellion was put down, did not represent the small farmers, the slaves, the poor indentured servants, women, Native peoples or any of the other oppressed. They were the bankers, merchants, landowners and slaveholders, shippers and lawyers. They represented the rich.

In 1776, African Americans comprised about 20 percent of the entire population in the 13 colonies. At that time, enslaved people were about 60 percent of South Carolina's total population and 40 percent of Virginia's. Although the largest percentages of enslaved peoples were found in the South, slavery did exist in the middle and Northern colonies. In Boston and Newport, 20 to 25 percent of the population consisted of enslaved laborers. Other large cities, such as Philadelphia and New York, also supported significant enslaved populations.

Although enslaved people in cities and towns were not needed as agricultural workers, they were employed in a variety of other capacities: domestic servants, artisans, craftsmen, sailors, dockworkers, laundresses and coachmen.

All slaves were considered property that could be bought and sold. Slaves thus constituted a portion of the owners' overall wealth. Although Southern slaveholders had a deeper investment in slavery than Northerners, many Northerners, too, had significant portions of their wealth tied up in the ownership of enslaved people.

### **Constitution modeled on Roman Republic**

When the framers of the Constitution met in Philadelphia, they chose as a model the Roman Republic, a slave state. It was a republic, not a democracy. Rome was considered to be the most stable slaveholder state in the past. And that's what they wanted.

The U.S. Constitution is almost a direct copy of that of Rome. The Roman Constitution was designed to give the semblance of power to the free, nonenslaved citizens (men only) while actually concentrating real power in a senatorial elite. [The state structure in Rome](#) was made up of:

1. The Consul. Consuls held the highest office and took on the kingly "power to command." Two consuls were elected for a year and alternated in office on a monthly basis. The president of the U.S. has the same position today as the Roman consul. The consul has supreme command of the army and the civil administration.
2. The Senate, which could pass decrees and represented the class from which the consuls were generally chosen. The U.S. Senate was explicitly modelled on this. Two senators were appointed by each state in the U.S.; direct election of senators didn't happen until 1913 with the 17th Amendment.
3. The "comitia centuriata" or Assembly of the Centuries, an assembly of

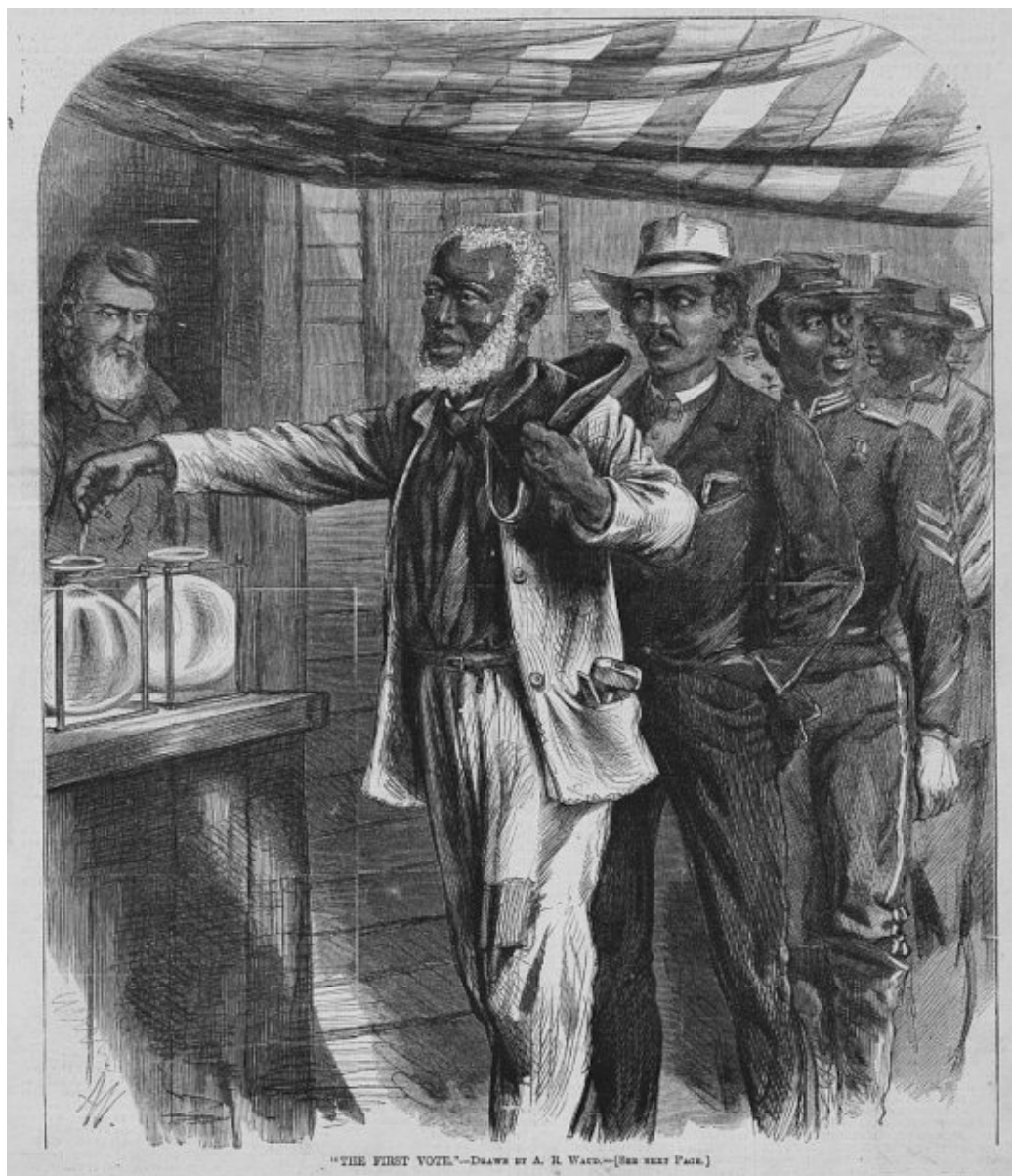


military officers (property owners) that selected the consul by indirect election: almost exactly copied by the U.S. Electoral College.

4. The Plebian Council or People's Assembly. This was a mass democratic assembly that could pass laws. The Plebian Council operated on the basis of direct democracy, not elected representatives. It could not, however, set its own agenda, having to vote on motions put to it by magistrates who were invariably from the upper classes. The U.S. Constitution does not have a popular democratic assembly, but instead substitutes a House of Representatives, based on elections (which are funded by wealthy oligarchs).

The effect of the Roman structure was that executive power was always held by a member of the slave-owning patrician class. The Roman Senate likewise was always made up of slave owners rather than common people. Similar effects were achieved in the U.S. Of the first 10 presidents of the U.S., only two, John Adams and John Quincy Adams, were not slave owners. John and John Quincy were both lawyers, serving bankers and landlords.

The Constitution legalized slavery, as noted by Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall in 1987, and specifically prohibits Native peoples from having any rights.



Etching entitled and captioned: "First Black Vote. Though there would be still so many rivers to cross and mountains to climb, this was indeed a glorious, inspiring, landmark event. We can sense the many years this gray-haired man has waited for this moment to cast his ballot. In line are others, including a military man." Harper's Weekly, November 16, 1867.

## **Elections by ballot favor wealthy**

Elections by ballot, Aristotle also said, are a mark of oligarchy, the rule of the wealthy, not of democracy, the rule of the poor.

Elections always favor the wealthy. It takes money to be a professional politician. The rich can spend to influence elections and have an education that prepares them as orators. Indirect elections, the Electoral College, only increases the rule of the wealthy.

In the 2000 election, George Bush lost the popular vote but won in the Electoral College. The same happened again with Donald Trump, who lost by almost 3 million votes — over 2 percent — but won the indirect Electoral College vote.

The U.S. government is made up of professional politicians, lobbyists and bureaucrats.

After the American Revolution, most states allowed only white male adult property owners to vote, about 6 percent of the population. In the early 1800s, the property requirement was gradually changed to paying taxes so that by 1857, all white male taxpayers were allowed to vote. Citizenship was not required until 1928, following an anti-socialist, anti-immigrant campaign that led to the illegal deportation of 1.8 million people.

The Reconstruction era 15th Amendment states that voting rights cannot be denied or abridged based on “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” And briefly, voting rights were opened to African Americans. Disfranchisement came after the defeat of Reconstruction, with Jim Crow laws effectively keeping voting limited to white male taxpayers.

Great struggles were waged in the following years and over time more democratic rights were won, particularly the right to vote. After a mass women’s movement for

suffrage, women's right to vote was won in 1920, with the 19th Amendment to the Constitution.

In 1964, the 24th Amendment prohibited the requirement to pay poll taxes in order to vote. Not until the historic Civil Rights Movement won the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was a nationwide "one person, one vote" electoral system established in the U.S., with the notable exception that prisoners are often denied the right to vote. The U.S. currently has 2.3 million people in prison, the most of any country in the world.



Residents of Freedman's Village reading books, in Arlington, Virginia, on Robert E. Lee's old estate.

## **Reconstruction: A democratic revolution**

A democratic revolution in the U.S. came with the Civil War (1861-1865) and Black Reconstruction (1865-1877), but that revolution was drowned in blood, much like the revolution taking place at the same time in France — the Paris Commune of 1871. Reconstruction is known as the unfinished revolution.

It was a revolution that destroyed forever the power of the slave owners as a class and chattel slavery as a system. The institution of slavery was overthrown, but the popular democracy that emerged in Reconstruction was subverted by racism breaking the unity of the poor, the laboring class, against the rich, and then crushed by the Ku Klux Klan and the Northern capitalists.

Reconstruction instituted voting rights, free public education and equal rights for all, including former slaves and women. There is no more democratic period in all of U.S. history. W.E.B. Du Bois' book "Black Reconstruction" details the significant, really revolutionary, advances made under Reconstruction.

As Du Bois notes elsewhere, socialism is the completion of the Reconstruction revolution. (See ["Black August 1619-2019"](#) compiled by Gloria Verdieu)

Socialism is democracy, the rule of the poor, the working class. That's the revolution that has to be finished.

