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Richard R. Beeman, *Our Lives, Our Fortunes and Our Sacred Honor: The Forging of American Independence, 1774-1776*. New York: Basic Books, 2013. Pp. xix, 492. ISBN 978-0-465-02629-6.

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In this new book, prolific historian Richard Beeman (Univ. of Pennsylvania) has written a companion piece to his earlier *Plain, Honest Men*.¹ He recounts the familiar events that led to the American colonies' severing of ties to their "mother country" with particular insights into the conflicting personal and political priorities of the men who navigated the tortuous passage from proudly loyal subjects of the British Empire to nervous "Founding Fathers" of a new, North American Republic. Decades of research, analysis, and teaching underlie this study of how representatives from thirteen politically and demographically distinct entities found common cause to create a new nation.

The volume begins with brief biographies of the main players in the drama, some well known, like John and Samuel Adams, John Dickinson, and Thomas Jefferson, others less so, like James Duane, Joseph Galloway, and Roger Sherman. Beeman starts with the Boston Tea Party (16 December 1773) and continues through the adoption of the Declaration of Independence (4 July 1776). In discussing the First Continental Congress (September 1774), he notes that few of the gathered delegates were, to begin with, contemplating independence from Great Britain. He seeks to discover what was in the hearts and minds of these men of widely differing backgrounds, economic interests, and cultural perspectives. Like most of the people they represented, they were struggling to reconcile their loyalties to king and country with the pain inflicted by Parliamentary restrictions on American trade and colonists' personal liberties.

Tensions between the American colonies and the British imperial government had escalated after the French and Indian War (1754-63) and a series of parliamentary acts that triggered the famous protests in Boston. In what became a typical reaction, the British issued punitive laws, known as the "Coercive Acts," rather than addressing the colonies' grievances or the inflamed emotions of their inhabitants. Beeman recounts in detail the debates, negotiations, and petitions involved in determining the best means of defending the colonists' rights and liberties as loyal British subjects while at the same time placating their political masters over four thousand miles away.

During the first century of the colonies' existence, British governments observed an unofficial policy of "salutary neglect" that allowed a relatively affluent colonial middle class to benefit from a flourishing North American economy. That began to change in 1763 with Parliament's attempts to recoup the costs of Britain's participation in the Seven Years' War (known in America as "the French and Indian War") by imposing new taxes on the colonies. Parliament saw this as the colonies merely bearing their "fair share" of the costs of membership in the British Empire. It discounted entirely the sweat, blood, and tears exacted from them by the depredations of the French and Native Americans on the frontier.

Beginning in 1764, the British government levied taxes to regulate American trade and help maintain its expanding empire. The Sugar Act, the Declaratory Act, and the even more comprehensive Stamp Act taxed many aspects of the American economy. The particularly onerous Stamp Act targeted dangerous groups—newspaper printers, lawyers, and merchants—who were most able and likely to protest. Again, American resistance brought a harsh response, not merely taxes, but other measures, including an order obligating Americans to lodge British troops in their homes.

1. Subtitle: *The Making of the American Constitution* (NY: Random House, 2009), for which Beeman won the 2010 George Washington Book Prize. He is also the author of *The Varieties of Political Experience in Eighteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: U Penn Pr, 2004) and *The Penguin Guide to the United States Constitution: A Fully Annotated Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution and Amendments, and Selections from The Federalist Papers* (NY: Penguin, 2010).

Beeman describes the strains that arose during the drafting of the 1774 Articles of Association over the issue of slavery. In the final version, the colonists agreed to

“neither import nor purchase any slave imported after the first day of December next; after which time we will wholly discontinue the slave trade, and will neither hire our vessels nor sell our commodities or manufactures to those who are concerned in it...” [Beeman comments] As Americans began to resort to language in which they described their condition as being one of “enslavement” by an unjust Parliament, it was becoming more difficult for at least some to ignore the moral hypocrisy of continuing the traffic in human beings. (157)

In the seven months between the convening of the First Continental Congress in September 1774 and the outbreak of armed conflict at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, attitudes changed dramatically. The British army mobilized to arrest Samuel Adams and John Hancock and seize the Massachusetts militia stores. Beeman recounts events on both sides of the Atlantic that widened the breach between King George III and his British subjects on the one hand and on the other the transatlantic colonists, who were beginning to develop a distinctly “American” identity. In January 1775, when the Continental Congress petitioned the king to restrain his Parliament’s abridging of American liberties, he responded: “The New England governments are now in a state of rebellion; blows must decide whether they are to be subject to this country or independent” (177).

Frederick (Lord) North, the king’s chief minister (an office later titled prime minister), drafted a so-called “Peace Plan,” adopted by Parliament in March 1775, which, ironically, declared Massachusetts to be in rebellion and imposed sanctions on the commerce of it and nine other colonies, exempting only Georgia, New York, and North Carolina because they were assumed to be loyal to the Crown. North proposed that colonies which contributed their “fair share” by voluntarily taxing themselves (to the level previously imposed by Parliament) would not be directly taxed by the British government. Even critical members of Parliament recognized that “North’s plan was ‘not free but compulsory’; its essence was to proclaim: ‘give us as much money as I wish, till I say enough, or I will take it from you’” (178). Edmund Burke knew Americans well enough to predict their reaction: “your colonies become suspicious, restive, and intractable, whenever they see the least attempt to wrest from them by force, or shuffle from them by chicane, what they think the only advantage worth living for. This fierce spirit of liberty is stronger in the English colonies probably than in any other people of the earth...” (179).

Beeman describes the acrimonious debates between John Adams and John Dickinson, and the latter’s influence on “The Declaration on the Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms” and the Olive Branch Petition. Yet, even Dickinson, the most articulate, moderate proponent of conciliation between colonies and king, was moved to write

Our cause is just. Our union is perfect.... We gratefully acknowledge, as signal Instances of the Divine Favour toward us, that his Providence would not permit us to be called into this severe Controversy, until we were grown up to our present strength, had been previously exercised in warlike operation, and possessed of the means of defending ourselves.... [T]he arms we have been compelled by our enemies to assume, we will, in defiance of every hazard, with unabating firmness and perseverance, employ for the preservation of our liberties; being with one mind resolved to dye Free-men rather than live Slaves. (250)

Despite the firm tone of the Declaration, Adams viewed Dickinson’s Olive Branch Petition as far too submissive and ended whatever “friendship and acquaintance” they had shared. The two never again exchanged a word except in the formal setting of Congress.

Beeman closely examines the roles of key actors in the three years between the First Continental Congress and the Declaration of Independence. He notes John Adams’s well-documented self-importance and influence on major events. He also decries the poor record keeping (at least from a historian’s perspective) by Ulsterman Charles Thompson, secretary of the Continental Congress. On the other hand, he shows some sympathy for John Dickinson, whose “decisions not to support independence *and* to absent himself from the vote [on 2 July 1776] were based entirely on his own moral sense of what was right” (379).

Our Lives, Our Fortunes and Our Sacred Honor should be essential reading for any serious student of the men, methods, and actions that transformed a group of disparate colonies into the interdependent elements of a free and unified nation.²

2. Concluding the book are two appendices: “A” prints the marked-up version of Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, including strike-throughs, edits, and insertions; “B” prints the final version.