At least since Herbert Levi Osgood proclaimed the Great Awakening as the first truly American event, historians have pondered its impact upon independence. Vernon L. Parrington saw it as a last explosion of clerical fanaticism from which the settlers happily escaped into saner preoccupations, such as the Revolution. John C. Miller linked it to class resentments surrounding the Massachusetts Land Bank, presumably another foretaste of 1776. Perry Miller tried to startle everyone by stressing the utter modernity of Jonathan Edwards; but his most distinguished student, Edmund S. Morgan, has emphasized quite a different contrast. He has juxtaposed the religious worldview of colonial spokesmen in 1740 against the astonishingly secular outlook of the Founding Fathers by 1790 and has tried to suggest how the Awakening helped to move America from the first position to the second.¹

Since the mid-1960s, Alan Heimert has set the terms of debate. He has divided late eighteenth-century Americans into evangelicals and antievangelicals, linking evangelicals to the Revolution and proclaiming Edwards as the intellectual progenitor of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson. His antievangelicals (or “liberals”) either resisted the Revolution or embraced it awkwardly and with reservations. Heimert’s claims soon drew heavy and withering fire from Morgan and Sidney Mead, and an ironic appreciation from William McLoughlin. Reaction since then has slowly grown more favorable. Richard Bushman, Harry Stout, Gary Nash, and Rhys Isaac have all seen clear revolutionary potential in the religious upheaval that began in the 1730s. Probably no one would now deny that an extraordinarily high correlation exists between New Lights and patriots. Remarkably few evangelicals in the Thirteen Colonies (unlike Britain and Nova Scotia) rallied to the crown in 1776.²

The other half of Heimert’s equation has not fared well. Many antievangelicals behaved as he described them, but far too potent a group did not. Indeed, if evangelicals clustered in a very narrow band of the political spectrum (somewhere to the left of center), antievangelicals can be found at every point. Among other things, they defined both extremes, providing the

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¹ John M. Murrin

² John M. Murrin
most radical patriots (Thomas Paine, Jefferson, Dr. Thomas Young, Samuel Adams, Ebenezer McIntosh, Ethan Allen), and virtually all of the loyalists. To put the matter differently, antievangelicals supplied nearly all positions of leadership, both radical and moderate, within the patriot camp—signers of the Declaration of Independence, members of Congress and the Philadelphia Convention of 1787, army commanders, and even the sons of liberty and the organizers of anti-British mobs. With a few exceptions that will shortly be noted, evangelicals followed but did not lead. Antievangelicals defined the terms of resistance to Britain, guided the republic to victory, set most of the agenda for the "internal revolution" after 1776, and wrote (and probably led resistance to) the Constitution of 1787.

A frank class analysis could resolve this enigma if it could demonstrate that evangelicals clustered among the "meager sort" but used their weight to give power to those antievangelicals among the elite who shared their social goals. Nash and Stout flirt with such an interpretation but do not state it explicitly; both are doubtless aware of numerous exceptions to any such pattern. As a result, the debate continues, but increasingly without any sharp focus. It no longer seems obvious what aspect of the Revolution the Awakening is supposed to explain.

Counterfactual arguments have their terrors for historians, especially when they lack a rigorous statistical base. Yet, as I argued ten years ago in discussing the impact of the Canada cession upon the Revolution, they can also clarify issues that have become muddled and suggest useful avenues for future research. The historiography of the Awakening has reached just such an impasse. One way of realizing where we are is to obliterate the Awakening and then try to discover what remains in its absence. This exercise, for all the risk of indiscipline it entails, might at least tell us what we are trying to say.3

Of course in annihilating a major historical event, we should make as few actual changes in the known record as are needed to procure the result. I propose to remove from the scene, before certain critical points in their careers, the three men who did most to make the Awakening a North American and trans-Atlantic event: George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and Gilbert Tennent. More than any other person, Whitefield drew together into a common experience the separate, local revivals that had agitated parts of the British world by 1740. In his absence, these local upheavals can continue to wax and wane much as they had been doing since the 1690s, but they will never reach the threshold of general awareness of "a great and extraordinary outpouring of the Spirit." To sustain our enterprise, he must disappear before 1739. Similarly, Edwards not only provided the Awakening with its most sophisticated theological exposition, but he also created a literary genre of crucial importance to its success—the published revival narrative, which
found numerous imitators once he had invented the model. Edwards must go before completing *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* in 1736. Tennent forced the disagreements in the American Presbyterian Church to the point of schism by 1741, and he contributed more than anyone else to the task of joining local Middle Atlantic revivals to those in New England. His existence is intolerable, for our purposes, by 1738 or 1739. Finally, some readers might wish a similar fate upon John Wesley, but his impact upon America was never large before the Revolution, and I hesitate to adopt a counterfactual premise that might remove the entire Methodist movement from Anglo-American history. If he must be neutralized, let us give his hitherto unrequited romance in Georgia a consummation so blissful that it sustains him for several more years at his High Church, ritualistic phase. He does not turn in 1738 to Martin Luther and the Moravian Brethren for spiritual rebirth.

As should already be obvious, one of the forbidden delights that such counterfactual musings can provide to any suitably degenerate mind is the invention of proper circumstances for dispatching the other three men. Whitefield crossed the Atlantic in perilous times. On his return from Georgia in 1738, we can blow him off course and invite his capture by Spanish *Guarda Costa*, who take him to Havana and lose him in a dungeon. Instead of awakening thousands, he can become another minor cause of the War of Jenkins’ Ear. We should detain him in these wretched conditions long enough to outgrow his angelic youth, and perhaps transform him into a solitary mystic without an audience by the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748.

Edwards, sadly, cannot survive even his first Northampton revival of 1734–35. Staring too fervently at the bellrope during one of his most quickening sermons, he suddenly became mesmerized and had to be carried, a hopeless catatonic, from his pulpit by his weeping congregation. He had not even started to write *A Faithful Narrative*.

Tennent, who really was struck by lightning in 1745 while preparing a blast or two against the Moravians, can perhaps experience this discomfort in a more fatal way seven or eight years earlier. He never delivered his fiery manifesto on *The Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry*, and his aged father did not force issues to a schism. Thus Tennent never invited James Davenport to supply his vacant pulpit while he toured New England, nor did Davenport follow behind him.4

With the Awakening gone, what can we now ask? Basically three questions: 1) Would colonial resistance to British measures after 1763 have reached the point of armed rebellion by 1775? 2) If it had, would the Revolution have turned out differently with no Awakening to draw upon? 3) With no Awakening, would the republic of 1800 have been significantly different
from the one we now love and study? The rest of this essay will suggest that we already know enough to provide clear answers to the first and third questions. Without the Awakening, colonial resistance would have taken very much the same forms it did and within the same chronology, but the America of 1800 would have been an unimaginably different place. Far more difficult is the second question, to which no unequivocal answer can yet be given.

Resistance to the Stamp Act was so universal and intense that one hardly needs to invoke the Awakening to explain its success, except in Connecticut. Apart from Martin Howard of Rhode Island, the stamp tax had no com-
mitted defenders in North America. In fact, a surprising number of people who would later be unable to repudiate the crown provided the settlers with their most cogent defense against Parliament—James Otis, Jr., Thomas Fitch, William Smith, Jr., John Dickinson, and Daniel Dullany. Of course actual nullification of the measure required forcible intervention by urban mobs, particularly in Boston, Newport, New York, and Charleston. Boston led all other cities in popular fervor in both 1740 and 1765, with the Boston Gazette defending the radical position in each case. But evangelical elation had declined sharply in 1742, and no one has yet connected the youthful converts of Whitefield, Tennent, and Davenport to the rioters of 1765. To be the same men, most would have had to be between 45 and 50 years old by then. To be younger men but still evangelical, we need to discover a later revival for Boston. Much the same generational argument applies to the other cities, with an interesting variation for Philadelphia. That port stood just behind Boston and ahead of New York and Charleston in the intensity of its excite-
ment over Whitefield. In 1765 it did less than any of the others to resist the Stamp Act. No doubt evangelicals found the Stamp Act reprehensible, but there is no reason to believe that they exerted a decisive influence in 1765, or anything of the kind. Nearly all of their neighbors agreed with them.5

Much the same analysis applies to the Townshend Crisis. Resistance centered in the ports, where evangelical passion had been declining for a generation while continuing to erupt sporadically in the countryside. Opposition to Britain spread to the colonial legislatures when Lord Hillsborough forbade any assembly to consider the Massachusetts Circular Letter. Everything we know about the lower houses before 1768 argues for the predictability of their response. In any case, resistance achieved only a limited success before it collapsed in 1770, leaving the colonies badly divided. Here too, no good evidence has yet been offered for suggesting that the crisis would not have occurred without the Awakening or that it would have been resolved in any significantly different way.6

The final imperial crisis from the Tea Act through Lexington can also be explained quite satisfactorily without invoking the Awakening. The flash
point again occurred in the nonevangelical port cities, Boston above all, and when Britain responded with the Coercive Acts, the countryside was rapidly drawn into a movement of massive resistance. Here we should expect to find a decent share of active evangelicals, but again colonial anger was so deep and widespread by the autumn of 1774 that we do not need them to account for what happened. The First Continental Congress developed its program without seeking guidance from the elect, and the war began shortly before the Second Congress met. Significantly, the town of Concord, site of the heaviest fighting on the first morning of the war, had split badly over the Awakening. It now united behind the Revolution.7

Even without the Awakening, the Revolution would have happened. But could it have succeeded? Would the colonies have been able to agree upon independence by July 1776? (Without the barrier of independence, the Howes’ Peace Commission later that summer would have stood a better, though still not a good chance of restoring the Empire.) Could Americans have won the war?

On these questions we find, for the first time, that some evangelicals were strategically located where their political decisions really mattered. The New Light Susquehannah Company faction had gained control of Connecticut politics during the Stamp Act Crisis and now guided that province steadily and exultantly toward independence. In New Jersey, where over a third of the population became active loyalists while others stood neutral, patriot leadership fell heavily to Presbyterians from the Princeton area, home of the college that had done more than any other to perpetuate and spread the Awakening. Quite appropriately, President John Witherspoon led a fresh New Jersey delegation to Philadelphia just in time to swing the colony’s vote in favor of independence by July 2. Pennsylvania experienced its own internal revolution in June 1776 when a movement dominated by backcountry Presbyterians overthrew the moderate, antiindependence, Quaker-Anglican elite that had controlled provincial politics.8

Elsewhere we can record evangelical support for independence, but its decisiveness seems highly dubious. Massachusetts Baptists, the most evangelical group in the province by the 1770s, were caught largely by surprise during the rush of events. So indifferent had many of them been to imperial issues that their neighbors suspected them of loyalism. They had played no conspicuous part in the resistance movement, but now at the culminating stage they climbed aboard. Similarly Virginia Baptists had struggled for a decade against the Anglican gentry who drove the Old Dominion into independence. They too rallied to a cause that others defined, but they seem to have provided no decisive impact upon policy until the fight for Anglican disestablishment in the 1780s.9
Even when a correlation exists, how much can we make of it? Connecticut, for example, appears beguilingly simple and obvious until we ponder the alternatives. A New Light party did lead the colony to independence. But had the Old Lights retained power past 1766, would they have behaved much differently? Governor Fitch, had he remained in office past 1766 and lived past 1774, might indeed have gone loyalist. He showed every sign of such behavior. Yet he probably would have been no more difficult a problem for patriots than loyalist governor Joseph Wanton in neighboring Rhode Island, who was jettisoned in the final crisis. When the crunch came, Connecticut Old Lights rallied overwhelmingly to the Revolution, as did Old Light Congregational clergy throughout New England. The only sizable pocket of loyalty in the state was Anglican, a faith that had grown rapidly in reaction against the Awakening. The argument would be more perverse than any I care to defend, but a case could be made that the net effect of the Awakening was to increase loyalism more than patriotism. More probably, it increased both the number of Anglican loyalists and the intensity of patriot resistance.¹⁰

In Pennsylvania, by contrast, the Revolution often seemed to be almost a civil war between Presbyterians and Quakers. This evaluation, however, does not place the province in the Awakening camp. As with Congregationalists, few prominent Presbyterians, New Side or Old, went loyalist, and the proportion was probably no higher among the inconspicuous and inarticulate. We can, of course, trace the revolutionary activities of such New Side Presbyterians as the Reverend George Duffield of Philadelphia. Even so, the decisive event in Pennsylvania was the rising of backcountry Scots-Irish, many of them without resident clergymen, yet strongly rooted in Ulster traditions of Presbyterianism. Radical as they were (and they soon helped to launch the most daring constitutional experiment of the period), they remained in all likelihood an antievangelical, Old-Side band of patriots. That leaves New Jersey as a fairly unequivocal case of New Lights dragging their fellows into independence and a bracing republican vision of the future. Only months later would the Princeton radicals begin to discover what could happen if they gave a revolution in New Jersey—and nobody came but the British.¹¹

Without an Awakening, one might argue, continuing opposition to independence in New Jersey might have stiffened the resistance of like-minded men throughout the Middle Atlantic region as a whole and thus postponed or even prevented the Declaration. New York, after all, abstained even in July 1776. But any such argument is tenuous and must rely upon an escalating succession of imponderables. Had the war continued, the logic for independence would almost certainly have prevailed eventually, as it soon did in antievangelical New York. To the war itself we must now turn.
Could the military conflict have been won without an Awakening? Here we approach the most difficult and fascinating problem of all. The war, we now realize, was an extremely brutal and draining experience. It stands just behind the Civil War as the most destructive conflict in our history. Did evangelicals somehow provide the resiliency and stamina to endure a struggle that the less righteous would have abandoned?  

Possibly so. The argument deserves serious consideration and can sustain far more research than it has yet received. Some hasty answers to the problem are clearly inadequate. Perry Miller, for example, has insisted that, while secular leaders spoke their lofty eighteenth-century language of natural rights, ordinary soldiers responded far more warmly to appeals based on biblical covenants. Perhaps. Leaving aside the realization that both Old and New Lights could endorse covenant and even millennial rhetoric, this contention lacks specificity. Does it apply chiefly to the Continental Army, which probably did have a disproportionate share of New Light chaplains? Two strong arguments suggest otherwise. First, the Continentals did not behave that way. They were no reincarnation of Oliver Cromwell's Ironsides from the previous century. Their outlook and grievances were far more secular. They did not defend themselves as the elect of God nor charge into battle chanting Psalms. Some of their chaplains undoubtedly hoped to make things otherwise, which may explain the intense mortification of the Reverend Samuel Spring, a committed evangelical. He learned that during his brief furlough from the Army, his men had rejoiced heartily to be rid of him. Second, most Continentals were the wrong age and probably from the wrong social class to match the profile that has been emerging of who got converted in eighteenth-century revivals. Most of them were too young, and their family and communal roots were too weak.  

On the other hand, as John Shy and others have contended, maybe the Continentals were not the decisive weapon after all. Maybe the militia really did tip the balance, politicizing the neutral at heart, holding loyal to the patriot cause every area not under British military occupation, and providing logistical support to George Washington and Nathaniel Greene, or even desperately needed reinforcements at several critical phases of the contest. Here, if anywhere, we should look for a direct impact of evangelicals upon the military struggle. Did they serve disproportionately in the tiring services required of the militia? This question can be researched but so far has not been. From everything we know about both evangelicals and the militia, we ought to expect richer results here than with the Continental Army. Evangelical conversions occurred most often within established families of church members, and the militia was a communal, family-based institution. For whatever reason, evangelical ministers (unlike Old Lights, who far more
often had clerical forebears) were disproportionately descended from militia officers. If the militia really accomplished all that Shy claims, perhaps evangelicals contributed more to the militia than to any other patriot institution. Here above all, a counterfactual question can give us a specific and important problem to investigate.  

Less concretely, the kind of emphasis stressed recently by Stout and Isaac also seems more appropriate to the war years, or at least to the period from 1774 on, than to earlier crises. Both men emphasize the sharp difference between the evangelicals, with their oral, face-to-face culture and emotional sermons, and the older colonial elite, with its polite, urbane, genteel, literary culture. Patrick Henry derived much of his influence, Isaac thoughtfully suggests, from his special talent for bridging the two worlds. Without in any way underplaying the importance of this insight or even trying to suggest that a counterfactual hypothesis can begin to measure its significance, we might still argue that the evangelical style of exhortation found its truest role in winning the war, not bringing it on. Baptists were by far the most vigorous evangelical group in America by the 1770s, but apart from a few individuals such as Elder John Allen of Boston (whose heterodoxy prevented him from winning a pulpit), they have not yet been detected provoking the imperial crisis. They responded to what others created.

We might also discover that evangelicals contributed significantly to the internal revolution of the 1770s and 1780s. The role of Presbyterians in Virginia and Baptists everywhere in the fight for ecclesiastical disestablishment is too well known to discuss here. But we still do not understand where evangelicals stood on other urgent, nonreligious, social questions. How large a presence were they in the reformed state legislatures of the era? If they appeared in significant numbers, did they cluster with Jackson Turner Main's localists or cosmopolitans? Or did Baptists perhaps behave differently from New Side Presbyterians and New Light Congregationalists in this respect? In New England, for example, Congregational New Lights eventually emerged as Federalists while Baptists went Jeffersonian. If such a split was general, can we speak meaningfully of an evangelical alignment or party in the very early republic? Only when we have mapped the boundaries of the evangelical social vision through rollcall votes and local records can we properly grasp its meaning and impact.

The internal revolution leads naturally to our final question, which need not detain us long. Everything we have learned recently about American political culture in the nineteenth century underscores the importance of the evangelical upheaval. In the early eighteenth century, the denominations bidding for hegemony in North America were Congregational, Quaker, and Anglican. As the two Great Awakenings did their work, the lead shifted
decisively to Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians, all major beneficiaries of the revivals. Without their contribution, the American republic after 1800 would have been an utterly different place from what we know. Speculation about its behavior would be quite pointless.

Nevertheless, partly because colonialists and early national specialists often seem to communicate as poorly with each other as New Lights did with Old Lights, some points of confusion remain that deserve short notice. Above all, Jonathan Edwards can in no sense be regarded as the intellectual progenitor of Jefferson and Jackson. The very notion would have startled and dismayed all three gentlemen. Although the Democratic party could and did attract Baptist support, it remained overwhelmingly a pluralistic and antievangelical coalition down to the Civil War and beyond. New Divinity men lopsidedly supported the other side—the Federalist, Antimasonic, Whig, Know-Nothing and Republican parties. So powerful is this correlation that, if we are determined to attribute a major political and military upheaval to revival fervor, we would do far better to choose the Civil War, not the Revolution. The Union Army, not the Continentals, sometimes marched to combat singing The Battle Hymn of the Republic, whose millennial tone has no counterpart among either Confederate or Revolutionary War songs.17

The Awakening did not create the Revolution. It surely contributed to its success, but how decisively we still do not know. More important, the Revolution liberated the spirit of the Awakening, which had grown tepid and largely ineffective among all but Baptists by the 1770s, when church membership and attendance may have been approaching an all-time low. The success of the Revolution, and the exhilarating prospects that it aroused, inspired a new generation of respectable evangelicals to reshape the social landscape of the United States. Far more dramatically than their predecessors of 1740, they imposed their social vision upon their fellow citizens until their reformist ardor drove an angry South to secession. Without the Great Awakening and its successors, there would have been a revolution in 1775, but in all probability, no Civil War in 1861.18


9. William G. McLoughlin, New England Dissent, 1630–1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State, vol. 1 (1971), ch. 31; Rhys Isaac, The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790 (1982), part 2. In the Middle Colonies, some Baptists, led by Morgan Edwards, did go loyalist, but their theological position would have to be investigated carefully before deciding whether they were New Lights. Edwards, for example, was flirting with Universalism by the 1780s.


