The late Richard Beeman (1942–2016) chose the concluding words of the Declaration of Independence as the title of his final book on the American Revolution: *Our Lives, Our Fortunes, Our Sacred Honor* (2013). Generations of historians and laypeople have taken the Declaration’s claims about lives and fortunes rather seriously. Certainly, the revolutionary generation gave their lives for a cause “that [tries] men’s souls.” The dead at Valley Forge and across the battlefields of the Revolutionary War confirm that. The Founders risked their fortunes as well. George Washington spent his own money on the war effort. Robert Morris also financed the war. But whether the Founders actually had any sacred honor to give to the cause leads contemporary Americans, both historians and the general citizenry, to balk. The supposed honor of a group of exclusively white males, many of whom sustained human bondage, must be highly suspect. Conversely, devotees of the Founding Fathers have presented the revolutionary generation as almost uniquely honorable and virtuous, presenting a hagiographic pantheon of demigods to whom subsequent generations of Americans can look back and marvel, but never replicate. Craig Bruce Smith’s *American Honor: The Creation of the Nation’s Ideals during the Revolutionary Era* (2018) offers an engaging and scholarly exploration of the way honor and virtue motivated the colonists who created the American republic.

*American Honor* is a useful and readable corrective to both presentist criticism and uncritical hagiography. Smith concedes that articulations of honor and virtue remained the domain of white Americans during the colonial era and the early Republic. But all white men, no matter their station, understood the standards to which they were publicly held. Elites and middle-class Americans alike interacted and lived in a society in which expectations of what constituted honor and virtue were rigorously applied across the socioeconomic spectrum. Honor and its practice extended to enslaved people, as well. Bound persons used ethical considerations to measure honor among themselves, and they applied those same standards of ethics and morality to their masters.

*American Honor* is a useful and
American honor in the eighteenth century found expositors in British North America’s fledgling universities and with its social reformers. Honor and virtue, Smith writes, were central to the curriculum of John Witherspoon at Princeton, and faculty members at King’s College (which became Columbia University) inculcated their students with both theoretical and practical applications of honor. Witherspoon, particularly, delved into the intellectual foundations of honor and allowed his students to debate its multiple definitions. Every significant member of the revolutionary generation who attended an institution of higher learning in the colonial era received an education in honor and virtue. Classical and Christian texts formed the foundation of American understandings of these attributes in the late eighteenth century. Students read Plutarch’s biographies of Roman figures. They learned Christian moral precepts from medieval Christian scholastics along with more contemporary Protestant thinkers. Despite the geographic, religious, and social differences among the colonies—Virginia’s College of William & Mary, Smith notes, emphasized the classical honor later identified with the American South—a relatively united understanding of what honor and virtue entailed existed across British North America in 1776.

Historians have given much attention to the use of honor as a justification for the post-war settlements that led the newly independent North American states to create the federal Constitution and the republican union in 1787–89. But less attention has been paid to the use of honor and virtue to justify the American Revolution beforehand. Smith shows that from the outset of the colonial conflict with Great Britain, revolutionary politicians held themselves to an extraordinarily high moral standard. The fact that they did not perfectly conform to their own rhetoric does not diminish the degree to which revolutionary Americans urged themselves to practice virtue in war and in peace. George Washington’s famous moral rectitude was not a mere private fetish useful for future electioneering. In 1776, he couldn’t envision the Constitutional Convention of 1787 or even a potential victory in war. Instead, honor represented an important aspect of Washington’s private and public conduct, which he believed ultimately reflected not merely on himself but also on his countrymen. The practice and rhetoric of honor was not something that public men in the revolutionary era used to cloak a more sinister and self-serving private ethos. Honor and virtue were shared moral and ethical presumptions and practices that protected the revolutionaries from debasing themselves. As Smith shows, the men who created the American Republic did not view themselves as special or uniquely moral men, which is precisely why they exhorted each other to maintain their individual and, later, their new national honor.
Great Britain, revolutionary politicians held themselves to an extraordinarily high moral standard. Maintenance of honor among those American elites who owned slaves represents one of the more problematic paradoxes for honor and virtue in late-eighteenth-century North America. Smith rightly shows the complexity of slavery within the context of American honor. The major slaveholding Founders—Jefferson, Madison, and Washington—all argued that emancipation was a testament to a slaveholder’s personal honor. Smith posits that one of the reasons why some revolutionaries did not free their slaves was that slavery afforded them the station that empowered them to resist what they perceived as the more consequential and immediate tyranny of the British Empire. This, Smith rightly argues, was an especially untenable position coming from Thomas Jefferson, who wrote extensively on slavery as a dishonor to the new union. As the internal politics of the new republic became more heated in the 1790s and between the Federalists and the Republicans, the paradoxes of slavery and honor informed federal politics.

*American Honor* offers the most exhaustive treatment of the importance of honor during and after the United States’ struggle for independence. Smith’s research is meticulous, and he presents his subjects as men deeply concerned about honor. He has done the study of history a remarkable service by forcing us to reckon with human beings rather than cartoons of power-obsessed white men. More importantly, he has written that rarest of books: a history that is scholarly in its scope and methodology but inspiring in its tone. If the revolutionary generation of Americans were normal men who bound themselves to the honorable pursuit of political goals despite their faults, those who live in their republic in the twenty-first century can do the same.

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