

## Independence, Peacemaking and the Economy

By Rita Chamblin

### **ARE WE FREE?**

What a great bunch of anti-authoritarians I'm looking at this morning!  
UU's, as many of you know, come from a long line of anti-authoritarians.

We choose to organize ourselves in congregations which determine their own destinies. We are free of hierarchical determination. We organize instead, in our association via covenants.

So, we're free. Free of the domination of a religious hierarchy. That's one type of freedom. There are others. Freedom from hunger. Freedom from toxic chemicals in the air, water and soil. What about economic freedom?

As UU's, we affirm and promote:

- **The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all**

That's one of our covenants!

So, we're anti-authoritarian and we want peace, liberty and justice.

Hmmmm.

## **ARE WE FREE?**

**Tomorrow is the Fourth of July!**

**It's Independence Day!**

**We celebrate the beginning of our nation's path to freedom!**

**Freedom FROM being a British Colony. Free TO have our own government.**

The pilgrim story we're all familiar with from Thanksgiving plays as youths makes good folklore. But, the pilgrims weren't the first European settlers in "the new world". Colonization of North America by the British Empire had already begun 19 years before their arrival.

As a matter of fact, the voyage carrying the pilgrims was the THIRD that the Mayflower had made to North America! The Mayflower was owned by The East India Company, which was chartered in 1600 by Queen Elizabeth. By 1681, most members of the British government and royalty were stockholders.

Roughly half the immigrants to English colonies were indentured servants. HALF!! And there were more in PA, MD and VA. At the time of the Revolutionary War, 3 of 4 people in these three states were or had been indentured servants.

So, what does this have to do with the Fourth of July?

The indentured servants were not free! Nor did they gain their freedom at the end of the Revolutionary War.

My original idea for this service was to talk about the peacemakers of our revolutionary war. I thought we should take time to consider, today, those who brought the peace home. Along the way, I realized that I needed to better understand the economic history of that era.

**NOTE** to listeners – I am not a historian, though I'll share with you what I learned. And, as I was researching all of this, what kept popping up were the economic aspects of the entire process: from colonial discontent to the Declaration of Independence to war to alliances to negotiations and ultimately, peace.

**I've always believed that war is a failure of foreign policy. If I'm right, then is foreign policy primarily an economic pursuit? And, have we achieved freedom from economic tyranny?**

The American colonies were, well, colonies. And, by that era's definition, colonies were supposed to provide the mother country with raw materials and resources. Much of those raw materials and resources would then be processed or manufactured into finished goods to be sold back to the colonists. At that time the British empire was far flung, so colonists benefited by being able to buy goods produced from materials derived from other, quite distant, colonies. The price of the finished goods included, of course, transportation costs and the attendant risks of sea travel. Colonists

also were expected to pay taxes on goods to pay for their government's protection of the colonies. Protection from both foreign powers and indigenous peoples and for the administration of the government.

**So, it was an economic relationship. In 1990's parlance: It's the economy, stupid! I'm going to rephrase it to It's the economy, get it?**

In the years leading up to the French and Indian War in the mid 1700's the American colonies were treated with benign neglect by Britain. The British governors and other administrators in the colonies were paid by the colonists. They were further co-opted with bribes to work in concert with the colonists' interests. Smuggling and tax evasion were widespread and accepted practices. **The economic relationship favored the colonists. It's the economy, get it?**

But, then France got in the way. France's incursions into territories claimed or intending to be claimed by Britain or their colonies became a provocation too great to ignore. The risks were the loss of resources as well as transportation routes. Colonial troops engaged in battle along with the British military. And, in 1763, the success of the British and Americans left the French in a state of diminished international status and strength. The French had to be content with what is now Canada. The Americans, however, felt a heightened sense of status because of the large part they felt that they'd played in winning this war. So, they thought they should have a special place at the table of the British empire. But, from their perspective, the British had depleted their treasury warring with France, the French and Indian war being the most recent. The British people were already highly

taxed, and it was observed that the colonies, especially the American colonies, were not contributing their fair share. The British still saw the colonies as, well, colonies, with a role to play, so it's not a surprise that the British government started to look closely at the reason for such low tax revenues from the American colonies. As we would say today, they were not paying their fair share. And, no, the mother country did not think the colonies should have a special place at the table of the empire. So, the American colonists were not being rewarded by increased status. Instead, they were taxed to pay for Britain's war costs and the running of an expanded empire. **This shifted the economic relationship to favor Britain. It's the economy, get it?**

So, over the following decade, mid 1760's to mid 1770's economic and cultural tensions grew. Britain tried to begin collecting taxes that should have been paid all along, but they met with resistance and were forced, on more than one occasion, to back down. Americans felt more secure with the defeat of France and the establishment of further American forts and settlements. The need for the mother country to protect them was no longer a high priority.

The Americans especially didn't like the changes made by Britain which were intended to stop the smuggling and tax evasion that had kept revenues from Britain's coffers. Yes, there were other arguments against Britain in those years, but most began with an economic issue – the right to buy goods from sources other than Britain, or the right to sell those goods without paying British taxes, etc.

You see, the East India Company set a precedent followed by large corporations to this day. It lobbied for laws to help it put its smaller competitors out of business. Since ownership of The East India Company overlapped extensively with British royalty and British government officials, it was easy to pass laws favorable to the company. So, one law The East India Company was able to pass was a law requiring a license to import anything into the Americas and the licenses were only rarely granted except to The East India Company and a few other large British operations. Further laws were passed limiting trade except through The East India Company, which increased the company's power and influence and continued to reduce its competition.

The Tea Act was most important because the Americas had become such a huge market. The official British version of the history says that the Tea Act was a "legislative maneuver by the British ministry of Lord North to make English tea marketable in America" with a goal of helping The East India Company sell a large surplus inventory. Meanwhile, the colonists' small businesses still had to pay full taxes on tea, which rankled. The colonists did not appreciate being used as a profit center for The East India Company.

So, you can imagine that the tea party in Boston Harbor resembled, in some ways, the current spirit of protests against large corporations:

1. Entering markets and displacing small businesses
2. Not paying taxes
3. Achieving specific rulings or legislation to benefit them at the expense of others

Sound familiar??

Businessmen were leaders in our revolution. They were concerned that the government was passing laws solely for the benefit of The East India Company to the detriment of small businesses and their employees. The government was choosing who would reap the economic benefits of the American Colonies. So, that's where freedom fits in. The colonists wanted the **freedom** to make buy/sell decisions without the restrictions and taxes being imposed by Britain. They wanted **freedom** from the domination of The East India Company.

**Freedom was about the economics! It's the economy, get it?**

Our Declaration of Independence was intended, primarily, to attract foreign support. Yes, it had an effect domestically, but our leaders also wanted to have an effect elsewhere. They knew that they needed to help other countries see an independent entity with whom they could trade. If we were to gain supplies and support, we had to convince other nations that they had a legal leg to stand on in dealing with us directly. Even nations not friendly to Britain were potentially constrained by treaties in dealing with possessions of Britain. So, we had to create for ourselves a new entity which could operate separately from our mother country, Britain. Unfortunately, we fell short. The Declaration of Independence drew little notice in Europe.

**Except for France. France was supportive of our separatist actions on two counts, both economic.** First, siding with the colonies was an

opportunity to reduce Britain's possessions and, therefore, their power. Second, if they could bring Americans into their orbit, they'd gain economically by opening another market as well as gaining access to America's resources for raw materials. France began supporting us covertly; but in February, 1778, we signed a treaty of "perpetual" alliance. This was shortly after our victory at Saratoga in October, 1777.

Let's remember, here, that July 4, 1776 was only our *Declaration* of Independence. We didn't *win* independence for another 6 ½ years. In fact, we did so poorly in the war efforts in that first year that one of the first peace efforts came from the British. Just 5 months after the Declaration of Independence, the Proclamation of November 30 from Britain offered an amnesty to any revolutionary who'd sign a return to loyalty for the British crown. The British leadership in America felt it was their obligation to serve as peace negotiators as well as military commanders. Thousands flocked to British camps to sign. It wasn't until late December, 1776/early January, 1777 that the revolutionary armies had some successes and the British Proclamation was sidelined.

American peacemakers included:

- **Benjamin Franklin**. You remember him. The guy who almost electrocuted himself with a kite. Franklin was instrumental in building and maintaining our relationship with France. Including our economic relationship. He worked primarily with France's representative, the Comte de Vergennes. Together they obtained funding and military aid for the colonies throughout the war. France funded us and, eventually, they were in so deep that they

had to continue to fund and support us in order to recoup their investment. **It was about the economics! It's the economy, get it?**

And, Benjamin Franklin held no illusions about his role as a peacemaker. He said "I have never yet known of a peace that did not occasion a great deal of popular discontent, clamour and censure on both sides." "The blessing promised to peacemakers, I fancy, relates to the next world for in this they seem to have a greater chance of being cursed."

Later, three more American peace commissioners were assigned by Congress to the Peace Commission:

- **Henry Laurens** Laurens was a merchant who renounced slave trading after it had made him a fortune. He spent most of his commission in the Tower of London
- **John Jay** Jay, the son of a wealthy New York merchant, was a lawyer. His original assignment was to Spain to establish good relations; it failed. But, to accept that assignment, Jay resigned both the Presidency of the Continental Congress and the Chief Justiceship of the State of New York. He later joined Adams and Franklin in France.
- **John Adams, our second president.** Adams came from a middle class background. He was first a teacher, then a lawyer. Throughout the negotiations, he was suspicious of both France and Spain and this worked to his advantage.

In 1781, 5 years after the Declaration of Independence, the war turned in the favor of the American colonies. And, the next year, the government of Lord North, in Britain, fell. Lord Rockingham returned to head the British government and, after some wrangling, Lord Shelburne became the primary negotiator for Britain with both France and America. Gradually, Britain had come to see that an independent America would be less beholden to France and would return to being Britain's best customer. In addition, France and Britain had had enough of the war on financial grounds; they needed to get their countries back to trading. **Again, it was about the economics! It's the economy, get it?**

All of the peacemakers mentioned here, American, British and French, were smart and capable. There were others, Dutch, Spanish, Prussian, etc., as this was, according to Winston Churchill, the first worldwide war. Their desire for peace, though, was a desire for peace **as a means for a return to prosperity**. This peacemaking, which gained us independence, was, essentially, a large, complicated trade agreement with many parties. The peacemakers didn't approach peace as a way of life as, say, a Quaker might.

**But, in the end, we gained peace and it was about the economics NOT the philosophy.**

So, don't we need to approach peacemaking in the same vein? Yes, we may believe in peace as a philosophy or way of life, as a deeply held belief and a cornerstone of our faith. Yet, we also need to understand the practical aspects of gaining peace.

Have we fulfilled our potential to bring Peace, Liberty and Justice to the world?

As a congregation?

As an individual?

## **ARE WE FREE?**

We also must decide what we seek to be free of or free from. As we look at the history of our nation, we can see that freedom from the power of a large corporation was central to the revolution. So, our experiment with democracy was to throw off the chains of a corporation supported by a monarchy!

**Thomas Jefferson, our third president**, saw a society where people were first. Institutions were second. He saw three threats to our “natural rights”:

1. Governments (especially elitist governments like kingdoms)
2. Organized religions
3. Commercial Monopolies and pseudo aristocrats (wealthy individuals and powerful corporations)

Jefferson even pushed (unsuccessfully) for a law, written into the constitution as an amendment, which would prevent companies growing so large that they could dominate industries or influence the people’s government. This contrasts with some current views that democracy can only flourish with unfettered, unregulated, predatory corporate activity. The Milton Friedman “Chicago School” economic model equates democracy with this consolidation of capital and power. Yet, we see that this is the very

problem faced by the colonists and which led directly to the Revolutionary War.

History is repeating itself. What a surprise!

Way back in 1949, Albert Einstein wrote about concentrated private capital being unable to be checked by a democracy – “This is true since the members of legislative bodies are selected by political parties, largely financed or otherwise influenced by private capitalists who, for all practical purposes, separate the electorate from the legislature. The consequence is that the representatives of the people do not in fact sufficiently protect the interests of the underprivileged sections of the population.”

Sound familiar 60 years later? “...the representative of the people do not in fact sufficiently protect the interests of the underprivileged sections of the population.”

### **ARE WE FREE?**

We make economic decisions every day when we decide WHAT to consume and HOW MUCH to consume. Do we understand both our complicity in current systems of oppression and our power to change those systems? The world is not a simple place and our choices are complex and, often, imperfect. It takes some extra energy to shift our consumption towards our values. But, we are called to live in right relationship with each other. And, the more our choices reflect that, the closer we come to creating Peace, Liberty and Justice for all.

We are living out an epic morality play. Our most celebrated spiritual teachers have taught that society works best when we share, cooperate and are honest in our dealings with one another. Does the economic reality of our culture support this?

Here are some quotes from Unitarian Universalist justice actions:

1. “Nations fight with each other to control natural resources. Energy use is essential for human survival. How can UU’s help all people, in all nations, to secure an adequate supply of energy that is safe, affordable, and sustainable? How can we prevent energy conflict while promoting energy justice?”
2. “Migration of people – driven by economic, social, political and environmental factors – is taking place around the world. Millions are currently in transit, in refugee camps, in detention centers, or living and working in places without full legal status and without access to social services or protection of civil rights.”
3. “More people are enslaved today than at any time in history, about 27 million worldwide. They are in communities throughout the US and their stolen labor creates objects we consume every day. Yet ending slavery forever is within our grasp. We can finish the work begun by our abolitionist forebears.”

4. “Democracy requires an informed, engaged citizenry. Corporate and financial interests actively influence our government, but citizen participation and oversight have been insufficient to provide balance. Voting is important, but we must also keep informed, participate personally, discuss policy with others, observe all actions of government, and advocate for needed changes.”
  
5. “Peacebuilding is the creation and support of institutions and structures that address the roots of conflict, including economic exploitation, political marginalization, the violation of human rights, and a lack of accountability to law.”

**So, I feel that the answer to the question I posed at the beginning is, yes, foreign policy is, in fact, primarily an economic pursuit.**

**The other question I asked was if we had achieved freedom from economic tyranny. That question I’m going to leave you to consider.**

**I think this is worth repeating -- as Unitarian Universalists we affirm and promote:**

- **The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.**

It seems to me that to achieve this we need to better understand the economic disparities between groups of people and groups which are formed into nation states. We need to be ever vigilant to how we might be contributing to these disparities. Disparities which could potentially threaten

our freedom, AND other people's freedoms. We need to be mindful of the loss of our nation's natural resources to waste, destruction or transfer into corporate hands. We need to think about who we're benefiting – or harming – with our consumption decisions.

This is hard. It requires thought and energy and determination.

**We celebrate our Declaration of Independence tomorrow. And, I believe that this chapter of our history illuminates the economic component to both war and peace.**

**Are we free?**

**May we all work towards peace.**

**Resources:**

**1776 by David McCullough**

**The Glorious Cause by Robert Middlekauff**

**The Peacemakers by Richard B. Morris**

**The Diplomacy of the American Revolution by Samuel Flagg Bemis**

**Unequal Protection by Thom Hartmann**

**UUA 2010 GA Program Guide**