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TS History

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This week, readings included a letter written by James Madison to Thomas Jefferson on October 17, 1788, and sections 1, 2, and 6 from *Forced Founders* by Woody Holton.

In a letter from James Madison to Thomas Jefferson dated as October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1788, Madison outlines his opinions on the addition of the Bill of Rights in the Constitution. He is generally in favor of it, although it is accompanied with heavy concerns; a declaration of a Bill of Rights could cause problems when the government needs control, and could be outright ignored by the majority anyway. Madison makes clear the danger of pure democracies: both the physical and political power is in the hands of the majority, whereas in a monarchy the physical and political power is distributed and a Bill of Rights could serve a meaningful purpose.

Woody Holton argues in *Forced Founders* that the Virginian elite spurred the movement for Independence more out of desperation than confidence. Holton highlights conflicts between tobacco growers and merchants; Parliament's Navigation Acts and trade limitations drastically cut profits, spurred conflicts, and pushed them towards an independent and open-trade nation. Holton also writes of discord between wealthy Virginian gentlemen and poorer farmers; independent militias were favored by farmers but disliked by gentlemen for being unorganized and undisciplined; desperate tenants in the midst of a money shortage resorted to riot. To address the problems that led to disorder, but also to establish a formal government that could better control outbursts, the Virginian gentlemen strove for independence.

To support his thesis that groups other than the Virginian gentry strongly influenced the push for Independence, Holton lists out major conflicts between the American colonies and England: the Navigation Acts drastically cut tobacco growers' profits, the Virginian elite wanted to establish a formal government to quell riots and unrest, and slaveholders' worries of slave insurrections were escalated by Parliament's push of the Atlantic slave trade. These independent clashes from different directions, Holton argues, collectively pushed the Virginian gentry to declare Independence. However, Holton conflates symptoms and causes; the factors Holton lists are not discrete causes but entirely symptoms of bad trade policy; trade was at the center of the rationale of revolution, further inflamed by components that branch off from it. The Navigation Acts, which were passed by Parliament to restrict the American colonies' trade<sup>1</sup> to England's benefit, caused a 75 percent decline in the price of tobacco<sup>2</sup>. This decline in tobacco – which was the lifeblood of Virginian agriculture<sup>3</sup> – hit the Virginian economy and tobacco growers hard. Governor William Berkeley lamented in 1663 that tobacco growers earned “soe very little for their labores as it will not cloath them and their Families... the poor people... [have become] very uneasy.”<sup>4</sup> It was this uneasiness, combined with other ill economical effects of Virginia's closed export markets like rapidly depreciating paper money<sup>5</sup>, that spurred conflict between creditors and debtors, led to riots and rent strikes, and rancor between the poor and British merchant class. When the value of money sharply declined as a result of England's trade restrictions, society – which was based around payment and debt – largely collapsed, spiking the Virginian gentry's concerns; thus riots and the corresponding conflict to suppress them were

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<sup>1</sup> Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Holton, *Forced Founders*, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Reagan, Michael. “Slavery: Race and Unfree Labor.” TS History: American History to 1877. Class lecture at Online UW, Seattle, Washington, October 15, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Holton, *Forced Founders*, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Holton, *Forced Founders*, 31.

wholly symptoms of trade. The Virginian elite also strongly feared a slave insurrection, so they stopped buying foreign slaves, deemed to be the most dangerous<sup>6</sup>, and attempted to pass higher duties on imported slaves, which were vetoed by the British Privy Council<sup>7</sup>. This forceful importation of foreign slaves, Holton argues, was one of the primary reasons for Independence, citing George Mason: “[keeping the slave trade open was] one of the greatest causes of our separation from Great Britain.”<sup>8</sup> One would imagine that the gentry would have stopped buying imported slaves altogether; however, a key cog in Holton’s argument is that poorer smallholders who could not obtain new slaves through breeding were anxious to buy “saltwater slaves”, yet he offers little explanation for why poorer smallholders were willing to trade with British slave merchants beyond a surface-level justification that everyone wanted slaves. This is complicated by three pieces of information: a plantation with only foreign slaves would be even more dangerous than buying a few imported slaves (the dangers of newly imported slaves demonstrated by the Stono River Rebellion<sup>9</sup>); even without duties, the prices offered by slave merchants were exorbitantly high<sup>10</sup>; and, as Holton dedicates an entire section to, the relationship between smallholders and merchants was incredibly hostile. An answer emerges when this factor is considered not in isolation but in relation to trade; closed export markets meant that general produce had no markets<sup>11</sup>, and thus tobacco growing, which England heavily relied upon and hence kept open but heavily restricted<sup>12</sup>, became favorable. As tobacco is inherently a labor-

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<sup>6</sup> Reagan, Michael. “Empire & Revolution: Society and Politics in Colonial America.” TS History: American History to 1877. Class lecture at Online UW, Seattle, Washington, October 22, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Holton, *Forced Founders*, 23.

<sup>8</sup> Holton, *Forced Founders*, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Reagan, Michael. “Empire & Revolution: Society and Politics in Colonial America.” TS History: American History to 1877. Class lecture at Online UW, Seattle, Washington, October 22, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Holton, *Forced Founders*, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Holton, *Forced Founders*, 32.

<sup>12</sup> Holton, *Forced Founders*, 14.

intensive plant<sup>13</sup> whose demand for returns was multiplied by profit losses from British regulation, desperate smallholders suffering under a miserable economy could only turn a blind eye and purchase foreign slaves to survive, lest their property be seized, their bodies imprisoned, and their lives ruined, as was common punishment for debtors<sup>14</sup>. By framing conflicts through the lens of trade, blurry and unexplained motivations are clarified and the interconnected dynamics of hostilities become more organized.

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<sup>13</sup> Reagan, Michael. "Slavery: Race and Unfree Labor." TS History: American History to 1877. Class lecture at Online UW, Seattle, Washington, October 15, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Reagan, Michael. "Empire & Revolution: Society and Politics in Colonial America." TS History: American History to 1877. Class lecture at Online UW, Seattle, Washington, October 22, 2020.