

Meghan T. Matthews
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Teaching American History
Final Project

Patriots: The Men Who Started the American Revolution is an in depth look at the period in American history between 1761 and 1783, with a focus on the personalities, choices, thoughts, and especially actions of the men who agitated for, started, fought in, and won the American Revolution. A. J. Langguth's book is divided into thirty-two chapters, each of which focuses on one of the men, Otis, Adams, Henry, Arnold, Washington, Lee, Jefferson, and Gates or the many events such as Riots, Occupation, Bunker Hill, Valley Forge, and Victory. At first glance, this might seem like a disjointed way of telling the story of American Independence; however Langguth is able to weave a seamless story and include many interesting insights to the familiar story.

Langguth provides a human portrait of the founding fathers. Most of his information about the private thoughts was through his extensive use of the diaries, letters, and personal papers of the founding fathers. He also used diaries of the enlisted soldiers, correspondence between King George III and his ministers, diplomatic records of our allies, and the writings of women and other observers. His sources were almost exclusively primary sources. The sources were from a variety of people for each chapter, allowing him to provide a complete picture.

Americans have been taught that the Revolution was fought because Americans did not have representation and Parliament continued to tax the

colonies. We recall the easy to remember rallying cry “no taxation without representation”. Langguth adds to the story with additional facts regarding this issue. The agitators in the American colonies did not want representation in Parliament. According to Langguth, if Americans elected members of Parliament, the town meetings would lose their power and influence. Any instructions from America would come far too late to be acted upon due to eighteenth century communication difficulties, and, most importantly, American members of Parliament would constantly be outvoted by other members.¹ The mostly New England agitators for rebellion were savvy propagandists who used the old English custom of representation in Parliament only to rally more supporters to their side. They were not trying to convince Parliament to allow Americans to elect representatives.

Another interesting insight from *Patriots* was about George Washington’s leadership. We are taught that he was a great general from the French and Indian War. From our simplified textbook narrative, he was chosen unanimously to lead the Colonial Army, nobody questioned him, everyone loved him, and then he became president. The truth, according to Langguth, is not surprisingly, more complicated. Washington was a compromise choice for the commander in chief of the Colonial Army. Other men were contenders for the job. John Hancock, for one, but the Continental Congress was reluctant to make the entire war effort from New England. However, with an army almost entirely from New England, there was serious and legitimate concern that a Virginian could lead the troops. Throughout the war, much of it difficult times for the Continental Army, George

¹ Langguth, A. J. page 50

Washington faced critics. From 1777 through much of 1780 Washington lost support of much of Congress,² faced many deserters, insubordination, and defeat. At Valley Forge George Washington was seen as a sometimes cruel disciplinarian. A large percentage of Washington's lack of support was because of sectionalism. New Englanders had a difficult time getting behind a general from Virginia. Of course, after the battle of Yorktown and the victory, Washington is seen as America's general.

Langguth also discusses historical details that became important aspects of our government and our history after the Revolution. Throughout the book, much of his focus is on sectionalism. The Congress had a difficult time overlooking their sectional differences and working together. There were efforts by the leaders of the Revolution to make it look less like an effort by only New England. There were also efforts by the British to split up the American colonies, cutting off the trouble making New England colonies from the more loyal middle and southern colonies. Langguth also mentions that a strong central government was not a new idea at the Constitutional Convention years later, that Alexander Hamilton, George Washington, and others saw the benefits of a strong central government during the Revolution.³ Washington, in April 1783 wrote his last circular letter to all the states naming the four provisions necessary to preserve their victory. The first of them, "an indissoluble union of states under one federal head."⁴ It is not surprising that years later, when the Articles of

² Langguth, page 464

³ Langguth, page 558

⁴ Langguth page 560

Confederation fell apart, Hamilton led the movement for a stronger central government.

I really enjoyed this book. It was entertaining, informative, and easy to read. The book, although it was long, was broken up into many chapters that were of manageable length and centered on one person or one event. Langguth did not simply tell the same old story that everyone has been taught. He provided a more human portrait of the men. Instead of the flat, flawless picture we get from history textbooks, Langguth allows the reader to get to know the men through their diaries, personal letters, and words others wrote about them. It is clear from his writing that the men who started the American Revolution believed in their cause, but they were not sure of anything they were doing. They feared failure every day, knowing that failure would mean execution or imprisonment.

Langguth's book is well written, interesting, and reader friendly while at the same time full of valuable information and insights. Unfortunately, it is far too long to assign to my tenth grade students to read the entire book. I, of course, will use the information that I have gained from reading it as I teach about the men, women, and events of the American Revolution. Langguth includes interesting stories that even standard level tenth graders would enjoy. For example, the story of James Otis's insanity and his propensity for getting into fights all over Boston. Also, the details regarding the insanity of Patrick Henry's wife will no doubt attract the attention of high school students. The other details about lives of men at camp, thoughts all the Founding Fathers had about failure

and their executions, use of propaganda to gain supporters, and battle tactics will all make its way into my lectures and classroom discussions.

This book is so well written and reader friendly, that I plan on assigning parts of it to students. The chapter about the Boston Massacre is short and entertaining enough that standard students will not be too intimidated by it. I would consider choosing a few chapters, assigning them to groups of students, finally allowing the groups to share what they learned with the class. I would use a few action filled chapters dealing with the coming of Revolution such as Riots, Occupation, Massacre, and Tea or I would consider using chapters about the war itself such as Bunker Hill, Trenton, Princeton, Saratoga, Valley Forge and Yorktown. This activity would allow the students to practice their reading, note taking, and public speaking skills. It would also give them the chance to learn from this book with out the task of reading the whole book, which for some students in an impossible assignment.