

HIST 5453 – New American Republic

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Liberty Poles and the Fight for Popular Politics in the Early Republic

Response Paper

Shira Lurie discusses in detail in her paper "Liberty Poles and the Fight for Popular Politics in the Early Republic " what the liberty poles mean to different political parties. When a reader asks the question "What did liberty poles mean to Republicans?" it was pretty clear when reading the first half of the article that the reader can find the answer. On page 674, she discusses the fears of the Republicans with all of the new taxes that the Federalists were implementing. The major fear was that these implementations of taxes would turn the government back into a monarchy since taxation is what spurred the eight-year Revolutionary War. Because of their experience with the British Monarchy's abuse of power, the Republics grew accustomed to speaking out to what they believe is not the right action of the government. Therefore, they decided to raise Liberty Poles in their yards as a protest. To the Republicans, the Liberty Poles embodied the reminder of freedom and what the Revolutionary War was fought over. After reading her thoughts, I see the liberty pole as an important statement for Republicans showing unity under the action of raising the pole. The liberty pole was a symbol of taking a stance on policies that Republicans disagreed on with the Federalists.

A reader can look for answers to the opposite question: “What did liberty poles mean to Federalist?” Lurie discusses the Federalists’ point of view in the first half of the reading as well. She states on page 674 the federalists’ position of the liberty poles. They feared that the protest of the different taxes that were being implemented would cause an increase of opposition in the Liberty Pole movement. The Federalists were hoping to move on from discord and unite as one nation after the Revolutionary war. They viewed the Liberty Poles as an old-fashioned protest. In the mind of the Federalist party, this type of behavior was too similar to the type of protests that were practiced prior to and during the Revolutionary War. Federalists were fearful that these actions may lead to another conflict or incite a riot or power movement in the new and already fragile government. Therefore, they would fight back by tearing down the Republicans’ Liberty Poles. The Federalists wanted to show the power of the government. This government will not be undermined. They were trying to find the balance between control as a new government and not falling into the ways of the monarchy.

The Reading PA incident is significant because this shows that contention between political views have been potentially volatile since the beginning of the newly formed United States. This shows that protests and riots are etched in the DNA of what made The United States of America. Even though this event may just be a minor blip on the history of the United States, it is important to understand the governmental struggles of the time. These small blips in history shape the country to what it is today. I have not heard of liberty poles prior to reading this article. The article illuminates a side of early American Republic history that shows this type of tension is what the backbone of America emerged from. Lurie also shows a side of consequences of the American Revolutionary War that is not discussed. Unity is something that one may think of when we discuss the American Revolutionary War, but unity was far from forming. The fear of

the outcome of what the new American government would turn into and in full fledged appearance is fully real. This can be witnessed by such events that occurred in Reading, PA by the political act of raising the liberty poles and the reaction of the other political side of tearing them down.

I agree with Lurie's arguments regarding the political analysis and ramifications that liberty poles had on politics and the political future of the United States of America. Everything she stated in her last section on pages 696 through 697 is what I picked up on. Lurie ended her paper well with this statement from page 697: "Republicans feared the federal government's threat to individual liberty and so practiced a popular politics of dissent focused on regulation and opposition to unjust laws. The Federalists worried that Republican challenges to law and order would undermine representative government. To combat this threat, they enacted a popular politics of assent that confronted dissenters and enforced majority rule. These anxieties induced both parties to imbue liberty poles with powerful significance. To each side, either the erection or destruction of the poles confirmed the danger that their opponents posed to the survival of the republic. Both Republicans and Federalists believed that the liberty poles were worth fighting over."