

# The Right's Re-Branding, 1860 to 1776

**Exclusive:** A new poll says 44 percent of Republicans believe “an armed revolution” may be needed in the next few years “to protect liberties,” proof of the Right’s success in re-branding itself with Revolutionary War symbols and fueling paranoia about the elected national government, Robert Parry reports.

By Robert Parry

The Republican Party has talked a lot about the need to re-brand, but the Right has pulled off a very successful re-branding of its own by shifting its imagery from the Confederacy to the American Revolution while maintaining the same states’ rights message and stamping its anti-government ideology falsely on the Framers of the Constitution.

The Right’s re-branding can be seen visually in the downplaying of the Confederacy’s battle flag, the “Stars and Bars,” and highlighting instead the yellow “Don’t Tread on Me” flag of the Revolution. This change, in effect, recognizes that many Americans now find images from the slave-owning South and the Ku Klux Klan as racist and unpalatable.

So, the Right has insinuated itself into the more admired symbolism from the War of Independence, meaning that instead of pulling on a “Stars and Bars” t-shirt or dressing up in Confederate gray, today’s right-winger is more likely to wear a tri-corner hat or a Revolutionary War costume. The naming of the modern right-wing movement after the Boston Tea Party of 1773 is another obvious sign of this re-branding process.

This Revolution War symbolism has accompanied revolutionary-style rhetoric from the likes of Glenn Beck and other right-wing demagogues who agitate their followers into a violent state of mind. [A May 1 poll](#) by Farleigh Dickinson University found that 44 percent of Republicans and 29 percent of all Americans “think that an armed revolution in order to protect liberties might be necessary in the next few years.”

Strident [Second Amendment claims](#) are another indication of how the Right has co-opted the Founding era to convince millions of Americans that the elected federal government and especially Barack Obama, the first African-American president must be resisted with violence. This paranoia has fed into the stockpiling of weapons, apparently for use killing police, soldiers and other government representatives once the revolution begins.

However, the Right's claim to be the heirs to the Framers of the Constitution has required a brazen theft of American history, particularly the ideological kidnapping of James Madison, the Constitution's principal architect. In today's right-wing fantasies, Madison has been reinvented as a states-rights ideologue who always wanted a weak federal government.

The fact that the real James Madison along with his ally George Washington took nearly the opposite position, disdaining states' rights and favoring a powerful central government has disappeared into a fog of right-wing mythology.

This historical hijacking has been carried out with surprisingly little resistance from mainstream commentators who either don't know the history or don't think the fight is worth having. Yet, ceding the historical narrative to the Right has meant that many Americans now think they are following the guideposts that the Framers left behind when they are actually being led in the opposite direction.

### **A Unified Nation**

Madison and Washington wanted a unified nation that addressed the country's practical needs and overcame the rivalries among the states. "Thirteen sovereignties," Washington wrote, "pulling against each other, and all tugging at the federal head, will soon bring ruin to the whole."

Prior to the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Madison told Washington that the states had to be made "subordinately useful."

However, what modern right-wing propaganda has done is essentially replace the Constitution with what it replaced, the Articles of Confederation, which governed the young nation from 1777 to 1787 and indeed had made the states "sovereign" and "independent" and relegated the central government to a "league of friendship."

Madison and Washington were among the pragmatic nationalists who recognized that the Articles were a disaster threatening the fragile independence and unity of the country.

For instance, both Madison and Washington believed the central government needed the power to regulate national commerce, a reform that Madison tried to get added as an amendment to the Articles of Confederation. Washington, who as commander in chief of the Continental Army had chafed under the states' failures to provide promised arms and money for his soldiers, strongly supported Madison's idea.

Washington called Madison's commerce amendment "so self evident that I confess I

am at a loss to discover wherein lies the weight of the objection to the measure. We are either a united people, or we are not. If the former, let us, in all matters of a general concern act as a nation, which have national objects to promote, and a national character to support. If we are not, let us no longer act a farce by pretending it to be.”

After Madison’s commerce amendment died in the Virginia legislature and as Shays’ Rebellion shook western Massachusetts in 1786 while the central government was powerless to intervene Madison and Washington turned to the more radical concept of a Constitutional Convention. Here is how historians Andrew Burstein and Nancy Isenberg describe Madison’s thinking in their 2010 book, *Madison and Jefferson*:

“Building a case against the Articles of Confederation, [Madison] needed to explain why the United States was so ill equipped to accomplish the basic tasks of raising money, making treaties, and regulating commerce. By April 1787 he had a diagnosis in hand. He called it ‘Vices of the Political System of the United States,’ and it became his working manifesto, a summary view at the end of his first decade as a state and national politician.

“Chief among the vices Madison identified was the undue power lodged in the individual states. Having held a seat in Congress longer than anyone else (four years), he had come to feel that the Confederation was barely a government at all. Like most confederations, the U.S. system was a voluntary compact, a weak ‘league of friendship’ among the states, and subject to internal dissensions. It lacked executive and judicial components; it rarely if ever represented the collective will of the people.

“Madison saw little to be gained in rescuing the Confederation. It was a dysfunctional system, its flaws too ingrained for it to be made energetic or even stable. Moreover, the aggrandizing state legislatures of the 1780s resembled nothing so much as a group of rambunctious children refusing to play together fairly. Damning the states unmercifully, Madison found his solution in a centralizing government.

“Madison explained his thinking to George Washington shortly before the Constitutional Convention was set to open. There was only one way to save the nation, he said. The states had to be made ‘subordinately useful.’”

### **Subordinating the States**

The phrase “subordinately useful” is evocative of Madison’s intent in the Constitution, a document that essentially shifted national sovereignty away from the individual 13 states to “We the People of the United States,” i.e. to the

federal Republic.

In Madison's original draft of the Constitution, the federal Congress would even be given veto power over state legislation, a provision that eventually was dropped. However, the Constitution and federal law were still made the supreme laws of the land, and federal courts had the power to strike down state laws deemed unconstitutional.

Though not giving the federal government all the powers that Madison had wanted, the Constitution still represented a major shift of authority from the states to the central government. Indeed, in crafting the Constitution, the Framers engineered the single largest shift of power from the states to the federal government in U.S. history.

And, that transformation was not lost on the Anti-Federalists who struggled desperately to block ratification in 1788. It was during that nip-and-tuck battle that Madison in the Federalist Papers and as a delegate to Virginia's ratifying convention sought to play down how sweeping the expanded federal powers were.

Those minimizing words are the ones cherry-picked by right-wing "scholars" who have sought to reinvent Madison as a big enthusiast for states' rights. To make the case, today's Right is fond of citing Federalist Paper No. 45, entitled "The Alleged Danger From the Powers of the Union to the State Governments Considered."

Madison wrote: "If the new Constitution be examined with accuracy, it will be found that the change which it proposes consists much less in the addition of NEW POWERS to the Union, than in the invigoration of its ORIGINAL POWERS.

"The regulation of commerce, it is true, is a new power; but that seems to be an addition which few oppose, and from which no apprehensions are entertained. The powers relating to war and peace, armies and fleets, treaties and finance, with the other more considerable powers, are all vested in the existing Congress by the Articles of Confederation. The proposed change does not enlarge these powers; it only substitutes a more effectual mode of administering them."

Today's Right also trumpets Madison's summation, that "the powers delegated by the proposed Constitution to the federal government are few and defined. Those which are to remain in the State governments are numerous and indefinite."

What the Right ignores, however, is the context of Madison's comments as he sought to tamp down the fiery Anti-Federalist opposition to the Constitution. A skilled politician, he was finessing his opponent.

After all, if Madison really thought the Articles only needed a few tweaks, why would he have insisted on throwing them out altogether? Plus, replacing toothless powers with ones with real teeth or substituting “a more effectual mode of administering” those powers is not some inconsequential change.

Under the Constitution, for instance, printing money became the exclusive purview of the federal government, not a minor change. And, stripping the states of their “sovereignty” and “independence” meant they would not be free to secede from the Union, a very important change that the South would challenge in the Civil War.

### **Madison, the Builder**

To cite Madison as an opponent of an activist federal government, the Right also must ignore Federalist Paper No. 14 in which Madison envisioned major construction projects under the powers granted by the Commerce Clause.

“[T]he union will be daily facilitated by new improvements,” Madison wrote. “Roads will everywhere be shortened, and kept in better order; accommodations for travelers will be multiplied and meliorated; an interior navigation on our eastern side will be opened throughout, or nearly throughout the whole extent of the Thirteen States.

“The communication between the western and Atlantic districts, and between different parts of each, will be rendered more and more easy by those numerous canals with which the beneficence of nature has intersected our country, and which art finds it so little difficult to connect and complete.”

What Madison is demonstrating in that essay is a key fact about the Founders that, by and large, they were practical men seeking to build a strong and unified nation. They were looking for peaceful means to work out political and regional differences, while avoiding the sort of violent uprisings represented by Shays’ Rebellion. They also viewed the Constitution as a flexible document designed to meet America’s ever-changing needs, not simply the challenges of the late Eighteenth Century.

Today’s Tea Party in claiming Madison and other Framers as fellow-travelers disdaining a strong central government and favoring states’ rights makes much of the Tenth Amendment, which asserts that “the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.”

But the Right’s historical revisionists again miss the key point here. The Constitution already had granted broad powers to the federal government so the states were left largely with powers over local matters.

To further appreciate how modest the Tenth Amendment concession was, you must compare its wording with Article II of the Confederation, which is what it replaced. Article II stated that “each state retains its sovereignty, freedom, and independence, and every power, jurisdiction, and right, which is not by this Confederation expressly delegated.”

In other words, the power relationship was flipped. Instead of the states being firmly in control, the new central government would now set the supreme laws of the land with state “sovereignty” largely confined to local matters. Arguably, the most important American leader effecting this monumental change was James Madison.

### **A Battle Rejoined**

In later years, Madison like other Framers of the Constitution switched sides in various debates over the practical limits of federal power. For instance, Madison joined with Thomas Jefferson in opposing Alexander Hamilton’s national bank, but then as Jefferson’s secretary of state, Madison applied an expansive view of national authority in negotiating the Louisiana Purchase from France. Madison also shifted regarding the value of the national bank after his frustrating experiences as president during the War of 1812.

The struggles between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists also didn’t end with those early disputes over how the new government should function. The battle lines formed again when it became clear to the agrarian South that its economic model, based on slavery, was losing ground to the industrial power of the North and the influence of the Emancipation movement.

In the early 1830s, Southern politicians led the “nullification” challenge to the federal government, asserting that states had the right to nullify federal laws, such as a tariff on manufactured goods. But they were beaten back by President Andrew Jackson who threatened to deploy troops to South Carolina to enforce the federal supremacy established by the Constitution.

In December 1832, Jackson denounced the “nullifiers” and declared “the power to annul a law of the United States, assumed by one State, incompatible with the existence of the Union, contradicted expressly by the letter of the Constitution, unauthorized by its spirit, inconsistent with every principle on which it was founded, and destructive of the great object for which it was formed.”

Jackson also rejected as “treason” the notion that states could secede if they wished, noting that the Constitution “forms a *government* not a league,” a reference to a line in the Articles of Confederation that had termed the

fledgling United States a "league of friendship" among the states, not a national government.

Jackson's nullification crisis was resolved nonviolently, but a few decades later, the South's continued resistance to the constitutional preeminence of the federal government led to secession and the formation of the Confederacy. It took the Union's victory in the Civil War to firmly settle the issue of the sovereignty of the national Republic over the independence of the states.

However, the defeated South still balked at the principle of equal rights for blacks and invoked "states' rights" to defend segregation during the Jim Crow era. White Southerners amassed enough political clout, especially within the Democratic Party, to fend off civil rights for blacks.

The battle over states' rights was joined again in the 1950s when the federal government finally committed itself to enforcing the principle of "equal protection under the law" as prescribed by the Fourteenth Amendment. Many white Southerners were furious that their system of segregation was being dismantled by federal authority.

Southern rightists and libertarians insisted that federal laws prohibiting denial of voting rights for blacks and outlawing segregation in public accommodations were unconstitutional, citing the Tenth Amendment. But federal courts ruled that Congress was within its rights in banning such discrimination within the states.

### **Racist Symbols**

The anger of Southern whites was reflected in the prevalence of the Confederate battle flag on pickup trucks and in store windows. Gradually, however, the American Right retreated from outright support of racial segregation and muffled the rhetorical threats of secession. The growing public revulsion over the "Stars and Bars" as a symbol of racism also forced the Right to make a stylistic adjustment as well.

The Right stopped deriving its key imagery from the embittered unreconstructed South and turned to the far more palatable era of Lexington and Concord. Instead of highlighting slogans like "the South will rise again," the Right glommed onto Revolutionary War messages like "Don't Tread on Me," with the elected American government placed in the role of a tyrannical British monarch.

Though the Right's imagery changed, the message remained the same. From the Anti-Federalist days of 1788 through the Civil War and the segregationist South to hatred of the first African-American president, there was a determination to prevent the federal Republic from acting against injustices existing inside

individual states.

Only occasionally is there a flashback to the Right's pro-slavery and pro-segregationist traditions, such as when the National Rifle Association's new president, Jim Porter, a 64-year-old Alabama attorney, is recorded in a [2012 speech](#) referring to the Civil War as "the War of Northern Aggression" and calling President Obama a "fake."

Today's violent right-wing rhetoric is also reminiscent of the pre-Civil War days when demagogues riled up Southern whites to defend their "liberty" to own blacks or of the Jim Crow era when white racists swelled the ranks of the Ku Klux Klan to terrorize blacks in defense of Southern "heritage."

The major difference now is that instead of waving the "Stars and Bars" or burning crosses on lawns, today's Right harkens back to the Minutemen fighting the British Crown. The Right also embraces the Framers of the Constitution as ideological brethren. All that's required is fictionalizing the Founding era's real history.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).**

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## A Lebanon Echo in Syrian War

Three decades ago, the Reagan administration followed Israel into the middle of the Lebanon civil war with disastrous results, including the deaths of 241 U.S. servicemen and a U.S. withdrawal. Now, the Obama administration faces a similar choice regarding the Syrian civil war, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar writes.

By Paul R. Pillar

Expressions of angst over Syria have entailed several themes, one of which concerns possible "spread" of the Syrian civil war into nearby states. Lebanon, for reasons of physical and ethnic geography, is most often mentioned as a locale of such spreading.

But at least as useful as speculation about what the Syrian civil war may do to Lebanon is to reflect on how current events in Syria are echoing an earlier civil war in Lebanon. We have been through much of this before, 30 years ago,

when Ronald Reagan was president.

By the early 1980s Lebanon had been suffering several years of combat among sectarian militias, reflecting disagreement over the fairness of old power-sharing agreements among the confessional communities. The biggest stirring of this already turbulent pot came in 1982 when Israel invaded Lebanon.

The principal Israeli targets, declared targets, at least, were fighters of the Palestinian Liberation Organization who had been in Lebanon ever since being kicked out of Jordan a decade earlier, after losing the Black September confrontation with King Hussein. A small multinational force of U.S., French and Italian troops entered Lebanon in August 1982 and supervised the extraction of the PLO to Tunisia before itself withdrawing to ships in the Mediterranean.

Israeli objectives were not limited just to booting the PLO out of Lebanon, however, and Israeli forces remained enmeshed in the sectarian fighting, besieging Beirut. Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin had ideas about trying to maintain a client to the north in the form of the pro-Israeli Christian government of Bachir Gemayel, who became president about when the PLO was leaving.

Three weeks later Gemayel was assassinated, triggering the most horrid blood-letting of the Lebanese war. At least several hundred, and by some outside estimates perhaps something closer to 2,000, Palestinian civilians were slaughtered in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

The massacre was carried out by the Christian Phalangist militia, which was allied to and supplied by the Israelis. Israeli forces facilitated the massacre by maintaining a cordon around the area of the camps, and fired illuminating flares that enabled the Phalangists to continue their work by night.

The massacre stimulated the Reagan administration to organize a new multinational force that eventually included 1,800 U.S. marines as well as French and Italian troops. The force initially had some success in acting as a buffer between contending elements. But the intervention later became a textbook example of the near-inevitability of getting drawn into ever costlier commitments and endeavors in any situation as messy as Lebanon at that time.

U.S. military engagement included not only the marines on the ground but also combat between carrier-based U.S. aircraft and Syrian forces (which had originally entered Lebanon as part of an Arab League peacekeeping force). At one point even the 16-inch guns of the battleship *New Jersey* were brought into action.

Those striking back at the increasingly resented foreign forces used methods

against which jet fighters and battleships are of little use. In April 1983 a truck bomb was detonated at the U.S. embassy in Beirut, killing 63 persons.

Six months later, another truck bomb was used against barracks housing U.S. troops (along with an identical and simultaneous attack against French troops). A total of 241 U.S. servicemen were killed in that bombing, the deadliest terrorist attack against U.S. citizens until 9/11. [Editor's Note: Some historians dispute the characterization of the Beirut bombing as "terrorist" since the targets were soldiers, not civilians, and because the United States already had intervened militarily in Lebanon's civil war.]

Congressional pressure on the administration to withdraw from Lebanon increased. The last U.S. forces left in February 1984. The Lebanese civil war continued for several more years until sheer exhaustion, and a new political accord brokered by Saudi Arabia and Syria, brought it to an unsatisfying end.

Some parallels between that experience and the current situation regarding Syria are obvious. There is the overall complexity of the conflict and the presence of bad guys all around. There also is Israel taking advantage of a neighboring state's civil war to pursue its own objectives, whether those are to smash a Palestinian force or to intercept long-established Hezbollah supply lines, regardless of how much its actions stoke and escalate the war.

And if much of the discourse in Washington about Syria since the (presumed) Israeli attacks there over the past few days are any indication, there again is the pattern of Israeli actions increasing the chance of the United States getting sucked into the mess.

Let us hope that those eager to get into the mess will reflect more than the statesmen of 1982 did about how this all will end. Moreover, those who talk about damage to U.S. prestige or credibility also ought to think about that aspect of the experience in Lebanon. Withdrawing the U.S. troops in 1984, although it was the least bad thing the Reagan administration could have done at the time, was a U.S. defeat by Hezbollah.

There is no way to sugar-coat that conclusion. It was just the sort of caving in to bad guys that we so often hear that we need to avoid. And it could have been avoided in Lebanon if the United States had not gotten involved in the mess in the first place, or at least if Israel had not, in pursuing absolute security for itself regardless of the insecurity it causes for everyone else, made the mess worse.

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University for security studies. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)

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