

Bicentennial Blues

By JAMES J. KILPATRICK

WASHINGTON — If you want something else to brood about these days, you might brood a while on this: If you had been born, say, in 1724, and had been 52 at the time of the Declaration of Independence, would you have joined the American Revolution?

In my own case, candor compels a sad acknowledgement: No, at 52, I probably would have sat the war out with the Tories. I suppose I would have been so imbued with loyalty, law, and order, that I would have suffered the abuses of the Crown rather than take arms against them. At 52, I might have viewed old Benjamin Franklin as a kind of Benjamin Spock; and I might have regarded 40-year-old Patrick Henry as today's Virginia Tories regard their radical - lib Lieutenant Governor, Henry Howell. It is raining tonight, and my back aches.

But suppose, just to be supposing, that you had been born like Alexander Hamilton in 1757, or like John Marshall in 1755, and you had come to the Revolution at 19 or at 21? It probably would have been a different thing. The boldness and the audacity of the Revolution would have warmed the blood, and the visions of Tom Jefferson would have fired the mind. The "long train of abuses" would have seemed intolerable then.

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THESE rainy - day musings lead to the observation that today's young radicals quite probably are right, in their bitter accusation that the nation's official celebration of the approaching bicentennial has been taken over by the Tories. The American Revolutionary Bicentennial Commission (ARBC) belatedly added a few young faces to its governing board some months ago, but this was mostly window dressing. Sad to say, we are missing the bicentennial boat.

Therefore, while it may seem sorely out of character, let me put in a small plug for the Peoples Bicentennial Commission, headed by Jeremy Rifkin, at 1346 Connecticut Avenue here in Washington. This is an aggregation of contemporary revolutionaries — populists, socialists, New Leftists, hippies, yuppies, braless girls and bearded men — but to judge from the literature they are sending out, they are a lot closer to the true Spirit of '76 than the promoter, politicians, and P. R. men in charge of the ARBC.

The ARBC — the official commission — still is floundering badly. Lyndon Johnson put some good people on the first commission, notably Carl Humelsine of Colonial Williamsburg, but Nixon lopped them off in favor of political appointees. A period of chaotic mismanagement followed. Executives came and went. Three years before the great day itself, the ARBC today has yet to get a handle on the meaning and the opportunity of a bicentennial observance.

If the observance is to rekindle old principles, as even the Peoples Bicentennial Commission understands, there must be some elements of show biz. The PBC already has a professional theatre company on the road. But of greater importance are the efforts that must be made to achieve a new comprehension of what the Revolution was all about, and to apply this comprehension to problems of our own time.

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THE REVOLUTION was mostly about power: Where power lies, how it is exercised, how it is abused, how it must be restrained. But the Revolution also embraced radical ideas of the rights of man and the duties of government. These great torches ought to be raised again. We must see how far we have wandered from the old paths.

This is not meant to endorse everything the PBC is putting out. Some of their stuff makes sense, as when they inveigh against the excessive power of the great corporations, but much of their material is sophomoric twaddle. Rifkin falls into gross error when he speaks of an American ideal of "Life, Liberty and Happiness." It was the pursuit of happiness that Jefferson placed among the rights of man. Their notions of an educational system in which teachers and pupils are equals are patently childish.

Even so, the PBC's publications breathe with fire and purpose and sincerity. They are contemptuous of T-shirts, tie pins, and superficial pageants. They are concerned, metaphorically if not literally, with a new American revolution. Most of their ideas strike me as half-baker, misguided, and irresponsible, but at least they have a sense of purpose. That's more than can be said for the Tories now officially in charge of producing the Grand and Glorious Fizzle of 1976.