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THE COLONIES' 1775 INVASION OF CANADA: A CAUTIONARY TALE

AN INTERVIEW
WITH HISTORIAN
RICK ATKINSON

By Anthony F. Hall

Among the pieces of artillery collected by Henry Knox at Fort Ticonderoga for delivery to George Washington in Boston were some originally intended to support the invasion of Canada – a 1775 event few Americans acknowledge, let alone commemorate.

Was the invasion of Canada imperial over-reach by the Continental Congress, an unprovoked act of aggression, a strategic maneuver to seize control of the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes? Or was it a pre-emptive, defensive measure, intended to spare the thirteen colonies a British invasion from the north?

"Those are good questions, which, 250 years later, deserve our reflection," says Rick Atkinson, the Pulitzer Prize winning historian of the American Revolution who will be interviewed on stage for public television at the Lake George Jr-Sr High School auditorium at 7 pm on December 12.

"How a war ostensibly fought for basic rights and political freedom could devolve into an act of naked aggression, into a battle for a 14th colony, which could not be taken by blandishment or negotiation, speaks to today's events," Atkinson said in a December 3 interview with the Lake George Mirror. "People who think that Canada ought to be the 51st state should take a look at what happened in 1775. It did not go well."

According to Atkinson, a featured contributor to Ken Burns' current documentary, "The American Revolution," our invasion of Canada, a detachment of which left from Fort Ticonderoga, was "to a large extent, a catastrophic debacle."

It is "a strange story," concedes Eliot A. Cohen, a military historian and former Fort Ticonderoga trustee whom Atkinson cites in "The British Are Coming," the first volume in his trilogy about the Revolution.

In May, 1775, Congress dispatched a letter addressed to Canadians, published widely and translated into French, claiming, possibly disingenuously, that "the taking (of) the fort and military stores at Ticonderoga and Crown Point, and the armed vessels on Lake Champlain" were entirely defensive and not, as many Canadians suspected, the spear tip of a planned invasion.

The letter also enjoined the Canadians to unite with their fellow North Americans in “resolving to be free, and in rejecting, with disdain, the fetters of slavery.”

Perhaps the invasion was undertaken on behalf of a doctrine, albeit an armed one, advancing democracy and individual rights – an early example of American exceptionalism.

“Of course, in retrospect, it’s easy to see the inconsistency between our assertion of our right to self-governance and our wish to impose our political will upon

a neighboring country, in this case, Canada,” Atkinson told us. “It foreshadowed a belligerence and a tendency to trample upon the rights of self-determination of others, including those of the Native American tribes.”

But no matter the reason it was launched, the campaign ended ignominiously in the spring of

1776, following an unsuccessful siege of Quebec City and the death of its military commander, General Richard Montgomery, in December, 1775.

After the retreat from Canada, the Continental Congress did not engage in much self-reflection about the causes of its army’s defeat – as little as it gave to the

causes of the invasion, or to its motives for launching it.

“So ended a botched campaign of liberation and aggrandizement, laden with miscalculation and marred by mishap,” Atkinson writes in “The British Are Coming.”

Even if the Americans had

succeeded in taking Quebec, the victory would have been a short-lived one, Atkinson said.

"The British would have counter-attacked in force. It was never in the cards for this to succeed," said Atkinson.

Nevertheless, the "dream of incorporating Canada into the United States persisted throughout the Revolution. Lafayette himself would have liked to lead an army into Canada. It took a while for this dream of the 14th state to subside," Atkinson said.

As Atkinson said in our interview, "The dream of being the continental power was firmly planted in the mind of the founding generation."

The use of the word "continental" when naming the congress and the army was no accident. It was a reflection of the founders' ambitions.

Although the invasion of Canada "was a footnote to the history of the American Revolution, and even smaller footnote to the history of the republic, its lessons are germane today. It's a cautionary tale," said Atkinson.