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Friday, May 14, 2010

Behind every successful rebel ...

Veteran political analyst Cokie Roberts reflects on the role of women in the American Revolution in time for the MecDec observation

Charlotte Business Journal - by [Erik Spanberg](#) Senior staff writer

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Captain James Jack is on his way — and he'll be greeted by Cokie Roberts.

Roberts, a national political correspondent for ABC News and National Public Radio, comes to Charlotte next week as part of the city's annual MecDec celebration. The day marks the region's role in the rebellion that led to the Revolutionary War. Captain Jack was entrusted with carrying to Colonial leaders the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, a document signed in 1775 by militia leaders eager to break with the British.

The May 20th Society formed in 2004 to revive the history of the oft-disputed declaration. Organizers will unveil next week a statue of Jack created by local sculptor Chas Fagan. Roberts will deliver remarks at the ceremony beginning at 11:30 a.m. on May 20 (for details, go to www.may20thsociety.org).

Roberts, who has written on the role of women in the Revolutionary War, recently discussed political matters past and present with the *Charlotte Business Journal*. Following are edited excerpts:

How familiar were you with MecDec when you were invited to speak?

(While I didn't know all the details of Captain James Jack), I certainly knew a good bit of North Carolina revolutionary history because I've written about it. The Edenton Ladies (a group of women who signed their names to a formal boycott of British tea and drew attention to rebellion in the colonies), for example.

Did it surprise you to learn about the role of the Edenton Ladies and other women in the revolution?

It did surprise me. I knew about some of it — the women spies and that stuff — because those things have, thankfully, come down in history. But what surprised me was the explicit nature of the call to women to resist the British. In other words, they were called upon to take political action in the 18th century, and that was surprising given their place at the time.

Particularly in the lead-up to the revolution, in the period of resistance where the boycott was the main weapon of choice. The women were explicitly enlisted to enforce the boycott, and then they had to replace the goods that were not coming from Britain. So they set up

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spinning (to replace imported clothing and textiles), often in parsons' parlors, and they would gossip and talk politics. Their letters were very political, which was greatly surprising given the fact that they had no legal rights and no political rights.

Why do you think this part of our history went overlooked for so long?

Because we tell history, unfortunately, through wars and documents. Documents can be wonderful if they are representative, but if you don't have documents representing everybody in history, then you only get a tiny bit of history. So if you're dealing with the Declaration of Independence or the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence or the Constitution or the Bill of Rights — very important documents, I'm not suggesting they're not (laughs) — but, if all you're dealing with is official government documents, then you leave out most of human history. (Writing about it) has been fabulous, fun beyond belief.

Especially with the bickering that's going on now in Congress ...

No kidding (laughs). Although it does give you a good perspective about that, too. Because people say to me all the time, "Oh, is this the most partisan time we've ever seen?" No. People are not killing each other. They used to call each other out on the floor of the House of Representatives and go out and shoot each other over political speech. That was worse. The vice president of the United States (Aaron Burr) murdered his political enemy over political speech. I always joke, our last vice president had a problem with guns, but it wasn't over political speech.

Given the current context, how serious is the divide now?

It's bad and it's counterproductive in a couple of ways. Not only can you not get anything done, but it destroys trust in government. All recent surveys on that are pretty grim.


Do you expect the frustration with government to lead to greater turnout in the midterm elections this fall?

I expect normal off-year turnout, which is angry voters.

With the Gulf oil spill, what impact do you see on the national energy bill?


I think it's likely to prompt energy legislation. The combination of the spill and the mine disaster (in West Virginia) enhances the political will.

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Do government unemployment benefits discourage people from seeking jobs?

Yes, it's human nature.

No, the vast majority want to work.

Sometimes -- about 50/50.

Not sure.

Other (specify by leaving a comment).

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