The Revolutionary years brought accelerated change to the lives of American women and their children. Historians have identified a number of different trends; all of them point to increasing autonomy for young people and the increasing likelihood that at least some adult women would be able to gain more control over their lives. Premarital pregnancy rates rose precipitously, implying a breakdown in parental authority over youths. At the same time parents began consciously to give their children (especially their sons but also their daughters) more freedom in the selection of mates. In some cases, male testators started to draft wills that allowed their children considerable independence to plan their own futures—despite the ensuing negative consequences for widows. Simultaneously, the iconography of the family, and particularly of childhood, changed: family portraits introduced pictorial distinctions, where none had previously existed, between adult women and their younger children and among the children themselves. The visual changes suggest the development of more individualized images and thus of different attitudes toward children. A new demographic trend—the attempts of some families, especially Quakers, to limit their fertility—also implies a shift in attitudes toward children and, indeed, toward their mothers (since women had always feared death in childbirth and had often sought to avoid too-frequent pregnancies). Finally, some states revised their laws and practices to give widows more control over the estates they had inherited, and many (but by no means all) states passed statutes legalizing divorce. Women as well as men took advantage of those new statutes to end unsuccessful marital unions.

The trends are unmistakable; the issue is how to interpret them. Elsewhere, I have argued that at least some of these developments are related to the effects of the American Revolution on women's consciousness—that their postwar behavior changed as a result of the experiences of assuming previously "male" responsibilities in the absence of men during the war, of participating actively in politics, albeit at a fairly low level, and of reassessing their own abilities after they had coped with wartime disruptions. Others have proposed different explanations. Edwin G. Burrows and Michael Wallace argued, for example, that changes in family organization and behavior helped pave the way for the political change of the Revolution (thus partially reversing the causal sequence I found) and Robert V. Wells saw both the Revolution and familial change as stemming from the same source—modernization—rather than bearing any direct causal relationship to each other. Moreover, some, including Linda K. Kerber, contended that the postwar changes decreased rather than increased women's autonomy, and still others, most notably Suzanne Lebsock, advanced precisely the opposite interpretation. Indeed, Lebsock concluded from her detailed study of the women of Petersburg, Virginia, from 1784 to 1860 that the sole clear trend of the period was the development of increasing autonomy for women in that they gained greater freedom from immediate and total dependence on particular men.

The implications of post-Revolutionary changes for the organization
of American religion lend support to Lebsock's interpretation rather than Kerber's. Throughout the colonial period, religion--or at least certain Protestant sects--had provided women with a nonfamilial outlet for their talents. Women's religious activities had worked to increase their independence from husbands and fathers, and religion had consistently supplied the one realm in which women could undeniably claim equality with men, even if that equality was defined in wholly spiritual terms. The disestablishment of American churches in the 1780s and 1790s opened new pathways for the women who numerically dominated the Protestant denominations. As the churches lost their politically privileged positions and access to tax revenues, they needed to generate new sources of funds, support, and loyalty. That need helped promote the formation of voluntary associations tied to individual churches; the earliest of these were denominationally sponsored sewing circles or female charitable societies organized in New England in the last two decades of the century. After the Second Great Awakening (1790-1840), which brought even larger numbers of female converts into Protestant churches, women's charitable and reform associations burgeoned, creating what historians of the nineteenth century called "the benevolent empire." Indeed, from these eighteenth-century women's voluntary groups grew such major nineteenth-century movements as temperance and abolitionism as well as the beginnings of urban philanthropy and, later, welfare services. Therefore, disestablishment provided the impetus for one of the most important developments in American community life and in the lives of nineteenth-century American Northern and urban women. Many historians now argue that the benevolent societies were an important step in the American women's movement toward emancipation from patriarchal power.

Still, the changes in women's roles resulting from disestablishment resembled the others considered thus far in that they occurred without conscious intent. What truly distinguished the Revolutionary era from preceding decades was that Americans initiated a public dialogue on the subject of women and their proper roles. In the colonies, women had been viewed as wholly domestic beings whose influence in the world was confined to their immediate families. It had long been recognized that pious women could reform rakish husbands and raise moral children, but the dimensions of their secular roles--especially their possible individual or collective influence on the polity--had not been carefully examined. During and after the Revolution that topic aroused considerable public comment for the first time, as Americans argued about such subjects as woman's basic nature, the proper aims and content of women's education, and the intellectual abilities of females. The new interest in women flowed directly from a combination of wartime experiences and republican ideology. Patriotic women supported the war effort along with their menfolk; Americans were thus forced to discard the traditional notion that women had no connection to the public sphere and accordingly needed no civic education. Likewise, republican ideology stressed the significant contributions all citizens made to the welfare of the polity; women's function in a republic now had to be delineated. The Revolutionary generation, therefore, became the first to define a public role for American women.
That role, logically enough in light of the persistent colonial emphasis on maternity, was as the republican mother. Revolutionary events reinforced the trends in American family life since the initial settlement of the colonies and generated a powerful image that dominated the lives of white native-born women throughout most of the nineteenth century. The ideal American woman was to be the nurturant, patriotic mother who raised her children, and especially her sons, to be good Christians, active citizens, and successful competitors in the wider arena of life. The image of the republican mother represented a successful fusing of contradictory collective and individualistic tendencies within republican ideology itself, tendencies that quickly proved irreconcilable with respect to men. On the one hand, republicanism looked to the past and preached the necessary sacrifice of the individual will to the good of the whole. On the other, it looked to the future and sang the praises of unencumbered individualism. Such disparate elements could not be joined successfully in the person of an American male; for men, individual values soon became paramount. But women had always been more tightly linked to a collectivity (the family) than had men. Accordingly, both aspects of republicanism could be incorporated into the definition of a woman's role as mother. Her duty was to sacrifice herself to the family, freeing her husband and sons to express their individualism to the fullest. She was also responsible for fulfilling the family's moral obligations to the less fortunate members of society through her participation in charitable associations. Her sacrifice of self to family and society provided the essential prerequisite for the individual endeavors of her male relatives. Women became the keepers of the nation's conscience, the only citizens specifically charged with maintaining the traditional republican commitment to the good of the entire community.

The successful resolution of the conflicting values of republicanism represented by the republican-mother ideal made it a particularly enduring image in American life. But the ideal had two other appealing qualities as well. It became the keystone in the development of clearly defined male and female roles. Although gender roles in the colonies were mutually exclusive, they could not be delineated with precision because men's and women's functions necessarily overlapped in a society based on a household economy. As long as the economic and public elements of men's role could not be distinguished in daily practice from the private and familial elements of women's role, the sexes appeared to be encroaching regularly on each other's domain. The existence of the republican-mother ideal, with its emphasis on child rearing and self-sacrifice, meant that when manufacturing activities gradually began to be moved from the home to the factory the basis for a major redefinition of woman's ideal role was already available. Once increasing numbers of adult women were no longer involved in the production of goods for home consumption or the market, their role could come to focus on the essential components of the republican-mother ideal. Thus, nineteenth-century American gender definitions were not only complementary and distinct, as gender roles had always been, but also clearly symmetrical. For the first time public and private functions could be separated within (not just outside) the family context.

Another notable characteristic of the republican-mother ideal was
how it managed to recombine state and family. The seventeenth-century link between state and family had been broken by the middle of the eighteenth century. Matters that had once been seen as crucial to the stability of society (such as the concurrent maintenance of the proper sexual hierarchy in each family and the correct social and political hierarchy in the community) no longer seemed so important. The American polity and American families had, in effect, gone their separate ways for much of the century. But republican ideology brought state and family together again. A successful republic, it was believed, required virtuous families--and women, in their maternal capacity, would ensure the existence of those virtuous families. In the seventeenth century, the state had supported the family, in the person of its male head. In the nineteenth century, the family--in the person of its nurturant mother--produced the citizens who supported the state. Republicanism, in other words, reunited state and family but reversed the roles and changed the sex of the key actor in the drama.

The role of the republican mother was limited. It presented no dramatic break with tradition, in spite of its novel political elements. Even so, perhaps the Revolution and its emphasis on republican motherhood were necessary prerequisites for nineteenth-century feminism. Only after women had acquired a public role, however restricted, could the extent of that role become a topic for discussion, definition, and debate. Yet republican motherhood also gave rise to the Victorian cult of domesticity. The image of the republican mother had two sides: if one innovatively stressed the importance of women's political role, the other conservatively emphasized the significance of their domestic role. The latter emphasis had infused American society since its beginnings at Plymouth and Jamestown, St. Mary's City and Boston. For the first one hundred seventy-five years of Anglo-American history, environmental conditions forced women to concentrate their energies on the domestic sphere. The American Revolution, because it broke the traditional colonial molds of politics, religion, and the family, hastened the onset of change. But that the older stress on domesticity continued, and indeed took on new life, should not surprise us. It had, after all, been the chief theme of American women's existence and could not quickly be abandoned.

In sum, nineteenth-century developments, far from representing a reversal of colonial trends--as the golden-age theory would have it--were a logical consequence of those trends. The cult of domesticity had deep colonial roots; the feminist movement's origins are more recent but are nevertheless intimately connected to the nation's identity. We must thus look to colonial and Revolutionary America if we wish to understand fully the patterns of women's lives in the United States even today.