

The Boston Massacre: Propaganda, Colonial Sentiment, and the Strained Relationship with Britain

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Introduction

In times of conflict, images have the power to shape public perception, ignite emotion, and spur action. In the years leading up to the American Revolution, one such image—a stark engraving by Paul Revere—would play a pivotal role in mobilizing public sentiment. The Boston Massacre of 1770, an event that saw British soldiers kill five colonists, became a rallying cry for independence. Revere's engraving, "The Bloody Massacre," presented this moment as a brutal, unprovoked attack, igniting outrage and unifying colonial opposition to British rule.

This paper examines how the portrayal of the Boston Massacre in Revere's engraving influenced public opinion and contributed to the growing resentment toward British authority. By analyzing the emotional appeal and visual rhetoric in this iconic image, we can better understand the role of propaganda in shaping colonial attitudes toward independence.

Content Analysis Strategy

Paul Revere's engraving of the Boston Massacre was one of the most influential pieces of revolutionary propaganda. Appearing in the *Boston Gazette* on March 12, 1770, Revere's depiction portrayed the British soldiers as merciless aggressors and the colonists as innocent victims. This image played a crucial role in galvanizing anti-British sentiment and furthering the cause of independence. The following analysis explores the 5 key elements that shaped this propaganda.

1. Portrayal of the Offender (British Soldiers)

Revere's title, "*The Bloody Massacre*," is a crucial piece of visual and linguistic propaganda that casts the British soldiers as ruthless aggressors. The term "*massacre*" evokes a sense of extreme violence, stirring deep emotional responses in the viewer. By using this loaded term, Revere exaggerates the scale of the event, shifting the narrative from a mere skirmish to a

brutal attack on innocent civilians. This language amplifies the sense of injustice and tyranny attributed to the British forces, rallying colonists' anger and driving them toward revolution.

Visually, the soldiers are depicted in harsh, aggressive postures—rifles raised, faces grim and determined—as if they are deliberately attacking defenseless colonists. The soldiers' posture and expression communicate not just action but intent, making it clear that they are acting with violence and cruelty. This visual rhetoric works in concert with the term "*massacre*", solidifying the narrative that the British soldiers are the oppressive force, positioning them as the enemy of the colonial cause.

2. Framing of Victims (Colonists)

Revere's engraving reinforced this narrative visually. It was an almost exact replica of a drawing by Henry Pelham, but Revere made deliberate changes: He portrayed the British as the clear aggressors, with their muskets raised, ready to fire upon a group of unarmed colonists who appeared dignified and helpless. This stark visual contrast between the aggressors and victims emphasized the supposed cruelty of the British forces. The colonists are shown in submissive postures—kneeling, lying helplessly on the ground, surrounded by their own blood—heightening their victimhood and vulnerability.

In addition to these alterations, Revere's engraving omitted a key detail—the race of Crispus Attucks, one of the victims, who was of African and Native American descent. By leaving out Attuck's identity, Revere avoided complicating the narrative and preserved the image of the colonists as unified, innocent martyrs. This omission helped further the propaganda goal by making the event relatable to a broader audience and more directly focused on the oppression of all colonists by British forces.

3. Emotional Tone of Language and Visual Symbolism

Revere's engraving provokes anger in colonists by portraying them as innocent victims of unwarranted violence. The symbolism of vulnerability is evident, emphasizing the victimhood of the colonists. In contrast, the British soldiers are depicted in aggressive positions, with guns raised and faces set in harsh, commanding expressions. They appear as though they are deliberately following an order to fire, capturing the violence and cruelty of their actions. This visual framing underscores the soldiers' role as the perpetrators of violence, reinforcing the propaganda that the British were merciless oppressors intent on quelling colonial resistance by force.

4. Omission/Alteration of Details (Crispus Attucks)

Revere's engraving strategically omitted the racial identity of Crispus Attucks, an important figure in the massacre. The absence of Attucks' racial background—a man of African and Native American descent—was a deliberate move to avoid complicating the narrative (Gilder Lehrman). Had Revere included this detail, it could have shifted the focus of the engraving, introducing the complexity of race into the broader colonial struggle. Instead, by portraying the victims as entirely white colonists, the engraving could appeal to a larger portion of the colonial population, thus avoiding the potential division over race and keeping the focus squarely on British aggression.

5. Visual Rhetoric in Revolutionary Pamphleteering

Revere's engraving of the Boston Massacre was a potent piece of revolutionary propaganda strategically designed to evoke outrage and sympathy among the colonists. In an era where pamphlets and visual imagery played a crucial role in spreading political ideas—especially when literacy rates were not universal—Revere's engraving served as an emotional appeal to galvanize support for the Patriot cause. The engraving misrepresented the event to create a powerful narrative

of British brutality, presenting the colonists as innocent victims and the British soldiers as aggressors.

This visual rhetoric worked in tandem with inflammatory pamphlets of the time, such as Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776), effectively rallying the public to join the fight for American independence. Both Revere's engraving and Paine's pamphlet used different methods—visual vs. textual—to fuel anti-British feelings and push the colonies closer to a break with Britain. Revere's use of visual symbols, dramatic imagery, and the emotional power of language in his engraving worked as a tool for social mobilization.

Coding Procedures and Scheme for Analyzing Revere's Engraving

To systematically analyze Revere's engraving and its impact, the following coding procedures and coding scheme test will be used to quantify and categorize different aspects of the engraving. This analysis will provide insight into how the image works as revolutionary propaganda and its influence on colonial sentiment.

Coding Procedures

1. Unit of Analysis: The primary unit of analysis will be Revere's engraving, "The Bloody Massacre," as it was widely reproduced and had a significant impact on public opinion at the time.
2. Categories for Analysis: The key variables that will be analyzed in the engraving include:
 - o Portrayal of the Offender: Are the British soldiers depicted as aggressive, neutral, or sympathetic? Are they shown as perpetrators or following orders?
 - o Framing of Victims: Are the colonists shown as helpless, unarmed, or complicit? What visual and emotional cues are used to portray their innocence?

- Emotional Tone of Language: How is the title and any text (if present) in the engraving framed to invoke anger, outrage, or sympathy?
- Visual Symbolism: What specific visual imagery is used to evoke certain emotions (e.g., raised weapons, blood, submissive positions)?
- Omission/Alteration of Details: Does the engraving omit or alter details to reinforce the desired narrative (e.g., the racial identity of Crispus Attucks)?

This coding scheme provides clear, quantifiable criteria for evaluating the engraving and allows for a systematic analysis of its propaganda effect. You can refine the categories further if needed, but this structure should help you with your analysis while keeping it consistent and easy to interpret.

Coding Scheme Test

To analyze Revere's engraving systematically, we will focus on the five key variables.

- Portrayal of the Offender: Are the British soldiers shown as aggressive or sympathetic?
- Framing of Victims: How are the colonists depicted—helpless, armed, or submissive?
- Emotional Tone of Language: How does the language (title and any text) invoke emotions like anger or sympathy?
- Visual symbolism: What visual elements (e.g. blood, posture, weapons) heighten the emotional impact?
- Omission/Alteration of Details: Does the engraving omit or alter key details to influence public perception?

This coding scheme allows for a clear, objective analysis of how engraving functions as propaganda.

I will use a rating scale of "Satisfactory" (S), "Neutral" (N), and "Unsatisfactory" (U) to code the data, tallying up each rating to quantify the emotional and political impact of Revere's engraving. I conducted a search in the BU database using the phrase "The Bloody Massacre on King Street." While I did not find relevant articles in newspapers,

I did locate a few references in books. Two books were mentioned as containing Paul Revere's engraving of the Boston Massacre; however, one of the books is out of print, and there is no online version available. Although one book is said to include the engraving, it is not actually mentioned in the text.

There seems to be limited scholarly material on Paul Revere's engraving of the Boston Massacre, which is surprising given its significance in advancing the cause of American independence from Great Britain. If I were to do this project again, I would shift my focus to the trial of the British soldiers involved in the event. I would specifically analyze the trial using the following five key variables:

1. Portrayal of the Offender (British Soldiers): This would involve analyzing how the British soldiers were depicted during the trial. I would focus on how the witnesses portrayed the soldiers' actions compared to how the defense attorney, John Adams, defended them to prove their innocence.
2. Framing of the Victims (Colonists): I would examine how the colonists were portrayed in terms of their role in the incident. Were they depicted as victims, instigators, or innocent bystanders?
3. Emotional Tone of Language: I would analyze the tone of language used during the trial, focusing on whether it was aggressive, calm, innocent, or charged with emotion.

Additionally, I would look for the use of key terms such as "massacre" and "brutality" to frame the event as unprovoked violence.

4. Visual Symbolism: I would look at visual cues from the trial, such as body language, facial expressions, and any public displays of emotion (shouting, gestures, etc.), to assess the emotional tone of the proceedings.
5. Omission or Alteration of Key Details: This would involve identifying which key facts or details were omitted or altered during the trial, with the goal of understanding how these omissions or alterations influenced public opinion and the narrative of the event.

With these categories for analysis, I will use a rating scale of "Satisfactory" (S), "Neutral" (N), and "Unsatisfactory" (U) to code the data, tallying up each rating to quantify the emotional and political impact of the trial. Given that there appears to be more material available on the trial itself in the BU database, I believe shifting my focus to the trial will yield better results and offer a more comprehensive understanding of how the Boston Massacre was portrayed and used as propaganda during this pivotal moment in American history. While my original research experiment did not provide results as planned, I have gained valuable insights into what works, what doesn't, and how I can improve moving forward.

Contextualizing Revere's Engraving in Revolutionary Propaganda

In contrast to Loyalist propaganda, which often portrayed the British as lawful authority and the colonists as rebellious or treasonous, Revere's engraving capitalized on the emotional appeal of victimhood. The Patriot press, using both visual art and inflammatory language, helped solidify the sense of unity among the colonists and presented them as victims of British tyranny. Revere's engraving was a critical piece of this effort, part of a larger propaganda campaign that also included pamphlets and speeches. The Loyalists, though less effective with visual

imagery, used textual arguments to defend the British government, often portraying the Boston Massacre as a tragic accident or the result of colonial provocation.

The battle of ideas, waged in pamphlets, engravings, and newspapers, was as much about shaping public perception as it was about rallying support for armed conflict. In this larger context, Revere's engraving can be seen as a critical piece of revolutionary rhetoric—one that effectively harnessed the emotional power of visual art to deepen the divide between Patriots and Loyalists while strengthening the Patriot cause on the eve of war.

Conclusion

Despite the inconclusive results of my experiment, this analysis of Paul Revere's engraving underscores its significance as a tool of revolutionary propaganda. Through emotional language, symbolic imagery, and selective portrayal of the British and the colonists, Revere crafted a narrative that stirred public outrage and solidified colonial unity. The engraving, along with other forms of media like pamphlets and speeches, played a crucial role in galvanizing support for American Independence. The power of visual rhetoric in shaping public opinion is clear, and Revere's engraving remains a prime example of how propaganda can influence the course of history.

In hindsight, however, I realized that my initial focus—on the engraving itself—was limited by the scarcity of primary sources and scholarly material. If I were to revisit this project, I would shift my focus to the trial of the British soldiers involved in the Boston Massacre. Analyzing the trial would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the event was interpreted and framed by both the colonial and British sides. This trial was a pivotal moment in the larger narrative of colonial resistance, and its portrayal in court could offer deeper insights into the dynamics of justice, public opinion, and the role of legal proceedings in shaping revolutionary sentiment.

The trial not only showcased how the British soldiers were defended and portrayed as acting under orders but also provide an opportunity for colonial leaders to emphasize the brutality of British authority. Investigating how the trial influenced public perception—through witness testimonies, legal arguments, and the broader media coverage—would have allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the propaganda surrounding the Boston Massacre. It could also highlight the interplay between legal and visual rhetoric, as both methods were crucial in fueling that growing movement for independence.

This shift in focus would have enabled me to explore the complexity of the event and its significance, beyond the visual propaganda, and contribute to a more holistic view of how colonial attitudes toward British were shaped during this critical period in American history.

Original Work
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of
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