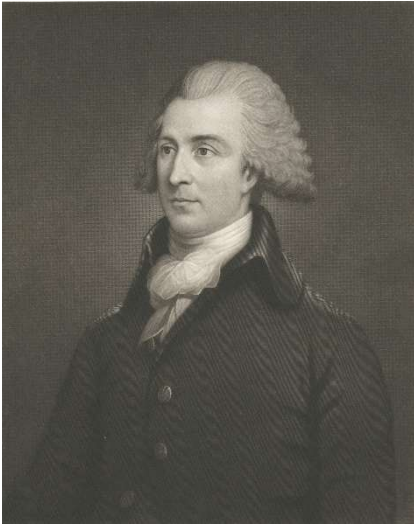


Tench Coxe on Work, Industry, and the Formation of a Nation

A Companion Brief from Truth & Transformation USA

Prepared by Theresa Willen

Executive Director, Truth & Transformation USA



Tench Coxe stands among the lesser-known yet highly influential thinkers of the early American republic. A political economist, government official, and advisor within the economic circles surrounding Alexander Hamilton, Coxe devoted much of his writing to the development of American industry and national prosperity. His work reflects a conviction shared by many founders: the stability of a free republic depends not only on political institutions but on the productive capacities and habits of its people.

In his writings on commerce, agriculture, and manufacturing—especially in *A View of the United States of America* (1794)—Coxe presents a vision in which productive labor forms both economic independence and civic stability. Industry, in his view, was not merely a matter of wealth creation. It was a formative practice that cultivated competence, discipline, and self-reliance within the citizenry.

For Coxe, the economic life of a nation was inseparable from the character of its people. Work was therefore more than an economic necessity; it was a means of shaping the habits and capacities that sustain republican freedom.

Early Education and Mercantile Formation

Tench Coxe's early schooling took place within the commercial and intellectual world of colonial Philadelphia. Born into a prosperous merchant family, he likely received his initial education through private tutors and local preparatory schools, where boys of his social standing were typically instructed in Latin, arithmetic, rhetoric, and bookkeeping. Such training prepared young men both for further study and for participation in the Atlantic trading economy that shaped Philadelphia's life. Alongside formal schooling, Coxe would have been exposed to the practical realities of commerce within his family's mercantile environment. This combination of classical instruction and commercial experience formed the foundation of his later interest in political economy and the development of American industry.

This early formation unfolded within the broader intellectual environment of the city of colonial

Philadelphia, one of the most active centers of learning and commerce in British North America. He attended the College of Philadelphia (the institution that would later become the University of Pennsylvania), where the curriculum reflected the Enlightenment emphasis on practical knowledge, classical learning, and political economy. Although Coxe did not complete a degree, his studies exposed him to the intellectual currents shaping the late eighteenth century—debates about commerce, national prosperity, and the responsibilities of civic life. Combined with his upbringing in a mercantile family, this educational environment helped form his lifelong interest in industry, trade, and the economic foundations of national independence. This early exposure to both learning and commerce shaped Coxe’s conviction that the prosperity of a nation depends upon the disciplined cultivation of productive labor—an insight that resonates with the long-standing biblical understanding of work as a form of stewardship within God’s created order.

Work as the Foundation of National Prosperity

Tench Coxe understood that the prosperity and stability of a republic depend not only on its political institutions but on the productive capacities and disciplined habits of its people. Writing in the early years of the American republic, Coxe argued that industry, labor, and economic development formed the practical foundations of national independence. A nation capable of cultivating skill, enterprise, and productive labor, he believed, would possess both the economic strength and the civic stability necessary to sustain freedom.

Coxe repeatedly emphasizes the central role of productive labor in the flourishing of the nation. Reflecting on the resources and potential of the young republic, he argues that the prosperity of the United States depends upon the cultivation of industry across multiple sectors of society. He writes:

“The United States contain within themselves the means of establishing and supporting every useful manufacture” (Coxe, 1794).

This statement reflects a broader conviction in early American thought: economic independence undergirds political independence. A nation reliant upon foreign production risks not only material vulnerability but also diminished civic strength.

For Coxe, the encouragement of agriculture, manufacturing, and skilled trades would allow the United States to develop a stable and self-sustaining economy. Such development required both technological innovation and disciplined labor, linking national prosperity directly to the

productive habits of its citizens. In Coxe’s world, the cultivation of such skill occurred largely through the apprenticeship system that shaped colonial economic life. Young men learned trades within the households and workshops of experienced craftsmen, where technical instruction was joined to habits of discipline and responsibility.

Productive Labor and Civic Stability

Coxe understood economic activity as deeply connected to the moral and social fabric of the republic. Productive work fosters habits of responsibility, diligence, and foresight—qualities essential to the functioning of a free society. Where labor is valued and opportunity for productive enterprise exists, citizens gain a degree of independence that strengthens civic life. Individuals capable of sustaining themselves and contributing to the broader economy are better prepared to participate responsibly in the public sphere.

This perspective aligns with a common insight among founding-era thinkers: liberty cannot be sustained by a people who lack the habits necessary for self-government. Economic formation, therefore, contributes directly to political stability.

Work becomes a formative arena in which individuals develop the discipline and competence required for responsible freedom. Apprenticeship thus functioned not only as economic training but also as a school of character, forming the reliability and perseverance necessary for responsible citizenship.

Industry, Skill, and National Development

Coxe also emphasized the importance of cultivating knowledge and skill within the nation’s workforce. The expansion of American manufacturing, trade, and agriculture depended not merely on natural resources but on the development of human capacity.

In *A View of the United States of America*, he surveys the nation’s productive potential with an eye toward encouraging innovation, technical knowledge, and entrepreneurial initiative. These qualities enable a society to transform its resources into prosperity.

By highlighting the relationship between industry and knowledge, Coxe anticipates later American emphasis on practical education, technical skill, and economic innovation. The growth of a nation, he suggests, depends upon the disciplined cultivation of human ability. Work, therefore, forms not only wealth but competence. The development of national industry

depended upon the transmission of practical knowledge from one generation to the next. In colonial America this occurred largely through apprenticeship, where young workers acquired the mechanical arts under the guidance of experienced masters.

Economic Independence and the Character of a People

Underlying Coxe's economic arguments is a deeper concern for national independence. A republic that relies excessively on foreign production risks both economic fragility and diminished autonomy. Coxe believed that a thriving domestic economy would strengthen the character and resilience of the American people. Industry encourages initiative, responsibility, and perseverance—qualities necessary for both economic success and civic participation.

In this sense, the development of national industry becomes part of a larger project of formation. The habits cultivated through productive labor shape not only economic outcomes but the character of the society itself. Work thus functions as a school of independence, preparing citizens to contribute to the common good while sustaining themselves and their communities.

Conclusion

Tench Coxe's writings illuminate a dimension of formation often overlooked in discussions of the American founding: the formative power of work. By linking industry to national prosperity, civic stability, and individual independence, Coxe presents productive labor as a cornerstone of republican life.

His perspective reminds us that economic activity is not merely transactional. The habits cultivated through disciplined labor—competence, diligence, and responsibility—shape the character of individuals and, through them, the strength of the nation.

In this vision, the prosperity of a republic rests not only upon its laws or institutions but upon the productive capacities and moral habits of its people. Work forms both the wealth and the character necessary to sustain freedom across generations. The apprenticeship tradition therefore linked economic productivity with moral formation, preparing individuals not only to sustain themselves but to contribute responsibly to the stability of the republic.

Reference

Coxe, T. (1794). *A View of the United States of America*.
<https://archive.org/details/viewofunitedstat00coxe>

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Pastor-Ready Bullet Points

Tench Coxe on Work, Industry, and National Formation

1) Coxe treats productive labor as the foundation of national prosperity

- He argues that industry and labor sustain the economic strength of the republic.
- National flourishing depends not merely on natural resources but on the disciplined work of its citizens.
- **For ministry framing:** “A healthy society grows from the faithful labor of its people.”

2) He connects economic independence to civic stability

- Coxe believed that a nation capable of producing its own goods strengthens both its autonomy and resilience.
- Economic self-sufficiency reduces vulnerability and supports responsible participation in civic life.
- **Pastor framing:** “Communities that cultivate responsible work cultivate responsible citizens.”

3) He views industry as a formative practice

- Work develops habits of diligence, responsibility, and perseverance.
- These habits contribute not only to economic success but to the moral stability of the community.
- **Pastor framing:** “Daily labor forms character as much as it produces goods.”

4) Coxe emphasizes the development of skill and competence

- National prosperity depends on cultivating human capacity—knowledge, craftsmanship, and innovation.
- The development of skill enables individuals to contribute meaningfully to the broader economy.
- **Pastor framing:** “Competence in one’s vocation becomes a way of serving the common good.”
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5) He understands work as part of the formation of a free people

- Citizens capable of sustaining themselves through productive labor are better prepared to exercise liberty responsibly.
- Economic formation therefore contributes directly to the preservation of republican freedom.
- **Pastor framing:** “Freedom flourishes when people are capable, responsible, and industrious.”

Pastoral Cross-References

(Biblical texts that resonate with Coxe’s insights about work and industry)

Work as part of God’s created order

- **Genesis 2:15 (ESV)**
“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.”
→ Work is part of humanity’s original vocation within creation.

Diligence and industry

- **Proverbs 14:23 (ESV)**
“In all toil there is profit, but mere talk tends only to poverty.”
→ Productive labor contributes to both personal and communal well-being.

Work as service to the Lord

- **Colossians 3:23–24 (ESV)**
“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.”
→ Labor becomes an expression of faithfulness and stewardship.

Responsibility and provision

- **2 Thessalonians 3:10–12 (ESV)**
“If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat... do their work quietly and earn their own living.”
→ Work supports both personal responsibility and social stability.

Skill and craftsmanship

- **Exodus 31:3–5 (ESV)**

“Filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship.”

→ Skill and competence are gifts that contribute to the flourishing of the community.

Practical “Next-Step” Applications Pastors Can Use This Week

Teach work as a form of stewardship

Encourage congregations to view their daily labor—whether professional, manual, or domestic—as participation in God’s ongoing care for creation.

Affirm the dignity of ordinary work

Highlight how seemingly routine occupations contribute to the well-being of families, communities, and the broader economy.

Encourage the development of skill and competence

Promote vocational excellence by reminding believers that growing in skill enables them to serve others more effectively.

Connect economic life with moral formation

Help families recognize that habits cultivated through work—discipline, reliability, perseverance—shape character as much as they shape income.

Frame work as service to the common good

Encourage believers to consider how their vocations contribute to the flourishing of their communities and the stability of society.