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The American Revolution

Introduction

In the 1760s, Benjamin Rush, a native of Philadelphia, recounted a visit to Parliament. Upon seeing the king’s throne in the House of Lords, Rush said he “felt as if he walked on sacred ground” with “emotions that I cannot describe.” Throughout the eighteenth century, colonists had developed significant emotional ties with both the British monarchy and the British constitution. The British North American colonists had just helped to win a world war and most, like Rush, had never been more proud to be British. And yet, in a little over a decade, those same colonists would declare their independence and break away from the British Empire. Seen from 1763, nothing would have seemed as improbable as the American Revolution.

The Revolution built institutions and codified the language and ideas that still define Americans’ image of themselves. Moreover, revolutionaries justified their new nation with radical new ideals that changed the course of history and sparked a global “age of revolution.” But the Revolution was as paradoxical as it was unpredictable. A revolution fought in the name of liberty allowed slavery to persist.

Resistance to centralized authority tied disparate colonies ever closer together under new governments. The revolution created politicians eager to foster republican selflessness and protect the public good but also encouraged individual self-interest and personal gain. The “founding fathers” instigated and fought a revolution to secure independence from Britain, but they did not fight that revolution to create a “democracy.” To successfully rebel against Britain, however, required more than a few dozen “founding fathers.” Common colonists joined the fight, unleashing popular forces that shaped the Revolution itself, often in ways not welcomed by elite leaders. But once unleashed, these popular forces continued to shape the new nation and indeed the rest of American history.

The Origins of the American Revolution

The American Revolution had both long-term origins and short-term causes. In this section, we will look broadly at some of the long-term political, intellectual, cultural, and economic developments in the eighteenth century that set the context for the crisis of the 1760s and 1770s.

**Britain's Loss of Control Over Its Colonies**

Between the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the middle of the eighteenth century, Britain had largely failed to define the colonies’ relationship to the empire and institute a coherent program of imperial reform. Two factors contributed to these failures.

First, Britain was at war from the War of the Spanish Succession at the start of the century through the Seven Years’ War in 1763. Constant war was politically consuming and economically expensive. Second, competing visions of empire divided British officials. Old Whigs and their Tory supporters envisioned an authoritarian empire, based on conquering territory and extracting resources. They sought to eliminate Britain’s growing national debt by raising taxes and cutting spending on the colonies.

The radical (or patriot) Whigs based their imperial vision on trade and manufacturing instead of land and resources. They argued that economic growth, not raising taxes, would solve the national debt. Instead of an authoritarian empire, “patriot Whigs” argued that the colonies should have equal status with the mother country. There were occasional attempts to reform the administration of the colonies, but debate between the two sides prevented coherent reform.

**Colonists Define Themselves**

Colonists developed their own understanding of how they fit into the empire. They saw themselves as British subjects “entitled to all the natural, essential, inherent, and inseparable rights of our fellow subjects in Great-Britain.” The eighteenth century brought significant economic and demographic growth in the colonies.

This success, they believed, resulted partly from Britain’s hands-off approach to the colonies. By midcentury, colonists believed that they held a special place in the empire, which justified Britain’s hands-off policy. In 1764, James Otis Jr. wrote, “The colonists are entitled to as ample rights, liberties, and privileges as the subjects of the mother country are, and in some respects to more.”

***Local political institutions***

In this same period, the colonies developed their own local political institutions. Samuel Adams, in the Boston Gazette, described the colonies as each being a “separate body politic” from Britain. Almost immediately upon each colony’s settlement, they created a colonial assembly.

These assemblies assumed many of the same duties as the Commons exercised in Britain, including taxing residents, managing the spending of the colonies’ revenue, and granting salaries to royal officials. In the early 1700s, colonial leaders unsuccessfully lobbied the British government to define their assemblies’ legal prerogatives, but Britain was too occupied with European wars.

***A new political ideology***

Colonial political culture in the colonies also developed differently than that of the mother country. In both Britain and the colonies, land was the key to political participation, but because land was more easily obtained in the colonies, a higher proportion of male colonists participated in politics. Colonial political culture drew inspiration from the “country” party in Britain.

These ideas—generally referred to as the ideology of republicanism—stressed the corrupting nature of power and the need for those involved in self-governing to be virtuous (i.e., putting the “public good” over their own self-interest). Patriots would need to be ever vigilant against the rise of conspiracies, centralized control, and tyranny. Only a small fringe in Britain held these ideas, but in the colonies, they were widely accepted.

***The Enlightenment vs. The Great Awakening***

In the 1740s, two seemingly conflicting bodies of thought—the Enlightenment and the Great Awakening—began to combine in the colonies and challenge older ideas about authority. Perhaps no single philosopher had a greater impact on colonial thinking than John Locke. In his Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Locke argued that the mind was originally a tabula rasa (or blank slate) and that individuals were formed primarily by their environment. The aristocracy then were wealthy or successful because they had greater access to wealth, education, and patronage and not because they were innately superior.

At the same time that Locke’s ideas about knowledge and education spread in North America, the colonies also experienced an unprecedented wave of evangelical Protestant revivalism. Between 1739 and 1740, the Rev. George Whitefield, an enigmatic, itinerant preacher, traveled the colonies preaching Calvinist sermons to huge crowds.

Unlike the rationalism of Locke, his sermons were designed to appeal to his listeners’ emotions. Whitefield told his listeners that salvation could only be found by taking personal responsibility for one’s own unmediated relationship with God, a process that came to be known as a “conversion” experience. He also argued that the current Church hierarchies populated by “unconverted” ministers only stood as a barrier between the individual and God. In his wake, new traveling preachers picked up his message and many congregations split. Both Locke and Whitefield had empowered individuals to question authority and to take their lives into their own hands.

***Prosperity impacts the culture***

In other ways, eighteenth-century colonists were becoming more culturally similar to Britons, a process often referred to as Anglicization. As colonial economies grew, they quickly became an important market for British manufacturing exports. Colonists with disposable income and access to British markets attempted to mimic British culture.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, middling-class colonists could also afford items previously thought of as luxuries like British fashions, dining wares, and more. The desire to purchase British goods meshed with the desire to enjoy British liberties. These political, intellectual, cultural, and economic developments built tensions that rose to the surface when, after the Seven Years’ War, Britain finally began to implement a program of imperial reform that conflicted with colonists’ understanding of the empire and their place in it.

The Causes of the American Revolution

Most immediately, the American Revolution resulted directly from attempts to reform the British Empire after the Seven Years’ War. The Seven Years’ War culminated nearly a half century of war between Europe’s imperial powers. It was truly a world war, fought between multiple empires on multiple continents.

**The Impacts of a New King**

King George III took the crown in 1760 and brought Tories into his government after three decades of Whig rule. They represented an authoritarian vision of empire in which colonies would be subordinate. The Royal Proclamation of 1763 was Britain’s first major postwar imperial action targeting North America. The king forbade settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains in an attempt to limit costly wars with Native Americans. Colonists, however, protested and demanded access to the territory for which they had fought alongside the British.

***Three new Acts***

In 1764, Parliament passed two more reforms. The Sugar Act sought to combat widespread smuggling of molasses in New England by cutting the duty in half but increasing enforcement. Also, smugglers would be tried by vice-admiralty courts and not juries.

Parliament also passed the Currency Act, which restricted colonies from producing paper money. Hard money, such as gold and silver coins, was scarce in the colonies. The lack of currency impeded the colonies’ increasingly sophisticated transatlantic economies, but it was especially damaging in 1764 because a postwar recession had already begun. Between the restrictions of the Proclamation of 1763, the Currency Act, and the Sugar Act’s canceling of trials-by-jury for smugglers, some colonists began to fear a pattern of increased taxation and restricted liberties.

In March 1765, Parliament passed the Stamp Act. The act required that many documents be printed on paper that had been stamped to show the duty had been paid, including newspapers, pamphlets, diplomas, legal documents, and even playing cards. The Sugar Act of 1764 was an attempt to get merchants to pay an already existing duty, but the Stamp Act created a new, direct (or “internal”) tax. Parliament had never before directly taxed the colonists. Instead, colonies contributed to the empire through the payment of indirect, “external” taxes, such as customs duties.

***Colonial resistance to the Acts***

Resistance to the Stamp Act took three forms, distinguished largely by class: legislative resistance by elites, economic resistance by merchants, and popular protest by common colonists.

Legislative resistance

Colonial elites responded by passing resolutions in their assemblies. The most famous of the anti-Stamp Act resolutions were the Virginia Resolves, passed by the House of Burgesses on May 30, 1765, which declared that the colonists were entitled to “all the liberties, privileges, franchises, and immunities . . . possessed by the people of Great Britain.” When the Virginia Resolves were printed throughout the colonies, however, they often included a few extra, far more radical resolutions not passed by the Virginia House of Burgesses, the last of which asserted that only “the general assembly of this colony have any right or power to impose or lay any taxation” and that anyone who argued differently “shall be deemed an enemy to this his majesty’s colony.”

The Stamp Act Congress issued a “Declaration of Rights and Grievances,” which, like the Virginia Resolves, declared allegiance to the king and “all due subordination” to Parliament but also reasserted the idea that colonists were entitled to the same rights as Britons. Those rights included trial by jury, which had been abridged by the Sugar Act, and the right to be taxed only by their own elected representatives. As Daniel Dulany wrote in 1765, “It is an essential principle of the English constitution, that the subject shall not be taxed without his consent.” Benjamin Franklin called it the “prime Maxim of all free Government.”

Because the colonies did not elect members to Parliament, they believed that they were not represented and could not be taxed by that body. In response, Parliament and the Crown argued that the colonists were “virtually represented,” just like the residents of those boroughs or counties in England that did not elect members to Parliament. However, the colonists rejected the notion of virtual representation, with one pamphleteer calling it a “monstrous idea.”

Economic resistance

The second type of resistance to the Stamp Act was economic. While the Stamp Act Congress deliberated, merchants in major port cities were preparing nonimportation agreements, hoping that their refusal to import British goods would lead British merchants to lobby for the repeal of the Stamp Act. In New York City, “upwards of two hundred principal merchants” agreed not to import, sell, or buy “any goods, wares, or merchandises” from Great Britain.

In Philadelphia, merchants gathered at “a general meeting” to agree that “they would not Import any Goods from Great-Britain until the Stamp-Act was Repealed.” The plan worked. By January 1766, London merchants sent a letter to Parliament arguing that they had been “reduced to the necessity of pending ruin” by the Stamp Act and the subsequent boycotts.

Popular resistance

The third, and perhaps, most crucial type of resistance was popular protest. Riots broke out in Boston. Crowds burned the appointed stamp distributor for Massachusetts, Andrew Oliver, in effigy and pulled a building he owned “down to the Ground in five minutes.” Oliver resigned the position the next day. The following week, a crowd also set upon the home of his brother-in-law, Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson, who had publicly argued for submission to the stamp tax. Before the evening was over, much of Hutchinson’s home and belongings had been destroyed.

By November 16, all of the original twelve stamp distributors had resigned, and by 1766, groups calling themselves the Sons of Liberty were formed in most colonies to direct and organize further resistance. These tactics had the dual effect of sending a message to Parliament and discouraging colonists from accepting appointments as stamp collectors. With no one to distribute the stamps, the act became unenforceable.

Violent protest by groups like the Sons of Liberty created quite a stir both in the colonies and in England itself. While extreme acts like the tarring and feathering of Boston’s Commissioner of Customs in 1774 propagated more protest against symbols of Parliament’s tyranny throughout the colonies, violent demonstrations were regarded as acts of terrorism by British officials.

Pressure on Parliament grew until, in February 1766, it repealed the Stamp Act. But to save face and to try to avoid this kind of problem in the future, Parliament also passed the Declaratory Act, asserting that Parliament had the “full power and authority to make laws . . . to bind the colonies and people of America . . . in all cases whatsoever.” However, colonists were too busy celebrating the repeal of the Stamp Act to take much notice of the Declaratory Act. In New York City, the inhabitants raised a huge lead statue of King George III in honor of the Stamp Act’s repeal. It could be argued that there was no moment at which colonists felt prouder to be members of the free British Empire than 1766. But Britain still needed revenue from the colonies.

New forms of resistance emerged in which elite, middling, and working-class colonists participated together. Merchants reinstituted nonimportation agreements, and common colonists agreed not to consume these same products. Lists were circulated with signatories promising not to buy any British goods. These lists were often published in newspapers, bestowing recognition on those who had signed and led to pressure on those who had not.

Resistance by women

Women, too, became involved to an unprecedented degree in resistance to the Townshend Acts. They circulated subscription lists and gathered signatures. The first political commentaries in newspapers written by women appeared. Also, without new imports of British clothes, colonists took to wearing simple, homespun clothing. Spinning clubs were formed, in which local women would gather at one of their homes and spin cloth for homespun clothing for their families and even for the community.

Homespun clothing quickly became a marker of one’s virtue and patriotism, and women were an important part of this cultural shift. At the same time, British goods and luxuries previously desired now became symbols of tyranny. Nonimportation and, especially, nonconsumption agreements changed colonists’ cultural relationship with the mother country. Committees of Inspection monitored merchants and residents to make sure that no one broke the agreements. Offenders could expect to be shamed by having their names and offenses published in the newspaper and in broadsides.

Colonial unity

Nonimportation and nonconsumption helped forge colonial unity. Colonies formed Committees of Correspondence to keep each other informed of the resistance efforts throughout the colonies. Newspapers reprinted exploits of resistance, giving colonists a sense that they were part of a broader political community.

The best example of this new “continental conversation” came in the wake of the Boston Massacre. Britain sent regiments to Boston in 1768 to help enforce the new acts and quell the resistance. On the evening of March 5, 1770, a crowd gathered outside the Custom House and began hurling insults, snowballs, and perhaps more at the young sentry. When a small number of soldiers came to the sentry’s aid, the crowd grew increasingly hostile until the soldiers fired.

After the smoke cleared, five Bostonians were dead, including one of the ringleaders, Crispus Attucks, a former slave turned free dockworker. The soldiers were tried in Boston and won acquittal, thanks, in part, to their defense attorney, John Adams. News of the Boston Massacre spread quickly through the new resistance communication networks, aided by a famous engraving initially circulated by Paul Revere, which depicted bloodthirsty British soldiers with grins on their faces firing into a peaceful crowd. The engraving was quickly circulated and reprinted throughout the colonies, generating sympathy for Boston and anger with Britain.

Resistance again led to repeal. In March 1770, Parliament repealed all of the new duties except the one on tea, which, like the Declaratory Act, was left, in part, to save face and assert that Parliament still retained the right to tax the colonies. The character of colonial resistance had changed between 1765 and 1770.

Independence

Tensions between the colonies and England eased for a time after the Boston Massacre. The colonial economy improved as the postwar recession receded. The Sons of Liberty in some colonies sought to continue nonimportation even after the repeal of the Townshend Acts. But in New York, a door-to-door poll of the population revealed that the majority wanted to end nonimportation. Yet Britain’s desire and need to reform imperial administration remained.

**The Boston Tea Party**

In April 1773, Parliament passed two acts to aid the failing East India Company, which had fallen behind in the annual payments it owed Britain. But the company was not only drowning in debt; it was also drowning in tea, with almost fifteen million pounds of it in stored in warehouses from India to England. In 1773, Parliament passed the Regulating Act, which effectively put the troubled company under government control. It then passed the Tea Act, which would allow the company to sell its tea in the colonies directly and without the usual import duties. This would greatly lower the cost of tea for colonists, but, again, they resisted.

The Tea Act stipulated that the duty had to be paid when the ship unloaded. Newspaper essays and letters throughout the summer of 1773 in the major port cities debated what to do upon the ships’ arrival. In November, the Boston Sons of Liberty, led by Samuel Adams and John Hancock, resolved to “prevent the landing and sale of the [tea], and the payment of any duty thereon” and to do so “at the risk of their lives and property.” The meeting appointed men to guard the wharfs and make sure the tea remained on the ships until they returned to London. This worked and the tea did not reach the shore, but by December 16, the ships were still there. Hence, another town meeting was held at the Old South Meeting House, at the end of which dozens of men disguised as Mohawk Indians made their way to the wharf.

As word spread throughout the colonies, patriots were emboldened to do the same to the tea sitting in their harbors. Tea was either dumped or seized in Charleston, Philadelphia, and New York, with numerous other smaller “tea parties” taking place throughout 1774.

**The Coercive Acts**

Britain’s response was swift. The following spring, Parliament passed four acts known collectively, by the British, as the Coercive Acts. Colonists, however, referred to them as the Intolerable Acts. First, the Boston Port Act shut down the harbor and cut off all trade to and from the city. The Massachusetts Government Act put the colonial government entirely under British control, dissolving the assembly and restricting town meetings. The Administration of Justice Act allowed any royal official accused of a crime to be tried in Britain rather than by Massachusetts courts and juries. Finally, the Quartering Act, passed for all colonies, allowed the British army to quarter newly arrived soldiers in colonists’ homes. Boston had been deemed in open rebellion, and the king, his advisors, and Parliament acted decisively to end the rebellion.

The Crown, however, did not anticipate the other colonies coming to the aid of Massachusetts. Colonists collected food to send to Boston. Virginia’s House of Burgesses called for a day of prayer and fasting to show their support. Rather than isolating Massachusetts, the Coercive Acts fostered the sense of shared identity created over the previous decade. After all, if the Crown and Parliament could dissolve Massachusetts’s government, nothing could stop them from doing the same to any of her sister colonies.

In Massachusetts, patriots created the Provincial Congress, and, throughout 1774, they seized control of local and county governments and courts. In New York, citizens elected committees to direct the colonies’ response to the Coercive Acts, including a Mechanics’ Committee of middling colonists. By early 1774, Committees of Correspondence and/or extralegal assemblies were established in all of the colonies except Georgia. And throughout the year, they followed Massachusetts’s example by seizing the powers of the royal governments.

**The First Continental Congress**

Committees of Correspondence agreed to send delegates to a Continental Congress to coordinate an intercolonial response. The First Continental Congress convened on September 5, 1774. Over the next six weeks, elite delegates from every colony but Georgia issued a number of documents, including a “Declaration of Rights and Grievances.” This document repeated the arguments that colonists had been making since 1765: colonists retained all the rights of native Britons, including the right to be taxed only by their own elected representatives as well as the right to a trial by jury.

***The Continental Association***

Most importantly, the Congress issued a document known as the “Continental Association.” The Association declared that “the present unhappy situation of our affairs is occasioned by a ruinous system of colony administration adopted by the British Ministry about the year 1763, evidently calculated for enslaving these Colonies, and, with them, the British Empire.” The Association recommended “that a committee be chosen in every county, city, and town . . . whose business it shall be attentively to observe the conduct of all persons touching this association.” These Committees of Inspection would consist largely of common colonists. They were effectively deputized to police their communities and instructed to publish the names of anyone who violated the Association so they “may be publicly known, and universally condemned as the enemies of American liberty.”

The delegates also agreed to a continental nonimportation, nonconsumption, and nonexportation agreement and to “wholly discontinue the slave trade.” In all, the Continental Association was perhaps the most radical document of the period. It sought to unite and direct twelve revolutionary governments, establish economic and moral policies, and empower common colonists by giving them an important and unprecedented degree of on-the-ground political power.

***The Battle of Bunker Hill***

However, by the time the Continental Congress met again in May 1775, war had already broken out in Massachusetts. On April 19, 1775, British regiments set out to seize local militias’ arms and powder stores in Lexington and Concord. The town militia met them at the Lexington Green.

The British ordered the militia to disperse when someone fired, setting off a volley from the British. The battle continued all the way to the next town, Concord. News of the events at Lexington spread rapidly throughout the countryside. Militia members, known as minutemen, responded quickly and inflicted significant casualties on the British regiments as they chased them back to Boston.

Approximately twenty thousand colonial militiamen laid siege to Boston, effectively trapping the British. In June, the militia set up fortifications on Breed’s Hill overlooking the city. In the misnamed “Battle of Bunker Hill,” the British attempted to dislodge them from the position with a frontal assault, and, despite eventually taking the hill, they suffered severe casualties at the hands of the colonists.

While men in Boston fought and died, the Continental Congress struggled to organize a response. The radical Massachusetts delegates—including John Adams, Samuel Adams, and John Hancock—implored the Congress to support the Massachusetts militia, who without supplies were laying siege to Boston. Meanwhile, many delegates from the Middle Colonies—including New York, New Jersey, and Philadelphia—took a more moderate position, calling for renewed attempts at reconciliation. In the South, the Virginia delegation contained radicals such as Richard Henry Lee and Thomas Jefferson, while South Carolina’s delegation included moderates like John and Edward Rutledge. The moderates worried that supporting the Massachusetts militia would be akin to declaring war.

The Congress struck a compromise, agreeing to adopt the Massachusetts militia and form a Continental Army, naming Virginia delegate George Washington commander in chief. They also issued a “Declaration of the Causes of Necessity of Taking Up Arms” to justify the decision. At the same time, the moderates drafted an “Olive Branch Petition,” which assured the king that the colonists “most ardently desire[d] the former Harmony between [the mother country] and these Colonies.” Many understood that the opportunities for reconciliation were running out.

**Independence Enters the Debate**

In the opening months of 1776, independence, for the first time, became part of the popular debate. Town meetings throughout the colonies approved resolutions in support of independence. Yet, with moderates still hanging on, it would take another seven months before the Continental Congress officially passed the independence resolution.

A small forty-six-page pamphlet published in Philadelphia and written by a recent immigrant from England captured the American conversation. Thomas Paine’s Common Sense argued for independence by denouncing monarchy and challenging the logic behind the British Empire, saying, “There is something absurd, in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island.” His combination of easy language, biblical references, and fiery rhetoric proved potent, and the pamphlet was quickly published throughout the colonies.

***Martial Law Offers Slaves Freedom***

George Washington had taken control of the army and after laying siege to Boston forced the British to retreat to Halifax. In Virginia, the royal governor, Lord Dunmore, issued a proclamation declaring martial law and offering freedom to “all indentured servants, Negros, and others” if they would leave their masters and join the British.

Though only about five hundred to a thousand slaves joined Lord Dunmore’s “Ethiopian regiment,” thousands more flocked to the British later in the war, risking capture and punishment for a chance at freedom. Former slaves occasionally fought, but primarily served in companies called Black Pioneers as laborers, skilled workers, and spies

***Slaveholders Respond***

Dunmore’s proclamation unnerved white southerners already suspicious of rising antislavery sentiments in the mother country. Four years earlier, English courts dealt a serious blow to slavery in the empire. In Somerset v Stewart, James Somerset sued for his freedom, and the court not only granted it but also undercut the very legality of slavery on the British mainland. Somerset and now Dunmore began to convince some slave owners that a new independent nation might offer a surer protection for slavery. Indeed, the proclamation laid the groundwork for the very unrest that loyal southerners had hoped to avoid.

Consequently, slaveholders often used violence to prevent their slaves from joining the British or rising against them. Virginia enacted regulations to prevent slave defection, threatening to ship rebellious slaves to the West Indies or execute them. Many masters transported their enslaved people inland, away from the coastal temptation to join the British armies, sometimes separating families in the process.

**Congress Calls for Colonial Independence**

On May 10, 1776, nearly two months before the Declaration of Independence, the Congress voted on a resolution calling on all colonies that had not already established revolutionary governments to do so and to wrest control from royal officials. The Congress also recommended that the colonies should begin preparing new written constitutions. In many ways, this was the Congress’s first declaration of independence. A few weeks later, on June 7, Richard Henry Lee offered the following resolution:

Resolved, That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, Free and Independent States, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.

Delegates went scurrying back to their assemblies for new instructions and nearly a month later, on July 2, the resolution finally came to a vote. It passed 12–0, with New York, under imminent threat of British invasion, abstaining.

***The Declaration of Independence***

The passage of Lee’s resolution was the official legal declaration of independence, but, between the proposal and vote, a committee had been named to draft a public declaration in case the resolution passed. Virginian Thomas Jefferson drafted the document, with edits being made by his fellow committee members John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, and then again by the Congress as a whole. The famous preamble went beyond the arguments about the rights of British subjects under the British Constitution, instead referring to “natural law”.

The majority of the document outlined a list of specific grievances that the colonists had with British attempts to reform imperial administration during the 1760s and 1770s. An early draft blamed the British for the transatlantic slave trade and even for discouraging attempts by the colonists to promote abolition. Delegates from South Carolina and Georgia as well as those from northern states who profited from the trade all opposed this language, and it was removed.

Neither the grievances nor the rhetoric of the preamble were new. Instead, they were the culmination of both a decade of popular resistance to imperial reform and decades more of long-term developments that saw both sides develop incompatible understandings of the British Empire and the colonies’ place within it. The Congress approved the document on July 4, 1776. However, it was one thing to declare independence; it was quite another to win it on the battlefield.

The War for Independence

The war began at Lexington and Concord, more than a year before Congress declared independence. In 1775, the British believed that the mere threat of war and a few minor incursions to seize supplies would be enough to cow the colonial rebellion. Those minor incursions, however, turned into a full-out military conflict. Despite an early American victory at Boston, the new states faced the daunting task of taking on the world’s largest military.

In the summer of 1776, the British forces that had abandoned Boston arrived at New York. The largest expeditionary force in British history, including tens of thousands of German mercenaries known as Hessians, followed soon after. New York was the perfect location to launch expeditions aimed at seizing control of the Hudson River and isolating New England from the rest of the continent. Also, New York contained many loyalists, particularly among its merchant and Anglican communities.

In October, the British finally launched an attack on Brooklyn and Manhattan. The Continental Army took severe losses before retreating through New Jersey. With the onset of winter, Washington needed something to lift morale and encourage reenlistment. Therefore, he launched a successful surprise attack on the Hessian camp at Trenton on Christmas Day by ferrying the few thousand men he had left across the Delaware River under the cover of night. The victory won the Continental Army much-needed supplies and a morale boost following the disaster at New York.

An even greater success followed in upstate New York. In 1777, British general John Burgoyne led an army from Canada to secure the Hudson River. In upstate New York, he was to meet up with a detachment of General William Howe’s forces marching north from Manhattan. However, Howe abandoned the plan without telling Burgoyne and instead sailed to Philadelphia to capture the new nation’s capital. The Continental Army defeated Burgoyne’s men at Saratoga, New York.

**An Alliance with the French**

This victory proved a major turning point in the war. Benjamin Franklin had been in Paris trying to secure a treaty of alliance with the French. However, the French were reluctant to back what seemed like an unlikely cause. News of the victory at Saratoga convinced the French that the cause might not have been as unlikely as they had thought. A Treaty of Amity and Commerce was signed on February 6, 1778. The treaty effectively turned a colonial rebellion into a global war as fighting between the British and French soon broke out in Europe and India.

Howe had taken Philadelphia in 1777 but returned to New York once winter ended. He slowly realized that European military tactics would not work in North America. In Europe, armies fought head-on battles in attempt to seize major cities. However, in 1777, the British had held Philadelphia and New York and yet still weakened their position. Meanwhile, Washington realized after New York that the largely untrained Continental Army could not win head-on battles with the professional British army. So he developed his own logic of warfare that involved smaller, more frequent skirmishes and avoided major engagements that would risk his entire army. As long as he kept the army intact, the war would continue, no matter how many cities the British captured.

***The Surrender of Cornwallis***

In 1778, the British shifted their attentions to the South, where they believed they enjoyed more popular support. Campaigns from Virginia to South Carolina and Georgia captured major cities, but the British simply did not have the manpower to retain military control. And upon their departures, severe fighting ensued between local patriots and loyalists, often pitting family members against one another. The war in the South was truly a civil war.

By 1781, the British were also fighting France, Spain, and Holland. The British public’s support for the costly war in North America was quickly waning. The Americans took advantage of the British southern strategy with significant aid from the French army and navy. In October, Washington marched his troops from New York to Virginia in an effort to trap the British southern army under the command of General Charles Cornwallis.

Cornwallis had dug his men in at Yorktown awaiting supplies and reinforcements from New York. However, the Continental and French armies arrived first, quickly followed by a French navy contingent, encircling Cornwallis’s forces and, after laying siege to the city, forcing his surrender. The capture of another army left the British without a new strategy and without public support to continue the war. Peace negotiations took place in France, and the war came to an official end on September 3, 1783.

***The Costs of War***

Americans celebrated their victory, but it came at great cost. Soldiers suffered through brutal winters with inadequate resources. During the single winter at Valley Forge in 1777–1778, over 2,500 Americans died from disease and exposure. Life was not easy on the home front either. Women on both sides of the conflict were frequently left alone to care for their households. In addition to their existing duties, women took on roles usually assigned to men on farms and in shops and taverns.

Daughters of the Revolution

Abigail Adams addressed the difficulties she encountered while “minding family affairs” on their farm in Braintree, Massachusetts. Abigail managed the planting and harvesting of crops, in the midst of severe labor shortages and inflation, while dealing with several tenants on the Adams property, raising her children, and making clothing and other household goods. In order to support the family economically during John’s frequent absences and the uncertainties of war, Abigail also invested in several speculative schemes and sold imported goods.

While Abigail remained safely out of the fray, other women were not so fortunate. The Revolution was not only fought on distant battlefields. It was fought on women’s very doorsteps, in the fields next to their homes. There was no way for women to avoid the conflict or the disruptions and devastations it caused. As the leader of the state militia during the Revolution, Mary Silliman’s husband, Gold, was absent from their home for much of the conflict.

On the morning of July 7, 1779, when a British fleet attacked nearby Fairfield, Connecticut, it was Mary who calmly evacuated her household, including her children and servants, to North Stratford. When Gold was captured by loyalists and held prisoner, Mary, six months pregnant with their second child, wrote letters to try to secure his release. When such appeals were ineffectual, Mary spearheaded an effort, along with Connecticut Governor, John Trumbull, to capture a prominent Tory leader to exchange for her husband’s freedom.

Black Americans join the fight

Slaves and free black Americans also impacted (and were impacted by) the Revolution. The British were the first to recruit black (or “Ethiopian”) regiments, as early as Dunmore’s Proclamation of 1775 in Virginia, which promised freedom to any slaves who would escape their masters and join the British cause. At first, Washington, a slaveholder himself, resisted allowing black men to join the Continental Army, but he eventually relented.

In 1775, Peter Salem’s master freed him to fight with the militia. Salem faced British Regulars in the battles at Lexington and Bunker Hill, where he fought valiantly with around three dozen other black Americans. Salem not only contributed to the cause, he earned the ability to determine his own life after his enlistment ended. Salem was not alone, but many more slaves seized on the tumult of war to run away and secure their own freedom directly. Historians estimate that between thirty thousand and one hundred thousand slaves deserted their masters during the war.

Conclusion

The American Revolution freed colonists from British rule and offered the first blow in what historians have called “the age of democratic revolutions.” The American Revolution was a global event. Revolutions followed in France, then Haiti, and then South America. The American Revolution meanwhile wrought significant changes to the British Empire. Many British historians even use the Revolution as a dividing point between a “first British Empire” and a “second British Empire.”

At home, however, the Revolution created a new nation-state, the United States of America. By September 1783, independence had been won. What the new nation would look like, however, was still very much up for grabs. In the 1780s, Americans would shape and then reshape that nation-state, first with the Articles of Confederation, ratified in 1781, and then with the Constitution in 1787 and 1788.

Historians have long argued over the causes and character of the American Revolution. Was the Revolution caused by British imperial policy or by internal tensions within the colonies? Were colonists primarily motivated by constitutional principles, ideals of equality, or economic self-interest? Was the Revolution radical or conservative? But such questions are hardly limited to historians. From Abraham Lincoln’s use of the Declaration of Independence in the Gettysburg Address to twenty-first-century Tea Party members wearing knee breeches, the Revolution has remained at the center of American political culture. Indeed, how one understands the Revolution often dictates how one defines what it means to be American.

The Revolution was not won by a few founding fathers. Men and women of all ranks contributed to the colonies’ most improbable victory, from the commoners who protested the Stamp Act to the women who helped organize boycotts against the Townshend duties; from the men, black and white, who fought in the army to the women who contributed to its support. The Revolution, however, did not aim to end all social and civic inequalities in the new nation, and, in the case of Native Americans, it created new inequalities.

But over time, the Revolution’s rhetoric of equality, as encapsulated in the Declaration of Independence, helped highlight some of those inequalities and became a shared aspiration for future social and political movements, including, among others, the abolitionist and women’s rights movements of the nineteenth century, the suffragist and civil rights movements of the twentieth century, and the gay rights movement of the twenty-first century.