

# The American Revolution

## 1. Introduction

The American Revolution was an important event in the history of the United States. It is also called the War of Independence and the American Revolutionary War. It entailed some remarkable transformations--converting British colonists into American revolutionaries, and a cluster of colonies into a confederation of states with a common cause, but it was far more complex and enduring than the fighting of a war. As John Adams put it, "The Revolution was in the Minds of the people... before a drop of blood was drawn at Lexington" and it continued long past America's victory at Yorktown.

## 2. Background

Beginning in the 1600s, groups of people from England and other countries moved to North America to start a new life. They took control of the land, though Indigenous peoples had lived there for many years. The Europeans formed colonies. A colony is an area controlled by one country but located somewhere else. By 1763, Great Britain controlled a large part of eastern North America. Most of the colonists lived in 13 colonies along the coast of the Atlantic Ocean.

Before the 1760s the colonies had a lot of freedom even though they were under British rule. The British government was across the Atlantic Ocean, more than 3,000 miles (5,000 kilometers) away. The colonies had their own leaders and learned to solve their own problems.

In the 1760s, however, the British government tried to take more control over the colonies. One major reason for this was that Britain had spent a lot of money fighting in several wars. By the 1760s Britain decided that its American colonies should help to pay its debts.

## 3. Causes of the War

### 3.1. Geography and Timing

The American Revolution took place during a time referred to as the "Age of Enlightenment"; a time where statesmen, thinkers, and artists, began to think more critically about fundamental parts of society, and discussed ways of seeking systemic change. The Kingdom of Great Britain ruled a wide and sprawling Empire, often leaving its subjects a vast distance from the center. With an ocean between them, the distance between North America and Great Britain would initially lead to the idea of "salutary neglect". Following the adoption of the Massachusetts Charter of 1691, the colonists were largely allowed to manage their own affairs. Under this unofficial policy, royal authorities seldom interfered with the daily governing of the British North American Colonies. Though acts were passed that affected the British colonies as a whole, many regulations were not strictly enforced, and some were outright

ignored. During the time of this unofficial policy, the British North American colonial legislatures were empowered to autonomously rule their provinces on behalf of the Crown. Once this policy was lifted, conflict eventually arose. This conflict would become one of the main causes of the American Revolution.

### **3.2. Taxation without Representation**

After the end of the French and Indian War in 1763, the British government began implementing new taxes in the Thirteen Colonies. The war, fought by the British against the French for control of America, was very expensive.

Beginning with the Stamp Act of 1765, the British government wanted to use taxation to pay off their war debt. They justified the Stamp Act by saying the revenue raised would be used to protect the Thirteen Colonies during future conflicts, funding the continued presence of the British Army on the continent.

In the 150 years prior to the American Revolution, in practice, the Thirteen Colonies had a significant amount of political autonomy. As a result, the implementation of the Stamp Act was a shock – and the colonists heavily resisted the new law. They felt that they did not need the continued protection of the British Army, and that they had already significantly contributed to the war effort.

By March 1766, the Stamp Act had been repealed. However, the British government wanted to make it clear that they had ultimate political authority in the colonies. At the time, in British Parliament, the common belief was that the primary purpose of His Majesty's colonies was to raise revenue for the United Kingdom.

Therefore, the British continued passing new legislation, adjusting tax policy, and giving their officials on the ground more power to enforce the law and raise revenue – particularly in combatting smuggling, which had largely gone unregulated up to this point. The Townshend Acts (1767) were met with popular resistance, as was the Tea Act of 1773.

Patriot politicians and groups such as the Sons of Liberty argued that the British did not have the right to tax the colonies without their consent. At the time, colonists did not have elected representatives in British parliament, and as a result, colonists argued that the British did not have the right to collect tax revenue – coining the slogan “no taxation without representation”. With the Tea Act, violent rebellion increased, leading to the Boston Tea Party in December 1773.

The British were outraged by the brazen destruction of their goods, leading them to implement punitive measures against the colonies in March 1774, such as closing Boston Harbor, under the Coercive Acts. In response, colonial government bodies were set up to circumvent the British, such as the Committees of Correspondence, and the First Continental Congress convened in the fall of 1774.

### **3.3. The Navigation Acts**

Unjust Parliamentary taxation would ultimately become one of the main causes of the American Revolution. While much has been made of the importance of the Stamp Act,

Townshend Acts, and Tea Act as central causes of the American Revolution, this unjust taxation has its roots as far back as the 17th century. The Navigation Acts of 1651 served as a way to restrict colonial trade to England, making the British monarchy the only lifeline for the American colonies, and ensured that Great Britain would benefit from the rich resources that the American Colonies could provide. Specifically, the Navigation Acts declared that only English ships would be allowed to bring goods into England, and that any goods produced in the North American colonies, if exported, must be exported to Great Britain.

These Navigation Acts would become one of the longer-standing economic causes of the American Revolution and would create tensions between the British government and the Dutch who the colonists began trading less with due to the strict regulations. Although legal trade still existed between the two, the import duties were considerably high. Goods such as sugar, tobacco, and molasses were given additional duties, driving many to begin smuggling these goods into the colonies. Smuggling prompted renewals of, and changes to, the Navigation Acts through the years and the passage of new laws meant to inhibit smuggling in the American colonies. Years later, the Navigation Acts would also play a critical role in the timing of the Boston Tea Party, which is also considered to be one of the causes of the Revolutionary War.

### **3.4. Boston Massacre and Boston Tea Party**

To keep order, the British government sent soldiers to Boston, Massachusetts. On March 5, 1770, British soldiers fired shots into a crowd. Crispus Attucks and several other Americans were killed. This event became known as the Boston Massacre.

On the same day as the Boston Massacre, Parliament did away with most of the Townshend Acts. They kept a tax on tea, however. Then, in 1773, Britain passed a law that allowed a British company to sell tea more cheaply than colonial merchants. On December 16, 1773, colonists boarded British ships in Boston Harbor and threw their cargo of tea into the water. This event became known as the Boston Tea Party.

The Boston Tea Party is considered by many to be one of the main causes of the Revolutionary War. It was a catalytic event that deepened the growing divide between Great Britain and her American colonies. The event itself was the culmination of a series of tense meetings and negotiations involving the Sons of Liberty, tea consignees, and the meetings of the Body of the People that played out over multiple weeks. For years, a conflict had been building between Parliament and the American Colonies regarding Parliament's authority over the colonies.

The Tea Act of 1773 gave new life to the debate. Only 16 months would pass between the Destruction of the Tea and the "shot heard round the world" at the Battles of Lexington and Concord, marking the beginning of the American Revolution. The Destruction of the Tea would be described by John Adams as "The most magnificent movement of all," and would forever more be considered one of the leading causes of the Revolutionary War.

## **4. The Beginning of The War**

By this time, many colonists believed that their problems with Britain could not be worked out peacefully. They prepared to fight. They formed groups of soldiers called minutemen. The minutemen were to be ready to fight "at a minute's warning."

In April 1775, Britain sent a force to seize the colonists' military supplies in Concord, Massachusetts. Paul Revere and William Dawes rode through the countryside to warn the colonists that the British soldiers were coming. On April 19 a group of minutemen met the British in Lexington, a town on the way to Concord. After a short fight, the British moved on to Concord. Another group of American soldiers forced them to turn back. The Battles of Lexington and Concord began the American Revolution.

The Second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in May 1775. It brought together the military forces of the colonies to form the Continental Army. It put George Washington in charge of the army. Washington spent months preparing his troops for battle.

Meanwhile, the first major battle of the war took place at Bunker Hill, near Boston. The British captured Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775. But they lost so many soldiers that the colonists claimed victory. The battle encouraged the colonists.

## **5. Fighting for Independence**

Before 1776 most colonists did not want to break free from Britain. They wanted only to get Britain to do something about their complaints. But as the fighting spread, more colonists became convinced that they had to separate from Britain. Some colonists continued to side with the British. They became known as loyalists. Those who fought for independence were known as patriots. On July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence. With this document, the 13 colonies became the United States of America.

The Americans struggled against the larger and better-equipped British army. In the summer and autumn of 1776 the British forced George Washington's troops out of New York. The Americans were driven across New Jersey into Pennsylvania. On Christmas night, however, Washington crossed the Delaware River to return to New Jersey. He had 2,400 troops with him, and they soon won important battles at Trenton and Princeton, New Jersey. These victories kept the struggle for independence alive.

The turning point of the war was the Battles of Saratoga, in New York. On October 17, 1777, General Horatio Gates led the Continental Army to a great victory over the British. The victory helped to bring France into the war on the side of the new United States. France sent ships and soldiers.

The winter of 1777–78 was a very hard one for the Americans. Washington and his troops camped at Valley Forge, near Philadelphia. They suffered terribly from hunger and illness. But they emerged in the spring as a stronger fighting force. They defeated the British in Monmouth, New Jersey, on June 28, 1778.

In the last years of the war, most of the fighting took place in the South. In 1780 the British, led by General Charles Cornwallis, won battles in South Carolina. But in 1781, American and French forces trapped Cornwallis in Yorktown, Virginia. Cornwallis surrendered on October 19, 1781. The fighting was over.

The peace treaty was signed on September 3, 1783, in Paris, France. It was called the Treaty of Paris. By signing the treaty, Britain agreed that the United States was an independent country.

## **6. The Consequences of the American Revolution**

### **6.1. Creation of New State Governments**

After independence in 1776, the former colonies began creating written state constitutions, which was a major change from the unwritten British constitution. These constitutions were based on popular sovereignty, meaning that government power came from the people. Most states created weak governors and strong legislatures, expanded voting rights somewhat, and added bills of rights to protect individual freedoms. Pennsylvania adopted the most democratic constitution, allowing all free men to vote and establishing a single legislative body. Massachusetts created a more balanced system in 1780 with three branches of government and checks and balances, after a broad public debate and ratification process.

### **6.2. The Articles of Confederation**

In 1781, the Articles of Confederation were ratified to create a national government. However, the system was weak because Congress had no power to collect taxes, regulate trade, or establish a federal court system. Each state had only one vote in Congress, which limited the effectiveness of the central government and made national coordination difficult.

### **6.3. Changes in Politics and Society**

The Revolution led to greater political participation as more citizens gained the right to vote and became involved in government. Ordinary citizens, often called “new men,” began to hold political positions. Social hierarchy weakened as society became more egalitarian and less aristocratic, emphasizing merit rather than inherited status.

### **6.4. Economic Changes**

One of the most important long-term consequences was the end of mercantilism, the system that had restricted colonial trade and manufacturing under British rule. After independence, Americans could trade with new markets and expand manufacturing. Western lands also opened for settlement, creating new economic opportunities and domestic markets.

### **6.5. Women and “Republican Motherhood”**

Although women supported the Revolutionary cause through boycotts and wartime contributions, the Revolution did not grant them political equality. Instead, women were expected to play the role of “republican mothers,” responsible for educating and raising virtuous citizens. This expectation encouraged better educational opportunities for women but still kept them largely outside political life.

## **6.6. Loyalists and Exile**

Around 60,000 Loyalists (colonists who supported Britain) left the United States after the war. Many lost property despite promises in the Treaty of Paris (1783) to protect them. Loyalists settled in places such as Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, and Britain, often having to rebuild their lives far from their original homes.

## **6.7. Black Loyalists and Formerly Enslaved People**

Thousands of enslaved people who had supported Britain left with British forces after the war because they had been promised freedom. Many settled in Canada, the Caribbean, or Britain, and some later moved to Sierra Leone in Africa. Despite their freedom, Black Loyalists still faced discrimination and economic hardships.

## **6.8. Slavery and the Limits of Equality**

Revolutionary ideas of liberty encouraged some slaveholders to free enslaved people, and northern states began gradual emancipation laws. However, slavery remained strong in the Southern states. The contradiction between slavery and the Revolution's ideals of equality eventually contributed to growing antislavery movements and conflicts that would lead to major national divisions in the nineteenth century.

## **6.9. Impact on Native Americans**

Many Native American nations sided with the British, hoping they would stop American expansion westward. After the American victory, settlers moved rapidly into western territories. As a result, Native Americans were displaced and pushed farther west, marking the beginning of a long decline in their independence and control over their lands.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the American Revolution was a major turning point in world history. It was caused by growing tensions between the thirteen colonies and Great Britain, including issues such as heavy taxation, lack of political representation, and restrictions on colonial self-government. These problems led the colonists to demand greater rights and eventually to fight for independence. The revolution resulted in the creation of the United States and the establishment of a new political system based on ideas of liberty, democracy, and the rights of citizens.

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