

The story of the American Colonies break from the British Empire with an emphasis on it's leaders and causes from Lexington to Yorktown

[Page 2](#)

[Page 3](#)

[Page 4](#)

[Declaration Of Independence](#)

[John Adams](#)

[Franklin](#)

[A. Hamilton](#)

[John Hancock](#)

[Patrick Henry](#)

[Thomas Jefferson](#)

[James Madison](#)

[Tom Paine](#)

[G. Washington](#)

Care to express an opinion on a current or past historical event?

Need to ask a question from our many visitors?

Just visit our Forum and leave your message.

[Forum](#)

[Weekly Poll](#)

The American Revolution
Edited by: Robert Guiseppi
Date: 1999

The Background Of Revolution Revolution In The Western World

Introduction

The last four decades of the eighteenth century marked a decisive turning point in the history of Western Civilization. Before 1760, divine-right monarchy and aristocratic society were accepted as normal; after 1800, ever stronger voices would speak for civil liberties and constitutions - political concepts that are basic to modern societies. The intervening era had seen a fundamental revolution in thought and political life.



This age of revolution was nevertheless a culmination of earlier trends. As we have seen, developing European capitalism, expanding population, growing cities, and a rising middle class had partially undermined traditional monarchies by 1750. The Enlightenment, particularly its more radical variation, was also approaching maturity. Each of these trends - economic, social, and intellectual - converged when colonial conflicts were plaguing the Western maritime states. The American Revolution, resulting from one such conflict, was first. It encouraged a much more comprehensive French upheaval, which had been brewing for more than a century. These were but the two most dramatic examples of the resulting revolutionary wave that rolled over much of western Europe and America during the late 1700s.

The American and French revolutions provided later generations with a new set of values. The two heroic struggles critically weakened the Old Regime, identifying freedom with progress in the popular mind and projecting democracy, as well as emotional nationalism, into the nineteenth century. For most Western societies before World War I, the revolutions provided a special heritage. This was particularly true for Americans, whose liberal ideals were deeply rooted in the developing traditions of a new land and assimilated in the folklore of a popular culture. Even in Europe and the rest of the world, however, the revolutionary dream of human liberty has lingered into the twentieth century, notably among the emerging nations of Asia and Africa.

Unfortunately, the revolutionary ideals were not all realized in their own time. The rights of "all men," proclaimed with such solemn dignity in 1776 and repeated with ringing appeal in 1789, were denied to women and most black people, many of whom had fought and died for liberty. This omission would have to be corrected later, at the price of great strife and hardship.

The Background Of Revolution

Eighteenth-century revolutions can be explained by two sets of circumstances in their past. One of these was the momentous social change that outmoded institutions, disrupted traditional ways of life, and brought hardships or injustices. Such conditions became especially prevalent after the Seven Years' War in the 1760s. A second source of revolution can be found in ideas, some recently generated by the Enlightenment, and others, even older, derived from English precedents.

English Precedents

Eighteenth-century revolutionaries looked back with respect to the

1640s, when the English Parliament, after struggling to maintain its rights through two reigns, fought a civil war, executed a king, and established a republic. For one brief period, revolutionary soldiers had even proclaimed a democratic system, guaranteed by a written constitution. Although this effort failed and the republic ultimately produced an unpopular dictatorship, it could never destroy the traditional popular ideal of limited monarchy, functioning in cooperation with a representative Parliament.

After the monarchy was restored in 1660, Parliament continued its struggle against the last two Stuart kings. The Whig opposition party in Parliament forced the resignation of Charles II's first minister, imprisoned the second, excluded the king's Catholic supporters from public office, and provided individuals with legal security against arbitrary arrest and imprisonment. Such actions forced Charles to dismiss four Parliaments and face a serious political crisis during the last years of his reign. James II, who succeeded his brother in 1685, dismissed Parliament and attempted to rule as a despot, using a standing army, largely commanded by Catholics. His actions caused such universal opposition that James was forced to call a new Parliament, which he tried to pack with his supporters, but local officials would not cooperate. Finally, when his wife gave birth to a prince, who was widely regarded as a potential Catholic king, parliamentary leaders offered the English crown to William of Orange, the Protestant stadtholder of the Netherlands and husband of Mary, one of James' Protestant daughters by an earlier marriage.

William and his Dutch army, welcomed as deliverers, soon effected the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688, and James fled to exile in France. Because he needed English support for his war with France, William was ready to accept Parliament's conditions, enacted as the famous "Bill of Rights." This declaration provided that -

1. the king could not suspend laws.
2. no taxes would be levied or standing army maintained in peacetime without the consent of Parliament.
3. sessions of Parliament would be held frequently.
4. freedom of speech in Parliament would be assured.
5. subjects would have the right of petition and be free of excessive fines, bail, or cruel punishments.
6. the king would be a Protestant.

This document has exerted tremendous influence on developing constitutional governments, an influence that is seen in the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution.

Other parliamentary acts supplemented the Bill of Rights and consolidated the Revolution. In 1689, the Mutiny Act required parliamentary approval for extending martial law more than one year. Although Catholics were subjected to harsh new restrictions and non-Anglican Protestants were still excluded from public office, the Toleration Act (1689) gave all Protestants freedom of worship. In 1693, when Parliament failed to renew the customary Licensing Act, the country achieved practical freedom of the press. Finally, in the Act of Settlement in 1701, Parliament prescribed a Protestant succession to the throne and barred the monarch from declaring war, removing judges, or even leaving the country without parliamentary consent.

The Glorious Revolution permanently limited the English monarchy, guaranteed important legal rights, and helped popularize the ideal, if not the practice, of popular sovereignty. For these reasons it provided a model for Locke and hope for Voltaire and Montesquieu. In many respects, however, it was neither glorious nor revolutionary; it certainly did not establish democracy, for the country after 1688 continued to be governed by a minority of merchants and landowners.

Their control during the eighteenth century was exercised through the developing cabinet system. The first two Hanoverian kings, George I (1714-1727) and George II (1727-1760) were so ignorant of the English language and politics that they had to rely on chief advisors (prime ministers), who could maintain support in Parliament. Sir Robert Walpole (1676-1745) first held this post, managing a Whig political machine. Walpole insisted that the entire ministry (cabinet) should act as a body; single members who could not agree were expected to resign. Later, he learned the practicality of resigning with his whole cabinet, when he could not command a parliamentary majority. This pragmatically developed system of cabinet government and ministerial

responsibility provided the constitutional machinery needed to apply the principles of 1689, permitting Parliament to assert its supremacy and still avoid awkward conflicts with royal authority.

Behind the cabinet was Parliament and behind Parliament was a tight aristocratic organization. Membership in the House of Commons after 1711 was confined to those with high incomes from land. It represented an electorate of about 6000 voters. Two representatives were elected from each county by the lesser freeholders, but most of these seats were filled by arrangements among the great land-owning families. Of more than 400 members from the boroughs, or towns, most were named by prominent political bosses. The Duke of Newcastle, for example, held estates in twelve counties, was Lord Lieutenant of three, and literally owned seven other seats in Commons. The system that filled the seats also determined votes in Parliament. Here the bases of loyalty were public offices, army commissions, and appointments in the church. Local magnates extracted all manner of concessions from the king's ministers, who framed policies in accordance with the system. English politics, which had been so dynamic in the 1600s, thus became stagnant by the end of George II's reign.

Conditions Favoring Revolution After 1760

While the English parliamentary system became increasingly conservative in the eighteenth century, converging economic, social, and intellectual forces pointed in an opposite direction. Sugar and slavery were transforming the European and American economies, encouraging the growth of cities and expanding populations. At the same time, the Enlightenment, with its emphasis upon reason and utopian expectations of progress, was reaching full maturity. Finally, and most importantly for the immediate future, the costs of imperial competition created serious problems for European maritime states. The most obvious source of such problems was the great Anglo-French colonial war, which ended with the Peace of Paris in 1763. The war left both France and Britain burdened with unprecedented debts. Since the international financial system was centered in the Netherlands, Dutch neutrality aroused more tensions. In addition, the elimination of a common French enemy in Canada generated new frictions between Britain and the American colonies. As the greatest world empire, Britain was suspicious of all its neighbors, particularly France. The fear was justified, because France, recently stripped of possessions in Canada and India, was determined on humbling Britain, not only to satisfy French pride but also to accommodate an expanding economy. Large objectives but limited resources encouraged the French and British governments, as well as other states such as Austria, to tighten administration and raise taxes. These policies naturally encouraged popular unrest.

Alignment with Britain after 1689 caused difficulties for the Dutch, whose trade in the eighteenth century declined while that of Britain increased. This ultimately forced the Dutch economy to specialize in financing foreign state debts, a policy which tied the Netherlands closer to Britain and increased the threat of French invasion. When this conflict actually occurred in the 1740s, the Dutch lower middle classes demanded better relations with France; in 1747, they even attempted revolution. The situation not only caused agitation in the Netherlands but also encouraged British and French meddling in Dutch internal politics.

A continuing French aggressive foreign policy against Britain after 1763 was a flagrant refusal to face fiscal realities and therefore a direct contribution to impending revolution. The steadily mounting French debt after 1740 reached a point in the 1760s when taxes failed to meet even the interest payments. Dutch bankers were reluctant to provide new loans because of declining French credit and the close official ties between the Netherlands and Britain. In 1769, following a struggle with the nobles in the provincial courts, Louis XV abandoned tax reform, which might have shifted more revenue burdens to the French upper classes. The country was thus almost bankrupt when it entered war against England on the side of the American colonies, a venture that led to the complete breakdown of French finances in the 1780s.

Britain faced similar problems. With a debt in 1763 roughly double that of 1756, the government had to manage an empire that had tripled in size during those same years. The cost of administering the North American

colonies alone rose to 135,000 a year in 1763 - five times what it had cost in 1756. Colonials were determined to resist new taxation and were intent on occupying western lands held by former Indian allies of the French. The tribes were restless and difficult to pacify since many had fought on both sides and did not know what to expect from British rule; Pontiac's rebellion, between 1763 and 1766, kept the northwestern colonial frontier in a state of near-anarchy. Restoring order to this vast land promised to be a long and expensive process, involving many differences between the crown and its colonial subjects.

At the same time, the new king, George III (1760-1820), was causing a stir in English politics. He alienated many commercial and colonial interests by opposing an aggressive policy toward France. Moreover, he demonstrated a determined intention of wielding constitutional powers never claimed by his Hanoverian predecessors, who had been virtual captives of Whig politicians. It took George only a few years to destroy the power of the Whigs and gain control of Parliament. His ministers accomplished this by means of lavish bribery and patronage, using methods developed earlier by Walpole. By 1770, they had filled the House of Commons with their supporters, known as "the King's Friends." For twelve years, George was the effective head of government, but his policies made enemies and produced a determined opposition party.

Parliamentary opposition merged with popular agitation in the person of John Wilkes (1725-1797), a wealthy member of the Commons and publisher of a newspaper, *The North Briton*. Wilkes became an outspoken critic of the king's policies. When he was imprisoned by the government, Wilkes posed as the champion of civil liberties, becoming overnight the darling of the London populace; but despite preliminary victories in court, he was ultimately forced into exile. Returning from France in 1768, he was again elected to the Commons, again thrown into jail, and again became the center of a great public clamor. For a while, in the early 1770s, England experienced a mild threat of revolution, as people were killed in clashes between protestors and government troops.

This trouble at home was less serious, in the long run, than that provoked in the American colonies. George Grenville (1712-1770), the king's chief minister after 1763, devised a comprehensive plan to settle problems in North America. He forbade colonial settlement beyond the Appalachians, put Indian affairs under English superintendents, established permanent garrisons of English troops for maintenance of order on the frontiers, issued orders against smuggling, sent an English fleet to American waters, assigned English customs officials to American ports, and had Parliament impose new taxes on the colonies. The Sugar Act of 1764 increased duties on sugar, wines, coffee, silk, and linens. The Stamp Act of 1765 required that government stamps be placed on practically every kind of American document, from college diplomas to newspapers. Grenville's program aroused an almost universal colonial protest, immediately allied in spirit with Wilkes' movement in England.

[Back to Main menu](#)

A project by History World International

[World History Center](#)