

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

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The American Revolution, continued

Within a decade after passage of the Stamp Act, Britain faced open rebellion in its American colonies. The resulting conflict was also a civil war, with many colonists remaining loyal to the crown. Indeed, one of Benjamin

Franklin's sons was a Loyalist leader and the last royal governor of New Jersey. But a majority of the colonists, whether New England merchants, Pennsylvania farmers, or Virginia planters, formed a united opposition.

Their

outlook, combining Locke's political ideas with a spirit of rough frontier independence, was also nationalistic in its dawning awareness tht many English

ways were foreign to American needs and values.

A Revolution In Minds And Hearts

John Adams (1735-1826), looking back on the Revolution, was well aware of this developing American nationalism when he wrote in 1818:

But what do we mean by the American Revolution? Do we mean the American war? The Revolution was effected before the war commenced ... in the minds and hearts of the people ... This ... was the real American Revolution. ^1

From almost the beginning, the American colonies had developed in a direction different from England's. Most Puritan settlers in New England opposed the Stuart kings; hundreds went to fight against Charles I in the 1640s. At the restoration of Charles II, rebels fled again to America.

Catholics, who had been favored by the later Stuarts, were persecuted at home

after the Glorious Revolution, and many came to the colonies, particularly to

Maryland. By 1775, 40 percent of the colonial population had descended from

non-English stock, mostly from Ireland and southern Germany. The resulting

cultural mix fostered more toleration for differences than was typical of any place in Europe.

Experience in self-government conditioned colonial development. Except for an unsuccessful attempt under James II, England had allowed the colonies

relative freedom in conducting their own affairs. This was particularly true during the early eighteenth century, under the corrupt and static Whig oligarchy. Radical political opinion, driven deep underground in England after

1649, ran much nearer the surface in America. Educated colonists remembered

Locke's emphasis on the social contract and the right of revolution. These ideas appealed to people who had created their own governments in the wilderness and who were somewhat suspicious of a distant king. In contrast,

the ruling Whig politicians forgot Locke's revolutionary implications as they gained power and became proponents of stability.

Colonial political thought was shaped as much by growth as by circumstances, as over 2 million discontented Europeans arrived in the eighteenth century. The Irish and Scotch-Irish, who pushed the frontier to the

Appalachians, settled on free or cheap western land. Its easy availability popularized the idea that property was each individual's birthright.

Grenville's restriction on westward migration after 1763 therefore aroused much colonial resentment. His policy was generally interpreted as an English

effort to monopolize land for a privileged aristocracy. Land speculators, in condemning the English land policy by appealing to free enterprise, found common interests with craftsmen, merchants, and planters, who felt themselves

exploited by trade restrictions and credit controls. Expanding American enterprises and profits could not be easily accommodated within British mercantilism.

The peace of 1763, followed by the Grenville program, brought all the major differences between Britain and the colonies into focus. With the French

and Spanish out of Canada and Florida, colonists felt little need for British protection while yearning to settle the new lands. They were naturally angered

by new taxes and controls over trade, which were required by the rising costs

of the new stabilization program. British troops, under these circumstances,

were regarded as oppressors rather than defenders or peacekeepers. The changes

in British imperial policy came at just the time when they were least likely to be successful.

Confrontation, War, And Independence

Between 1763 and 1775, relations between England and the colonies grew steadily worse eventually erupting into open hostilities. Neither the king's government nor the colonists had foreseen or planned this result. The few American radicals who may have dreamed of a new political order did not advocate such ideas in this period, when most Americans wanted reforms to restore rights and redress grievances within the British system. The idea of an open break - of war and revolution - became acceptable only as reform efforts failed.

The first colonial protests came with the Grenville program, when the Sugar Act sparked outcries against "taxation without representation" in colonial newspapers and pamphlets. These reactions were mild, however, in comparison with those following the Stamp Act. Colonial assemblies in Massachusetts and New York denounced the law as "tyranny," and a "Stamp Act Congress" meeting in New York petitioned the king to repeal the law. Mob actions occurred in a number of places, but they were less effective than boycotts of English goods, imposed by a thousand colonial merchants. Soon hundreds of British tradesmen were petitioning Parliament, pleading that the taxes be rescinded. This was done in 1766, although Parliament issued a declaration affirming its absolute right to legislate for the colonies.

Having repealed the Stamp Act, Parliament almost immediately enacted other revenue measures. Charles Townshend (1725-1767), chancellor of the exchequer in the next cabinet, had Parliament levy duties on paint, paper, lead, wine, and tea imported into the colonies from Britain. The returns were to pay colonial governors and maintain troops garrisoned in America. Other laws established admiralty courts at Halifax, Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston, to sit without juries and enforce trade regulations. The decisions of these courts soon generated popular agitation. In Boston, this culminated on March 5, 1770, when soldiers fired into an unruly crowd, killing five people. Meanwhile, American merchants had entered nonimportation agreements that cut British imports by 50 percent. Again, commercial losses induced Parliament to repeal most of the duties, on the very day of the Boston massacre.

For a while, the colonies appeared angry but pacified, until Lord North (1732-1792), the king's new chief minister, blundered into another crisis. He persuaded Parliament to grant a two-thirds cut in duties on East India Company tea delivered to American ports. Because the Company could thus undersell smugglers and legitimate traders, both of these groups quickly converted to political radicalism. The tea was turned away from most American ports. In Boston, at the famous tea party, townsmen in Indian garb dumped the tea into the harbor. The English government retaliated in the "Intolerable Acts," by closing the port of Boston, revoking the Massachusetts Charter, and providing that political offenders be tried in England.

By September 1794, the crisis in Boston had created a revolutionary climate. Representatives of twelve colonies, meeting in the First Continental Congress at Philadelphia, denounced British tyranny, proclaimed political representation to be a natural right, and made plans for armed resistance. By the next April, the explosive situation around Boston had led to a conflict between British regulars and the Massachusetts militia. In battles at Lexington and Concord, near Boston, 8 Americans and 293 British soldiers were killed. Those shots "heard 'round the world" marked the beginning of the American Revolution.

The war begun at Lexington and Concord lasted eight years. At first, the American cause appeared almost hopeless, because the king's government was not inclined to compromise, wishing to make an example of the rebels. The prospect encouraged radical colonial leaders to fight on desperately. It was a time, as Thomas Paine wrote, "to try men's souls," but it was also a time for dreams of new liberties, new opportunities, and a new social justice that might come with independence.

The turning point of the war came in October 1777. Already occupying New York and Philadelphia, the British attempted to split the colonies by moving an army south from Canada. This army was forced to surrender after suffering a crushing defeat at Saratoga in upper New York. France, which had been cautiously helping the Americans, then signed an alliance guaranteeing American independence. Ultimately, the French persuaded their Spanish ally to enter the war. The Dutch also joined the alliance in a desperate effort to save their American trade. With their sea power effectively countered, the

British pulled their two main armies back to defensive positions in New York and on the Virginia coast. In the final campaigns of 1781, French and American troops, aided by the French fleet, forced the surrender of British commander Lord Cornwallis (1738-1805) to George Washington (1732-1799) at Yorktown in Virginia.

While the war continued, American radicals were creating a new nation. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, published early in 1776 as a spirited plea for liberty, heavily influenced popular opinion and helped convince the American Congress to break with England. In June, a special Congressional Committee drafted a formal statement of principles. The resulting Declaration of Independence, written by Thomas Jefferson, first announced the creation of the United States. In claiming for every individual "certain inalienable rights ... to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," it embodied typical radical appeals to natural law and the social contract.

[Footnote 3: William Macdonald, ed., *Select Documents Illustrative of the History of the United States* (New York: Bart Franklin, 1968), p. 2.]

Similar radical political principles, drawn from the Enlightenment, were espoused in the Articles of Confederation. This document, completed by the Congress in 1778 and ratified by the states three years later, established the new government as a loose league, much like the Dutch Republic. Taxation, control of trade, and issuance of money were all left to the sovereign states, each represented by one vote in Congress. Major decisions required the assent of nine states; amendments to the Articles had to be accepted by the states unanimously. Although Congress could make war and peace, maintain armies, and conduct Indian affairs, it was financially dependent on the states for these functions. The system was designed to protect liberties against a distant central government, dominated by the wealthy.

More obvious demonstrations of radical principles were provided by the new states, which were the real centers of political power. Their constitutions, often ratified in town meetings, manifested Locke's and Montesquieu's ideas concerning the separation of executive, judicial, and legislative function. "Bills of rights" typically guaranteed freedom of speech, press, and religion. Eleven of the thirteen states provided for separation of church and state. Many great loyalist estates were divided into small holdings, and property qualifications for voting were considerably lowered. These were but a few indications of applied radicalism during the war years.

The Conservative Reaction And The American Constitution

After the war ended in 1783, the Articles of Confederation provoked a strong conservative reaction. Some merchants wanted to send their goods to English ports. Others wanted a common stable currency and tariff protection against foreign goods. Wealthy people were frightened by popular uprisings, such as Shays' Rebellion in Massachusetts, and by inflation, caused by state issues of cheap paper currency. Moved by such concerns, prominent conservatives urged a reconsideration of the Articles. Their efforts led to the Constitutional Convention, which met at Philadelphia from May to September 1787. Since radicals, such as Patrick Henry (1736-1799), refused to attend the convention, delegates were united by their concerns for protecting property and maintaining order. Led by George Washington, Alexander Hamilton (1757-1804), Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), James Madison (1751-1836), and Charles Pinckney (1746-1825), they successfully compromised differences between large and small states, as well as those between mercantile New England and the plantation south. In the end, they succeeded in producing a document that strengthened the national government.

Despite the conservative views of its drafters, the Constitution affirmed some popular principles. It limited the autonomy of public officials, delegated specific powers to the states, and provided for state participation in the amending process. It thus retained some of the states' rights which were so important to the radicals.

The separation of powers was another fundamental principle of the Constitution. It was also revealed in the Constitution's careful definition of the functions ascribed to the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government. Congress was to make the laws, the president was to apply and

enforce them, and the courts were to interpret them. Other provisions prevented any one of the branches from becoming too independent and powerful.

The president, for example, could veto laws passed by Congress, but the legislature, by a two-thirds vote, could override a presidential veto. The Supreme Court later expanded its original charge of interpreting laws to interpreting the Constitution itself, thus acquiring the right to declare any law void as unconstitutional.

In recognizing the principle of popular sovereignty, the Constitution was similar to the Articles; it differed in its centralization of government and in its securities against disorder. Proclaiming itself as the supreme law of the land, it specifically prohibited the states from coining money, levying customs, or conducting foreign diplomacy. The president, as chief executive, commanded national military forces, an arrangement meant to protect against popular unrest and disorder. Most of the delegates at Philadelphia feared democracy and favored property qualifications on the franchise, a policy they abandoned only because it was politically impractical. They indicated their distrust of democracy, however, by avoiding the direct election of senators and presidents.

The process of ratifying the Constitution precipitated a great political debate. Congress, dominated by conservatives, ignored the amending provisions of the Articles and appealed directly to the states. Radicals everywhere were alarmed but were generally overwhelmed by arguments from the wealthier, more articulate, and better educated Federalists, who supported the Constitution. By promising written guarantees of individual liberties, the Federalists ultimately won the required nine states and the Constitution was formally adopted on July 2, 1788. Three years later, the first ten amendments guaranteed freedom of religion, speech, and the press, along with security against arbitrary government. Thus the radicals left a lasting legacy, despite the Federalist triumph.

After winning their greatest victory, the Federalists dominated American politics for more than a decade. George Washington was elected as the first president in 1789. His two administrations imposed a high tariff, chartered a national bank, paid public debts at face value, negotiated a commercial treaty with England, and opposed the French Revolution, which began in the year of Washington's election. Ironically, some French revolutionaries, such as Lafayette, who had helped win American independence, were bitterly denounced by American leaders a decade later.

Unfinished Business Of The American Revolution

The war for American rights and liberties left much unfinished business. The right to vote did not extend to all male citizens for decades, until changes were made in state constitutions, particularly in the developing western states. An even more flagrant omission involved blacks and women, who were denied freedom and full civil equality after the Revolution, despite their many contributions to the American cause.

Many women helped promote the Revolution. A few, like Mercy Warren, wrote anti-British plays and pamphlets; some published newspapers; and others organized boycotts against British goods. Female patriots in Philadelphia, including Benjamin Franklin's daughter, raised funds to buy shirts for Washington's troops. Women were often involved in dangerous exploits as spies and couriers. Seventeen-year-old Emily Geiger of South Carolina ate the message she was carrying to General Nathanael Green when she was captured by the British. She later delivered it verbally, after riding a hundred miles.

In addition to those who stayed home, some 20,000 women moved with the armies. Many were wives of Continental common soldiers, who marched on foot behind the troops, carrying their baggage and their children. In camp, they cooked, washed, and cared for their men, sometime foraging after battles among enemy dead for clothing and ammunition. A few saw combat, like the legendary Mary Hayes (Molly Pitcher) and Margaret Corbin, who continued to fire their husbands' artillery pieces after the men fell in battles at Fort Mifflin (1776) and Monmouth (1778). Corbin's husband was killed, and she was severely wounded in the arm and chest. The most famous female fighter in the Revolution was Deborah Sampson, an orphaned Connecticut schoolteacher, who donned men's

clothes and served for more than a year in Washington's army before she was discovered and honorably discharged.

Despite their sacrifices, American women gained few immediate improvements. They remained legally subordinated to their husbands in the disposition of property and practically denied the possibility of divorce. Reacting against these conditions, Abigail Adams and Mercy Warren both urged their husbands to promote legal and political equality for women during the Revolution. For a while, a mild feminism was publicly expressed. The New Jersey constitution of 1776 gave women the vote, and the same state's election law of 1790 permitted local boards to enfranchise women. But general indifference to the nascent women's movement led the New Jersey legislature to end female suffrage in 1807.

The conservative reaction was even stronger against blacks, who provided a major problem to leaders of the Revolution. Although slavery was already losing its practical value, it was still important in the southern plantation economy. Moreover, free northern blacks, including several hundred around Boston, were already becoming politically conscious. To many slaveholders, the situation promised violent black rebellion.

In response to this fear, blacks were at first banned from military service, despite the embarrassing facts that many free blacks had supported the Stamp Act protest. But when the British promised freedom to slave recruits and the supply of white American volunteers dwindled, Congress began enlisting blacks, promising slaves their freedom. Even before they could be legally recruited, black soldiers fought at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill, and they participated in every major battle afterward. They also served at sea, even on Virginia ships; but they were never admitted to the Virginia militia or to any military forces of Georgia and the Carolinas, although a contingent of Santo Domingo blacks under French command fought the British at Savannah. The southern adherence to slavery divided the new country, providing a major controversial issue at the Constitutional Convention.

Outside of the Deep South, a strong black emancipation movement developed during and immediately after the Revolutionary era. While more than 100,000 former slaves escaped to Canada, to the Indians, or to British sanctuary ships, many blacks, both free and slave, exploited the rhetoric of the Revolution to petition for their freedom and equality. Such petitions were supported by a growing number of white dissidents among Quakers and political activists, such as James Otis (1724-1783), Thomas Paine, Benjamin Rush (1745-1813), and Benjamin Franklin. In response, every state limited or abolished the slave trade; many owners, even in the south, freed their slaves; six state constitutions (Vermont, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey) abolished slavery; and practical legal emancipation was achieved in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Free Massachusetts blacks won the vote in 1783, a precedent slowly adopted by other free states.

Such gains, however, were offset by losses. Many blacks who had been promised their freedom were enslaved by their former masters and even by their new British friends. Laws against slavery were not always enforced. Even in the northern states, emancipation was often legally delayed for decades, so that in 1810 there were more than 35,000 slaves in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. The conservative reaction of the 1790s, stimulated by debates in the Constitutional Convention, and the invention of the cotton gin, which gave a new impetus to cotton planting, confirmed the south in its economic and emotional commitments to slavery. American slaves after the 1790s were further from "the rights of all men" than they had been before the Revolution. This injustice was the ultimate cause for a subsequent bloody and tragic civil war.

Impact Of The American Revolution Abroad

Even with its shortcomings, the American Revolution exerted a tremendous influence elsewhere in the world. Americans were generally regarded as having returned to a "state of nature" and then established a new government by a written social contract. As their republic promised freedom, maintained

order,
and achieved moderate prosperity, it seemed to validate the principles of
the
Enlightenment for literate peoples of western Europe, generating a wave of
revolutionary sentiment, from Ireland to Hungary.

The trend was evident, even in England. Before the Revolution, a number
of influential Englishmen, notably Edmund Burke (1729-1797), championed
the
American cause in Parliament and English radical reformers, like Major
John
Cartwright (1740-1824), welcomed American independence. Pro-American
enthusiasm languished after the war began, but it revived when American
fortunes improved after Saratoga. In 1779, reform societies sprang up in
London and in rural Yorkshire. The more radical London society grew into a
National Association, with delegates drawn from county organizations,
imitating the American town meetings, state conventions, and Congress.
The
Association welcomed American independence while calling for
parliamentary
reform.

Even more drastic changes occurred in Ireland. During the war, after
centuries of religious persecution and economic exploitation under English
rule, Henry Grattan (1746-1820) and Henry Flood (1732-1791), two leaders
of
the Irish Protestant gentry, exploited British weakness to obtain
concessions.
Having created an Irish militia, supposedly to protect the coasts against
American or French attacks, they then followed American precedents. In
February 1782 a convention at Dublin, representing 80,000 militiamen,
demanded
legislative independence. After the British Parliament subsequently agreed,
a
new Irish legislature could make its own laws, subject only to a veto by the
British king. Ireland thus acquired a status denied the American colonies in
1774.

Ireland's response to the Revolution was almost matched in the
Netherlands, where a popular movement, in sympathy with the Americans
and the
French, nearly ruined the Dutch economy. William V, the stadtholder and a
relative of the English royal family, was unjustly blamed for the nation's
misfortunes. Radical propaganda during the 1780s subjected his
government to
the most violent abuse, followed by uprisings in 1785 and 1787, which
forced
William to leave his capital. For a brief period, in the ensuing civil war,
"patriots" held most of the country. The revolt was suppressed only when
William's brother-in-law, the king of Prussia, sent 20,000 troops.

In France, revolutionary refugees from Holland found a congenial
atmosphere, decisively affected by American ideas. To French philosophical
radicals, the American Revolution proved their principles; to Frenchmen in
the
establishment, it promised a new and favorable diplomatic alignment
against
Britain. Consequently, radical ideas were no longer confined to learned
treatises but appeared everywhere in pamphlets, newspapers, and even in
the
theater. Aristocratic vanities and even royal formalities suddenly became
subjects for humorous comment; but, as one French noble observed, no one
"stopped to consider the dangers of the example which the new world set to
the
old."

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