

The Era of the American Revolution 1763-1800

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"It should be your care, therefore, and mine, to elevate the minds of our children and exalt their courage; to accelerate and animate their industry and activity; to excite in them an habitual contempt of meanness, abhorrence of injustice and inhumanity, and an ambition to excel in every capacity, faculty, and virtue. If we suffer their minds to grovel and creep in infancy, they will grovel all their lives."

—John Adams, *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, 1756

But the Day is past. The Second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more.

—John Adams, *Letter to Abigail*, July 3, 1776

"I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain."

—John Adams, *Letter to Abigail*, 1780

Introduction

This section covers the era of the American Revolution. The beginning of early American history takes us through 1763, when the colonies were developed to the extent that they had the capacity to become a separate nation. In fact, the Americans were already a different people by 1763, if for no other reason than through their physical separation from the mother country. It has been said that contact with a frontier environment changes people and the way they think, and there is much evidence to support that claim for American history well into the 19th century. Practices that were accepted as normal in the home country did not necessarily work in America, and skills that were undervalued in Europe offered a path to self-sufficiency for many American colonists. Life in the fields and forests of America was very different from life in the streets and alleys in London as well as in the British countryside.

We have also noted that there was a difference between the people who came to America, at least those who came voluntarily, and the people who did not. It took a certain character to leave one's hearth and home and family and travel across the ocean on a dangerous voyage into an uncertain future. The conditions that confronted the colonists when they arrived, especially in the early decades, must have caused them to rethink the way they intended to live their lives.

When John Adams said that the American Revolution had begun in the hearts and minds of the people long before the firing began at Lexington, he was referring to the era of the Stamp Act of 1765, the first piece of British legislation to get the colonials' backs up. One can argue, however, that the revolution began when the first colonists left their homes to settle in America. Most of them were, in a sense, already rebelling against a life that offered them few opportunities.

The trip to America was daunting; many did not survive the Atlantic voyage. Since large numbers of colonists came as indentured servants, their introduction to colonial America was often just as harsh and forbidding as life at home had been. The difference was that in America there was a light, however dim, at the end of the tunnel: if they could just hold out for the three to seven years of their indentures, they had an excellent chance of becoming landowners themselves, since cheap land in America was plentiful, especially on the frontiers.

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By the mid-1700s thousands of colonists either born in America or having arrived from Europe themselves had begun to take advantage of America's opportunities. Virtually all of them considered themselves British subjects, and few were unhappy with that notion. Indeed, many colonists had brought bits and pieces of English culture with them, as the names of colonial towns and villages make clear. As long as the British continued their policy of benign neglect of the colonies, everything was fine.

True, the navigation acts that placed costs and restrictions on trade could be cumbersome; the colonists, however, found that it was easy to skirt the navigation laws with little fear of being caught or punished. Merchants and farmers began to prosper, and while the large plantations in the South or the fine homes in Boston, New York, or Philadelphia could not rival those in London or the English countryside, they were by no means humble habitations.

Behind the growing contentment of the Americans was a readiness for rebellion based upon the notion that they had carved a new existence out of a demanding wilderness and would be ready to defend and protect their homeland against any intruders, even their British relations. At the conclusion of the long series of colonial wars that had begun before 1700 and continued until 1763, Great Britain found herself strapped financially. Suddenly the colonies were recognized as a source of revenue, and benign neglect ended; when that happened, the trouble began quickly.

As we shall see, it is ironic that the Americans who rebelled were in many ways the freest people in the civilized world in 1760. Until then the hand of government had touched them but lightly; even where British laws sought to control their lives, as with the navigation acts, Americans found it easy to work their way around the legal restrictions imposed by the Empire. In short, the colonists had gotten used to doing things their own way. When the British decided to change that and attempted to bring the Americans back into the fold, as they saw it from their perspective, the Americans were not so sure they wanted to go. In that sense, the American Revolution was not only about change, but about preserving a way of life to which the hardy colonists had grown accustomed. The colonists were used to being left alone; when the British ceased leaving them to their own devices, revolution of one sort or another was all but inevitable.

The Larger Revolutionary Era 1763-1800: Why those Dates?

Almost all American historians begin the Revolutionary Era with the year 1763. The Treaty of Paris of that year ended the Seven Years, or French and Indian War, and Great Britain, standing "astride the globe like a colossus," turned her attention to her colonies as a means of securing her frontiers and beginning to ease the huge debt that resulted from decades of war. The tensions between the colonists and the mother country, which had always been present to some degree, began to sharpen, and 12 years later the war broke out.



The ending date of the Revolution is not so easy to peg. The year 1783, which brought the Treaty of Paris and official recognition of American independence is certainly one possible date. Many historians extended the date to 1789, the year in which the Constitution went into effect. Certainly there is a logic in that, for it is clear that the colonies-become-states could not have survived and prospered under the Articles of Confederation, and so it is fair to argue that without the Constitution the revolution would not have been fully complete.

This author will argue that the revolution was sealed to a great extent in the year 1800 when a Republican president and a Republican Congress replaced the Federalists, who had been in power for 12 years under presidents Washington and Adams. Thomas Jefferson recognized the significance of 1800 when he called the election of that year a "revolution"; what Jefferson meant was that for the first time in the modern world, political power at the top of a nation had changed hands without the shedding of blood. There is good reason to endorse Jefferson's claim and to say that once the democratic process had demonstrated that there could be an orderly transfer of power in United States, then the true goal of the revolution had been achieved.

Despite the often contentious nature of our modern elections, we take it for granted that power will regularly change hands without bloody rioting. But in the 1790s that was no certainty, for the country was in perhaps the most agitated political state in which it had ever found itself, with the exception of the civil war years. At least one noted historian has argued that had the Republicans not won the election of 1800, the country might well have broken up or resorted to violence. Although we associate secession with the Civil War era, it was openly discussed even at that time, as the different areas of the country found themselves unable to agree on the proper course of the American nation under a Constitution which had, in some respects, been left deliberately vague.

The 1790s do, then, belong to the formative years of the Revolution, for even after the Constitution was adopted, a certain time was required for the meaning of it all to begin to settle in. For good reasons strong disagreement as to what was the true meaning of the Revolution—and even of the Constitution—existed for some time.

Thus we are setting 1800 as the end date for the revolutionary era. In a real sense, however, the American Revolution has never ended, for as we debate our political differences and argue over laws, courts, politicians, and administrators, we continue to define the meaning of the American Revolution and American democracy.

The Legacy of the Revolution

Although much has changed in the 200 odd years since our revolution concluded, it is still safe to say that the American Revolution can still teach us much about ourselves as a nation. We are descendants of those early Americans, and many of the ideas they passed on to their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren are still alive, however faintly, in the United States today.

One example of the leftover legacy of the colonial era is the fact that in the northeastern states and out into the Midwest, government is organized down to the village level. That local autonomy has its roots in the concept of the New England town meeting and the practice of Congregationalism. Those Northeasterners didn't need nor desire help from above. The South was organized differently, into parishes. And as the Anglican church was organized into parishes or diocese, counties tended to be the locus of government and many of the southern states. Indeed, Louisiana still refers to counties as parishes. Here in Northern Virginia where our college is located, local government as it exists in the North is hard to find. Throughout Fairfax County, for example, there are many areas such as Springfield, Burke, Great Falls, Lorton, and others, but the governing authority is that of Fairfax County, with the exception of two small cities within the county limits.

When Max Weber, the German political economist, wrote his most famous work, the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, he had in mind the workings of New England Puritanism, outlined by philosophers such as Benjamin Franklin. Belief in hard work, individualism, making the most of opportunities, making efficient use of time, not wasting one's resources, are all things that many Americans think of as guiding principles today. But they find their roots in pre-revolutionary America. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis expressed this fundamental American idea when he wrote: *"The makers of the Constitution conferred the most comprehensive of rights and the right most valued by all civilized men—the right to be let alone."*

The American Revolution lived into the future in other ways. During the American Civil War both sides felt they were fighting to protect the legacy of the Revolution—the North to protect the Union so painfully created, and the South to defend what it conceived as the right to manage its own affairs. The American Revolution also stretched far beyond our shores—it was an event that touched the world. When North Vietnamese communist Ho Chi Minh wrote his country's Declaration of Independence, he quoted Thomas Jefferson. It is also interesting to compare our Revolution with the French Revolution—Some of the same players were involved, and there were certain similarities in the fundamental causes.

The Historic Significance of the Revolution: Points to Ponder

- The American Revolution can still teach us much about ourselves as a nation.
- We can also understand subsequent historic events more clearly:
- During the American Civil War both sides felt they were fighting for the legacy of the Revolution;
- The American experience in Vietnam had similarities with the Revolutionary War.
- The American Revolution stretched far beyond our shores—it was an event that touched the world.
- It is interesting to compare our Revolution with the French Revolution—some of the same players were involved, but the results were very different.

SUMMARY OF CONDITIONS IN 1763:

In 1763 the French had been driven out of North America, and the British Empire covered about half of North America. Although Great Britain was still a very wealthy nation, the government was nevertheless deeply in debt. The officers who had fought in America during the French and Indian War carried reports of American prosperity when they returned home. The American population had grown large enough, and the colonists were prosperous enough for Parliament to take notice. There were bills to be paid, and the British government decided it was time for the colonies to pay their share. The colonists didn't necessarily see it that way. They had their own bills to pay, and a certain sense of differentness from Great Britain had been around for some time. Besides, the colonists had provided troops to support the colonial wars and considered that they had already made a substantial contribution to the British war costs. Nevertheless, at that time few if any Americans were thinking about a formal separation, that is independence, from Great Britain.

Furthermore, the Enlightenment, which we have already discussed, generated new ways of thinking about how the world functions and how it could function better. The idea of republicanism (democracy), although not yet highly developed, was gaining currency in some quarters. For some of a more conservative bent, it was considered a highly radical concept and was not well received, especially among the ruling classes. For many, republicans were seen as wild eyed fanatics who favored mob rule. Because of the nature of life in colonial America, where birthright and inherited benefits carried relatively little weight, progressive ideas such as republicanism found much more fertile ground in which to develop on the American side of the Atlantic. Americans were also well versed in political philosophy from reading John Locke and others. American ideology also heavily emphasized the idea of "virtue" as a necessary component of political structure—another idea from the Enlightenment.

As Great Britain began to tighten the screws on the colonists after 1763, the colonists struggled to maintain the status quo which had existed before the French and Indian War. Americans assumed that their own colonial legislatures were the equivalent of Parliament. They believed that since they were not represented in Parliament, only their own colonial assemblies could tax them. Americans still believed in the British Constitution, though they saw it somewhat differently from many British. In conclusion, although there was no conscious thought of independence in America in 1763, Americans quickly began to see that in many ways they were drifting farther apart from their British cousins.

Theories of Revolution

Many theories of revolution exist, but they do not always explain what happened in America. For example, one assumed necessary ingredient of revolution is widespread economic discontent, yet the average American was in general as well off as anyone in the world at that time. While it was true that there were few persons of great wealth in the American colonies, there was almost certainly far less poverty than in many of the European nations among the poorest classes. Yet revolutions do tend to have certain things in common. It is interesting to note that four major revolutions in modern times—the English, American, French and Russian—all began with government trying to get more money out of the people. What does that bode for modern America? It is clear that the sharpest single issue for the Americans was "taxation without representation."

In any case, revolutions necessarily start with discontent of some sort, but it is not always clear to what extent wrongs are real or merely perceived. In the end, it probably does not matter. Another factor that certainly played a part in the American Revolution was the idea of republicanism, that is, government by representatives of the people. When the colonists adopted the motto of taxation without representation, they understood well exactly what that meant. It was not yet quite the same as true democracy, where the people have direct input regarding governmental decisions; rather, it meant that government was in the hands of those who represented the people's interest rather than in the hands of those who had inherited power through divine right or otherwise.

The concept of republicanism was a radical idea in the late 18th century. Among the ruling classes, republicanism was seen as an alien notion advocated by wild eyed fanatics who favored mob rule. Since the colonials from earliest times had governed themselves in most matters, the people they chose to handle their affairs came necessarily from members of their own society. From the House of Burgesses in Virginia to the New England town meeting, Americans were practiced in the art of republicanism. In that regard they were far more progressive than their European cousins.

Following from that idea, the Americans assumed that their own colonial legislatures were the equivalent of Parliament. They believe that since they were not represented in Parliament, only their own assemblies could tax them. Those ideas were sorely tried by the British. In addition, Americans were well-versed in political philosophy from reading John Locke and others. American ideology also heavily emphasize the idea of "virtue" as a necessary component of political structure—also an idea from the Enlightenment.

Bottom Line: Although the French are out of North America, there is no thought of independence as early as 1763, but Americans do perceive sharp differences between themselves and their British cousins. The seeds of revolution have been sowed and will soon begin to grow.



In order for a great conflagration to be ignited in human society, it is usually necessary that each party to the dispute make miscalculations concerning the intent and the courage of its adversary sufficiently profound to allow it to proceed on a course that will inevitably bring disaster.

—Page Smith, *A New Age Now Begins* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976) vol I, p. 428.

The foundation of our Empire was not laid in the gloomy age of Ignorance and Suspicion, but at an epic when the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined, than at any former period.

—George Washington

Eugène Delacroix, 1830
"Liberty Leading the People"
Oil on Canvas
Louvre, Paris

DON'T TREAD ON ME

Revolutionary Classes

We tend to think of the American Revolution as having been led from the top, by people like Washington, Jefferson, Adams and others. The ordinary working-class people, however, did not need much prodding to take up the revolutionary cause. After all, it was the foot soldiers who ended up fighting the revolution any war. Although the power of rhetoric as provided by leaders can inspire and motivate from the top, the sting tends to go out after a while unless the people buy into the ideas being put forth. The American people bought into those ideas with vigor, despite the many who remained loyal to the Crown.

The top tier leaders of the revolution were the American aristocracy, men of "striking respectability and social standing." The 56 signers of the Constitution were educated men—they included 22 lawyers, 5 doctors, 11 merchants and 12 ministers or ministers sons. Thus the "establishment"—to borrow a modern phrase—provided the leadership. There were moderates and extremists among them, but most eventually embraced independence.

Another important question to ask about the revolution is whether anything substantial really changed. Most revolutions include things like transfer of property from one group to another, changes in the ruling classes, changes in attitudes about institutions and practices or changes in the institutions themselves, and none of those things seem to have been major outcomes of the American Revolution.

On the other hand, as historian Gordon Wood has pointed out, the American Revolution was one of the most radical events in modern history. What it did change was the fundamental relationship between the government and the people. The idea of virtue, mentioned above, was seen as important in a Republican society. In the society that evolved from the American Revolution, the virtue to be found in government necessarily resided with the people. It was, as Lincoln famously said, a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. If the people lacked virtue, the government was sure to fail.

So what can we say about the real causes of the American Revolution? First, the colonists had developed a sense of national identity—the isolation of the colonial period evolved into a spirit of common interest. As Ben Franklin said, "We had best hang together, or we shall surely hang separately." That national identity was facilitated in part by the fact that the colonies had an efficient Postal Service, and as revolutionary feelings developed, the colonial legislatures established committees of correspondence so that the other colonies would know what each of them had in mind.

Patrick Henry's "Liberty or Death" speech also showed unity of purpose. Evidence existed that people felt bound to each other. The Revolution began in the early 1760s with Otis's protest against Writs of Assistance. John Adams claimed it began in the "Hearts and Minds" with the Stamp Act of 1765. As we said above, the seeds of rebellion had actually been planted when the colonial settlements became established.

In outlining the causes of the Revolution we must acknowledge that in many ways, the British had no one to blame but themselves; their governance of the colonies was an unending stream of insensitivity and inflexibility: the real cause of the war was "imperial mismanagement"—they failed to consult the colonists on almost all major policy issues, feeling that what was good for the Empire was good for all its parts. They insisted upon treating the colonies as "dependent children." Connected to that failure was the British idea of "virtual representation," which the colonists rejected. Even so, Americans read the worst possible motives into everything the British did, and exaggerated their complaints, even in the Great Declaration (which has been called by another historian the "defense brief for the treason trial.") But though they may have exaggerated what they saw as British intentions, there was plenty of fuel for the fire.

The real key to the idea of revolution (in the opinion of your author) is that prior to the American revolution, the responsibility for honest, virtuous, or just plain good government, resided in the hands of the power structure—the aristocracy. From 1776 onward, that responsibility lies in the hands of the people. Tom Paine made that point most eloquently in his pamphlet [Common Sense](#). Thus, as Gordon Wood says, the American Revolution was "the most radical and far-reaching event in American history." On the other hand, principles were involved, and perhaps Americans saw those principles more clearly than most in 1770. Bottom line: the American Revolution could have been avoided, but sooner or later America was bound to become independent.

Leadership in the American Revolution

When we reflect on the leadership of the Revolutionary generation, we tend to focus on the names with which we are all familiar: Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton, Franklin, and so on. There is no question that those men guided the revolution successfully to its conclusion. All the same, we should not assume that the ordinary people blindly followed the lead of those monumental figures. A great deal of the impetus for the move toward independence came from the ranks of the working classes.

Leadership at the local level was instrumental in the resistance movement against British dominance of the American colonies. Particularly in the middle Atlantic and northeastern colonies, people became aware of what they considered to be the oppressive tactics not only of the British government, but of British business interests. As the colonists struggled to create a viable independent economy, they were often thwarted by British merchants and financiers. They began to boycott local businessmen who seem to kowtow to British interests. Memories of the impact of the navigation acts that clearly favored British over colonial interests fueled the resentment felt by American working class people.

Those revolutionaries at the working class level could not be described as "wild-eyed radicals," as is often assumed when one thinks of revolutionary leaders. They were thoughtful, sober people who really wanted their own interest protected. At the top level of the spectrum of revolutionary leaders, many could almost be described as boring in their lack of revolutionary passion. Washington was a very non-revolutionary figure who was one of the least radical Americans, yet he was technically guilty of treason.

American leaders were the American aristocracy, men of "striking respectability and social standing." The 56 signers of the Constitution were educated men (22 lawyers, 5 doctors, 11 merchants, 12 ministers or ministers' sons.)

When it came to actually fighting the Revolutionary War, we should note that the rank-and-file soldiers often come from the working classes. They fought hard and suffered a great deal, risking everything in the revolutionary cause. How the British would have dealt with the revolutionaries had the Americans not won the conflict is difficult to determine, though the example of officers like Banastre Tarleton in the South might provide a hint. As Franklin said, "We must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately." Whether mass hangings would have taken place is questionable, but there would have been harsh punishments all around.

How Successful Are Revolutions?

One important question regarding revolutions is whether they change anything substantial. Of course any social upheaval that rises to a level that can be called revolution is going to make changes. That does not necessarily mean they are successful. Revolutionary activities sometimes backfire, and can result in worse conditions rather than improvements. In most cases, it can be said that revolutions are at least partially successful, though sometimes the changes made are not permanent. For example, the French Revolution overthrew the monarchy, and King Louis XVI was executed, which created the first French Republic. After the fall of

Napoleon, however, the monarchy was restored under Louis XVIII.

There are certain elements generally regarded to be part of revolutions. They include such things as the transfer of property from one group of citizens to another, changes in the ruling classes, and changes in institutions such as the church, or elements of government, and how they are regarded by the people. The American Revolution certainly changed the way the government was structured, but the other elements seem to have been lacking.

What were the real causes of the American Revolution?

Among the causes was a growing sense of national identity. Being isolated from the mother country, the colonists developed a spirit of common interest. The colonies had an effective postal service, which to enhance communication between the different regions. As revolutionary ideas spread throughout the country, committees of correspondence were formed to share information among the colonial legislatures. With the Revolutionary war approaching,, Patrick Henry's "Liberty or Death" speech showed unity of purpose—evidence existed that people felt bound to each other.

There was, in fact, a growing sense of discontent among the colonial people, and they had no avenues for the redress of grievances. In the end it was an anticolonial war that eventually resulted in independence. In many ways the British had no one to blame but themselves; their governance of the colonies was an unending stream of insensitivity and inflexibility. Thus the real cause of the war was imperial mismanagement—the British failed to consult the colonists on almost all major policy issues, feeling that what was good for the Empire was good for all its parts, all the while treating the colonies as "dependent children."

The Nature of the American Revolution

For much of American history the American Revolution was considered to be a conservative revolution, one that made no fundamental changes beyond the removal of the King as the head of state. But Gordon Wood, in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, a 1988 book (and a Pulitzer Prize winner), makes a number of interesting points about the American Revolution and suggests that in terms of social change the American Revolution was "as radical as any in history." It destroyed the concept of an aristocracy, gave status to the working classes and brought respectability to ordinary people.

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In sum, if not inevitable, the American Revolution was “The most radical and far-reaching event in American history.” Whether or not it occurred when it did, sooner or later America was bound to become independent.

[Revolution Home](#) | [Background 1761-1774](#) | [War 1775-1777](#) | [1778-1783](#) | [Updated January 4, 2017](#)

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