

# The Road to Revolution

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1763–1775

*The Revolution was effected before the war commenced.  
The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people.*

JOHN ADAMS, 1818

Victory in the Seven Years' War made Britain the master of a vastly enlarged imperial domain in North America. But victory—including the subsequent need to garrison ten thousand troops along the sprawling American frontier—was painfully costly. The London government therefore struggled after 1763 to compel the American colonists to shoulder some of the financial costs of empire. This change in British colonial policy reinforced an emerging sense of American political identity and helped to precipitate the American Revolution.

The eventual conflict was by no means inevitable. Indeed, given the tightening commercial, military, and cultural bonds between colonies and mother country since the first crude settlements a century and a half earlier, it might be considered remarkable that the Revolution happened at

all. The truth is that Americans were reluctant revolutionaries. Until late in the the day, they sought only to claim the “rights of Englishmen,” not to separate from the mother country. But what began as a squabble about economic policies soon exposed irreconcilable differences between Americans and Britons over cherished political principles. The ensuing clash gave birth to a new nation.

## The Deep Roots of Revolution

In a broad sense, America was a revolutionary force from the day of its discovery by Europeans. The New World nurtured new ideas about the nature of society, citizen, and government. In the Old World, many

humble folk had long lived in the shadow of graveyards that contained the bones of their ancestors for a thousand years past. Few people born into such changeless surroundings dared to question their lowly social status. But European immigrants in the New World were not so easily subdued by the scowl of their superiors. In the American wilderness, they encountered a world that was theirs to make afresh.

Two ideas in particular had taken root in the minds of the American colonists by the mid-eighteenth century: one was what historians call *republicanism*. Looking to the models of the ancient Greek and Roman republics, exponents of republicanism defined a just society as one in which all citizens willingly subordinated their private, selfish interests to the common good. Both the stability of society and the authority of government thus depended on the virtue of the citizenry—its capacity for selflessness, self-sufficiency, and courage, and especially its appetite for civic involvement. By its very nature, republicanism was opposed to hierarchical and authoritarian institutions such as aristocracy and monarchy.

A second idea that fundamentally shaped American political thought derived from a group of British political commentators known as “radical Whigs.” Widely read by the colonists, the Whigs feared the threat to liberty posed by the arbitrary power of the monarch and his ministers relative to elected representatives in Parliament. The Whigs mounted withering attacks on the use of patronage and bribes by the king’s ministers—symptoms of a wider moral failure in society that they called “corruption,” in the sense of rot or decay. The Whigs warned citizens to be on guard against corruption and to be eternally vigilant against possible conspiracies to denude them of their hard-won liberties. Together, republican and Whig ideas predisposed the American colonists to be on hair-trigger alert against any threat to their rights.

The circumstances of colonial life had done much to bolster those attitudes. Dukes and princes, barons and bishops were unknown in the colonies, while property ownership and political participation were relatively widespread. The Americans had also grown accustomed to running their own affairs, largely unmolested by remote officials in London. Distance weakens authority; great distance weakens authority greatly. So it came as an especially jolting shock when Britain after 1763 tried to enclose its American colonists more snugly in its grip.

## Mercantilism and Colonial Grievances

Britain’s empire was acquired in a “fit of absent-mindedness,” an old saying goes, and there is much truth in the jest. Not one of the original thirteen colonies except Georgia was formally planted by the British government. All the others were haphazardly founded by trading companies, religious groups, or land speculators.

The British authorities nevertheless embraced a theory, called mercantilism, that justified their control over the colonies. Mercantilists believed that wealth was power and that a country’s economic wealth (and hence its military and political power) could be measured by the amount of gold or silver in its treasury. To amass gold or silver, a country needed to export more than it imported. Possessing colonies thus conferred distinct advantages, since the colonies could both supply raw materials to the mother country (thereby reducing the need for foreign imports) and provide a guaranteed market for exports.

The London government looked on the American colonists more or less as tenants. They were expected to furnish products needed in the mother country, such as tobacco, sugar, and ships’ masts; to refrain from making for export certain products, such as woolen cloth or beaver hats; to buy imported manufactured goods exclusively from Britain; and not to indulge in bothersome dreams of economic self-sufficiency or, worse, self-government.

From time to time, Parliament passed laws to regulate the mercantilist system. The first of these, the Navigation Law of 1650, was aimed at rival

*Adam Smith (1723–1790), the Scottish “Father of Modern Economics,” frontally attacked mercantilism in 1776:*

“To prohibit a great people, however, from making all that they can of every part of their own produce, or from employing their stock and industry in the way that they judge most advantageous to themselves, is a manifest violation of the most sacred rights of mankind.”

Dutch shippers trying to elbow their way into the American carrying trade. Thereafter all commerce flowing to and from the colonies could be transported only in British (including colonial) vessels. Subsequent laws required that European goods destined for America first had to be landed in Britain, where tariff duties could be collected and British middlemen could take a slice of the profits. Other laws stipulated that American merchants must ship certain “enumerated” products, notably tobacco, exclusively to Britain, even though prices might be better elsewhere.

British policy also inflicted a currency shortage on the colonies. Since the colonists regularly bought more from Britain than they sold there, the difference had to be made up in hard cash. Every year gold and silver coins, mostly earned in illicit trade with the Spanish and French West Indies, drained out of the colonies, creating an acute money shortage. To facilitate everyday purchases, the colonists

resorted to butter, nails, pitch, and feathers for purposes of exchange.

Currency issues came to a boil when dire financial need forced many of the colonies to issue paper money, which swiftly depreciated. British merchants and creditors squawked so loudly that Parliament prohibited the colonial legislatures from printing paper currency and from passing indulgent bankruptcy laws—practices that might harm British merchants. The Americans grumbled that their welfare was being sacrificed for the well-being of British commercial interests.

The British crown also reserved the right to nullify any legislation passed by the colonial assemblies if such laws worked mischief with the mercantilist system. This royal veto was used rather sparingly—just 469 times in connection with 8,563 laws. But the colonists fiercely resented its very existence—another example of how principle could weigh more heavily than practice in fueling colonial grievances.

## The Merits and Menace of Mercantilism

In theory the British mercantile system seemed thoroughly selfish and deliberately oppressive. But the truth is that until 1763, the various Navigation Laws imposed no intolerable burden, mainly because they were only loosely enforced. Enterprising colonial merchants learned early to disregard or evade troublesome restrictions. Some of the first American fortunes, like that of John Hancock, were amassed by wholesale smuggling.

*The Boston Gazette declared in 1765,*

“A colonist cannot make a button, a horseshoe, nor a hobnail, but some snooty ironmonger or respectable buttonmaker of Britain shall bawl and squall that his honor’s worship is most egregiously maltreated, injured, cheated, and robbed by the rascally American republicans.”

*English statesman Edmund Burke  
(1729–1797) warned in 1775,*

“Young man, there is America—which at this day serves for little more than to amuse you with stories of savage men and uncouth manners; yet shall, before you taste of death, show itself equal to the whole of that commerce which now attracts the envy of the world.”

debasing. They felt used, kept in a state of perpetual economic adolescence, and never allowed to come of age. As Benjamin Franklin wrote in 1775,

*We have an old mother that peevish is  
grown;  
She snubs us like children that scarce walk  
alone;  
She forgets we're grown up and have sense  
of our own.*

Revolution broke out, as Theodore Roosevelt later remarked, because Britain failed to recognize an emerging nation when it saw one.

Americans also reaped direct benefits from the mercantile system. If the colonies existed for the benefit of the mother country, it was hardly less true that Britain existed for the benefit of the colonies. London paid liberal bounties to colonial producers of ship parts, over the protests of British competitors. Virginia tobacco planters enjoyed a monopoly in the British market, snuffing out the tiny British tobacco industry. The colonists also benefited from the protection of the world's mightiest navy and a strong, seasoned army of redcoats—all without a penny of cost.

But even when painted in its rosiest colors, the mercantile system burdened the colonists with annoying liabilities. Mercantilism stifled economic initiative and imposed a rankling dependency on British agents and creditors. Most grievously, many Americans simply found the mercantilist system

## **The Stamp Tax Uproar**

Victory-flushed Britain emerged from the Seven Years' War holding one of the biggest empires in the world—and also, less happily, the biggest debt, some £140 million, about half of which had been incurred defending the American colonies. To justify and service that debt, British officials now moved to redefine their relationship with their North American colonies.

Prime Minister George Grenville first aroused the resentment of the colonists in 1763 by ordering the British navy to begin strictly enforcing the Navigation Laws. He also secured from Parliament the so-called Sugar Act of 1764, the first law ever passed by that body for raising tax revenue in the colonies for the crown. Among various provisions, it increased the duty on foreign sugar imported from

the West Indies. After bitter protests from the colonists, the duties were lowered substantially, and the agitation died down. But resentment was kept burning by the Quartering Act of 1765. This measure required certain colonies to provide food and quarters for British troops.

Then in the same year, 1765, Grenville imposed the most odious measure of all: a stamp tax, to raise revenues to support the new military force. The Stamp Act mandated the use of stamped paper or the affixing of stamps, certifying payment of tax. Stamps were required on bills of sale for about fifty trade items as well as on certain types of commercial and legal documents, including playing cards, pamphlets, newspapers, diplomas, bills of lading, and marriage licenses.

Grenville regarded all these measures as reasonable and just. He was simply asking the Americans to pay a fair share of the costs for their own defense, through taxes that were already familiar in Britain. In fact, the British people for two generations had endured a stamp tax far heavier than that passed for the colonies.

Yet the Americans were angrily aroused at what they regarded as Grenville's fiscal aggression. The new laws did not merely pinch their pocketbooks. Far more ominously, Grenville also seemed to be striking at the local liberties they had come to

assume as a matter of right. Thus some colonial assemblies defiantly refused to comply with the Quartering Act, or voted only a fraction of the supplies that it called for.

Worst of all, Grenville's noxious legislation seemed to jeopardize the basic rights of the colonists as Englishmen. Both the Sugar Act and the Stamp Act provided for trying offenders in the hated admiralty courts, where juries were not allowed. The burden of proof was on the defendants, who were assumed to be guilty unless they could prove themselves innocent. Trial by jury and the precept of "innocent until proved guilty" were ancient privileges that British people everywhere, including the American colonists, held most dear.

And why was a British army needed at all in the colonies, now that the French were expelled from the continent and Pontiac's warriors crushed? Could its real purpose be to whip rebellious colonists into line? Many Americans, weaned on radical Whig suspicion of all authority, began to sniff the strong scent of a conspiracy to strip them of their historic liberties. They lashed back violently, and the Stamp Act became the target that drew their most ferocious fire.

Angry throats raised the cry, "No taxation without representation." There was some irony in the slogan, because the seaports and tidewater towns that were most wrathful against the Stamp Act had long denied full representation to their own back-country pioneers. But now the aggravated colonists took the high ground of principle.

*The famous circular letter from the Massachusetts House of Representatives (1768) stated,*

"... considering the utter impracticability of their ever being fully and equally represented in Parliament, and the great expense that must unavoidably attend even a partial representation there, this House think that a taxation of their constituents, even without their consent, grievous as it is, would be preferable to any representation that could be admitted for them there."

The Americans made a distinction between “legislation” and “taxation.” They conceded the right of Parliament to legislate about matters that affected the entire empire, including the regulation of trade. But they steadfastly denied the right of Parliament, in which no Americans were seated, to impose taxes on Americans. Only their own elected colonial legislatures, the Americans insisted, could legally tax them. Taxes levied by the distant British Parliament amounted to robbery, a piratical assault on the sacred rights of property.

Grenville dismissed these American protests as hairsplitting absurdities. The power of Parliament was supreme and undivided, he asserted, and in any case the Americans *were* represented in Parliament. Elaborating the theory of “virtual representation,” Grenville claimed that every member of Parliament represented all British subjects, even those Americans in Boston or Charleston who had never voted for a member of Parliament.

The Americans scoffed at the notion of virtual representation. And truthfully, they did not really want direct representation in Parliament, which might have seemed like a sensible compromise. If they had obtained it, any gouty member of the House of Commons could have proposed an oppressive tax bill for the colonies, and the American representatives, few in number, would have stood bereft of a principle with which to resist.

Thus the principle of no taxation without representation was supremely important, and the colonists clung to it with tenacious consistency. When the British replied that the sovereign power of government could not be divided between “legislative” authority in London and “taxing” authority in the colonies, they forced the Americans to deny the authority of Parliament altogether and to begin to consider their own political independence. This chain of logic eventually led, link by link, to revolutionary consequences.

### **Parliament Forced to Repeal the Stamp Act**

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Colonial outcries against the hated stamp tax took various forms. The most conspicuous assemblage was the Stamp Act Congress of 1765, which brought together in New York City twenty-seven distinguished delegates from nine colonies. After digni-

fied debate the members drew up a statement of their rights and grievances and beseeched the king and Parliament to repeal the repugnant legislation.

The Stamp Act Congress, which was largely ignored in England, made little splash at the time in America. Its ripples, however, began to erode sectional suspicions, for it brought together around the same table leaders from the different and rival colonies. It was one more halting but significant step toward intercolonial unity.

More effective than the congress was the widespread adoption of nonimportation agreements against British goods. Woolen garments of homespun became fashionable, and the eating of lamb chops was discouraged so that the wool-bearing sheep would be allowed to mature. Nonimportation agreements were in fact a promising stride toward union; they spontaneously united the American people for the first time in common action.

Mobilizing in support of nonimportation gave ordinary American men and women new opportunities to participate in colonial protests. Many people who had previously stood on the sidelines now signed petitions swearing to uphold the terms of the consumer boycotts. Groups of women assembled in public to hold spinning bees and make homespun cloth as a replacement for shunned British textiles. Such public defiance helped spread revolutionary fervor throughout American colonial society.

Sometimes violence accompanied colonial protests. Groups of ardent spirits, known as Sons of Liberty and Daughters of Liberty, took the law into their own hands. Crying “Liberty, Property, and No Stamps,” they enforced the nonimportation agreements against violators, often with a generous coat of tar and feathers. Patriotic mobs ransacked the houses of unpopular officials, confiscated their money, and hanged effigies of stamp agents on liberty poles.

Shaken by colonial commotion, the machinery for collecting the tax broke down. On that dismal day in 1765 when the new act was to go into effect, the stamp agents had all been forced to resign, and there was no one to sell the stamps. While flags flapped at half-mast, the law was openly and flagrantly defied—or, rather, nullified.

England was hard hit. America then bought about one-quarter of all British exports, and about one-half of British shipping was devoted to the American trade. Merchants, manufacturers, and shippers suffered from the colonial nonimportation agreements, and hundreds of laborers were thrown out of work. Loud demands converged on Parlia-

ment for repeal of the Stamp Act. But many of the members could not understand why 7.5 million Britons had to pay heavy taxes to protect the colonies, whereas some 2 million colonists refused to pay for only one-third of the cost of their own defense.

After a stormy debate, Parliament in 1766 grudgingly repealed the Stamp Act. Grateful residents of New York erected a leaden statue to King George III. But American rejoicing was premature. Having withdrawn the Stamp Act, Parliament in virtually the same breath provocatively passed the Declaratory Act, reaffirming Parliament’s right “to bind” the colonies “in all cases whatsoever.” The British government thereby drew its line in the sand. It defined the constitutional principle it would not yield: absolute and unqualified sovereignty over its North American colonies. The colonists had already drawn their own battle line by making it clear that they wanted a measure of sovereignty of their own and would undertake drastic action to secure it. The stage was set for a continuing confrontation. Within a few years, that statue of King George would be melted into thousands of bullets to be fired at his troops.

## **The Townshend Tea Tax and the Boston “Massacre”**

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Control of the British ministry was now seized by the gifted but erratic “Champagne Charley” Townshend, a man who could deliver brilliant speeches in Parliament even while drunk. Rashly promising to pluck feathers from the colonial goose with a minimum of squawking, he persuaded Parliament in 1767 to pass the Townshend Acts. The most important of these new regulations was a light import duty on glass, white lead, paper, paint, and tea. Townshend, seizing on a dubious distinction between internal and external taxes, made this tax, unlike the Stamp Act, an indirect customs duty payable at American ports. But to the increasingly restless colonists, this was a phantom distinction. For them the real difficulty remained taxes—in any form—without representation.

Flushed with their recent victory over the stamp tax, the colonists were in a rebellious mood. The impost on tea was especially irksome, for an estimated 1 million people drank the refreshing brew twice a day.

The new Townshend revenues, worse yet, were to be earmarked to pay the salaries of the royal governors and judges in America. From the standpoint of efficient administration by London, this was a reform long overdue. But the ultrasuspicious Americans, who had beaten the royal governors into line by controlling the purse, regarded Townshend’s tax as another attempt to enchain them. Their worst

fears took on greater reality when the London government, after passing the Townshend taxes, suspended the legislature of New York in 1767 for failure to comply with the Quartering Act.

Nonimportation agreements, previously potent, were quickly revived against the Townshend Acts. But they proved less effective than those devised against the Stamp Act. The colonists, again enjoying prosperity, took the new tax less seriously than might have been expected, largely because it was light and indirect. They found, moreover, that they could secure smuggled tea at a cheap price, and consequently smugglers increased their activities, especially in Massachusetts.

British officials, faced with a breakdown of law and order, landed two regiments of troops in Boston in 1768. Many of the soldiers were drunken and profane characters. Liberty-loving colonists, resenting the presence of the red-coated “ruffians,” taunted the “bloody backs” unmercifully.

A clash was inevitable. On the evening of March 5, 1770, a crowd of some sixty townspeople set upon a squad of about ten redcoats, one of whom was hit

*Giving new meaning to the proverbial tempest in a teapot, a group of 126 Boston women signed an agreement, or “subscription list,” which announced,*

“We the Daughters of those Patriots who have and now do appear for the public interest . . . do with Pleasure engage with them in denying ourselves the drinking of Foreign Tea, in hopes to frustrate a Plan that tends to deprive the whole Community of . . . all that is valuable in Life.”

by a club and another of whom was knocked down. Acting apparently without orders but under extreme provocation, the troops opened fire and killed or wounded eleven “innocent” citizens. One of the first to die was Crispus Attucks, described by contemporaries as a powerfully built runaway “mulatto” and as a leader of the mob. Both sides were in some degree to blame, and in the subsequent trial (in which future president John Adams served as defense attorney for the soldiers), only two of the redcoats were found guilty of manslaughter. The soldiers were released after being branded on the hand.

### **The Seditious Committees of Correspondence**

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By 1770 King George III, then only thirty-two years old, was strenuously attempting to assert the power of the British monarchy. He was a good man in his

private morals, but he proved to be a bad ruler. Earnest, industrious, stubborn, and lustful for power, he surrounded himself with cooperative “yes men,” notably his corpulent prime minister, Lord North.

The ill-timed Townshend Acts had failed to produce revenue, though they did produce near-rebellion. Net proceeds from the tax in one year were a paltry £295, and during that time the annual military costs to Britain in the colonies had mounted to £170,000. Nonimportation agreements, though feebly enforced, were pinching British manufacturers. The government of Lord North, bowing to various pressures, finally persuaded Parliament to repeal the Townshend revenue duties. But the three-pence toll on tea, the tax the colonists found most offensive, was retained to keep alive the principle of parliamentary taxation.

Flames of discontent in America continued to be fanned by numerous incidents, including the redoubled efforts of the British officials to enforce the Navigation Laws. Resistance was further kindled

by a master propagandist and engineer of rebellion, Samuel Adams of Boston, a cousin of John Adams. Unimpressive in appearance (his hands trembled), he lived and breathed only for politics. His friends had to buy him a presentable suit of clothes when he left Massachusetts on intercolonial business. Zealous, tenacious, and courageous, he was ultrasensitive to infractions of colonial rights. Cherishing a deep faith in the common people, he appealed effectively to what was called his “trained mob.”

Samuel Adams’s signal contribution was to organize in Massachusetts the local committees of correspondence. After he had formed the first one in Boston during 1772, some eighty towns in the colony speedily set up similar organizations. Their chief function was to spread the spirit of resistance

by interchanging letters and thus keep alive opposition to British policy. One critic referred to the committees as “the foulest, subtlest, and most venomous serpent ever issued from the egg of sedition.”

Intercolonial committees of correspondence were the next logical step. Virginia led the way in 1773 by creating such a body as a standing committee of the House of Burgesses. Within a short time, every colony had established a central committee through which it could exchange ideas and information with other colonies. These intercolonial groups were supremely significant in stimulating and disseminating sentiment in favor of united action. They evolved directly into the first American congresses.

*Peter Oliver (1713–1791), the chief justice of Massachusetts, penned a Loyalist account of the Revolution after the outbreak of hostilities. Recalling the popular protests of the early 1770s, he wrote that*

“[the colonial] upper & lower House consisted of Men generally devoted to the Interest of the Faction. The Foundations of Government were subverted; & every Loyalist was obliged to submit to be swept away by the Torrent. . . . Some indeed dared to say that their Souls were their own; but no one could call his Body his own; for that was at the Mercy of the Mob, who like the Inquisition Coach, would call a Man out of his Bed, & he must step in whether he liked the Conveyance or not.”

### Tea Parties at Boston and Elsewhere

Thus far—that is, by 1773—nothing had happened to make rebellion inevitable. Nonimportation was weakening. Increasing numbers of colonists were reluctantly paying the tea tax, because the legal tea was now cheaper than the smuggled tea, even cheaper than tea in England.

A new ogre entered the picture in 1773. The powerful British East India Company, overburdened with 17 million pounds of unsold tea, was facing bankruptcy. If it collapsed, the London government would lose heavily in tax revenue. The ministry therefore decided to assist the company by awarding it a complete monopoly of the American tea business. The giant corporation would now be able to sell the coveted leaves more cheaply than ever before, even with the three-pence tax tacked on. But many American tea drinkers, rather than rejoicing at the lower prices, cried foul. They saw this British move as a shabby attempt to trick the Americans, with the bait of cheaper tea, into swallowing the principle of the detested tax. For the determined Americans, principle remained far more important than price.

If the British officials insisted on the letter of the law, violence would certainly result. Fatefully, the British colonial authorities decided to enforce the law. Once more, the colonists rose up in wrath to defy it. Not a single one of the several thousand chests of tea shipped by the East India Company ever reached the hands of the consignees. In Philadelphia and New York, mass demonstrations forced the tea-bearing ships to return to England with their cargo holds still full. At Annapolis, Marylanders burned both cargo and vessel, while proclaiming “Liberty and Independence or death in pursuit of it.” In Charleston, South Carolina, officials seized the tea for nonpayment of duties after intimidated local merchants refused to accept delivery. (Ironi-

cally, the confiscated Charleston tea was later auctioned to raise money for the Revolutionary army.)

Only in Boston did a British official stubbornly refuse to be cowed. Massachusetts governor Thomas Hutchinson had already felt the fury of the mob, when Stamp Act protesters had destroyed his home in 1765. This time he was determined not to budge. Ironically, Hutchinson agreed that the tea tax was unjust, but he believed even more strongly that the colonists had no right to flout the law. Hutchinson infuriated Boston's radicals when he ordered the tea ships not to clear Boston harbor until they had unloaded their cargoes. Sentiment against him was further inflamed when Hutchinson's enemies published a private letter in which he declared that "an abridgement of what are called English liberties" was necessary for the preservation of law and order in the colonies—apparently confirming the darkest conspiracy theories of the American radicals. Provoked beyond restraint, a band of Bostonians, clumsily disguised as Indians, boarded the docked tea ships on December 16, 1773. They smashed open 342 chests and dumped the contents into Boston harbor. A silent crowd watched approvingly as salty tea was brewed for the fish.

Reactions varied. Radicals exulted in the people's zeal for liberty. Conservatives complained that the destruction of private property violated the fundamental norms of civil society. Hutchinson, chastened and disgusted, betook himself to Britain, never to return. The British authorities, meanwhile, saw little alternative to whipping the upstart colonists into shape. The granting of some measure of home rule to the Americans might at this stage still have prevented rebellion, but few Britons of that era were blessed with such wisdom. Among those who were so blessed was Edmund Burke, the great conservative political theorist and a stout champion of the American cause. "To tax and to please, no more than to love and be wise," he stonically remarked, "is not given to men."

### **Parliament Passes the "Intolerable Acts"**

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An irate Parliament responded speedily to the Boston Tea Party with measures that brewed a revolution. By huge majorities in 1774, it passed a series

of acts designed to chastise Boston in particular, Massachusetts in general. They were branded in America as "the massacre of American Liberty."

Most drastic of all was the Boston Port Act. It closed the tea-stained harbor until damages were paid and order could be ensured. By other "Intolerable Acts"—as they were called in America—many of the chartered rights of colonial Massachusetts were swept away. Restrictions were likewise placed on the precious town meetings. Contrary to previous practice, enforcing officials who killed colonists in the line of duty could now be sent to Britain for trial. There, suspicious Americans assumed, they would be likely to get off scot-free.

By a fateful coincidence, the "Intolerable Acts" were accompanied in 1774 by the Quebec Act. Passed at the same time, it was erroneously regarded in English-speaking America as part of the British reaction to the turbulence in Boston. Actually, the Quebec Act was a good law in bad company. For many years the British government had debated how it should administer the sixty thousand or so conquered French subjects in Canada, and it had finally framed this farsighted and statesmanlike measure. The French were guaranteed their Catholic religion. They were also permitted to retain many of their old customs and institutions, which did not include a representative assembly or trial by jury in civil cases. In addition, the old boundaries of the province of Quebec were now extended southward all the way to the Ohio River.

The Quebec Act, from the viewpoint of the French-Canadians, was a shrewd and conciliatory measure. If Britain had only shown as much foresight in dealing with its English-speaking colonies, it might not have lost them.

But from the viewpoint of the American colonists as a whole, the Quebec Act was especially noxious. All the other "Intolerable Acts" laws slapped directly at Massachusetts, but this one had a much wider range. It seemed to set a dangerous precedent in America against jury trials and popular assemblies. It alarmed land speculators, who were distressed to see the huge trans-Allegheny area snatched from their grasp. It aroused anti-Catholics, who were shocked by the extension of Roman Catholic jurisdiction southward into a huge region that had once been earmarked for Protestantism—a region about as large as the thirteen original colonies. One angry Protestant cried that there ought to be a "jubilee in hell" over this enormous gain for "popery."



#### Quebec Before and After 1774

Young Alexander Hamilton voiced the fears of many colonists when he warned that the Quebec Act of 1774 would introduce “priestly tyranny” into Canada, making that country another Spain or Portugal. “Does not your blood run cold,” he asked, “to think that an English Parliament should pass an act for the establishment of arbitrary power and Popery in such a country?”

## The Continental Congress and Bloodshed

American dissenters responded sympathetically to the plight of Massachusetts. It had put itself in the wrong by the violent destruction of the tea cargoes; now Britain had put itself in the wrong by brutal punishment that seemed far too cruel for the crime. Flags were flown at half-mast throughout the colonies on the day that the Boston Port Act went into effect, and sister colonies rallied to send food to the stricken city. Rice was shipped even from far-away South Carolina.

Most memorable of the responses to the “Intolerable Acts” was the summoning of a Continental Congress in 1774. It was to meet in Philadelphia to consider ways of redressing colonial grievances. Twelve of the thirteen colonies, with Georgia alone missing, sent fifty-five distinguished men, among them Samuel Adams, John Adams, George Washington, and Patrick Henry. Intercolonial frictions were partially melted away by social activity after working hours; in fifty-four days George Washington dined at his own lodgings only nine times.

The First Continental Congress deliberated for seven weeks, from September 5 to October 26, 1774. It was not a legislative but a consultative body—a convention rather than a congress. John Adams

played a stellar role. Eloquently swaying his colleagues to a revolutionary course, he helped defeat by the narrowest of margins a proposal by the moderates for a species of American home rule under British direction. After prolonged argument the Congress drew up several dignified papers. These included a ringing Declaration of Rights, as well as solemn appeals to other British American colonies, to the king, and to the British people.

The most significant action of the Congress was the creation of The Association. Unlike previous nonimportation agreements, The Association called for a *complete* boycott of British goods: nonimportation, nonexportation, and nonconsumption. Yet it is important to note that the delegates were not yet calling for independence. They sought merely to repeal the offensive legislation and return to the happy days before parliamentary taxation. If colonial grievances were redressed, well and good; if not, the Congress was to meet again in May 1775. Resistance had not yet ripened into open rebellion.

But the fatal drift toward war continued. Parliament rejected the Congress’s petitions. In America chickens squawked and tar kettles bubbled as violators of The Association were tarred and feathered. Muskets were gathered, men began to drill openly, and a clash seemed imminent.

In April 1775 the British commander in Boston sent a detachment of troops to nearby Lexington

and Concord. They were to seize stores of colonial gunpowder and also to bag the “rebel” ringleaders, Samuel Adams and John Hancock. At Lexington the colonial “Minute Men” refused to disperse rapidly enough, and shots were fired that killed eight Americans and wounded several more. The affair was more the “Lexington Massacre” than a battle. The redcoats pushed on to Concord, whence they were forced to retreat by the rough and ready Americans, whom Emerson immortalized:

*By the rude bridge that arched the flood,  
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,  
Here once the embattled farmers stood,  
And fired the shot heard round the world.\**

The bewildered British, fighting off murderous fire from militiamen crouched behind thick stone walls, finally regained the sanctuary of Boston. Licking their wounds, they could count about three hundred casualties, including some seventy killed. Britain now had a war on its hands.

## Imperial Strength and Weakness

Aroused Americans had brashly rebelled against a mighty empire. The population odds were about three to one against the rebels—some 7.5 million Britons to 2.5 million colonists. The odds in monetary wealth and naval power overwhelmingly favored the mother country.

Britain then boasted a professional army of some fifty thousand men, as compared with the numerous but wretchedly trained American militia. George III, in addition, had the treasury to hire foreign soldiers, and some thirty thousand Germans—so-called Hessians—were ultimately employed. The British enrolled about fifty thousand American Loyalists and enlisted the services of many Indians, who though unreliable fair-weather fighters, inflamed long stretches of the frontier. One British officer boasted that the war would offer no problems that could not be solved by an “experienced sheep herder.”

Yet Britain was weaker than it seemed at first glance. Oppressed Ireland was a smoking volcano, and British troops had to be detached to watch it. France, bitter from its recent defeat, was awaiting an

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\*Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Concord Hymn.”

*Privately (1776) General George Washington (1732–1799) expressed his distrust of militia:*

“To place any dependence upon militia is assuredly resting on a broken staff. . . . The sudden change in their manner of living . . . brings on sickness in many, impatience in all, and such an unconquerable desire of returning to their respective homes that it not only produces shameful and scandalous desertions among themselves, but infuses the like spirit in others. . . . If I was called upon to declare upon oath whether the militia have been most serviceable or hurtful upon the whole, I should subscribe to the latter.”

opportunity to stab Britain in the back. The London government was confused and inept. There was no William Pitt, “Organizer of Victory,” only the stubborn George III and his pliant Tory prime minister, Lord North.

Many earnest and God-fearing Britons had no desire whatever to kill their American cousins. William Pitt withdrew a son from the army rather than see him thrust his sword into fellow Anglo-Saxons struggling for liberty. The English Whig factions, opposed to Lord North’s Tory wing, openly cheered American victories—at least at the outset. Aside from trying to embarrass the Tories politically, many Whigs believed that the battle for British freedom was being fought in America. If George III triumphed, his rule at home might become tyrannical. This outspoken sympathy in Britain, though plainly a minority voice, greatly encouraged the Americans. If they continued their resistance long enough, the Whigs might come into power and deal generously with them.

Britain’s army in America had to operate under endless difficulties. The generals were second-rate; the soldiers, though on the whole capable, were brutally treated. There was one extreme case of eight hundred lashes on the bare back for striking an officer. Provisions were often scarce, rancid, and wormy. On one occasion a supply of biscuits, captured some fifteen years earlier from the French, was softened by dropping cannonballs on them.

Other handicaps loomed. The redcoats had to conquer the Americans; restoring the pre-1763 status quo would be a victory for the colonists. Britain was operating some 3,000 miles from its home base, and distance added greatly to the delays and uncertainties arising from storms and other mishaps. Military orders were issued in London that, when received months later, would not fit the changing situation.

America’s geographical expanse was enormous: roughly 1,000 by 600 miles. The united colonies had no urban nerve center, like France’s Paris, whose capture would cripple the country as a whole. British armies took every city of any size, yet like a boxer punching a feather pillow, they made little more than a dent in the entire country. The Americans wisely traded space for time. Benjamin Franklin calculated that during the prolonged campaign in which the redcoats captured Bunker Hill and killed some 150 Patriots, about 60,000 American babies were born.

### American Pluses and Minuses

The revolutionists were blessed with outstanding leadership. George Washington was a giant among men; Benjamin Franklin was a master among diplomats. Open foreign aid, theoretically possible from the start, eventually came from France. Numerous European officers, many of them unemployed and impoverished, volunteered their swords for pay. In a class by himself was a wealthy young French nobleman, the Marquis de Lafayette. Fleeing from boredom, loving glory and ultimately liberty, at age nineteen the “French gamecock” was made a major general in the colonial army. His commission was largely a recognition of his family influence and political connections, but the services of this teenage general in securing further aid from France were invaluable.

Other conditions aided the Americans. They were fighting defensively, with the odds, all things considered, favoring the defender. In agriculture, the colonies were mainly self-sustaining, like a kind of Robinson Crusoe’s island. The Americans also enjoyed the moral advantage that came from belief in a just cause. The historical odds were not impossible. Other peoples had triumphed in the face of greater obstacles: Greeks against Persians, Swiss against Austrians, Dutch against Spaniards.

*General Washington's disgust with his countrymen is reflected in a diary entry for 1776:*

“Chimney corner patriots abound; venality, corruption, prostitution of office for selfish ends, abuse of trust, perversion of funds from a national to a private use, and speculations upon the necessities of the times pervade all interests.”

Yet the American rebels were badly organized for war. From the earliest days, they had been almost fatally lacking in unity, and the new nation lurched forward uncertainly like an uncoordinated centipede. Even the Continental Congress, which directed the conflict, was hardly more than a debating society, and it grew feebler as the struggle dragged on. “Their Congress now is quite disjoint’d,” gibed an English satirist, “Since Gibbets (gallows) [are] for them appointed.” The disorganized colonists fought almost the entire war before adopting a written constitution—the Articles of Confederation—in 1781.

Jealousy everywhere raised its hideous head. Individual states, proudly regarding themselves as sovereign, resented the attempts of Congress to exercise its flimsy powers. Sectional jealousy boiled up over the appointment of military leaders; some

distrustful New Englanders almost preferred British officers to Americans from other sections.

Economic difficulties were nearly insuperable. Metallic money had already been heavily drained away. A cautious Continental Congress, unwilling to raise anew the explosive issue of taxation, was forced to print “Continental” paper money in great amounts. As this currency poured from the presses, it depreciated until the expression “not worth a Continental” became current. One barber contemptuously papered his shop with the near-worthless dollars. The confusion proliferated when the individual states were compelled to issue depreciated paper money of their own.

Inflation of the currency inevitably skyrocketed prices. Families of the soldiers at the fighting front were hard hit, and hundreds of anxious husbands and fathers deserted. Debtors easily acquired handfuls of the quasi-worthless money and gleefully paid their debts “without mercy”—sometimes with the bayonets of the authorities to back them up.

### **A Thin Line of Heroes**

Basic military supplies in the colonies were dangerously scanty, especially firearms. Legend to the contrary, colonial Americans were not a well-armed people. Firearms were to be found in only a small minority of households, and many of those guns were the property of the local militia. Not a single gun factory existed in the colonies, and an imported musket cost the equivalent of two months’ salary for a skilled artisan. Small wonder that only one in twelve American militiamen reported for duty with

his own musket—or that Benjamin Franklin seriously proposed arming the American troops with bows and arrows. Among the reasons for the eventual alliance with France was the need for a reliable source of firearms.

Other shortages bedeviled the rebels. At Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, shivering American soldiers went without bread for three successive days in the cruel winter of 1777–1778. In one southern campaign, some men fainted for lack of food. Manufactured goods also were generally in short supply in agricultural America, and clothing and shoes were appallingly scarce. The path of the Patriot fighting men was often marked by bloody snow. At frigid Valley Forge, during one anxious period, twenty-eight hundred men were barefooted or nearly naked. Woolens were desperately needed against the wintry blasts, and in general the only real uniform of the colonial army was uniform raggedness. During a grand parade at Valley Forge, some of the officers appeared wrapped in woolen bedcovers. One Rhode Island unit was known as the “Ragged, Lousy, Naked Regiment.”

American militiamen were numerous but also highly unreliable. Able-bodied American males—perhaps several hundred thousand of them—had received rudimentary training, and many of these recruits served for short terms in the rebel armies. But poorly trained plowboys could not stand up in

the open field against professional British troops advancing with bare bayonets. Many of these undisciplined warriors would, in the words of Washington, “fly from their own shadows.”

A few thousand regulars—perhaps seven or eight thousand at the war’s end—were finally whipped into shape by stern drillmasters. Notable among them was an organizational genius, the salty German Baron von Steuben. He spoke no English when he reached America, but he soon taught his men that bayonets were not for broiling beefsteaks over open fires. As they gained experience, these soldiers of the Continental line more than held their own against crack British troops.

Blacks also fought and died for the American cause. Although many states initially barred them from militia service, by war’s end more than five thousand blacks had enlisted in the American armed forces. The largest contingents came from the northern states with substantial numbers of free blacks.

Blacks fought at Trenton, Brandywine, Saratoga, and other important battles. Some, including Prince Whipple—later immortalized in Emanuel Leutze’s famous painting “Washington Crossing the Delaware” (see p. 153)—became military heroes. Others served as cooks, guides, spies, drivers, and road builders.

African-Americans also served on the British side. In November 1775 Lord Dunmore, royal governor of Virginia, issued a proclamation promising freedom for any enslaved black in Virginia who joined the British army. News of Dunmore’s decree traveled swiftly. Virginia and Maryland tightened slave patrols, but within one month, three hundred slaves had joined what came to be called “Lord Dunmore’s Ethiopian Regiment.” In time thousands of blacks fled plantations for British promises of emancipation. When one of James Madison’s slaves was caught trying to escape to the British lines, Madison refused to punish him for “coveting that liberty” that white Americans proclaimed the “right & worthy pursuit of every human being.” At war’s end the British kept their word, to some at least, and evacuated as many as fourteen thousand “Black Loyalists” to Nova Scotia, Jamaica, and England.

Morale in the Revolutionary army was badly undermined by American profiteers. Putting profits before patriotism, they sold to the British because the invader could pay in gold. Speculators forced prices sky-high, and some Bostonians made profits of 50 to 200 percent on army garb while the American army was freezing at Valley Forge. Washington never had as many as twenty thousand effective

*Enslaved blacks hoped that the Revolutionary crisis would make it possible for them to secure their own liberty. On the eve of the war in South Carolina, merchant Josiah Smith, Jr., noted such a rumor among the slaves:*

“[Freedom] is their common Talk throughout the Province, and has occasioned impertinent behavior in many of them, insomuch that our Provincial Congress now sitting hath voted the immediate raising of Two Thousand Men Horse and food, to keep those mistaken creatures in awe.”

*Despite such repressive measures, slave uprisings continued to plague the southern colonies through 1775 and 1776.*

troops in one place at one time, despite bounties of land and other inducements. Yet if the rebels had thrown themselves into the struggle with zeal, they could easily have raised many times that number.

The brutal truth is that only a select minority of the American colonists attached themselves to the

cause of independence with a spirit of selfless devotion. These were the dedicated souls who bore the burden of battle and the risks of defeat; these were the freedom-loving Patriots who deserved the gratitude and esteem of generations yet unborn. Seldom have so few done so much for so many.

## Chronology

1650	First Navigation Laws to control colonial commerce	1770	Boston Massacre All Townshend Acts except tea tax repealed
1696	Board of Trade assumes governance of colonies	1772	Committees of correspondence formed
1763	French and Indian War (Seven Years' War) ends	1773	British East India Company granted tea monopoly Governor Hutchinson's actions provoke Boston Tea Party
1764	Sugar Act	1774	"Intolerable Acts" Quebec Act First Continental Congress The Association boycotts British goods
1765	Quartering Act Stamp Act Stamp Act Congress	1775	Battles of Lexington and Concord
1766	Declaratory Act		
1767	Townshend Acts passed New York legislature suspended by Parliament		
1768	British troops occupy Boston		

## VARYING VIEWPOINTS

### Whose Revolution?

Historians once assumed that the Revolution was just another chapter in the unfolding story of human liberty—an important way station on a divinely ordained pathway toward moral perfection in human affairs. This approach, often labeled the “Whig view of history,” was best expressed in George Bancroft’s ten-volume *History of the United States of America*, published between the 1830s and 1870s.

By the end of the nineteenth century, a group of historians known as the “imperial school” challenged Bancroft, arguing that the Revolution was best understood not as the fulfillment of national destiny, but as a constitutional conflict within the British Empire. For historians like George Beer,

Charles Andrews, and Lawrence Gipson, the Revolution was the product of a collision between two different views of empire. While the Americans were moving steadily toward more self-government, Britain increasingly tightened its grip, threatening a stranglehold that eventually led to wrenching revolution.

By the early twentieth century, these approaches were challenged by the so-called progressive historians, who argued that neither divine destiny nor constitutional quibbles had much to do with the Revolution. Rather, the Revolution stemmed from deep-seated class tensions within American society that, once released by revolt, produced a truly transformed social order. Living them-

selves in a reform age when entrenched economic interests cowered under heavy attack, progressive historians like Carl Becker insisted that the Revolution was not just about “home rule” within the British Empire, but also about “who should rule at home” in America, the upper or lower classes. J. Franklin Jameson took Becker’s analysis one step further in his influential *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (1926). He claimed that the Revolution not only grew out of intense struggles between social groups, but also inspired many ordinary Americans to seek greater economic and political power, fundamentally democratizing society in its wake.

In the 1950s the progressive historians fell out of favor as the political climate became more conservative. Interpretations of the American Revolution as a class struggle did not play well in a country obsessed with the spread of communism, and in its place arose the so-called consensus view. Historians such as Robert Brown and Edmund Morgan downplayed the role of class conflict in the Revolutionary era, but emphasized that colonists of all ranks shared a commitment to certain fundamental political principles of self-government. The unifying power of ideas was now back in fashion almost a hundred years after Bancroft.

Since the 1950s two broad interpretations have contended with each other and perpetuated the controversy over whether political ideals or economic and social realities were most responsible for the Revolution. The first, articulated most prominently by Bernard Bailyn, has emphasized ideological and psychological factors. Focusing on the power of ideas to foment revolution, Bailyn argued that the colonists, incited by their reading of seventeenth-

century and early-eighteenth-century English political theorists, grew extraordinarily (perhaps even exaggeratedly) suspicious of any attempts to tighten the imperial reins on the colonies. When confronted with new taxes and commercial regulations, these hypersensitive colonists screamed “conspiracy against liberty” and “corrupt ministerial plot.” In time they took up armed insurrection in defense of their intellectual commitment to liberty.

A second school of historians, writing during the 1960s and 1970s and inspired by the social movements of that turbulent era, revived the progressive interpretation of the Revolution. Gary Nash, in *The Urban Crucible* (1979), and Edward Countryman, in *A People in Revolution* (1981), pointed to the increasing social and economic divisions among Americans in both the urban seaports and the isolated countryside in the years leading up to the Revolution. Attacks by laborers on political elites and expressions of resentment toward wealth were taken as evidence of a society that was breeding revolutionary change from within, quite aside from British provocations. While the concerns of the progressive historians echo in these socioeconomic interpretations of the Revolution, the neoprogresives have been more careful not to reduce the issues simplistically to the one-ring arena of economic self-interest. Instead, they have argued that the varying material circumstances of American participants led them to hold distinctive versions of republicanism, giving the Revolution a less unified and more complex ideological underpinning than the idealistic historians had previously suggested. The dialogue between proponents of “ideas” and “interests” has gradually led to a more nuanced meeting of the two views.

