

# The American Revolution, 1763-1783 [excerpt]

By Pauline Maier

*This essay excerpt is provided courtesy of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.*

## INDEPENDENCE

The Seven Years' War had left Great Britain with a huge debt by the standards of the day. Moreover, thanks in part to Pontiac's Rebellion, a massive American Indian uprising in the territories won from France, the British decided to keep an army in postwar North America. Surely the colonists could help pay for that army and a few other expenses of administering Britain's much enlarged American empire. Rather than request help from provincial legislatures, however, Britain decided to raise the necessary money by acts of Parliament.

Two laws, the Sugar Act (1764) and the Stamp Act (1765), began the conflict between London and America. The Sugar Act imposed duties on certain imports not, as in the past, to affect the course of trade—for example, by making it more expensive for colonists to import molasses from the non-British than from the British West Indies—but to raise a revenue in America “for defraying the expense of defending, protecting, and securing the same.” The Stamp Act levied entirely new excise taxes (like sales taxes) in America on pamphlets, almanacs, newspapers and newspaper advertisements, playing cards, dice, and a wide range of legal and commercial documents. Those accused of violating the Stamp Act would be tried in Admiralty Courts, which had no juries and whose jurisdiction normally pertained to maritime affairs. The colonists protested that provision because it violated their right to trial by jury. Above all, however, they insisted that both acts levied taxes on them and that, under the old English principle of “no taxation without representation,” Parliament had no right to tax the colonists because they had no representatives in the House of Commons.

British spokesmen did not question the principle but argued that the colonists, like many Englishmen in places that could not send delegates to Parliament, were “virtually” represented in Parliament because its members sought the good of the British people everywhere, not just of those who chose them. That made no sense to the Americans, who lived in a young society where representation was generally tied to population and voters expected their representatives to know and defend their interests. A legislator could not represent people who did not choose him, they argued. It was as simple as that.

Several colonies unsuccessfully petitioned Parliament against the Sugar and Stamp Acts. A Stamp Act Congress of delegates from nine colonies met in New York in October 1765, passed resolutions asserting their rights, and petitioned the king, the Lords, and the Commons for redress of their grievances. What else could the colonists do? Allowing the Stamp Act to go into effect would create a precedent for new taxes, which Parliament would surely approve again and again because every tax on the Americans relieved them and their constituents of that financial burden.

Boston led the way. On August 14 and 15, 1765, a popular uprising there forced the Massachusetts stamp collector, Andrew Oliver, to resign his office. That meant there was nobody in the colony to distribute stamps or collect the taxes. With a minimum of force, the Stamp Act had been effectively nullified in Massachusetts. Soon other colonies' stampmen resigned to avoid Oliver's fate. In the end, the Stamp Act went into effect only in remote Georgia for a brief time. In the spring of 1766, Parliament repealed the Stamp Act, but it also passed a Declaratory Act that said Parliament had the right to bind the colonies "in all cases whatsoever."

As if to affirm that right, in 1767 the new chancellor of the exchequer, Charles Townshend, persuaded Parliament to pass an act levying new duties on glass, lead, paint, paper, and tea imported into the American colonies to help pay for the colonies' defense and also to pay royal officials who had previously been dependent on provincial assemblies for their salaries. Those "Townshend duties" sparked a second wave of opposition. In an effort to avoid further violence within America, the colonists organized non-importation associations to build pressure for repeal of the duties among those manufacturers and merchants in Britain who suffered from the decline in exports to America. Only men signed the associations, but women often supported the effort by making homespun cloth to replace British textiles and seeking alternatives to imported tea. Exports to America declined enough that in 1770 Parliament repealed most of the Townshend duties, retaining only the one on tea.

That led to a third crisis in 1773, when Parliament passed a Tea Act to help the financially strapped East India Company (EIC) sell its surplus tea in America. The Tea Act did not impose a new tax. It refunded to the EIC duties collected in Britain and allowed the company to sell tea in America through its own agents (or "consignees") rather than through independent merchants. The king's minister, Lord North, who proposed the act, thought that the Tea Act would allow the EIC to price its tea low enough to compete with smugglers of cheap Dutch tea. The act also gave the EIC a monopoly of the American market, which caused discontent among colonial merchants cut out of the tea trade and others who feared that more monopolies

would follow if this one became established. More important, Lord North insisted on retaining the old Townshend duty on tea. He did not anticipate how much opposition that would provoke from colonists determined to resist all taxes imposed upon them by Parliament.

The first tea ship, the *Dartmouth*, arrived in Boston on November 28, 1773. For several weeks thereafter, a mass meeting of “the Body of the People,” whose members came from Boston and several nearby towns, tried unsuccessfully to get the consignees to resign and to secure permission from customs officials and the royal governor for the ships to leave the harbor and take their tea back to England. (In Philadelphia and New York, the consignees resigned and the tea ships were successfully sent back to England with the tea chests still on board.) Finally, on December 16, the night before the tea became subject to seizure by customs men, to whom the consignees would surely pay the duty, a group of men disguised as Indians threw 342 chests of tea into the harbor.

An angry Parliament responded to the “Boston Tea Party” in 1774 by passing a series of Coercive Acts that the colonists soon called the “Intolerable Acts.” They closed Boston Harbor (the Port Act); nullified the Massachusetts Charter of 1691 and instituted a new government with greater royal control (the Massachusetts Government Act); and allowed royal officials accused of committing felonies while executing their offices in Massachusetts to be tried in England (the Administration of Justice Act). The fourth Coercive Act, a new Quartering Act, facilitated housing troops where they could be used against colonial civilians. Soon the king appointed General Thomas Gage, head of the British army in North America, as governor of Massachusetts, and essentially put the province under military rule.

If the Coercive Acts were meant to isolate Massachusetts, they failed; the other colonies rallied to its defense. A Continental Congress met in Philadelphia (September 5–October 26, 1774), adopted a statement of rights, demanded the repeal of several acts of Parliament including the “unconstitutional” Coercive Acts, advised the people of Massachusetts to act in self defense, and approved a comprehensive program of economic sanctions against Britain (the “Continental Association”) that would be enforced by elected local committees. It also called a second Continental Congress to meet on May 10, 1775, if the Americans’ grievances had not yet been redressed. By then, however, war between provincial and regular soldiers had begun at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts (April 19, 1775).

The Second Continental Congress again petitioned the king for redress of grievances and assured him of the colonists’ loyalty. Nonetheless, in a proclamation in August and again in a speech to Parliament in October 1775, King George III said that the Americans were seeking

independence. Their professions of loyalty, he claimed, were “meant only to amuse,” that is, to mislead. He had already decided that only force could end the conflict. In November, Lord Dunmore, the royal governor of Virginia, offered freedom to slaves who fled to the British lines. That further alienated white planters. And in December, the king signed a Prohibitory Act that put American shipping on the same status as that of enemy nations, effectively putting the American colonists outside his protection. Soon he began negotiating with German princes to hire soldiers to help put down the American “rebellion.” Those actions drove more and more Americans toward the independence that the king sought to prevent.

Some colonists—roughly 20 percent of the population—remained loyal to the Crown. Those “loyalists” included farmers and artisans of modest means as well as wealthy merchants and planters. One group, however, was represented among loyalists out of proportion to its incidence in the population as a whole: British officeholders, from sheriffs to royal governors. Other loyalists lived in areas cut off from the flow of information, and so were not driven by events to reconsider their allegiance, or they had reason to think their liberty and interests would be better served under the Crown than in a government controlled by the majority of their white male neighbors. Many members of the Church of England who lived in Congregationalist Connecticut drew that conclusion. So did the unassimilated members of several ethnic minorities and those slaves who flocked into British lines.

By the spring of 1776, however, even many reluctant colonists thought they had no choice. They could declare their independence and secure foreign help, probably from France, Britain’s old enemy, or they would be crushed. On July 2, Congress, confident that it had the support of the people, approved a resolution that “these united colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States,” then spent much of the next two days editing a draft declaration of independence. On July 4, it approved the text by which the United States claimed a “separate and equal station” among “the powers of the earth,” free of that allegiance to the Crown and state of Great Britain that had for so long been a cause of profound pride among the British colonists of North America.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. The British taxed American colonists in 1764 and 1765 in order to raise money. Why did the British need to raise money?

- A to help pay for a war the British were fighting elsewhere in Europe
- B to pay to keep an army in North America and manage their American empire
- C to pay for the manufacturing of more goods and supplies in Britain
- D to pay for the creation of more roads, schools, and businesses in North America

2. In response to the Stamp Act, an uprising in Boston forced the Massachusetts stamp collector to resign his position. What was an effect of the Massachusetts stamp collector's resignation?

- A Britain gave the East India Company a monopoly of the American stamp market.
- B Additional stamp collectors were sent to Massachusetts to control the rebellious colonists.
- C The colonists lost confidence in their ability to force Britain to repeal its unfair taxes.
- D Stamp collectors in other colonies resigned from their positions.

3. Read this paragraph from the text:

An angry Parliament responded to the "Boston Tea Party" in 1774 by passing a series of Coercive Acts that the colonists soon called the "Intolerable Acts." They closed Boston Harbor (the Port Act); nullified the Massachusetts Charter of 1691 and instituted a new government with greater royal control (the Massachusetts Government Act); and allowed royal officials accused of committing felonies while executing their offices in Massachusetts to be tried in England (the Administration of Justice Act). The fourth Coercive Act, a new Quartering Act, facilitated housing troops where they could be used against colonial civilians. Soon the king appointed General Thomas Gage, head of the British army in North America, as governor of Massachusetts, and essentially put the province under military rule.

Based on this evidence, what might have been a purpose of the Coercive Acts?

- A to encourage colonists in other parts of America to work with Britain to maintain order within Massachusetts
- B to convince colonists in Massachusetts that the British tax on tea was imposed in order to help the colonies
- C to control the colonists in Massachusetts more closely as punishment for their actions against British taxes
- D to force the colonists in Massachusetts to declare their independence from British rule

4. Based on the text, what was the main goal behind American colonists' rebellious actions against the various acts imposed by the British government?

- A to address the colonists' complaints and get the British to repeal their acts that the colonists thought were unfair
- B to prove to other countries that Americans were more powerful than the British
- C to convince all colonists that going to war with Britain was the only solution to their problems
- D to force the British government to grant the colonists independence from Britain

5. What is the main idea of this excerpt?

- A American colonists declared their independence from Britain because they were unable to pay the taxes imposed on them by the British government.
- B A number of taxes, restrictions, and actions taken by the British government caused American colonists to declare their independence from Britain.
- C Although many American colonists wanted to declare independence, a number of colonists remained loyal to the British Crown.
- D American colonists declared their independence from Britain as a result of a single act of the British government that the colonists thought was unfair.

6. Read these sentences from the text:

A Stamp Act Congress of delegates from nine colonies met in New York in October 1765, passed resolutions asserting their rights, and petitioned the king, the Lords, and the Commons for redress of their grievances. What else could the colonists do? Allowing the Stamp Act to go into effect would create a precedent for new taxes, which Parliament would surely approve again and again because every tax on the Americans relieved them and their constituents of that financial burden.

Why might the author have included the question, "What else could the colonists do?"

- A to express that the colonists did not believe they had any choice but to assert their rights
- B to express that the British government did not think the colonists would continue to rebel
- C to suggest that there were other ways for the colonists to achieve their goals
- D to suggest that the colonists were strong compared to the British government

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

The Second Continental Congress again petitioned the king for redress of grievances and assured him of the colonists' loyalty. \_\_\_\_\_, in a proclamation in August and again in a speech to Parliament in October 1775, King George III said that the Americans were seeking independence.

- A Moreover
- B Therefore
- C Accordingly
- D Even so

8. Why did colonists object to the Sugar Act and the Stamp Act? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

---

---

---

---

9. The Second Continental Congress in 1775 assured the British king of the colonists' loyalty to Britain, but the king had already decided that only force could end the conflict. What are two examples of actions the British took between 1775 and 1776 which pushed more and more Americans toward independence?

---

---

---

---

**10.** American colonists' strong principles were the main reason they decided to declare their independence from Britain.

Using evidence from the text, argue for or against this statement.

---

---

---

---