

Topic 3.5

The American Revolution

What do we mean by the revolution? The war? That was no part of the revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it. The revolution was in the minds of the people.

John Adams, Letter to Thomas Jefferson, August 24, 1815

Learning Objective: Explain how various factors contributed to the American victory in the Revolution.

Parliament's passage of the **Intolerable Acts** in 1774 intensified the conflict between the colonies and Great Britain. In the next two years, many Americans reached the conclusion—unthinkable to most colonists only a few years earlier—that the only solution to their quarrel with the British government was to sever all ties with it. How did events from 1774 to 1776 lead to revolution?

The First Continental Congress

The punitive Intolerable Acts drove all the colonies except Georgia to send delegates to a convention in Philadelphia in September 1774. The purpose of the convention—later known as the **First Continental Congress**—was to respond to what the delegates viewed as Britain's alarming threats to their liberties. Most Americans had no desire for independence. They simply wanted to protest parliamentary infringements of their rights and restore the relationship with the crown that had existed before the Seven Years' War.

The Delegates Those attending the congress were outwardly similar: all were wealthy White men. But they held diverse views about the crisis, from radical to conservative. Leading the radicals—those demanding the greatest concessions from Britain—were **Patrick Henry** of Virginia and **Samuel Adams** and **John Adams** of Massachusetts. The moderates included **George Washington** of Virginia and **John Dickinson** of Pennsylvania. The conservative delegates—those who favored a mild statement of protest—included **John Jay** of New York and **Joseph Galloway** of Pennsylvania. Unrepresented were the **Loyalists**, the colonists who would not challenge the king's government in any way.

Actions of the Congress The delegates voted on a series of proposed measures, each of which was intended to change British policy without offending moderate and conservative colonists. Joseph Galloway proposed a plan, similar to the Albany Plan of 1754, that would have reordered relations

with Parliament and formed a union of the colonies within the British Empire. By only one vote, Galloway's plan failed to pass. Instead, the convention adopted these measures:

- It endorsed the **Suffolk Resolves**, a statement originally issued by Massachusetts. The Resolves called for the immediate repeal of the Intolerable Acts and for colonies to resist them by making military preparations and boycotting British goods.
- It passed the Declaration and Resolves. Backed by moderate delegates, this petition urged the king to redress (make right) colonial grievances and restore colonial rights. In a conciliatory gesture, it recognized Parliament's authority to regulate commerce.
- It created the Continental Association, a network of committees to enforce the **economic sanctions** of the Suffolk Resolves.
- It declared that if colonial rights were not recognized, delegates would meet again in May 1775.

Fighting Begins

Angrily dismissing the petition of the First Continental Congress, the king's government declared Massachusetts to be in a state of rebellion and sent additional troops to put down further disorders. The combination of colonial defiance and British determination to suppress it led to violent clashes in Massachusetts—what would be the first battles of the American Revolution.

Lexington and Concord On April 18, 1775, General Thomas Gage, the commander of British troops in Boston, sent a large force to seize colonial military supplies in the town of **Concord**. Warned of the British march by two riders, **Paul Revere** and **William Dawes**, the militia (or **Minutemen**) of **Lexington** assembled on the village green to face the British. The Americans were forced to retreat under heavy British fire with eight killed in the brief encounter. Who fired the first shot of this first skirmish of the American Revolution? The evidence is ambiguous, and the answer will probably never be known.

Continuing their march, the British entered Concord and destroyed some military supplies. Marching back to Boston, the long column of British soldiers was attacked by hundreds of militiamen firing from behind stone walls. The British suffered 250 casualties—and also humiliation at being so badly mauled by “amateur” fighters.

Bunker Hill Two months later, on June 17, 1775, a true battle was fought between opposing armies on the outskirts of Boston. A colonial militia of Massachusetts farmers fortified Breed's Hill, next to **Bunker Hill**, for which the ensuing battle was wrongly named. A British force attacked the colonists' position and managed to take the hill, suffering over a thousand casualties. Americans claimed a victory of sorts, having succeeded in inflicting heavy losses on the attacking British army.

The Second Continental Congress

Soon after the fighting broke out in Massachusetts, delegates to the **Second Continental Congress** met in Philadelphia in May 1775. The congress was divided. One group of delegates, mainly from New England, thought the colonies should declare their independence. Another group, mainly from the middle colonies, hoped the conflict could be resolved by negotiating a new relationship with Great Britain.

The congress adopted a **Declaration of the Causes and Necessities for Taking Up Arms** and called on the colonies to provide troops. George Washington was appointed the commander-in-chief of a new colonial army and sent to Boston to lead the Massachusetts militia and volunteer units from other colonies. Congress also authorized a force under Benedict Arnold to raid Quebec in order to draw Canada away from the British empire. An American navy and marine corps were organized in the fall of 1775 for the purpose of attacking British ships.

Peace Efforts

At first the congress adopted a contradictory policy of waging war while at the same time seeking a peaceful settlement. Many in the colonies valued their heritage and Britain's protection, so they did not want independence. They did, however, want a change in their relationship with Britain. In July 1775, the delegates voted to send an "**Olive Branch Petition**" to King George III, in which they pledged their loyalty and asked the king to intercede with Parliament to secure peace and the protection of colonial rights.

King George angrily dismissed the congress's plea and agreed instead to Parliament's **Prohibitory Act** (August 1775), which declared the colonies in rebellion. A few months later, Parliament forbade all trade and shipping between Britain and the colonies.

The Declaration of Independence

After meeting for more than a year, the congress gradually and somewhat reluctantly began to favor independence rather than reconciliation. On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia introduced a resolution declaring the colonies to be independent. Five delegates, including **Thomas Jefferson**, formed a committee to write a statement in support of Lee's resolution. The declaration drafted by Jefferson listed specific grievances against George III's government and also expressed the basic principles that justified revolution: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

The congress adopted Lee's resolution calling for independence on July 2. It adopted Jefferson's work, the **Declaration of Independence**, on July 4, 1776.

The Revolutionary War

From the first shots fired in Lexington and Concord in 1775 to the final signing of a peace treaty in 1783, the American War for Independence, or Revolutionary War, was a long and bitter struggle. As Americans fought, they also laid the foundations for a new national identity, as the former colonies became a new country, the United States of America.

The Competing Sides

About 2.6 million people lived in the 13 colonies in 1775. Maybe 40 percent of them actively joined the struggle against Britain. They called themselves American **Patriots**. Around 25 percent sided with the British as Loyalists. All others remained neutral, with many paying little attention to the struggle.

British Strength The British entered the war with far greater resources than the colonists. They had three times the population, a wealthy economy that could finance a war, a large and well-trained army, and the most powerful navy in the world. From previous conflicts with French, they had experience fighting overseas in North America, the West Indies, and South Asia.

Patriots The largest number of Patriots were from the New England states and Virginia. Most soldiers were reluctant to travel outside their own region. They would serve in local militia units for short periods, leave to work their farms, and then return to duty. Thus, even though several hundred thousand people fought on the Patriot side in the war, General Washington never had more than 20,000 regular troops under his command at one time. His army was chronically short of supplies, poorly equipped, and rarely paid. However, many colonists had a strong commitment to independence, so they provided a solid core of people resilient enough to undergo hardships.

African Americans Initially, George Washington rejected the idea of African Americans serving in the Patriot army. However, when the British promised freedom to enslaved people who joined their side, Washington and the congress quickly made the same offer. Approximately 5,000 African Americans fought as Patriots. Most of them were free citizens from the north, who fought in mixed racial forces, although there were some units composed entirely of African Americans. These troops took part in most of the military actions of the war, and a number, including Peter Salem, were recognized for their bravery.

Tories The Revolutionary War was in some respects a civil war in which anti-British Patriots fought pro-British Loyalists. Those who maintained allegiance to the king were also called **Tories** (after the majority party in Parliament). Almost 60,000 American Tories fought next to British soldiers, supplied them with arms and food, and joined in raiding parties to pillage Patriot homes and farms. The war divided some families. For example, while Benjamin Franklin was a leading Patriot, his son William joined the Tories and served as the last royal governor of New Jersey.

How many American Tories were there? They were often strongest in major port cities, except in Boston. In New York, New Jersey, and Georgia, they were probably in the majority. Toward the end of the war, about 80,000 Loyalists emigrated from the states to settle in Canada or Britain rather than face persecution at the hands of the Patriots.

Although Loyalists came from all groups and classes, they tended to be wealthier and more conservative than the Patriots. Most government officials and Anglican clergy in America remained loyal to the crown.

American Indians At first, American Indians tried to stay out of the war. Eventually, however, attacks by colonists prompted many American Indians to support the British, who promised to limit colonial settlements in the west.

Initial American Losses and Hardships

The first three years of the war, 1775 to 1777, went badly for Washington's poorly trained and equipped revolutionary army. It barely escaped complete disaster in a battle for New York City in 1776, in which Washington's forces were routed by the British. By the end of 1777, the British occupied both New York and Philadelphia. After losing Philadelphia, Washington's demoralized troops suffered through the severe winter of 1777–1778 camped at **Valley Forge** in Pennsylvania.

Economic troubles added to the Patriots' bleak prospects. British occupation of American ports resulted in a 95 percent decline in trade between 1775 and 1777. Goods were scarce, and inflation was rampant. The paper money issued by Congress, known as **continentals**, became almost worthless.

Alliance with France

The turning point for the American revolutionaries came with a victory at Saratoga in upstate New York in October 1777. British forces under General John Burgoyne had marched from Canada in an effort to join forces marching from the west and south. Their objective was to cut off New England from the rest of the colonies (or states). Burgoyne's troops were attacked at Saratoga by troops commanded by American generals Horatio Gates and Benedict Arnold. The British were forced to surrender.

The diplomatic outcome of the **Battle of Saratoga** was even more important than the military result. News of the surprising American victory persuaded France to join the war against Britain. France's king, Louis XVI, an **absolute monarch**, had no interest in aiding a revolutionary movement. But he did see a chance to weaken his country's traditional foe, Great Britain, by undermining its colonial empire. France had secretly provided money and supplies to the American revolutionaries as early as 1775. After Saratoga, in 1778, France openly allied itself with the Americans. (A year later, Spain and Holland also entered the war against Britain.) The French alliance proved decisive in the American struggle for independence as it widened the war, forcing the British to divert military resources away from America.

Victory

Faced with a larger war, Britain decided to consolidate its forces in America. British troops were pulled out of Philadelphia, and New York became the base of British operations. In a campaign through 1778–1779, the Patriots, led by **George Rogers Clark**, captured a series of British forts in the Illinois country to gain control of parts of the vast Ohio territory. In 1780, the British army adopted a southern strategy, concentrating its military campaigns in Virginia and the Carolinas, where Loyalists were especially numerous and active.

Yorktown In 1781, the last major battle of the Revolutionary War was fought near Yorktown, Virginia, on the shores of Chesapeake Bay. Strongly supported by French naval and military forces, Washington’s army forced the surrender of a large British army commanded by General Charles Cornwallis.

Treaty of Paris News of Cornwallis’s defeat at Yorktown was a heavy blow to the Tory Party in Parliament that was conducting the war. The war had become unpopular in Britain, partly because it placed a heavy strain on the economy and the government’s finances. Lord North and other Tory ministers resigned and were replaced by Whig leaders who wanted to end the war.

In Paris, in 1783, the belligerents finally signed a peace treaty. The **Treaty of Paris** provided for the following: (1) Britain would recognize the existence of the United States as an independent nation. (2) The Mississippi River would be the western boundary of that nation. (3) Americans would have fishing rights off the coast of Canada. (4) Americans would pay debts owed to British merchants and honor Loyalist claims for property confiscated during the war.

REFLECT ON THE LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Explain the factors that resulted in the American success against Britain.

KEY TERMS BY THEME

Separation (NAT)

Intolerable Acts
First Continental Congress
Patrick Henry
Samuel Adams
John Adams
George Washington
John Dickinson
John Jay
Joseph Galloway
Suffolk Resolves
economic sanctions
Second Continental Congress (1775)

Declaration of the Causes and Necessities for Taking Up Arms
Olive Branch Petition
Thomas Jefferson
Declaration of Independence

War (POL)

Concord
Paul Revere
William Dawes
Lexington
Bunker Hill
Battle of Saratoga

George Rogers Clark
Yorktown

Final Break (WOR)

Prohibitory Act (1775)
absolute monarch
Treaty of Paris (1783)

A New Nation (SOC)

Loyalists (Tories)
Patriots
Minutemen
continentals
Valley Forge

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

Questions 1–2 refer to the following excerpt.

“I have not the least doubt that the Negroes will make very excellent soldiers, with proper management. . . .

I foresee that this project will have to combat much opposition from prejudice and self-interest. The contempt we have been taught to entertain for the black makes us fancy many things that are founded neither in reason nor experience; and an unwillingness to part with property of so valuable a kind will furnish a thousand arguments to show the impracticability or pernicious tendency of a scheme which requires such a sacrifice. But it should be considered that if we do not make use of them in this way, the enemy probably will. . . . An essential part of the plan is to give them their freedom with their muskets.”

Alexander Hamilton, “A Proposal to Arm and Then Free the Negroes,” 1779

1. This excerpt suggests that Hamilton saw the conflict with Great Britain as also a conflict among colonists over
 - (A) whether to trust reason or experience more
 - (B) whether colonists had adequate skills to manage soldiers
 - (C) the views of plantation owners about the enemy
 - (D) the views of White Americans toward enslaved Black Americans
2. The excerpt supports the claim that the use of Black troops during the Revolutionary War was likely motivated by which of the following?
 - (A) Awareness that the French were using Black soldiers in their army
 - (B) Fear that the British would recruit African Americans
 - (C) Concern that state militias were short of troops
 - (D) Belief that the Declaration of Independence called for equality

SHORT-ANSWER QUESTION

1. Answer (a), (b), and (c).
 - (a) Briefly explain ONE specific strength that Patriots had in the American Revolution in the period 1774 to 1783.
 - (b) Briefly explain ONE specific way that France influenced the American Revolution in the period 1774 to 1783.
 - (c) Briefly explain ONE specific role that Native Americans played in the American Revolution in the period 1774 to 1783.