Conference of Young Nigerian Democrats

DEMOCRACY DIGEST

Compilation of E-Books on Democracy

Compiled by:
Wole Adedoyin
American Revolution

I

INTRODUCTION

The 13 Colonies in 1775

This map shows the 13 British colonies in North America as they existed on the eve of the American Revolution (1775-1783). After winning independence from Britain, the colonies made up the first 13 states of the newly formed United States of America.

© Microsoft Corporation. All Rights Reserved.

American Revolution (1775-1783), conflict between 13 British colonies in North America and their parent country, Great Britain. It was made up of two related events: the American War of Independence (1775-1783) and the formation of the American government as laid out by the
Constitution of the United States in 1787. First, the war achieved independence from Great Britain by the colonies. Second, the newly created United States of America established a republican form of government, in which power resided with the people.

The revolution had many causes. Long-term social, economic, and political changes in the colonies before 1750 provided the basis for an independent nation with representative political institutions. More immediately, the French and Indian War (1754-1763) changed the relationship between the colonies and their mother country. Finally, a decade of conflicts between the British government and the colonists, beginning with the Stamp Act crisis in 1765, led to the outbreak of war in 1775 and the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

Once independent, the new state governments implemented republican constitutions, and a Continental Congress directed the American war effort. Then in 1781 the rebellious states created a loose union under the Articles of Confederation. At the end of the war in 1783, Britain recognized its former colonies as an independent nation. In 1789 the people of the several states ratified the Constitution that created a stronger central government.

II  THE BRITISH COLONIES IN 1750

A  The American People

Britain’s 13 North American colonies experienced an extraordinary rate of population growth. In 1700 the population was about 250,000; seven decades later there were about 2,500,000 inhabitants, a tenfold increase. This phenomenal growth was a prerequisite for a successful independence movement. In 1700 there were 20 people in Britain for every American colonist; by 1775 this ratio had fallen to 3 to 1. See also Colonial America, History of.

The American population also changed in composition. The proportion of the colonists who were of English culture and ancestry steadily declined during the 1700s as the result of the arrival, by forced or voluntary migration, of new racial and ethnic groups. Among the 80 percent of Americans who were
of European descent, there were important cultural divisions. Migrants from Germany, Scotland, and Ireland made up at least 30 percent of the white population. Members of these groups often settled in their own communities, especially in the mid-Atlantic colonies of Delaware, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Others migrated into the backcountry regions of the Southern colonies (Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia), thus adding ethnic diversity to a region already divided along racial lines. Only the New England colonies of Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire remained predominantly English in composition and culture.

In 1775 about one-fifth of the people of the mainland colonies were of African ancestry. Unlike Latin America and the West Indies, North American slaves had a high rate of natural increase. About 250,000 Africans were brought to the mainland colonies before 1775, but the total black population numbered 567,000 on the eve of independence. Most lived as slaves working on tobacco and rice plantations in the Southern colonies. Slaves and some free blacks also lived in the Northern colonies, working on small farms or in cities. See also Slavery in the United States.

Diversity existed not only in the population but also in religious life. Many of the American colonists were not members of any church. Of those who had a religious affiliation, the vast majority were Protestant Christians. There were significant numbers of Roman Catholics in Maryland and Delaware, and a small number of Jews, mostly in Rhode Island. Among the Protestants, there were significant regional variations. In New England, the Congregational Church was legally established; all residents had to contribute to its support. In the South, the Church of England likewise received state support. However, Scots-Irish migrants created Presbyterian churches in the Southern backcountry. In addition, many Baptist congregations were formed during the Great Awakening, an important religious revival that swept through all the colonies during the 1740s. In the mid-Atlantic colonies, there were many different faiths, including Quakers, Dutch Reformed, Mennonites, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Lutherans, so that it was difficult to enforce support for a single established church.

This growth in population and diversity made the American colonies more difficult for Britain to rule. It was therefore an important precondition for the rise of an independence movement and the subsequent emergence of a unique American nationality.
The Political System

In 1750 there was little political basis for a national consciousness in the colonies of British North America. Each of the 13 colonies was a separate entity, with its own governor and legislative assembly. The inhabitants’ first political allegiance was to their own colony. The lower house of each legislature was elected by the adult white men who were property owners. However, the upper houses, or councils, and the governors were chosen in different ways depending on the type of colony.

There were three kinds of colonies: corporate, proprietary, and royal. Rhode Island and Connecticut were corporate colonies, so called because they had been founded under charters granted by the king of England that bestowed corporate rights. In these two colonies, the corporation of property owners elected the council and governor as well as the assembly. Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Delaware were proprietary colonies, ruled by descendants of their founders. Their governors and councils were chosen by their British proprietors, or owners. Georgia, North and South Carolina, Virginia, New Jersey, New York, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire were royal provinces. Their governors were appointed by the king on the advice of the Board of Trade, the British administrative agency that supervised colonial affairs. Their councils, except in Massachusetts, were nominated by the governor and approved by the Board of Trade.

In 1750 there were no governmental bodies or political parties that could formulate policy for the colonists as a whole. Such intercolony ties were created only in response to political events that affected all the colonies—first the French and Indian War and then the struggle for independence.

Nevertheless, the colonies shared one important political institution. Each colony had a representative assembly with authority to make laws covering most aspects of local life. The assemblies had the right to tax; to appropriate money for public works and public officials; and to regulate internal trade, religion, and social behavior. Although the British government was responsible for external matters, such as foreign affairs and trade, the American colonists had a great deal of self-government during the colonial period. The capable leaders of the assemblies took the lead in the independence struggle. These well-functioning representative institutions would form the basis for the new state governments.
C  

Economy and Society

In addition to the rapid growth and diversity of the population and the experience in representative government, the emergence of a prosperous agricultural and commercial economy in the colonies during the 18th century helped pave the way for the independence movement. This economic system was based on the production of wheat, cattle, corn, tobacco, and rice in America for export to the West Indies, Britain, and Europe.

C1  The South

Southern agriculture was founded on the cultivation of tobacco, wheat, and corn in Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina, and of rice and indigo (a blue dye) in South Carolina and Georgia. There was a large demand for these crops in Europe. These crops were cultivated with the help of black slaves imported from Africa. The white planter class in the South was the most powerful, both politically and economically.

C2  The North

Wheat was the main cash crop of the mid-Atlantic colonies of Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey. These colonies, along with those in New England, exported wheat—along with corn, cattle, horses, fish, and wood—primarily to the West Indies. The British and French planters of the Caribbean, exploiting a mainly African labor force, specialized in the production of sugar for export to Europe and imported many of their foodstuffs. The Northern mainland prospered from this vast transatlantic division of labor. In payment for supplies shipped to the West Indies, their merchants received bills of exchange (essentially credit slips) from merchant houses in Great Britain. These credits were then used to purchase British manufactured goods.
Trade Patterns and Urban Growth

The two most important trade routes in terms of volume and financial return were controlled by British merchants: the tobacco and the sugar trades. American merchants dominated two small trade routes: the export of rice to Europe and the export of supplies from the Northern mainland to the West Indies. However, American control of these subsidiary trade routes undermined the British policy of mercantilism, which depended on raw materials from the colonies that were shipped to Great Britain and then exported as finished products. This policy discouraged any colonial trade except with Great Britain.

The colonists’ participation in transatlantic trade accounted for the rise of the American port cities of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Newport, and Charleston. These shipping centers gradually came to provide the commercial services, such as insurance and wholesale trade, and the small-scale industries, such as rope and sail manufacture and shipbuilding, that were necessary to sustain a merchant fleet. The independence movement began in these cities.

Social Divisions

The contrast between the rich and the poor was stark in the colonial cities. In 1774 about 29 percent of the adult men in Boston possessed no taxable property at all. These men were wage earners, working for others. They lived in the back of shops, taverns, or rented rooms. Since they had little or no property, they could not vote, and thus lacked direct political power.

Next in social rank were the artisans and small shopkeepers. Constituting almost half of a town’s population, they owned about one-third of the total wealth. Shopkeepers had once dominated town life, but their political and social influence had waned with the rise of wealthy merchants. Artisans feared a similar decline in their position; the influx of British manufactures might destroy their small businesses, reducing them to the status of propertyless wage laborers. As threatened social groups, artisans and shopkeepers were vital to the revolutionary upheaval. They took the strongest stand
against the new British measures of taxation and control. They also challenged the political domination of the merchants and lawyers.

Urban merchants also played key leadership roles in American resistance. By 1770 these men, about 10 percent of the taxpayers, owned from 50 to 60 percent of the total wealth of these towns. Their wealth also gave them much prestige and enabled them, and their lawyer allies who handled complex commercial transactions, to dominate political life.

The gap between rich and poor was much narrower in the farming regions of the Northern colonies. However, even in rural communities, where most Americans lived, social differences were increasing. Inequality was especially apparent in areas where crops were raised for sale, rather than just for subsistence. For example, in the Southern colonies, great disparity existed between plantation farmers who grew rice and tobacco on a large scale and family farmers who grew food to feed themselves. In both the North and the South these differences divided farming communities.

In 1775 it was not clear whether the many divisions within American society—among racial and ethnic groups, religious denominations, and social classes—and the fragmented character of colonial political institutions would prevent a unified movement for independence. But it was increasingly apparent that the battle with Britain for American home rule would also involve a struggle among Americans over which people would rule in the new country.

III

THE GREAT WAR FOR EMPIRE

The warfare between Britain and France that began in 1754 with skirmishes in North America has several different names. In America it is known as the French and Indian War (1754-1763). In Europe it is called the Seven Years’ War because the fighting there lasted from 1756 to 1763. The war in North America was fought mostly throughout the Northern colonies, and in the end Great Britain defeated France. During the peace negotiations, Britain acquired French holdings in Canada and Florida from France’s ally, Spain. However, Britain also accumulated a large debt over the course of the war. To help pay off the debt, Britain turned to the colonies to generate revenue.
The war changed the relationship between Great Britain and the colonies. Prior to the war, Great Britain had practiced a policy of salutary neglect, not insisting on strict enforcement of laws, such as the Molasses Act, which in 1733 imposed a tax on molasses, because trade with the American colonies was making Britain very wealthy and powerful. During this period, the colonists developed a nearly independent political and economic system.

After the war, however, British leaders reevaluated their relationship with the colonies, ending the policy of salutary neglect and proposing reforms and new taxes. This reevaluation was caused by conflicts between Great Britain and the colonies during the war, such as the colonial assemblies’ insistence on controlling the militia units raised to fight the French, the increased colonial independence, and colonial smuggling of French goods into the country during the war. In addition, the war had left Great Britain deeply in debt. British leaders viewed American prosperity as a resource and taxing the colonies as a means to relieve British debt. Conflicts arose as Great Britain attempted to reassert its power over the colonies; they viewed Great Britain’s attempts to tax them as interference into internal matters. The colonies believed that Great Britain had jurisdiction only over external issues.

IV THE COMING OF THE REVOLUTION
Colonial Resistance

Facing heavy costs of supporting a standing army in the North American colonies, Britain hoped to shift some of the fiscal burden onto the colonists by imposing a series of taxes without consulting colonial governments. The colonies resisted, claiming there should be no taxes without representation. The British government prepared to quash what they perceived as an open revolt, and the colonists prepared for war.

The New Imperial System
Tax Stamps

Because Britain had accumulated large war debts, Parliament passed the Stamp Act in 1765. The act was intended to generate revenues that would help pay for the cost of maintaining a permanent force of British troops in the American colonies. All official documents, including deeds, mortgages, newspapers, and pamphlets, had to bear British government stamps in order to be deemed legal.

After the war the British government undertook a concerted effort to bring the colonies more firmly under its control. Prompted by an uprising of Native Americans led by the Ottawa chief Pontiac, the British king issued the Royal Proclamation of 1763. This edict restricted European settlement to the area east of the Appalachian Mountains in order to prevent new wars with the Native American peoples of the interior. It was followed by the Currency Act of 1764, which prohibited the colonial assemblies from using paper money as legal tender for payment of debts. Another revenue measure, the Sugar Act of 1764, lowered the duties imposed by the much-evaded Molasses Act of 1733, but sought to ensure that the new tariffs would be diligently collected (see Sugar and Molasses Acts). The law placed tighter administrative controls on coastal shipping. More important, it provided that violations of the Sugar Act would be prosecuted in the vice-admiralty courts, in which cases were heard by British-appointed judges with no local juries. Another innovation was the Quartering Act of
1765, which obliged the colonial assemblies to provide housing and supplies for British troops. In addition, well-publicized discussions were taking place in London about taxing the colonies for the support of British troops in Canada and in frontier outposts. Reform of the empire was clearly underway.

Coming after more than 50 years of salutary neglect, the new regulations alarmed the colonists. Then, in 1765 the British government headed by George Grenville acted to raise revenue by levying, for the first time, a direct tax on the colonists. The Stamp Act required them to buy and place revenue stamps on all official legal documents, deeds, newspapers, pamphlets, dice, and playing cards. Colonists strongly opposed the Stamp Act. In part, the colonists were alarmed by the economic costs imposed on them by the reforms. Ordinary people had always been lightly taxed in America and did not want their money to be used to support British officials.

B The Ideological Sources of Resistance

Educated colonists mounted an ideological attack on the new British policies. They drew inspiration from three intellectual traditions. The first tradition was English common law, the centuries-old body of legal rules and procedures that protected the king’s subjects against arbitrary acts by other subjects or by the government.

A second major intellectual resource was the Age of Enlightenment in Europe during the 18th century. Unlike common-law attorneys, who valued precedent, Enlightenment philosophers questioned the past and appealed to reason. Many of them followed 17th-century English philosopher John Locke in believing that all individuals possessed certain “natural rights”—such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of property—and that it was the responsibility of government to protect those rights.

The English political tradition provided a third ideological basis for the American resistance. Early English Whigs had resisted the arbitrary power exercised by the Stuart kings before 1689 and had sought to limit the authority of the Crown and to increase the power of Parliament. Their ideas had
appealed to many members of the colonial assemblies, who faced powerful governors appointed by the king.

Then, in the decades after 1720, many educated Americans followed arguments in England that attacked the power of government financiers, condemned the idea of standing armies, and accused the king and his ministers of manipulating Parliament through patronage and bribes. To these Americans, the Stamp Act was not simply an economic measure to defray the cost of the American garrisons. The colonists believed that Britain was responsible for external matters but the colonial assemblies legislated internal affairs. Therefore, the Stamp Act represented a cunning attempt by Britain to seize control of taxation from the representative colonial assemblies and to tax the colonists without giving them representation in government.

C The Stamp Act Crisis

American opposition to the Stamp Act began shortly after its passage in March 1765. Patrick Henry of Virginia urged the House of Burgesses to condemn the Stamp Act. The Massachusetts assembly called for an intercolonial meeting, and a Stamp Act Congress met in New York City in October 1765. Delegates from nine colonies attended, and petitioned the king for repeal of the act, denouncing it as taxation without representation. Many British merchants joined in this appeal. Their exports of manufactures to the colonies had increased markedly since 1750 and they feared the effects of American refusal to pay commercial debts amounting to millions of pounds.

However, the broader issues at stake were temporarily obscured by the drama of immediate events. Some Americans responded with violence to the new British measures of taxation and control. On October 31, the day before the Stamp Act was to go into effect, 200 merchants in New York City vowed to stop importing British goods, beginning the First Nonimportation Movement. Then they joined storekeepers, artisans, sailors, and laborers in a mass protest meeting. On the next night, 2,000 residents surrounded the fort where the stamps were being guarded and then plundered the house of a British officer. These mob actions prompted the lieutenant governor to ask General Thomas Gage, the British military commander in North America, to rout the protesters by force.
Similar situations occurred in Philadelphia, Albany, and Charleston. Local merchants joined in nonimportation agreements. Groups of artisans, calling themselves Sons of Liberty, forcibly prevented the distribution of stamps and forced the resignation of the stamp collectors. In Boston, a mob destroyed the house of Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson. The colonial elite—merchants, planters, assembly leaders—did not condemn this resort to violence; some even encouraged it. Nearly everywhere, British authority was challenged, and the imperial forces lacked the power or the determination to prevail.

Pressure from the British merchants, who feared the nonimportation movement, persuaded a new British ministry, led by Prime Minister Charles Wentworth, Marquess of Rockingham, to repeal the Stamp Act in 1766. However, Parliament enacted a Declaratory Act that restated its traditional claim to legislate for and to tax the colonists. As Chief Justice William Murray, later 1st earl of Mansfield, stated: "The British legislature ... has the authority to bind every part and every subject without the least distinction, whether such subjects have the right to vote or not."

D The Townshend Acts

Mansfield’s argument was directed against the colonial position of no taxation without representation. Colonists who protested the taxes distinguished between taxes designed to raise money, which they opposed, and duties intended primarily to regulate trade, which the colonists had accepted, at least in principle, since the Molasses Act of 1733.

This distinction between revenue and regulation was subtle and somewhat artificial. And it was misinterpreted by Charles Townshend, longtime critic of the American assemblies and now chancellor of the Exchequer in the government headed by William Pitt. Townshend believed that the colonists were objecting to internal taxes, such as the Stamp Act, but not to external taxes on trade. Consequently, he assumed that the colonists would accept external taxes. The Townshend Acts, which were passed in 1767, placed duties on colonial imports of lead, glass, paint, paper, and tea. This act also specified that the revenue was to be used not only to support British troops in America but also to
provide salaries for royal officials who would collect taxes. Such funding would make these officials financially independent of the colonial assemblies.

This attempt to raise revenue through trade duties and to circumvent American control of imperial officials angered many colonial leaders. John Dickinson argued in his influential *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* (1767) that the Townshend duties were “not for the regulation of trade ... but for the single purpose of levying money upon us.” Bolstered by such arguments, the colonists opposed the taxes, not with the violence of 1765, which ended with the repeal of the Stamp Act, but with a new boycott of British goods, the Second Nonimportation Movement.

### Economic and Moral Upheaval

The Americans’ determined resistance to the Townshend Acts resulted, in part, from a profound transition in the colonial economy. Before 1754 the colonists had earned enough from their exports to pay for their imports from Great Britain. Then, British military expenditures in America during the French and Indian War bolstered the incomes of many colonists and unleashed a wave of spending for consumer items: equipment for their farms and all kinds of household goods—including cloth, blankets, china, and cooking utensils. British merchant houses aided this spree of consumption by extending to American traders a full year’s credit, instead of the traditional six months. The mainland colonists soon accounted for 20 percent of all British exports and had gone deeply into debt.

At the end of the war in 1763, the boom came to an abrupt end. The postwar recession brought bankruptcy and disgrace to those Americans who had overextended their commitments and brought hard economic times to nearly everyone else. This financial hardship generated opposition to the Stamp Act in 1765, especially among urban artisans. They had suffered from the competition of low-priced British manufactures and now feared higher taxes. Similar economic pressures fueled resistance to the Townshend Acts in 1767.

Americans also had moralistic reasons for calling a halt to the mass importation of European goods. Extravagant expenditures on luxury items—fancy carpets and carriages, elegant clothes and
furniture—produced calls for a return to more frugal living standards. In New England, where Puritan influence was strongest, excessive consumption and debt was seen as a moral failing that inevitably led to a weakening of character.

American women, especially religious women, added their support to the nonimportation movement. Ordinarily women were excluded from prominent roles in political affairs, but the boycotts prompted a more sustained involvement by women in the public world. In Providence, Rhode Island, during the Stamp Act crisis, 18 “Daughters of Liberty” met to spin yarn for cloth, to avoid purchasing any cloth from British manufacturers. To protest the Townshend Acts, a much larger group of religious women in New England organized dozens of spinning matches, bees, and demonstrations at the homes of their ministers. Some gatherings were openly patriotic, such as that at Berwick, Maine, where the spinners “as true Daughters of Liberty” celebrated American goods, “drinking rye coffee and dining on bear venison.” But many more women combined support for nonimportation with charitable work by coming together to spin flax and wool, which they donated to their ministers and needy members of the community.

F

Constitutional Conflict
Boston Massacre

The Boston Massacre was not a massacre but actually a street fight between a mob and a squad of British soldiers that ended with the deaths of five colonists. This picture was engraved, printed, and sold by Paul Revere but does not depict events as they actually happened.

Hulton Deutsch

While confrontations over taxes and reforms were serious, the bonds uniting the colonies and Britain were still strong. Peace and unity were still possible. American diplomat Benjamin Franklin declared in 1769 that the British ministry should “Repeal the laws, Renounce the Right, Recall the troops, Refund the money, and Return to the old method of requisition.” Late in that year the British government, now directed by Lord Frederick North, the new prime minister and ally of King George III, went part way toward meeting these demands. Under the pressure of the American economic boycott, and a sharp drop in British exports, Parliament agreed to the repeal of most of the Townshend Acts. However, the ministry did not recall the British troops from any of the colonies and showed no disposition to return to the pre-1763 imperial system. Indeed, Parliament reasserted its authority to legislate for and to tax the colonies, retaining the tax on tea as a symbol of its supremacy.

The long debate over taxes clarified the fundamental constitutional questions at stake and posed the political issue in stark terms. “I know of no line that can be drawn between the supreme authority of Parliament and the total independence of the colonies,” declared Thomas Hutchinson, the American-born governor of Massachusetts, early in the 1770s. A committee of the Massachusetts assembly accepted Hutchinson’s challenge and drew the obvious, if nearly unthinkable, conclusion: “If there be no such line,” then the colonies would have to be “independent.” But the committee proposed a solution: If Britain and its American colonies were united by the king as their “one head and common sovereign,” then they could “live happily in that connection,” retaining their own semiautonomous assemblies.

This solution would have required Parliament to renounce its claims to sovereign power in America and was almost unthinkable given its quest for authority. Moreover, two violent incidents showed how difficult it would be to achieve any peaceful constitutional compromise. In Boston in 1770 British troops fired on an unruly mob, killing five people, an event known as the Boston Massacre. Two years
later, a Rhode Island mob destroyed a British customs ship, the Gaspée, wounding its captain in the process. In both cases, the British ministry declined to take a strong stand, hoping that time and patience would resolve the imperial crisis. Many members of Parliament demanded a more aggressive stance: American violence, they said, should be met with British force.

These incidents also played into the hands of those Americans who favored independence. Following the Stamp Act crisis, the Sons of Liberty in the various colonial towns were in contact with each other. More assertive leaders of the colonial assemblies also corresponded, and gradually an organized Patriot movement developed. Following the Gaspée incident, Boston patriot Samuel Adams persuaded the Massachusetts assembly to establish a formal Committee of Correspondence, and Patriot leaders in the assemblies of Virginia and the other colonies soon followed suit. These committees exchanged information and fostered a new sense of American interdependence and identity. In any new imperial crisis, American Patriots would for the first time be able to formulate a coherent and unified policy of resistance.

G

The Tea Act and the Outbreak of Fighting
Bostonians Paying the Excise Man

Colonists in Boston, Massachusetts, pour tea down the throat of a tarred-and-feathered tax collector in this adaptation of a 1774 cartoon entitled The Bostonians Paying the Excise Man, or Tarring and Feathering. The background shows the Boston Tea Party, in which colonists dumped shiploads of British tea into Boston Harbor to protest unfair taxation. Unpopular taxes imposed by Great Britain on the colonists caused violent protests and led to the American Revolution (1775-1783).

As Patriots warned fellow colonists of the dangers of imperial domination, Lord North lent substance to their predictions. He wanted to assist the East India Company, which had incurred great military expenses in expanding British trade in India. To do so, he secured the Tea Act in 1773, which eliminated the customs duty on the company’s tea and permitted its direct export to America. The company’s tea, although still subject to the Townshend duty, would be cheaper than the smuggled Dutch tea most Americans drank. If the colonists bought it, however, they would be accepting the
duty. Beyond that, American merchants would lose a valuable trade, because the company planned to sell its tea through its own agents.

Lord North knew that the Tea Act would be unpopular in America, but he was determined to uphold parliamentary supremacy. When a shipment of tea arrived in Boston, radical Patriots led by Samuel Adams prevented its unloading. When Governor Hutchinson refused to permit the tea to be reexported, the Patriots, many disguised as Native Americans, threw the cargo overboard in the so-called Boston Tea Party in December 1773.

### G1 Britain Stands Firm

**Boston**

This British military map, which details the waterways and topography of the Boston area, was completed in 1775, just before the onset of the American Revolution. It marks locations fortified by minutemen—colonists who stood ready to fight for independence from Britain. The numbers in the waterways indicate depth at various points throughout Boston Harbor—a significant consideration for the British, who deployed naval units against the colonists during the war. The map is based on observations made by a lieutenant in the British Corps of Engineers; the cartographer is unknown. The fortifications built by the minutemen appear on the map highlighted in red. A key fortification stood in Charlestown, just north of Boston. At this spot, outnumbered minutemen held off two of three British assaults on June 17, 1775, during the Battle of Bunker Hill. The third British assault forced the minutemen to retreat, and Britain gained control of both Breed’s and Bunker Hill, burning Charleston to the ground in the process. The British suffered about 1000 casualties; the minutemen suffered about 400.

© Microsoft Corporation. All Rights Reserved.
Events now swiftly moved toward the outbreak of war. An outraged Parliament demanded compensation for the tea. The Boston town meeting, now under the influence of the radical Caucus Club led by Adams and Joseph Warren, rejected this demand. The North ministry replied with a series of stern edicts in March 1774. These edicts, along with the Québec Act, a measure passed by the British Parliament at the same time, were known among the colonists as the Intolerable Acts. The port of Boston was declared closed; the powers of the Massachusetts assembly and local town meetings were curtailed; and two acts provided for the quartering of troops in private houses and the exemption of imperial officials from trial in Massachusetts. The ministry’s strategy was to use the destruction of tea to isolate what the British saw as the radical Massachusetts Patriots from more moderate Americans in Virginia and the mid-Atlantic colonies.

The British strategy of dividing the Americans nearly succeeded. Colonial leaders met in the First Continental Congress, held in Philadelphia in September and October 1774. In a pamphlet titled *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, intended to influence the Virginia delegates to the Congress, Thomas Jefferson denounced all parliamentary legislation as acts “of arbitrary power ... over these states.” A much more conciliatory attitude was reflected in a plan presented by Joseph Galloway of Pennsylvania. Galloway proposed the creation of an American parliament that would have significant powers of taxation and legislation, but whose acts would need the approval of a governor-general appointed by the Crown. Galloway’s plan was rejected by a narrow vote. The delegates then adopted policies favored by more radical Patriots, including a petition to the king called the Declaration of Rights and Grievances. The Congress declared the British reform program “unconstitutional, dangerous, and destructive to the freedom” of America. More important, it voted to establish a Third Nonimportation Movement. To implement this boycott, which included pledges against exportation and consumption as well as importation, the Congress created a Continental Association—a system of local committees to mobilize patriotic fervor. Among these local committees were the Committees of Correspondence and the Committees of Safety. These measures were to remain in effect until all colonial grievances had been addressed.

Lexington and Concord
Battles of Lexington and Concord

On the night of April 18, 1775, British General Thomas Gage ordered his troops to Concord, Massachusetts, to seize a large cache of arms and gunpowder that American colonists had stored there. Boston patriots rode quickly toward Lexington and Concord to warn people about the approaching army. The colonial militias first opposed the British at Lexington. However, the British continued on to Concord. There additional colonial militias forced them to retreat and harassed them all the way back to Boston.

The British government remained firm in the face of American resistance. Early in 1775 orders were sent to General Gage, who at the time was governor and military commander of Massachusetts. He was ordered to close the Massachusetts assembly, which was then meeting illegally outside Boston; to arrest its leading members; and to capture the arms being stockpiled by the colonial militia. On April 19 Gage ordered his troops to Concord. They were opposed first at Lexington and then at Concord by colonial militia, who had been warned by Patriots, including Paul Revere. At Lexington, shots were fired, but the British continued on to Concord. There they were harassed by American militia shooting from behind trees, hedges, and buildings. The British were forced to retreat, and they headed back to Boston in disorganized flight. The battle was a strong American victory. As the British retreated to Boston, they suffered more than 270 casualties. The colonists lost fewer than 100 people.

Too much blood had been spilled to allow a peaceful compromise. A final “Olive Branch Petition” approved by the Second Continental Congress in July 1775 was rejected by the king. In December, Parliament passed the Prohibitory Act, which outlawed trade with the rebellious colonies and set up a naval blockade. Consequently, when Anglo-American philosopher Thomas Paine asked in the pamphlet Common Sense (published in January 1776) whether “a continent should continue to be ruled by an
Island,” only a minority of Loyalist Americans were willing to defend the connection with Great Britain. As a series of military skirmishes fostered the growth of American patriotism, the Continental Congress took the final steps. In June 1775 it had commissioned George Washington to organize and lead a Continental Army. In addition, the Congress ordered publication on July 4, 1776, of a Declaration of Independence, which recounted the grievances against Britain and declared the colonies free and independent as the United States of America.

THE AMERICAN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

War Aims and Military Forces

American Revolution Uniforms

During the American Revolution (1775-1783), the colonists wore different uniforms depending on the state they were from and their military rank. This drawing depicts the following uniforms, from left to right, Light Infantry, First City Troops Philadelphia, George Washington’s Body Guard, Pennsylvania Line Infantry Private, Continental Artillery Private, Massachusetts Line Infantry Lieutenant, New York Line Infantry Private, Artillery Captain, South Carolina Line Infantry Lieutenant, Washington’s Uniform, and Movlan’s Draggons.

Culver Pictures
In the fall of 1775 the British government decided to use overwhelming military force to crush the American revolt. The task looked easy. England, Wales, and Scotland had a combined population of about 9 million, compared with 2.5 million in the 13 rebel colonies, nearly 20 percent of whom were black slaves. Militarily, Britain was clearly superior, with a large standing army and the financial resources to hire additional troops, and the most powerful navy in the world. The British government also counted on mobilizing thousands of Loyalists in America and Native Americans who were hostile to white expansion.

Nonetheless, the Americans had a number of important advantages. They were fighting on their own territory, close to the sources of supply and amid a mostly friendly population. In addition, the Patriots had some resourceful military leaders, who had been tested in the French and Indian War. Finally, later in the war, the rebellious colonies received crucial aid from France and Spain. This assistance offset British superiority in wealth and military power, and made possible a clear-cut American victory. However, few of these American advantages were obvious when the war began.

Throughout the war, one of the main challenges facing the Americans was maintaining a credible army. Washington’s main Continental Army never had more than 24,000 active-duty troops, although Congress promised to raise a force at least three times that size. In addition, the army was poorly supplied and short on weapons and food. Early in the war General Philip Schuyler of New York complained that his men were “weak in numbers, dispirited, naked, destitute of provisions, without camp equipage, with little ammunition, and not a single piece of cannon.” The situation did not improve during the course of the war. Because of the meager financial support provided by Congress and the American people, the Continental Army almost perished from hunger and cold during the winters of 1777 and 1778. Inadequate pay prompted mutinies in the ranks and in the officer corps as late as 1783. The Continental Army had to struggle to survive during the entire war.

If inadequate support was one weakness of the Continental Army, its composition was another. The army was a new creation, without tradition or even military experience. Trained militiamen wanted to serve in local units near their farms and families, so raw recruits formed the basis of the Continental forces. Muster rolls for troops commanded by General William Smallwood of Maryland show that they were either poor American-born youths or older foreign-born men, often former indentured servants.
Some of these men enlisted out of patriotic fervor; many more signed up to receive a cash bonus and the promise of a future land grant.

It took time to turn such men into loyal soldiers. Many panicked in the heat of battle. Others deserted, unwilling to accept the discipline of military life. Given this weak army, Washington worried constantly that he would suffer an overwhelming defeat.

In total, the war lasted for eight years and had four phases, each with a distinct strategy and character. During the first phase, from April 1775 to July 1776, the Patriots’ goal was to turn the revolt into an organized rebellion, while British governors and armed Loyalists tried to suppress the uprising. The second phase of the war began with a major British invasion of New York in July 1776 and ended with the American victory at Saratoga in October 1777. The British strategy was to confront and defeat the Continental Army and to isolate the radical Patriots of New England. Washington’s goal was to protect his weak forces by retreat and, when he held the advantage, to counterattack. During the third phase of the war Britain tried to subdue the South. Beginning in early 1778 it used regular troops to take territory and local Loyalists to hold it. Patriots used guerrilla warfare to weaken British forces, and then used French assistance to win a major victory at Yorktown, Virginia, in October 1781. Then came the final phase of the war when astute Patriot diplomacy won a treaty recognizing the independence of the United States in September 1783.

B Phase One: The Opening Campaigns

![Battle of Bunker Hill](image)
The first major engagement of the American Revolution was fought to control the heights dominating Boston Harbor. It occurred on June 17, 1775, in Charlestown, Massachusetts. The colonial militias twice repulsed the British, who suffered heavy losses, but the colonists ran out of ammunition and had to retreat. Although the British won the battle, the colonial militias learned that they could fight against the regular British soldiers.

Following the outbreak of fighting at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, the Americans held the strategic advantage. They had numerical superiority and quickly brought it to bear against the main British force in Boston. Nearly 20,000 New England militiamen surrounded the town and placed it under siege. On June 17 General Gage responded by attacking American positions on Breed’s and Bunker hills (see Battle of Bunker Hill). The British dislodged the Patriot forces, but they suffered more than 1,000 casualties. American losses were much lower, with about 140 men killed and about 270 wounded.

Battle Site at Bunker Hill

The first major battle of the American Revolution was fought on the heights overlooking Boston Harbor at Breed’s and Bunker hills. From fortified positions, the Americans repulsed two British charges. On the third charge, the Americans ran out of gunpowder and were driven from their positions.
The stalemate at Boston continued until March 1776, when the Americans, now under the command of Washington, erected a battery of cannon on Dorchester Heights, overlooking the city. Rather than engage the entrenched Americans, General William Howe, who had succeeded Gage as the British commander because Gage was criticized for heavy British casualties at Bunker Hill, evacuated his troops from Boston. The British departed for Nova Scotia accompanied by more than 1,000 Loyalist refugees.

**Civil War in the South**

In the meantime, the fighting in Massachusetts had sparked skirmishes between Patriots and Loyalists in Virginia and the Carolinas. In June 1775 the Virginia House of Burgesses forced the royal governor, Lord John Dunmore, to take refuge on a British warship in Chesapeake Bay. From there, Dunmore organized two military forces: one of whites, the Queen’s Own Loyal Virginians, and one of blacks, the Ethiopian Regiment. In November he issued a controversial proclamation offering freedom to slaves and indentured servants who joined the Loyalist cause.

In North Carolina, Governor Josiah Martin tried to maintain his authority by raising a force of about 1,500 Loyalist migrants from the highlands of Scotland. However, in February 1776 the Patriot militia defeated Martin’s army in the Battle of Moore’s Creek Bridge, capturing more than 800 of his troops. In Charleston, South Carolina, in June 1776 General Charles Lee and Patriot John Rutledge, who later became governor of South Carolina, mobilized armed artisans and three Continental regiments and repelled a British assault by about 3,000 troops commanded by General Henry Clinton.

**The Americans Invade Canada**

Yet another series of battles took place in Canada, which had not joined the American colonies in their independence movement. In May 1775 Fort Ticonderoga, an undermanned fortress on the inland route to Montréal, fell to colonial forces led by Ethan Allen and Benedict Arnold, who later became a British spy. The British garrison at Crown Point on Lake Champlain surrendered almost immediately
afterward. In September an American army under General Richard Montgomery moved farther north, laying siege to Saint Johns, a British fort. Following the capture of this post in November, Montgomery’s troops quickly advanced on Montréal, capturing the city without serious resistance.

While Montgomery’s army was pushing toward Montréal along the Lake Champlain route, another American force of about 1,000 men, commanded by Arnold, was slowly proceeding up the Kennebec River in Maine to attack the British at Québec. Despite harsh weather, inadequate supplies, and the desertion of one-third of his force, Arnold reached Québec late in November. He joined forces with Montgomery, who had brought a small detachment down the St. Lawrence River from Montréal. In late December the combined American forces attacked the well-fortified city. British fire inflicted heavy casualties on the Americans, wounding Arnold and killing Montgomery. Unable to take Québec by storm, the remaining Americans besieged the city until the spring of 1776. Then, a British relief convoy raised the siege and recaptured Montréal from the disease-ridden and poorly supplied American force.

The Americans’ failure to capture Québec revealed their weak offensive capabilities. The local militiamen who comprised the bulk of the Patriot forces during the first phase of the war were prepared to fight only for short periods and within a few hundred miles of their homes. They could oust the British army from Boston and British governors from the South, but they could not carry the war into enemy territory. Still, the American Patriots had achieved a great deal in 15 months. They had asserted control over most of the mainland and upheld the authority of their rebel governments. Indeed, it was these victories that emboldened the new American state governments and the Continental Congress to move toward independence during the spring of 1776.

C

Phase Two: The British Northern Offensive

Just as the Congress was issuing the official Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia in July 1776, a British army of more than 30,000 men was landing on Staten Island near New York City. Lord North, who was still the prime minister, had ordered General Howe to capture New York City and seize control of the Hudson River valley, thus isolating the radical Patriots in New England from the rest of
the colonies. Expecting this show of force to dissolve Patriots’ resolve, North gave Howe the authority to negotiate an end to the rebellion.

When initial negotiations failed, Howe launched an attack on August 27 against the 10,000 American troops entrenched on Brooklyn Heights. His experienced men outflanked the American positions and captured two generals and about 1,000 soldiers. The British general then directed a deliberate, tactically correct pursuit of the retreating American forces, defeating them in pitched battles in October on Harlem Heights and at White Plains.

As Howe aimed for a decisive victory, Washington’s goal was simple survival. Outnumbered, outgunned, and outmaneuvered, the American general retreated into New Jersey in a desperate effort to keep his battered army intact. In a major mistake, he failed to order the evacuation of Fort Washington on the northern end of Manhattan Island. This fortress fell easily to the British in November, with the loss of 3,000 troops and scores of cannon. Abandoning Fort Lee, across the Hudson from Manhattan, Washington withdrew to the south.

The American position was bad in 1776, but it would have been even worse had it not been for the determined resistance offered by American forces commanded by Benedict Arnold. His skillful defense on Lake Champlain forced the withdrawal to Canada of a strong British force under General Guy Carleton. Carleton’s army had been moving south toward Albany and New York City, as part of North’s plan of isolating New England from the rest of the colonies and falling on Washington’s army from the rear.

Even without Carleton’s assistance, General Howe’s forces might have decisively defeated the main Continental Army. However, Howe was a naturally cautious man, and he employed the relatively static tactics standard in 18th-century Europe. Moreover, he did not want to take military risks that might result in heavy casualties because it would take at least six months to get reinforcements from Britain. Finally, Howe was personally sympathetic to many American demands and hoped to negotiate a settlement of the conflict. Consequently, the British commander did not undertake a pursuit of Washington’s disorganized forces, giving the Americans much-needed time to regroup.
The American Counterattack

Washington Crossing the Delaware

On December 25, 1776, General George Washington led his troops in a surprise attack against the British, who had settled into winter quarters in New Jersey. The American forces crossed the Delaware River at night and defeated the British troops first at Trenton and then at Princeton. These victories, although minor, dramatically improved the morale of the American forces.

Howe’s caution prevented the British from crushing the rebellion in 1776. Washington withdrew his shattered army across New Jersey and over the Delaware River into Pennsylvania, advising the Continental Congress that “on our Side the war should be defensive.” The American general’s strategy was to draw the British away from the seacoast to extend their lines of supply and spread out their forces. As the British went into their winter quarters, Washington led a surprise attack across the Delaware River into New Jersey on Christmas night, December 25, 1776. His forces won victories against German troops, called Hessians, at the Battle of Trenton, and then against British regulars at the Battle of Princeton. These were minor triumphs but they had a startling effect on American morale, which improved dramatically.
Despite the setbacks the British had suffered in New Jersey, they still held the military advantage. General Howe’s troops continued to occupy New York City and to control most of northern New Jersey. Another British army, under General Clinton, captured the important port of Newport, Rhode Island, on December 1, 1776. And General John Burgoyne, who had replaced Carleton, was massing a third force in Canada. The events of the last half of 1776 had shown that the American forces were no match for British regulars in a fixed battle. Each time the opposing armies had faced each other, the Americans had been forced to retreat, sometimes in orderly fashion, more often in disarray.

**Britain’s Strategic Mistakes**

**Battle of Germantown**
Fought on October 4, 1777, the Battle of Germantown came soon after a British victory the previous month at nearby Brandywine Creek. The defeat of the Americans in these two battles allowed the British to easily occupy Philadelphia, the home of the Continental Congress.

The year 1777 was crucial to the contest. It tested the ability of the British to overpower the Continental Army and the will of the Americans to endure a series of military defeats. Lord North’s
strategy remained the isolation of New England. To achieve this goal a strong army under General Burgoyne was to move down the Lake Champlain route to Albany, where it would join up with Howe's force from New York City. But Howe had decided upon a different plan. He left 3,000 troops under General Clinton in New York City and personally led the main British force in an attack on Philadelphia, the home of the Continental Congress.

Washington at Valley Forge

The Continental Army's encampment at Valley Forge in Pennsylvania during the winter of 1777-1778 was the bleakest time of the American struggle for independence. Hunger and disease compounded the problems of inadequate shelter and lack of adequate winter clothing. More than 2500 men died of typhus, dysentery, and pneumonia. Washington made repeated appeals for aid and supplies, but the Congress was unable to move the states to provide them.

There were two flaws in Howe’s plan, one strategic and the other tactical. The strategic flaw was the division of his force and the failure to dispatch any troops to the north. If Burgoyne’s army encountered heavy American resistance, it would have no help. This basic mistake was then compounded by a tactical error. Instead of quickly marching overland through New Jersey to Philadelphia, Howe decided to move his force by water, a much longer and slower route. Embarking about 20,000 men on some 250 ships, the British general sailed down the coast and then up the Chesapeake Bay toward Philadelphia. Although Congress had fled the city, General Washington had no choice but to meet Howe’s forces in fixed battle, whatever the danger to his outnumbered army. First at the Battle of the Brandywine on September 11 and again at the Battle of Germantown on October
4, the British outflanked the entrenched Continental Army, forcing it to retreat. Having easily occupied Philadelphia, Howe set up headquarters in the city.

Washington withdrew his battered forces to nearby Valley Forge, where 11,000 soldiers spent a harsh and trying winter. Perhaps more than 2,500 soldiers died from exposure or disease in the winter encampment, while desertions and an extreme lack of provisions further reduced the army to about half its former size. Only the efforts of Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, a Prussian officer who volunteered his services to the American cause, restored discipline and morale to the rebel forces by training and teaching many military tactics.

C3

Saratoga: The Turning Point of the War

Battle of Saratoga

On October 17, 1777, following a defeat at the second Battle of Saratoga, British General John Burgoyne surrendered to American General Horatio Gates at Saratoga, New York. The surrender, depicted here in a painting by John Trumbull, encouraged France to join the American side and was thus a turning point in the American Revolution.

Architect of the Capitol
The British victories in Pennsylvania were won at a high price: the loss of an entire army at Saratoga, New York. Because of Howe’s water route and Washington’s determined, if futile, resistance, the British captured Philadelphia late in the campaigning season—too late for them to send aid to General Burgoyne’s forces in the north. Early in July 1777, Burgoyne’s army of almost 9,000 troops took Fort Ticonderoga, and began to move south toward Albany. Simultaneously, a mixed force of about 2,000 British regulars and Native Americans under Colonel Barry St. Leger marched to launch a coordinated attack on Albany. St. Leger proceeded along the St. Lawrence to Fort Oswego on Lake Ontario and began to descend the Mohawk River valley. His mission was to reduce the American stronghold of Fort Stanwix and then to continue east and link up with Burgoyne at Albany.

The first British setback came on the Mohawk. St. Leger’s forces placed Fort Stanwix under siege early in August and ambushed a relief column led by General Nicholas Herkimer near Oriskany. However, they failed to capture the American fortress. In late August, following the departure of some of his Native American allies and threatened by the approach of an American force under Benedict Arnold, St. Leger was compelled to lift the siege and retreat to Montréal. The Americans could now concentrate their forces against Burgoyne’s army.

At first, the progress of Burgoyne’s invasion force was impeded by troops commanded by General Philip Schuyler. Then, New England militias dealt a staggering blow to a contingent sent out to secure supplies for the underprovisioned British army, killing or capturing most of the 800-man force in the Battle of Bennington, in present-day Vermont, on August 16. Nevertheless, Burgoyne decided to push south toward Albany. He hoped for help from St. Leger and from General Clinton, who was now leading a relief expedition north from New York City.

By mid-September Burgoyne’s army had advanced south of Saratoga and was within striking distance of Albany. But American forces, commanded by General Horatio Gates, were well entrenched at Bemis Heights and repelled a British assault. Because of the slow movement of British regulars and their supply wagons over the rough terrain, the Americans had been able to bring up substantial reinforcements, primarily militia from western New England. On October 7, these forces resisted a second British attack. Burgoyne’s reduced army withdrew to Saratoga, where it was surrounded by the ever increasing American force, now numbering up to 17,000. On October 17, 1777, they forced
Burgoyne to surrender his remaining 5,800 troops. This capitulation gave the Patriots their first major military victory and brought to an end the second, and pivotal, phase of the war of independence.

Phase Three: The War in the South

A new phase of the war began in 1778. The American triumph at Saratoga completely disrupted Britain’s military strategy, and General Howe was forced to resign in disgrace. The Americans had demonstrated their capacity to resist, even following the loss of their chief cities.

European Diplomacy

These events were observed closely in the capitals of Europe, especially in Paris. France, still seeking revenge for the loss of Canada in 1763, had watched the development of the American resistance movement with great interest. The French government had sent observers to America at the time of the Stamp Act Congress in 1765 and was ready to offer positive assistance when fighting broke out a decade later.

The policy of Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes, the French foreign minister, was to offer covert aid to the rebels, but to keep France out of the war until an opportune moment. An American emissary, Silas Deane, was welcomed in Paris as a “commercial agent” in 1776. In May of that year a fictitious company was set up under the direction of the author Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais to funnel military supplies to the rebellious colonists. These much-needed munitions were paid for by a secret loan from the French and Spanish governments. However, in December, when the American representatives, who now included Benjamin Franklin and Arthur Lee as well as Deane, attempted to secure additional military aid, they were firmly rebuffed by Vergennes. Knowing of Howe’s initial military victories in New York and fearing the imminent collapse of the American rebellion, the French leader had no desire to commit his nation to a losing cause.
The American victory at Saratoga profoundly altered French thinking. When news of Burgoyne’s capture reached Paris in December 1777, Vergennes immediately offered the Americans a commercial and military alliance. His haste was justified. In Britain, Lord North was deeply troubled by the inability of his generals to defeat the Patriot armies and had decided to seek a negotiated settlement of the rebellion. He secured repeal of the Tea Act and the Intolerable Acts and sent a commission headed by Frederick Howard, 5th earl of Carlisle to negotiate directly with the Continental Congress, offering a return to the pre-1763 imperial relationship.

North’s offer of peace came too late and promised too little. The Patriot leaders now wanted complete independence and they had another diplomatic option. In February 1778 the Continental Congress entered into a formal alliance with France. The French agreed to give up their claim to Canada and regions east of the Mississippi River and promised to fight until American independence had been achieved. In return, the United States opened up their trade to French merchants and agreed to support French territorial gains in the West Indies. Because of this treaty, war soon broke out between France and Britain. For the first time during the war of independence, American success seemed possible.

The New British Strategy

Defeated at Saratoga and now vulnerable to French attack in the West Indies and on the high seas, the British devised a new military strategy. The new British plan had two objectives. The first was to concentrate their forces in the North in two seaports, New York City and Newport, Rhode Island. General Clinton, who had replaced Howe as commander in chief of British forces, evacuated Philadelphia and moved the main British army overland to New York. On the way he fought an indecisive engagement with General Washington’s army near Monmouth Courthouse (now Freehold), New Jersey, on June 28, 1778. In 1778 British forces also repelled a joint French-American attack against Newport. During the following year the Americans were only able to capture a few outlying fortresses, at Stony Point, New York, and Paulus Hook, New Jersey.
Secure in their Northern bases, the British focused their efforts on a second objective: the conquest of the South. The South, with its export crops of tobacco, rice, and indigo, was the most valuable region of the mainland. Moreover, the British believed that more Loyalists lived in the South. They hoped that these Southern Loyalists could be mobilized both to provide support and supplies to the advancing British armies and to hold captured territory after the armies had moved on.

At first, this new strategy met with considerable success. An army of 3,500 British troops captured Savannah, Georgia, at the end of December 1778, and seized Augusta one month later. An American attempt to dislodge the British from Savannah in October 1779 failed, despite the assistance of French naval forces. At the end of 1779 most of Georgia was firmly under Loyalist control, and the British army shifted its attention to South Carolina. In May 1780 an expedition commanded by General Clinton took Charleston, capturing more than 5,000 American troops. Aided by local Loyalists, the invaders gradually occupied most of South Carolina. At the Battle of Camden in August, the British, now commanded in the South by Lord Charles Cornwallis, routed an American army under General Horatio Gates.

The War at Sea
**Bonhomme Richard and Serapis Battle**

Commanded by John Paul Jones, the barely seaworthy American vessel Bonhomme Richard engaged the British warship Serapis in the North Sea. Jones sailed alongside the Serapis and lashed his ship to it. During the bloody three-hour battle, 300 of the 375 Americans aboard were killed or wounded, but in the end the captain of the Serapis surrendered.

Hulton Deutsch

As British and American troops battled in the Southern backcountry, the small Patriot navy won a few spectacular victories at sea. On two occasions a small American squadron captured the port of Nassau in the Bahamas. Captain John Paul Jones twice carried the naval war into British waters. In 1778 Jones raided the port of Whitehaven, in England, and then captured the British sloop *Drake*. In the North Sea on September 23, 1779, Jones’s *Bonhomme Richard* forced the surrender of the British warship *Serapis*.

More important than these isolated triumphs was the steady war of attrition waged by American privateers against the British commercial fleet. By 1781 more than 450 privately owned vessels had received commissions from the states or the Congress to attack British shipping. During the war, these vessels captured or destroyed nearly 2,000 British merchant ships. The privateers did not seriously impede the movement of British armies and military supplies, which were usually transported in well-protected convoys. But they raised the cost of the war to Britain and, in combination with the French fleet, formed a serious threat to Britain’s commercial supremacy.

4 The Road to Yorktown
Francis Marion

American soldier Francis Marion was instrumental in fighting the British during the American Revolution (1775-1783). Marion commanded guerrilla operations in South Carolina, continually harassing the British forces. He gained his nickname, “Swamp Fox,” after he and his troops hid in the swamps to escape from the British.

Culver Pictures

Ultimately, the outcome of the American War of Independence was determined on land, not at sea. Following Cornwallis’s victory at Camden, South Carolina, in the summer of 1780, the British controlled most of Georgia and South Carolina. Then Britain’s Southern strategy began to collapse. Clinton never had enough troops and supplies to crush the Patriot armies. Some much-needed British forces were tied down by French threats to the West Indies and to the British garrisons in Newport and New York City. Moreover, Parliament was unwilling to make an unlimited commitment of men and supplies to the reconquest of its mainland colonies. Equally important, the British and Loyalist troops in the South were unable to hold captured territory in the face of rebel guerrilla attacks.

Patriot bands led by Francis Marion, Thomas Sumter, and Andrew Pickens engaged in guerrilla warfare against the British. They gradually cut the British lines of supply, forcing the garrisons to withdraw toward Charleston and Savannah. At the same time, American troops and militia under the command of Nathanael Greene, “Light Horse Harry” Lee, and Daniel Morgan inflicted heavy casualties on the
main British army under Cornwallis. Following significant American victories at Kings Mountain on October 7, 1780, and Cowpens on January 17, 1781, in South Carolina and a costly battle at Guilford Courthouse, North Carolina, on March 15, 1781, Cornwallis moved his army northward to Virginia.

After Cornwallis’s departure, General Greene’s army engaged the remaining British forces in South Carolina in battles at Hobkirk’s Hill in April, at Ninety Six in May and June, and at Eutaw Springs in September. Each time the combined force of British regulars and Loyalists emerged victorious on the battlefield, but each time they were then forced to retreat because of American strength in the surrounding countryside. By the fall of 1781, the British had been forced back to their coastal enclaves at Charleston and Savannah.

By 1781 the British attempt to conquer the Southern states, which had begun so successfully in 1778, was failing. The British strategy finally collapsed in Virginia. After leaving the Carolinas, Lord Cornwallis moved his forces through Virginia without serious resistance. At Yorktown, near the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, they began building a fortified base from which to launch a new campaign against American forces in Virginia. At this point, the American alliance with France allowed the Patriots to administer a crushing defeat to Cornwallis’s army.

Before 1780, the French had focused their attention on the rich British sugar islands and had provided the Americans with little assistance. Then, in July 1780, a French army of about 5,000 men, commanded by General Jean Baptiste de Vimeur, Comte de Rochambeau, dislodged the British from Newport and threatened their garrison in New York City. The presence of this French army gave Washington enough military force to launch a surprise attack on Cornwallis. In the summer of 1781, a large French fleet under Admiral François Joseph Paul, Comte de Grasse sailed from the West Indies to Chesapeake Bay, where it was joined by a French squadron from Newport. This strong naval force prevented the resupply or evacuation of Cornwallis’s army. Meanwhile, Washington secretly moved Rochambeau’s troops to Virginia, where they joined an American army commanded by the Marquis de Lafayette, a French volunteer, and 3,000 French troops carried by de Grasse’s ships. By September 1781 the 7,000 men under Cornwallis faced a combined French and American force of more than 16,000. As at Saratoga, British immobility had permitted the Americans to gather reinforcements for
the Siege of Yorktown. Once more the British were greatly outnumbered, and they were again forced to surrender an entire army. Cornwallis capitulated on October 19, 1781.

Phase Four: Peace Negotiations

The French and American victory at Yorktown was even more devastating to the British cause than the earlier American triumph at Saratoga. After six futile years of warfare, the British Parliament was not willing to support a new military campaign. The British public would not accept new taxes, and many people were demanding reform of the political system. The British ministry gave up hope of suppressing the rebellion. Sporadic fighting continued for two years, especially at sea, but the major events of the fourth and last phase of the war took place at the negotiations in Europe.

The stakes were not limited to the issue of American independence. When France joined the war in 1778, the American conflict became a key element in European diplomacy. In 1779 Spain offered to remain neutral if the British would return Gibraltar. When this demand was refused, Spain allied with France and declared war on Britain. In the short run, Spain’s entry into the war assisted the American cause by adding to French naval strength. However, its ultimate implications were less favorable. Spain wanted the war to continue until the British could be ousted from Gibraltar. Similarly, France wanted to delay a peace treaty until it had captured some British sugar islands in the West Indies.

These diplomatic and military questions came to the fore after the British surrender at Yorktown. In March 1782 Charles Watson-Wentworth, 2nd Marquess of Rockingham, once again took power as the chief British minister. As in 1766, when he resolved the Stamp Act crisis, Rockingham sought compromise. He secured from Parliament a resolution declaring that Britain would no longer prosecute “an offensive war in America.” His ministry then opened negotiations with French and American diplomats in Paris.

Britain’s negotiating strategy was to play its enemies against one another. Thus, the ministry offered independence to the Americans, but refused to return Gibraltar to Spain or to meet any French demands for territory. When the French negotiators continued to press their demands and those of
their Spanish ally, the four American diplomats in Paris—John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, and Henry Laurens—acted to protect American interests. Although instructed by Congress to act in concert with their French allies, the Americans entered into secret and separate talks with the British.

The American initiative succeeded. After hard bargaining, the British and American negotiators signed preliminary articles of peace on November 30, 1782. Following an unsuccessful Spanish assault on Gibraltar, the Spanish government finally joined the peace negotiation. Under the provisions of the Treaty of Paris, signed by all parties on September 3, 1783, Britain retained Canada, won legal protection for its merchants who held debts in America, and secured promises concerning the property and rights of Loyalists. In return, Britain acknowledged the independence of the United States of America and accepted the claim of Congress to the lands inhabited by Native Americans peoples between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. In part, this concession was made because of the capture of Kaskaskia and Vincennes in the Illinois country by Virginian George Rogers Clark in 1778 and 1779. Britain also granted the Americans fishing rights off Newfoundland. Finally, to reconcile the Spanish to the loss of Gibraltar, Britain returned Florida to Spain, which also gained control of Louisiana from France. The peace agreements were an American triumph, extending at the negotiating table the victories gained on the battlefield.

The Social Impact of the War

The struggle for independence exposed civilians as well as soldiers to deprivation and death. The residents of New Jersey and the Carolinas were particularly hard hit by the fighting, as British and American armies marched back and forth across their lands. Patriot militias and Loyalist partisans looted farms, seeking political revenge or mere booty. Troops harassed or raped women and girls. Wherever the armies went, families lived in fear. Neighbors came to fear one another as well. Patriot mobs in New England tarred-and-feathered suspected Loyalists and seized their property. Local Committees of Safety often imposed fines or jail sentences on those who failed to support the Patriot cause.
The Plight of Soldiers

Initially Patriots hoped that a local institution, the militia, would form the core of the American military effort. They feared that a permanent, or “standing,” army constituted a danger to political liberty, and therefore were not eager to supply the Continental Army with money and supplies. As a result, the Continental Army suffered through hardships, such as hunger and deprivation, during the war.

Soldiers had many grievances, for they were subject to harsh discipline and received inadequate rations and pay. During the winters of 1779 and 1780, Continental troops stationed at Morristown, New Jersey, rose up in mutiny to protest the harsh conditions. To restore authority, Washington ordered the execution of several leaders of the mutiny, and persuaded the Continental Congress to find monetary incentives—in the form of back pay and new clothing—to pacify the rest of the recruits. Unrest among higher-ranking military men continued; in 1783 Washington had to use his personal authority to prevent a group of disgruntled officers from leading an armed revolt against Congress. In the end, the officers won a half-pension for seven years, and soldiers received small grants of western lands. These were meager rewards, given the hardships of military life.

Civilian Hardships

The war also demanded personal sacrifices and hard work from the civilian population. Faced with a scarcity of imported goods and skyrocketing prices, Patriot governments requisitioned needed goods directly from the people. Thus in 1776 Connecticut officials asked for shirts and shoes for state troops. Patriot women met this need by increasing their production of homespun cloth. Women also assumed new responsibilities, challenging traditional gender roles. With their husbands and sons away in the army, women assumed the burden of farm production. Some worked the family farm themselves, plowing fields or cutting and loading grain. Others supervised hired laborers or slaves.

It was not physical danger or hard work that dealt the most devastating blow to ordinary Americans, but rather the financial costs of the war of independence. Most families suffered because of a dramatic
rise in prices. Their money bought less and less as the war went on. The hyperinflation of the Continental dollar was the result of the financial policies of the Patriot governments. Because of their fragile authority, American political leaders were afraid to levy heavy taxes to pay for the cost of the war. Instead they printed money, and used it to pay the troops and to buy food, equipment, and munitions for them. By 1779 the Continental Congress had issued $242 million worth of Continental currency, and the state governments had printed another $210 million. The currency constantly declined in purchasing power because people feared that it could not be redeemed in gold or silver; if a $10 bill was worth $3 when it came into their hands, it would be worth only $2.90 or less when they spent it. Although individual losses were small, collectively these “currency taxes” paid the huge cost of the war.

This soaring inflation (rise in the cost of living) forced nearly every family to become more calculating and to look out for its own interests. Unwilling to accept worthless currency, hard-pressed farmers refused to sell their crops to the Continental Army. In towns, women led mobs that seized overpriced sugar, tea, and bread from storekeepers. Among the civilian population, the war lowered the standard of living and increased conflict among social groups.

The Loyalists Depart

The group that lost the most during the war were the Loyalists. The number of Loyalists who fled the United States is unknown but estimates range from 80,000 to 100,000 people. They emigrated mostly to Canada but also to the West Indies and Britain. Their departure affected the character of American society, for a significant minority of Loyalists were wealthy and politically powerful merchants, lawyers, and landowners. In many cities, upwardly mobile Patriot merchants replaced Loyalists at the top of the economic ladder.

The houses and lands left behind by the Loyalists raised the issue of their property rights. Some Patriots demanded confiscation of the property of the so-called traitors, but most public officials thought this would be contrary to republican principles. The new state constitutions declared that
every citizen should be secure "in the enjoyment of his life, liberty, and property," and this protection was usually extended to Loyalists.

Consequently, the state governments did not foster a social revolution by transferring Loyalist property to their Patriot supporters. In some cases yeoman farmers and former tenants purchased small sections of large Loyalist estates. But the general structure of rural society did not change as a result of the American Revolution, making it different from the French Revolution of 1789 and the Communist revolutions in Russia in 1917 and China in 1949.

Black Americans Seek Freedom

The War of Independence did make a significant change in the lives of thousands of enslaved black Americans. Thousands of slaves in the South sought freedom by taking refuge behind British lines. When the British army evacuated Charleston and Savannah, more than 10,000 former slaves went with them. Some blacks settled in Nova Scotia; others moved to Sierra Leone in West Africa. Just as many blacks sought to improve their situation by enrolling in the Patriot cause. Free New England blacks served in the First Rhode Island Company, while slaves in Maryland won their freedom by serving in the army. Elsewhere in the South, slaves bargained with their owners, trading wartime loyalty for eventual liberty. Between 1782 and 1790, Virginia planters freed almost 10,000 slaves. See also African American History.

In the North, where there were relatively few slaves, the war brought an end to the institution in Massachusetts and the enactment of gradual emancipation laws in Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. By 1800 every state north of Delaware had enacted similar laws, and blacks were taking advantage of their freedom to create their own social organizations such as black churches.

In the South, slavery continued. Enslaved people represented a huge financial investment. Most political leaders were slaveholders, and they resisted the pleas of various religious groups—primarily Quakers, Baptists, and Methodists—to move toward emancipation. Planters maintained that slavery
was a “necessary evil” required to ensure the supremacy of whites and the elaborate lifestyles of the planter elite.

Nonetheless, the War of Independence formed a major turning point in black history. It changed slavery from a national to a regional institution and created new opportunities for thousands of freed blacks in the Northern states.

The War in Retrospect

The War of Independence was the central event in the lives of a generation of Americans. For nearly a decade it entangled them in experiences of a remarkable intensity, shaping their thoughts about themselves, their society, and their government. Of the approximately 400,000 adult white men who lived in the colonies in 1775, probably about 175,000 fought in the war—120,000 as Patriot soldiers or militia, 55,000 as Loyalists. Thus, husbands or sons from nearly half of all white families were part of the “shooting” war. Many others—black as well as white, women and children as well as men—were shot at or suffered personal harm. Thousands of homes were looted or burned, and tens of thousands of people were detained, molested, or forced to flee from the cities occupied by British or Patriot troops and the intensely contested battle zones around New York City, throughout central New Jersey, and nearly everywhere in Georgia and the Carolinas.

For all these families the war was a political education. They learned, first, that one had to choose sides; it was more dangerous to remain neutral, without friends, than to join the Patriot militia or declare for the British cause. In the end, this process of wartime politicization led to mass emigration among Loyalists and intense patriotism among rebels. The war itself created loyalty to the new state governments and to the United States.

Second, they learned to question social and political authority. Once ordinary people had sensed the power of their united strength—whether in mobs, or militia, or armies, or popular conventions—they were less willing to defer to men of wealth and high status. In this sense, the war was a democratizing
experience that solidified support for republicanism and began to overturn the deeply ingrained deferential habits of the colonial era.

Finally, some of the American people learned that success in war, and presumably in peace, required not only a loyal and purposeful population but also direction by a strong central government. The economic trials of the war, especially the difficulty of raising money without the power of taxation, encouraged them to enhance the powers of Congress at the expense of those of the states. Thus, the war developed sentiment for national political institutions.

The legacy of the war was a volatile mix of forces: patriotic fervor, democratic energy, republican values, and nationalist sentiment. Their interaction would determine the fate of the new nation.

VI THE NEW NATION: 1775-1789

While Americans struggled to win the independence of the United States, they were also creating new republican institutions of government to replace royal authority. In the process they had to work out the full implications—political, social, and intellectual—of life in a republican nation.

A New Political Institutions

The collapse of royal authority in America in 1775 did not lead to a breakdown of public order. Instead, the provincial assemblies, local county courts, and town meetings simply added the tasks previously performed by the imperial government to their traditional functions. The transfer of power was given legitimacy by state constitutions, which were written and ratified by the assemblies between 1776 and 1780.

The new constitutions were republican because they derived their legitimacy from the consent of the people—also known as the doctrine of popular sovereignty—and created representative political institutions. However, in structure, the new governments closely resembled those of the colonial
period. Most states had an elected governor, a legislature of two houses, and property qualifications for voting.

There were, however, several significant variations. The most democratic of the new constitutions was that of Pennsylvania, ratified in 1776. It bestowed the vote on all adult white taxpayers and, to encourage majority rule, provided for only one house in the legislature and curtailed the powers of the governor. In sharp contrast, the aristocratic constitution of South Carolina imposed high property qualifications for voting and even higher restrictions for officeholding. These political differences reflected the contrasting societies of the two states. Pennsylvania’s democratic institutions resulted from the coming to power, during the revolution, of a coalition of social groups from the middling ranks: independent farmers, established artisans, and Scots-Irish Presbyterians. South Carolina’s elitist government was designed to protect the interests of a relatively small group of rich, slave-owning white planters.

Other constitutional provisions had historical or ideological origins. Some state charters included a bill of individual rights while most of the others had specific clauses that guaranteed traditional English legal rights, such as freedom from arbitrary searches, trial by jury, and protection of property. The documents also reflected Enlightenment values, such as guaranteeing religious toleration.

In some states, such as Pennsylvania and Massachusetts, the new constitutions were approved only after fierce political battles. In other states, primarily those in the South, the governmental institutions given legitimacy in the new documents excluded the majority of the people—white as well as black—from a role in the political process. But everywhere the new charters were generally accepted, allowing a stable transition to republican government.

B Toward a New Religious Order

Before 1776 most Americans lived in colonies with established churches. All members of the community were assumed to be members of that church (the Church of England in the South, the Congregational Church in New England) and they were required by law to contribute to the support of
the minister. Only Pennsylvania and Rhode Island, founded by Quakers and Baptists respectively, had no established church and allowed religious freedom.

Independence brought significant changes in American religious institutions, particularly in the South. Patriots who were members of the Church of England repudiated their allegiance to the king, the head of that church, and formed the Protestant Episcopal Church of America. Most of the leading planters in Virginia were Episcopalians and, to win support for the war effort from Presbyterians and Baptists, they had the Virginia Convention of 1776 issue a Declaration of Rights that guaranteed religious toleration. Then in 1786 the Virginia legislature passed Thomas Jefferson’s Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom. It declared that all churches had the same legal rights and that no church should receive direct financial support from the state. New York and New Jersey adopted similar legislation.

Even as the Southern and mid-Atlantic states were moving toward a separation of church and state, some citizens wanted to maintain the traditional European system of established churches. They felt that state support for religion would promote morality and respect for authority. These sentiments were particularly strong in New England, where there were close links between state government and the established Congregational Church. There were relatively few members of other religious faiths, and most New England ministers had enthusiastically supported the Patriot cause. For these reasons, Massachusetts and Connecticut maintained an established church until the 1830s. However they allowed Baptists and Methodists to support their own ministers. Thus, following the American Revolution, there was a general movement toward religious freedom.

C Economic Problems

In many respects the creation of a new political order was much easier than forging a new financial and economic system. During the War of Independence, British warships temporarily destroyed the New England fishing industry and seized many American merchant ships. Both the tobacco and the rice exporting states of the South and the grain-marketing regions of the North suffered from the disruption of Atlantic trade. The port cities had the greatest difficulty. Boston, New York, Philadelphia,
Charleston, and Newport were occupied for a time by British troops and suffered drastic declines in population as trade virtually ceased.

Peace did not bring a return to prewar prosperity. The United States was now outside the British Empire and could no longer count on special preferences and subsidies. Angry over unpaid debts, some British merchants refused to handle Chesapeake tobacco exports, cutting American sales. Without a financial subsidy from the British government, South Carolina’s once-lucrative indigo industry nearly vanished. Because of the British Navigation Acts, American-owned ships could no longer trade with the sugar islands in the British West Indies.

The result was a commercial recession that lasted for nearly two decades. In 1790 the value of American exports per capita was only two-thirds of what it had been in 1774. Nevertheless, low-priced British goods flooded into the United States, driving many artisans out of business. Responding to artisan protests, New York, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts imposed tariffs on imported manufactures. The American standard of living declined, increasing the potential for conflict among competing economic groups.

D Political and Social Conflicts

The process of creating a democratic government during the American Revolution increased the prospect of social conflict. During the colonial era, most political offices had been occupied by wealthy men, and less wealthy Americans deferred to them. However, as early as 1770 Philadelphia workers protested against high-powered men who sought to control the political process with little regard for their involvement. By 1776 the backcountry farmers of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, were instructing their representatives to the state’s constitutional convention to “oppose everything that leans to aristocracy or power in the hands of the rich and chief men exercised to the oppression of the poor.”
At first, influential Patriots refused to cede power to the lower orders. They insisted that voting and officeholding be restricted to propertied white men. Conservative Patriots wanted to deny political rights to men who owned only a little property.

Nevertheless, the American Revolution did undermine the control of the state legislatures by an oligarchy of wealthy planters and merchants. In 1774 fewer than one in five members of the assemblies had been artisans or yeoman farmers. After the war, men from these social groups formed a majority in some Northern legislatures and a powerful minority in the Southern assemblies. Claiming a “right to speak and think for themselves,” artisans formed Mechanics Associations and elected representatives from their own ranks. Yeoman farmers benefited from the increased representation of backcountry regions under the new state constitutions. Overall, the increased political activity of farmers and artisans was significant.

Gender Inequalities

The democratic reforms generated by the revolution were not fully extended to women. Women had not taken an active role in politics during the colonial era. However, during the revolution, educated upper-class women entered into political debate in private conversations and, less frequently, in public letters to newspapers. These women did not seek voting rights but some of them asked for a republican legal order that would give women greater individual rights. Under English and American common law, a woman was subject to the legal control of her father until age 21 and to the legal control of her husband upon her marriage. This meant that a married woman could not own property or make legal contracts for herself and was virtually subject to her husband’s will. Despite the pleas of Patriot women, including Abigail Adams, neither Congress nor the state governments took significant steps to enhance the legal rights of their female citizens.

Women continued to be excluded from politics, as well. The state constitutions either restricted suffrage (voting rights) to men or imposed property qualifications for voting that effectively excluded married women. The New Jersey Constitution of 1776 did allow the vote to all free adult inhabitants
worth £50, but when widows and unmarried women began to exercise this right after 1800, new legislation in 1807 excluded women from the polls. See also Women’s Rights.

F  The Nature of the Revolution

The republican freedoms won in the war against Great Britain and incorporated into the new state constitutions made the United States a more democratic and a more equal polity. However, the Patriot leaders who led the independence movement did not want a political or a social revolution. The governments they founded did not attempt to alter the existing unequal distribution of wealth or eliminate the barriers of class, race, or gender status. Most of the benefits of political independence went to men who were white and property owners.

Thus, the American uprising against Britain was less a total revolution than a movement for home rule that was led and ultimately controlled by a privileged minority. And yet the American War of Independence shook up the existing society in profound ways. The long war created a huge price inflation that made many people more calculating, forcing some of them to embrace the market economy and others to retreat into subsistence farming. It also caused the departure of thousands of wealthy Loyalists, an event that altered the social structure. Moreover, the Patriot doctrines of republican liberty led to the end of slavery in the North and challenged its legitimacy in the South; prompted the political mobilization of ordinary farmers and artisans; and raised fundamental questions about gender roles.

Beyond these immediate social changes, the upheaval brought a revolution in American political thought. The people of the United States repudiated social hierarchy and hereditary monarchy in favor of individual liberty and representative republican government. Jefferson used Enlightenment natural law principles, such as the right to life and liberty, as the foundation of the Patriots’ doctrine of popular sovereignty. Thus, he argued in the Declaration of Independence in 1776 that “to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” These principles—of individual rights and popular sovereignty—were truly revolutionary and were among the Patriots’ most important legacies to future generations.
The revolutionary generation of Americans also bequeathed to posterity a workable system of national government. No national political institutions existed in America before the war. To fight the war against Britain, the states in 1781 agreed to Articles of Confederation, which created a weak but workable national government. Then in 1787 nationalist-minded Patriots devised a constitution, creating a “national republic” whose powers were drawn from the people at large and which established a much stronger central government.

A The First Congresses

Second Continental Congress

The Second Continental Congress, made up of about 50 delegates from the American colonies, convened on May 10, 1775, amid calls for a revolutionary war with Great Britain. On July 2, 1776, the Congress voted for national independence and on July 4 it adopted the Declaration of Independence. During this session the Congress also declared itself the supreme government of the colonies, commissioned George Washington to raise an army, issued paper money, and established local governments.
The movement toward centralized government began slowly and sporadically. The Albany Congress of 1754 and the Stamp Act Congress of 1765 addressed specific issues and were attended by representatives from only some of the colonies. However, beginning in 1772 the Patriot Committees of Correspondence expanded these contacts among colonial leaders. Consequently, the First and Second Continental Congresses, held at Philadelphia in 1774 and 1775, were attended by delegates from most colonies and claimed to speak for the entire American population.

Following the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the states voluntarily joined together in a legislative assembly, the Continental Congress, in which each state had one vote. The Congress mediated disputes among the states, raised and maintained the Continental Army, secured loans from European bankers, and made military and commercial alliances with France. Its success laid the basis for more permanent national political institutions.

The Articles of Confederation

The Continental Congress was a temporary government without clearly defined powers. To establish its authority, the Congress in November 1777 enacted the Articles of Confederation, drafted by John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, and declared they would go into effect when ratified by all of the states. The Articles proposed a loose confederation in which each state kept its sovereign independence and control over all of its internal affairs. However, certain powers, primarily relating to diplomacy and defense, were delegated to the Confederation Congress. It was given the power to declare war, make treaties, borrow and print money, and requisition funds from the states.

At first, a number of states refused to ratify the Articles. Some state governments hesitated to create a central political authority that might restrict their autonomy like the British Parliament had done. Other states demanded recognition of their colonial-era land claims that, in some cases, stretched to the Pacific Ocean. Gradually, the pressures of war overcame this reluctance. "Unless Congress are vested with powers, by the separate states, competent to the great purposes of war ...,” General
George Washington warned the country in 1780, "our cause is lost." Congress did its part, persuading the states to give up their western land claims and to allow creation of a national domain. Finally, in 1781, under the threat of British invasion, Maryland became the final state to ratify the Articles.

The central government created by the Articles was simple in structure and limited in authority. There was no governor or chief executive and no system of courts. The legislature was a one-house Congress in which each state had one vote, regardless of population or wealth. The Congress had military and diplomatic powers, but no authority to regulate commerce or to levy taxes. It could ask the states for needed funds, but it could not force them to comply. Furthermore, the powers of the Confederation could be changed only by the unanimous consent of the states.

Although the Confederation was created primarily to fight the war against Britain, its structure and powers had deeper roots in American history. Indeed, they represented a fragile compromise between two contradictory aspects of the colonial experience. On the one hand, there was the tradition of local political control. For decades the colonial assemblies had sought to expand their powers and to diminish those of the central government in London. Now that they were independent states, they had no wish to subject themselves to external control. On the other hand, the individual colonies had prospered because they were part of a larger political and economic entity. Under the British imperial system, goods had moved freely between one colony and another without being subject to local tariffs, and people were free to migrate as well. Now that the Americans were independent, some sort of national authority was necessary to ensure unrestricted travel and trade among the independent republican states and to resolve other common peacetime problems.

C Nationalists

Even as the Articles of Confederation were ratified, some Patriots were campaigning for a stronger central government. One group that wanted a more powerful Confederation was composed of nationalists. These men—military officers, diplomats, delegates to Congress, and federal financiers and bureaucrats—had served the Confederation during the war and had acquired a national
perspective and outlook. In their thinking, there was a self-evident need for central control over the disposition of western lands, tariff and commercial policies, and dealings with foreign states.

The first success of the nationalists came with respect to western lands. By 1781 the Congress had acquired title to most of the lands between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River and began to develop policies for the coherent settlement of this vast national domain. Congress decided that the revenues from the sale of this national domain would go to the national government, not the states.

C1 Tariffs and the Annapolis Convention

Even as the Confederation government was devising this program for the settlement of the West, nationalists won Congress’s approval for a 5 percent tariff on foreign imports. Until the western lands could be sold, Congress needed this revenue to pay its war-related debts. Moreover, three states had enacted tariffs to protect their artisans. So a uniform levy seemed imperative to prevent smuggling of foreign manufactures between states and to ensure the free flow of American farm goods and manufactures.

However, before this tariff could go into effect, it had to be approved by all the states because it increased the powers of the Confederation. The refusal of Rhode Island and New York to approve the tariff prompted the nationalists to call a commercial convention at Annapolis, Maryland, in 1786. When only five states sent delegates to the Annapolis meeting, the nationalists planned a new, and broader, meeting. They asked Congress and the states to approve a convention at Philadelphia in 1787. Its task would be to devise a stronger national government.

C2 Creditors and Shays’ Rebellion

Nationalists were not the only group seeking the creation of a stronger central government. In most states there were creditors—men who had lent money to governments or private individuals—who had
a similar goal. They wanted high taxes so that they could redeem their loans quickly and at face value. In order to do this, they wanted to diminish the power of state legislatures, which were often influenced by hard-pressed farmers and other debtors. Farmers, and many wealthier planters, wanted low taxes. The recession of the 1780s had cut their income, and many farmers and planters owed private debts to merchants or landlords.

To protect their economic interests, debtors elected men to the state legislature who favored low taxes and debt-relief measures. The South Carolina legislature enacted a law that prevented creditors from legally seizing the land of debtors and selling it. Instead, creditors were required to accept installment payments over a three-year period. Pro-debtor state legislatures also printed large amounts of paper money and, when it depreciated in value, enacted "legal tender" laws requiring creditors to accept it in payment for private debts. Such laws angered creditors, but they eased the financial pressures on debtors and prevented major social upheavals.

In Massachusetts, the refusal of the legislature to enact pro-debtor measures sparked Shays’ Rebellion, the first armed uprising in the new nation. During the 1780s wealthy creditors used their influence to defeat legislation regulating legal fees and lowering taxes. Hard-pressed by economic recession, high taxes, and private debts, many farmers were unable to pay their debts. Creditors sued them in court and won legal judgments against their land and homes. To protect their property, mobs of farmers closed the courts in 1786 and organized extralegal conventions to discuss their grievances. Led by Daniel Shays, a former captain in the Continental Army, they set up a military force and prepared to seize the arsenal at Springfield. The Massachusetts legislature quickly passed a Riot Act and, with financial support from eastern merchants, Governor James Bowdoin mobilized an army, which put down the rebellion in early 1787.

Shays’ Rebellion stemmed from economic grievances but derived much of its force from the doctrine of popular sovereignty enshrined by the American Revolution. Coming on the eve of the Constitutional Convention, Shays’ Rebellion reinforced the determination of nationalists—and their creditor allies—to create a stronger central government. They wanted a government that could raise a powerful army both to put down domestic insurrections and to confront foreign threats. Britain continued to hold military forts in western lands belonging to the United States, and Spain was fomenting secessionist
movements among western settlers and threatening to close the Mississippi River to American commerce.

The Constitutional Convention of 1787

Constitutional Convention

Under the Articles of Confederation, the federal government was too weak to govern the states. After several proposals for reform, the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia in 1787 to write the document that still forms the basis of the United States government. The new Constitution delegated extensive powers to the central government, especially in economic and war powers, but reserved many powers for the individual states.

The 55 delegates who gathered in Philadelphia in May 1787 were mostly merchants, slave-owning planters, and landlords. There were no artisans and only a few farmers. The delegates included some of the most prestigious men in the United States—among them George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison. Other leading Patriots were absent: Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were in Europe on diplomatic missions; Patrick Henry refused to attend because he favored the limited central government of the Confederation.
The strong nationalist bias of most delegates quickly emerged. William Paterson of New Jersey proposed a limited reform of the existing Articles of Confederation. Paterson’s New Jersey Plan would have given the Confederation government authority to regulate trade and commerce and to levy taxes. It would also have ensured that acts of Congress would be the “supreme law of the respective states.” However, the convention rejected the New Jersey Plan. Some members objected that it discriminated against states with large populations by leaving all states with a single vote in the one-house Confederation legislature. Many other delegates were convinced that it left too many powers to the states.

The convention turned its attention to the plan for a national republic presented by James Madison of Virginia. Madison was determined to create a powerful central government. His Virginia Plan would limit the sovereignty of the individual states and ensure “the supremacy of national authority.” The new government would draw its authority not from the states but from the people as a whole; it would be a national republic with the power to act directly on individuals within the various states. Finally, the Virginia Plan proposed a three-part national government, with a lower house elected by the voters, an upper house selected by the lower body, and an executive and judiciary chosen by the entire legislature.

Compromises over Representation and Slavery

The delegates endorsed the basic principles of Madison’s plan in June. During the following month, they addressed the complex and controversial issue of representation and fashioned two compromises. The first compromise, suggested by the delegation from Connecticut, sought to balance the political power of states with large and small populations. Under the terms of the compromise, the states would be represented in the lower house on the basis of population. In the upper house, each state would have an equal number of votes.

Although the main conflict over representation was between the large and the small states, a second compromise was necessary to address an important regional issue. The Southern states contained a large number of black slaves. Since these slaves were not allowed to vote, Northern delegates argued
that they should not be counted for purposes of representation. They maintained that the number of seats held by Southern states in the lower house of the national legislature should be based on their white population. Southerners replied that this method of apportioning seats did not recognize the wealth and importance of their states; they wanted slaves to be counted equally with free people. The delegates compromised. Three-fifths of a state’s enslaved population would be counted for purposes of representation and taxation.

There were other regional arguments over slavery. Although moral arguments against slavery shaped the debates in the convention, most delegates treated slavery primarily as a political issue. That is, they sought compromises between the North and the South that would preserve national unity. Thus, the Constitution permitted the importation of slaves until 1808 but then gave Congress the power to ban the trade. And Northern delegates reluctantly accepted a fugitive clause that allowed owners to reclaim slaves who fled to other states.

Limiting Popular and State Power

After reaching these compromises over representation and slavery, the delegates spent two months working out the details of the new plan of government. They defined the judicial power of the central government in broad terms and created a Supreme Court. However, because they did not want to raise opposition to the new Constitution, the delegates left it to the first Congress to work out a politically acceptable way of establishing national courts within the states. For the same reason, they decided not to impose a property qualification for voting in national elections, although many of the delegates wished to diminish the power of the people. To limit popular power, the convention used other means: for example, both the Senate and the president of the United States would be chosen by indirect means. Voters would not have the power to elect senators; rather, they would be selected by the state legislatures (a provision that was changed only by the 17th Amendment, ratified in 1913). Likewise, voters would not choose the president; instead, they would select members of a small Electoral College who would choose a president (a system that still prevails today in theory though not in practice).
During these months, the delegates also agreed to create a strong, pro-creditor national state. The Constitution declared that the new government would honor the existing national debt and would have broad powers of taxation as well as control over commerce. Moreover, the new document restricted the power of pro-debtor state legislatures. Like the British government before it, it took away from the states the power to issue money, thus protecting creditors from inflation caused by paper currency. And it prohibited the states from enacting any law that impaired “the obligation of contracts,” thereby preventing debt-relief legislation.

In the middle of September, 38 of the delegates still in Philadelphia signed the Constitution of the United States (3 refused to sign) and submitted it to the Confederation Congress. The document stipulated that it would go into effect upon ratification by special conventions in 9 of the 13 states.

E The Ratification Struggle

The new constitution produced exciting debates and bitter political battles both in the state conventions and among the public at large. Supporters of the new document called themselves Federalists. Merchants, commercial-minded farmers, and creditors were the most vocal advocates of the Constitution, hoping it would spur business activity. The Federalists’ ranks also included many urban artisans, who wanted protective tariffs and praised the constitutional provisions regarding commerce.

The Antifederalists, who opposed ratification of the Constitution, were drawn from all sections and classes and included political leaders in many states. However, their arguments appealed primarily to small-scale farmers, who would have little voice in the new government and feared its power. Antifederalist leaders argued that republican institutions—governments truly “of” and “for” the people—were possible only in cities or small states. They contended that the new central government would be far removed from the people; that the relatively small number of representatives would lead to the election primarily of the wealthy and well-known; and that the lack of a bill of rights would expose citizens to arbitrary national power.
Some Federalists saw merit in this last criticism and, in order to win ratification in the crucial states of Virginia, Massachusetts, and New York, promised that a bill of rights would be added by the first Congress. The other Antifederalist contentions were answered by Madison, Hamilton, and John Jay in a series of newspaper articles known as *The Federalist* (1788). They stressed that the state governments, which were closer to the people, would retain substantial powers. The authors also asserted that the three branches of the new government would “check and balance” one another, thus preventing an arbitrary exercise of power. Madison went even further, arguing that republican liberty would be better preserved in a large rather than in a small state. He pointed out that in a large state there would be a great number of economic interests and social groups, thus making it impossible for any one of them to dominate the rest.

These arguments of *The Federalist*, the promise of a bill of rights, and superb political tactics secured the ratification of the Constitution. The conventions in most small and less populous states quickly voted in favor, for the delegates hoped that a strong national government would offset the power of their larger neighbors. Elsewhere the debates were vigorous, and the outcome was close. The Federalists’ margin of victory was only 89 to 79 in Virginia and 30 to 27 in New York. By 1789 the Constitution had been ratified in 11 states and was put into effect with the election of the first Congress of the United States and a first president, George Washington.

**The Nature of the Constitution**

To some Americans at the time, the Constitution of 1789 appeared to be a reactionary document, almost a throwback to British imperial rule. The strong central government removed power from the responsive state governments created by the revolution and seemed to protect the interests of men of wealth. But other Americans observed that the new government could protect the nation from external threats and that the Constitution provided a flexible and potentially democratic political framework.

There was considerable truth in both views. The new Constitution did solidify the control of national affairs by a diverse yet definable group of wealthy white men. Many of them had helped to lead the Patriot independence movement and then found their new-found power threatened from below. The
American Revolution—the triumph of republicanism—unleashed democratic political forces that challenged traditional elite power. The Constitution incorporated this new republicanism in its representative institutions, thereby providing the means by which later generations of Americans would attempt legally to fashion a more democratic and equal society.

Contributed By:

James A. Henretta