

# The Road to Revolution

by T.H. Breen



Detail from Paul Revere's engraving of "A View of Boston . . . and British Ships of War," depicting the arrival of British soldiers in 1768, published in May 1770. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

The Peace of Paris (February 10, 1763) marked a glorious moment in the history of the British Empire. France surrendered Canada, ending more than a century of warfare on the northern frontier. At the time, no one seriously thought that the conclusion of the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) would lead in little more than a decade to the creation of an independent state. Thomas Pownall, a respected commentator on economic affairs and former royal governor of Massachusetts, explained to British policy makers precisely why the Americans could never hope to form a government of their own. "The different manner in which they are settled, the different modes under which they live, the different forms of charters, grants, and frame of government," he insisted, ". . . will keep the several provinces and colonies perpetually independent of, and unconnected with each other, and dependent on the mother country."<sup>[1]</sup>

Pownall's assertions provide an arresting reminder that the American Revolution was not inevitable. The British colonists faced almost insuperable obstacles in organizing resistance to the most powerful army and navy the world had ever seen. Scattered over a huge territory—over 1,800 miles from New Hampshire to Georgia—they had developed strong local loyalties. The large rice and tobacco plantations of the South relied on slave labor; the northern economy drew upon small family farms. No single sect dominated the religious landscape. It seemed highly unlikely that such a diverse population would even be able to communicate effectively, let alone support a common political agenda. Moreover, in 1763 the great majority of white colonists expressed general contentment with imperial rule. After all, their ties with Great Britain brought commercial prosperity and military security. Considering the manifest benefits of being part of the empire, one should ask not why the colonists mounted a rebellion against the king and Parliament, but rather why they fell out of love so quickly with a political system that had served so well for so long.

One obvious answer is that after 1763 the king and Parliament changed the assumptions that had defined colonial rule. The British emerged from the Seven Years' War saddled with a huge national debt. English taxpayers had generously supported the struggle against France, but as peace returned, they were in no mood to increase their financial burden. It made good sense, therefore, to ask the Americans to take greater responsibility for their own defense. However, since the colonial governments had made sizeable contributions to the war effort, they did not see why they should produce new revenue. It was not that they rejected the idea that ordinary citizens had an obligation to fund government services. From the beginning of the controversy, the issue was representation, not taxation. Americans rejected out of hand arguments that the members of Parliament—men whom they had not elected—somehow represented the interests of colonists who lived 3,000 miles from London.

During the early 1760s the leaders of Parliament sought to exploit new sources of American revenue. The Sugar Act of 1764 aimed to raise more money from the molasses trade. And then, in 1765 George Grenville, Chancellor of the Exchequer, guided the Stamp Act through Parliament. The colonists expressed immediate outrage. The act placed a tax on almost all printed materials including legal documents, newspapers, and diplomas. Americans not only refused to purchase the hated stamps but also protested in the streets. Urban mobs forced stamp collectors to resign. British administrators had not anticipated such violent resistance, and in 1766 they reluctantly repealed the Stamp Act. They made it clear, however, that they would never again compromise with the colonists. On the same day that Parliament repealed the Stamp Act, it passed the Declaratory Act, which stated that it had authority to legislate for the Americans in “all cases whatsoever.” The king and his advisors gave not an inch on the question of representation. Within a year, Parliament announced new schemes to tax the colonists.

During the early stages of resistance members of the colonial elite forcefully articulated American grievances. Without the support of ordinary colonists, however, the protest would have involved little more than impassioned rhetoric. The people demonstrated remarkable resolve. They made it clear—especially after 1773—that they were prepared to sacrifice personal comfort to preserve their liberties. In small communities, colonists organized boycotts of consumer goods manufactured in Great Britain. The strategy aimed to put pressure on English merchants and laborers. If these groups concluded that it was in their interest to mollify the Americans, they would then demand that their representatives in Parliament devise a less confrontational colonial policy. American boycotts did not bring down the English economy, but by linking British oppression to the enjoyment of everyday consumer items, the colonists turned personal acts—buying tea, for example—into public testimony of defiance.

Until 1773 able statesmen might have been able to resolve the imperial crisis, but the destruction of a huge cargo of tea owned by the East India Company in Boston harbor dramatically altered the character of the entire contest. The events of the night of December 16, 1773, persuaded Parliament that the situation in America required an extraordinary response. Not only did the British dispatch an army of occupation to Massachusetts, but also punished Boston—regarded in London as the seat of organized resistance—by closing the port to all commerce. Parliament achieved these ends through a series of laws known collectively in Britain as the Coercive Acts, and in the colonies as the Intolerable Acts. They struck ordinary Americans as completely unwarranted, and they reacted accordingly. During the summer of 1774 Crown officials lost control over the New England countryside. An armed insurgency terrorized anyone who defended British policy, and militia units began preparing for an armed confrontation with General Thomas Gage's troops.

Although law and custom barred colonial women from holding civil office, they participated fully in the general mobilization of the American people. They played a key role in the success of the non-importation movement. As almost everyone at the time recognized, if the wives and mothers continued to purchase British manufactured goods, the protest against taxation without representation would fail. They rose to the challenge. “The Ladies” of Newport, Rhode Island, for example, announced, “We are willing to give up our dear & beloved Tea, *for the Good of the Public*. . . provided the Gentlemen will give

up their dearer & more beloved Punch, [and] renounce going so often to Taverns.”[2] In Boston women carried subscription lists door to door. Signers pledged to abstain from buying items carrying parliamentary taxes. At moments of military crisis, women actively supported the insurgency. A witness reported that in September 1774 when New Englanders thought that the British navy had bombed Boston, “at every house Women & Children making Cartridges, running Bullets . . . crying & bemoaning & at the same time animating their Husbands & Sons to fight for their Liberties, tho’ not knowing whether they should ever see them again.”[3]

In September 1774 the members of the first Continental Congress gathered in Philadelphia. The group included some of the most respected leaders in the various colonies. These wealthy gentlemen were planters, lawyers, and merchants, and however upsetting the news from New England may have been, they still hoped that they could resolve the imperial crisis without further violence. But growing popular resistance—especially in the northern colonies—forced them to make decisions that energized the rebellion. Congress drafted a document known as the Association, which among other things ordered a universal boycott of British goods. Article eleven was truly radical. It authorized the formation in every town, city, and county in America of an elected committee empowered to punish anyone guilty of ignoring the boycott. At first, these committees concentrated on commercial transgressions, but they soon filled a vacuum left by retreating British officials. By 1775 the committees had transformed themselves into the infrastructure for revolution, punishing ideological enemies and overseeing local government. They also communicated their activities through newspapers so that Americans living in distant places gained a powerful sense that they were part of a larger movement capable of standing up to Great Britain.

Americans of all backgrounds based their revolution within powerful intellectual frameworks. Some elite spokesmen argued that the colonists would not succeed unless they possessed political virtue. They argued that unless the colonists were willing to sacrifice the pleasures of the marketplace and stand vigilant against the excesses of despotic power, they could never hope to achieve freedom and liberty. But ordinary farmers—the men who flocked to Lexington and Concord in April 1775—subscribed to a different set of ideas. They relied on the ideas of the great English philosopher John Locke to explain why they were justified in taking up arms against George III: They believed that all people possessed certain rights and that it was the responsibility of the government to protect these rights. When the government did not do so—when it no longer served the common good—it no longer merited obedience. Many rank-and-file soldiers of the Revolution were evangelical Protestants, and they viewed politics through a highly religious lens. A British officer stationed in New York City, for example, reported that an American minister “told his Congregation, that ‘the Man, who was able in this Country to wield a Sword and did not endeavor to stain it with the Blood of the King’s Soldiers . . . would be renounced by the Lord Jesus Xt at the Day of Judgement.”[4]

Although the members of the Continental Congress dragged their heels on the question of independence, Thomas Paine informed Americans that the moment had arrived to create a new republic. In January 1776 he published *Common Sense*, which captured the popular imagination. He advanced a brilliant argument, demonstrating not only that monarchy was a fundamentally corrupt form of government, but also that it was high time for the American people to establish an independent republic. As he declared, “The cause of America is in great measure the cause of all mankind.” Slowly, often reluctantly, the members of the Continental Congress accepted the logic of *Common Sense*, and on July 4, 1776, they affirmed Thomas Jefferson’s powerful declaration that “all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Beating the British on the battlefield proved much harder than most Americans imagined. The stunning victory over General Gage’s forces at Bunker Hill in 1775 persuaded them that courageous yeomen farmers could stand up to well-trained British redcoats. George Washington, whom Congress appointed as the commander of the American Army, knew better. He demanded a proper military force, one that

understood discipline, and while his lieutenants strove to create the army he desired, Washington avoided direct confrontation with the main British army whenever possible. Critics sometimes charged that Washington was a second-rate general who feared defeat so much that he refused to risk his soldiers in battle. The claim had no merit. Washington waged a defensive war because that was the only option available. He sensed that in the long run the British were in an impossible situation. Their supply lines were too long and vulnerable. They could hold cities, but once they marched to a new location, the Americans quickly returned.

Washington eventually managed to transform raw recruits—most of them young men who were desperately poor—into a formidable fighting force. But without the support of France, the Americans might have lost the contest. After General John Burgoyne surrendered an entire British army at Saratoga, New York, in October 1777, the French negotiated a Treaty of Amity with the United States. Its declared purpose was preserving the “liberty, sovereignty, and independence absolute and unlimited of the United States.” There were as many French soldiers as Americans at Yorktown, the scene in 1781 of the last major battle of the Revolution.

American peace commissioners—John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and John Jay—won a victory of a different sort. Mastering the intricate diplomacy of European courts, they played French ambitions off against British fatigue and in September 1783 negotiated a settlement that awarded the United States all the territory east of the Mississippi River, south of the current Canadian boundary, and north of the thirty-first parallel.

As with all revolutions, the American experience included winners as well as losers. The war itself took a terrible toll. Over 20,000 American soldiers died during the conflict. And when the British finally accepted defeat, 60,000 men and women left the United States. Loyalists took their chances on new homes in distant places rather than become citizens of an independent republic. For Americans Indians, the Revolution was a total disaster. Since many tribes had sided with the British, Americans treated them like enemies and drove them from the lands where they had lived for centuries. African Americans wanted freedom from slavery, and many fled to the British in hope of escaping bondage. They were often betrayed. However passionately white masters spoke of liberty, they did almost nothing to free the slaves. Women too anticipated a new political order that would have awarded them a more significant voice in public affairs. They too were disappointed. Still, despite these setbacks, the Revolution created a republican society—the likes of which the world had never seen—that invited citizens to take responsibility for their own government, to preserve fundamental human rights, and to take seriously the notion that all men are created equal.

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[1] Thomas Pownall, *The Administration of the British Colonies*, 5th ed. (London: J. Walter, 1774), 1:97–98.

[2] *Newport Mercury* (RI), December 14, 1767.

[3] Ezra Stiles, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, ed. Franklin Bowditch Dexter (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901), 1:480.

[4] Ambrose Serle to the Earl of Dartmouth, March 20, 1777, in Benjamin Franklin Stevens, *Facsimiles of Manuscripts in European Archives Relating to America, 1773–1783*, vol. 24 (London, 1895), no. 2052.

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