CHAPTER 6

From Empire to Independence

1750–1776
CHAPTER OUTLINE

THE SEVEN YEARS’ WAR IN AMERICA
- The Albany Conference of 1754
- Colonial Aims and Indian Interests
- Frontier Warfare
- The Conquest of Canada
- The Struggle for the West

THE IMPERIAL CRISIS IN BRITISH NORTH AMERICA
- The Emergence of American Nationalism
- The Press, Politics, and Republicanism
- The Sugar and Stamp Acts
- The Stamp Act Crisis
- Repeal of the Stamp Act

“SAVE YOUR MONEY AND SAVE YOUR COUNTRY”
- The Townshend Revenue Acts
- Nonimportation: An Early Political Boycott
- The Massachusetts Circular Letter
- The Politics of Revolt and the Boston Massacre

FROM RESISTANCE TO REBELLION
- Intercolonial Cooperation
- The Boston Tea Party
- The Intolerable Acts
- The First Continental Congress
- Lexington and Concord

DECIDING FOR INDEPENDENCE
- The Second Continental Congress
- Canada, the Spanish Borderlands, and the Revolution
- Fighting in the North and South
- No Turning Back
- The Declaration of Independence
The opening minutes of the First Continental Congress did not bode well. A delegate moved they begin with prayer, but others responded that “we were so divided in religious sentiments, some Episcopalians, some Quakers, some Anabaptists, some Presbyterians, and some Congregationalists, that we could not join in the same act of worship.” The delegates who arrived in Philadelphia in September 1774 hailed from many communities with different identities and loyalties. Was the Congress to be stymied, here at the very beginning, by the things separating them? John Adams’s cousin and fellow Massachusetts delegate Samuel Adams leapt to his feet. He was no bigot, he proclaimed, and was willing to hear a prayer “from any gentleman of piety and virtue who was at the same time a friend to his country.” There was a larger identity at stake here—their common identity as British Americans. Suspending their religious differences, the delegates agreed to a prayer from a local clergyman, who took as his text the Thirty-fifth Psalm: “Plead my cause, O Lord, with them that strive with me; fight against them that fight against me.” He “prayed with such fervor, such Ardor, such Earnestness and Pathos, and in Language so elegant and sublime,” John Adams wrote to his wife, that “it has had an excellent Effect upon every Body here.”

The incident highlighted the most important task confronting the First Continental Congress—emphasizing the common cause without compromising local identities. The delegates were like “ambassadors from a dozen belligerent powers of Europe,” noted Adams. They represented distinct colonies with traditions and histories as different as those of separate countries. Moreover, these lawyers, merchants, and planters, leaders in their respective colonies, were strangers to one another. “Every man,” he worried, “is a great man, an orator, a critic, a statesman, and therefore every man, upon every question, must show his oratory, his criticism, and his political abilities.” As a result, he continued, “business is drawn and spun out to an immeasurable length. I believe that if it was moved and seconded that we should come to a resolution that three and two make five, we should be entertained with logic and rhetoric, law, history, politics and mathematics concerning the subject for two whole days.”

Britain’s North American colonies enjoyed considerable prosperity during the first half of the eighteenth century. But in 1765—in the aftermath of the great war for empire in which Great Britain soundly defeated France, forcing the French to give up their American colonies—the British government began to apply new trade restrictions and levy new taxes, generating increasing resistance among the colonists. By 1774, peaceful protest had escalated into violent riot, most notably in the city of Boston, and in an attempt to force the colonists to acknowledge the power of Parliament to make laws binding them “in all cases whatsoever,” the British proclaimed a series of repressive measures, including the closure of ports in Massachusetts and the suspension of that colony’s elected government. In this atmosphere of crisis, the twelve colonial assemblies elected fifty-six delegates for a “Continental Congress” to map out a coordinated response. If they failed to act collectively, delegate Arthur Lee of Virginia declared, they would be “attacked and destroyed by piece-meal.” Abigail Adams, the politically astute wife of John Adams, a delegate from Massachusetts, agreed. “You have before you,” she wrote her husband, “the greatest national concerns that ever came before any people.”

Despite their regional and religious differences, during seven weeks of deliberations, the delegates succeeded in forging an agreement on the principles and policies they would follow in this, the most serious crisis in the history of the British North American colonies. At the outset they resolved that each colony
would have one vote, thereby committing themselves to the preservation of provincial autonomy. Their most vexing problems they sent to committees, whose members could sound each other out without committing themselves on the public record. They added to their daily routine a round of dinners, parties, and late-night tavern-hopping. And in so doing they began to create a community of interest. “It has taken us much time to get acquainted,” John Adams wrote to Abigail, but he left Philadelphia thinking of his fellow representatives as “a collection of the greatest men upon this continent.”

These were the first steps toward the creation of an American national political community. Communities are not only local, but also regional, national, even international. In a town or village, the feeling of association comes from daily, face-to-face contact, but for larger groups, those connections must be deliberately constructed. In their final declaration the delegates pledged to “firmly agree and associate, under the sacred ties of virtue, honor and love of our country.” They urged their fellow Americans to “encourage frugality, economy, and industry, and promote agriculture, arts and the manufactures of this country;” and to “discountenance and discourage every species of extravagance and dissipation.” They asked their countrymen to remember “the poorer sort” among them during the troubles they knew were coming. And in demanding that patriotic Americans “break off all dealings” and treat with contempt anyone violating this compact, they drew a distinction between “insiders” and “outsiders,” one of the essential first acts in the construction of community.

Patrick Henry of Virginia, a delegate strongly committed to American independence, was exuberant by the time the Congress adjourned in late October. “The distinctions between Virginians, Pennsylvanians, New Yorkers, and New Englanders, are no more,” he declared. “I am not a Virginian, but an American.” He exaggerated. Local, provincial, and regional differences would continue to clash. As yet there was no national political community. But Henry voiced an important truth. With its repressive actions, Great Britain had forced the colonists to recognize a shared community of interest distinct from that of the mother country. As the colonies cautiously moved toward independence, the imagined community of America would be sorely tested, and during the difficult months and years of warfare, the differences among the former colonies would frequently threaten to destroy the nation even as it was being born. But the First Continental Congress marked the point when Americans began the struggle to transcend their local and regional differences in pursuit of national goals.

**KEY TOPICS**

- The final struggle among Great Britain, France, and American Indian tribes for control of eastern North America
- American nationalism in the aftermath of the French and Indian War
- Great Britain’s changing policy toward its North American colonies
- The political assumptions of American republicanism
- The colonies’ efforts to achieve unity in their confrontation with Great Britain

**THE SEVEN YEARS’ WAR IN AMERICA**

The first attempt at cooperation among the leaders of the British colonies occurred in 1754, when representatives from New England, New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland met to consider a joint approach to the French and Indian challenge. Even as the delegates met, fighting between French Canadians and Virginians began on the Ohio River, the first shots in a great global war for empire, known in Europe as the Seven Years’ War, that pitted Britain (allied with Prussia) against the combined might of France, Austria, and Spain. In North America this would be the
final and most destructive armed conflict between the British and the French before the French Revolution. Ultimately, it decided the future of the vast region between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River, and lay the groundwork for the conflict between the British and the colonists that led to the American Revolution.

**The Albany Conference of 1754**

The 1754 meeting, which included an official delegation from the Iroquois Confederacy, and took place in the New York town of Albany on the Hudson River, was convened by the British Board of Trade. British officials wanted the colonies to consider a collective response to the continuing conflict with New France and the Indians of the interior. High on the agenda was the negotiation of a settlement with the leaders of the Iroquois Confederacy, who had grown impatient with colonial land grabbing. Because the powerful Iroquois Confederacy, with its Covenant Chain of alliances with other Indian tribes, occupied such a strategic location between New France and the British colonies, the British could ill afford Iroquois discontent. But the official Iroquois delegation walked out of the conference, refusing all offers to join a British alliance.

The Albany Conference did adopt **Benjamin Franklin’s Plan of Union**, which proposed that Indian affairs, western settlement, and other items of mutual interest be placed under the authority of “one general government” for the colonies, consisting of a president-general appointed and supported by the Crown, and a Grand Council, a legislative body empowered to make general laws and raise money for the defense of the whole, its delegates chosen by the several colonial legislatures, the seats allocated by population and wealth. Franklin, who had been appointed by the British government as deputy postmaster general for all of British North America and charged with improving intercolonial communication and commerce, had become extremely sensitive to the need for cooperation among the colonies. British authorities were suspicious of the plan, fearing it would create a very powerful entity that they might not be able to control. They had nothing to worry about, for fearing the loss of their autonomy, the colonial assemblies rejected the Albany Plan of Union. As one British official noted, each colony had “a distinct government, wholly independent of the rest, pursuing its own interest and subject to no general command.”

**Colonial Aims and Indian Interests**

The absence of cooperation among the colonies in North America would prove to be one of the greatest weaknesses of the British Empire, because the ensuing war would be fought at a number of widespread locations and required the coordination of command. There were three principal flash points of conflict in North America. The first was along the northern Atlantic coast. In 1713, France had ceded to Britain its colony of Acadia (which the British renamed Nova Scotia), but France then built the fortress of Louisburg, from which it guarded its fishing grounds and the St. Lawrence approach to New France. New Englanders had captured this prize in 1745 during King George’s War, but the French then reclaimed it upon the settlement of that conflict in 1748. They subsequently reinforced Louisburg to such an extent that it became known as the Gibraltar of the New World.

A second zone of conflict was the border region between New France and New York, from Niagara Falls to Lake Champlain, where Canadians and New Yorkers were in furious competition for the Indian trade. Unable to compete effectively against superior English goods, the French resorted to armed might, constructing fortifications on Lake George and reinforcing their base at Niagara. In this zone, the strategic advantage was held by the Iroquois Confederacy.

It was the Ohio country—the trans-Appalachian region along the Ohio River—that became the primary focus of British and French attention. This rich land was a
prime target of British backcountry settlers and frontier land speculators. The French worried that their isolated settlements would be overrun by the expanding British population and that the loss of the Ohio River would threaten their entire Mississippi trading empire. To reinforce their claims, in 1749, the French sent a heavily armed force down the Ohio River to ward off the British, and in 1752, supported by their northern Indian allies, they expelled a large number of British traders from the region. To prevent the British from returning to the west, they began the next year to construct a series of forts running south from Lake Erie to the junction of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers, the site known as the Forks of the Ohio River.

The French “have stripped us of more than nine parts in ten of North America,” one British official cried, “and left us only a skirt of coast along the Atlantic shore.” In preparation for a general war, the British established the port of Halifax in Nova Scotia as a counter to Louisburg. In northern New York, they strengthened existing forts and constructed new ones. Finally, the British king decided to directly challenge the French claim to the upper Ohio Valley. He conferred an enormous grant of land on the Ohio Company, organized by Virginia and London capitalists, and the company made plans to build a fort at the Forks of the Ohio River.

The impending conflict involved more than the competing colonial powers, however, for the Indian peoples of the interior had interests of their own. In addition to its native inhabitants, the Ohio country had become a refuge for Indian peoples who had fled the Northeast—Delawares, Shawnees, Hurons, and Iroquois among them. Most of the Ohio Indians opposed the British and were anxious to preserve the Appalachians as a barrier to westward expansion. They were also disturbed by the French movement into their country. The French outposts, however, unlike those of the British, did not become centers of expanding agricultural settlements.

The Iroquois Confederacy as a whole sought to play off one European power against the other, to its own advantage. In the South, the Creeks carved out a similar role for themselves among the British, the French in Louisiana, and the Spanish in Florida. The Cherokees and Choctaws attempted, less successfully, to do the same. It was in the interests of these Indian tribes, in other words, to perpetuate the existing colonial stalemate. Their position would be greatly undermined by an overwhelming victory for either side.

**Frontier Warfare**

At the Albany Congress, the delegates received news that Colonel George Washington, a young militia officer sent by the governor of Virginia to expel the French from the region granted to the Ohio Company, had been forced to surrender his troops to a French force near the headwaters of the Monongahela River. The Canadians now commanded the interior country from their base at Fort Duquesne, which they had built at the Forks of the Ohio.

Taking up the challenge, the British government dispatched two Irish regiments under General Edward Braddock across the Atlantic in 1755 to attack and capture Fort Duquesne. Meanwhile, colonial militias (the equivalent of today’s National Guard) commanded by colonial officers were to strike at the New York frontier and the North Atlantic coast. An army of New England militiamen succeeded in capturing two French forts on the border of Nova Scotia, but the other two prongs of the campaign were failures. The offensive in New York was repulsed. And in the worst defeat of a British army during the eighteenth century, Braddock’s force was destroyed by a smaller number of French and Indians on the upper Ohio, and Braddock himself was killed.

Braddock’s defeat was followed by the outbreak of full-scale warfare between Britain and France in 1756 (see Map 6-1). Known as the Seven Years’ War in Europe,
CHAPTER 6  FROM EMPIRE TO INDEPENDENCE, 1750–1776

in North America it came to be called the French and Indian War. The fighting of 1756 and 1757 was a near catastrophe for Great Britain. Canadians captured the British forts in northern New York. Indians pounded backcountry settlements, killed thousands of settlers, and raided deep into the coastal colonies, throwing British colonists into panic. The absence of colonial cooperation greatly hampered the British attempt to mount a counterattack. When British commanders tried to exert direct control over provincial troops in order to coordinate their strategy, they succeeded only in angering local authorities.

In this climate of defeat, the British adopted a harsh policy of retribution against the French-speaking farmers of Acadia, who had lived peacefully under British rule for over forty years. The Acadians’ refusal to bear arms in defense of the British crown was now used as an excuse for their expulsion. In the fall of 1755, troops from New England began the forcible removal of approximately 18,000 Acadians, selling their farms at bargain prices to immigrants from New England. Suffering terrible
hardship and heartbreak, the Acadians were dispersed throughout the Atlantic world, a substantial number of them ending up in Louisiana, then under Spanish control, where they became known as “Cajuns.” The Acadian expulsion is one of the most infamous chapters in the British imperial record in North America.

**The Conquest of Canada**

In the darkest days of 1757, William Pitt, an enthusiastic advocate of British expansion, became prime minister of Great Britain. “I know that I can save this country,” Pitt declared, “and that no one else can.” Deciding that the global war could be won in North America, he subsidized the Prussians to fight the war in Europe, and reserved his own forces and resources for naval and colonial operations. Pitt committed the British to the conquest of Canada and the elimination of all French competition in North America. Such a goal could be achieved only with a tremendous outpouring of men and money. By promising that the war would be fought “at His Majesty’s expense,” Pitt was able to buy colonial cooperation. A massive infusion of British currency and credit greatly stimulated the North American economy. Pitt dispatched over 20,000 regular British troops across the Atlantic. Combining them with colonial forces, he massed over 50,000 armed men against Canada.

The British attracted Indian support for their plans by “redressing the grievances complained of by the Indians, with respect to the lands which have been fraudulently taken from them,” in the words of a British official. In 1758, officials promised the Iroquois Confederacy and the Ohio Indians that the crown would “agree upon clear and fixed boundaries between our settlements and their hunting grounds, so
that each party may know their own and be a mutual protection to each other of their respective possessions."

Thus did Pitt succeed in reversing the course of the war. Regular and provincial forces captured Louisburg in July 1758, setting the stage for the penetration of the St. Lawrence Valley. A month later, a force of New Englanders captured the strategic French fort at Oswego on Lake Ontario, thereby preventing the Canadians from resupplying their western posts. Encouraged by British promises, many Indian tribes abandoned the French alliance. The French were forced to give up Fort Duquesne, and a large British force took control of this strategic post at the Forks of the Ohio, renaming it Fort Pitt (Pittsburgh today) in honor of the prime minister. "Blessed be God," wrote a Boston editor. "The long looked for day is arrived that has now fixed us on the banks of the Ohio." The last of the French forts on the New York frontier fell in 1759. In the South, regular and provincial British troops invaded the homeland of the Cherokees and crushed them.

British forces now converged on Quebec, the heart of French Canada. In the summer of 1759, British troops—responding to General James Wolfe’s order to "burn and lay waste the country"—plundered farms and shelled the city of Quebec. Finally, in an epic battle fought on the Plains of Abraham before the city walls, more than 2,000 British, French, American, and Canadian men lost their lives, including both Wolfe and the French commander, the Marquis de Montcalm. The British army prevailed and Quebec fell. The conquest of Montreal the next year marked the final destruction of the French empire in America.

In the final two years of the war, the British swept French ships from the seas, invaded Havana and conquered Cuba, took possession of several other important Spanish and French colonies in the Caribbean, achieved dominance in India, and even captured the Spanish Philippines. In the Treaty of Paris, signed in 1763, France lost all its possessions on the North American mainland. It ceded its claims east of the Mississippi to Great Britain, with the exception of New Orleans. That town, along with the other French trans-Mississippi claims, passed to Spain. For its part, in exchange for the return of all its Caribbean and Pacific colonies, Spain ceded Florida to Britain. The imperial rivalry in eastern North America that had begun in the sixteenth century now came to an end with complete victory for the British Empire (see Map 6-2 on page 172).

**The Struggle for the West**

When the Ohio Indians heard of the French cession of the western country to Britain, they were shocked. "The French had no right to give away [our] country," they told a British trader. They were "never conquered by any nation." A new set of British policies soon shocked them all the more. Both the French and the British had long used gift-giving as a way of gaining favor with Indians. The Spanish officials who replaced the French in Louisiana made an effort to continue the old policy. But the British military governor of the western region, General Jeffery Amherst, in one of his first official actions, banned presents to Indian chiefs and tribes, demanding that they learn to live without "charity." Not only were Indians angered by Amherst’s reversal of custom, but they were also frustrated by his refusal to supply them with the ammunition they required for hunting. Many were left starving.

In this climate, hundreds of Ohio Indians became disciples of an Indian visionary named Neolin ("The Enlightened One" in Algonquian), known to the English as the Delaware Prophet. The core of Neolin’s teaching was that Indians had been corrupted by European ways and needed to purify themselves by returning to their traditions and preparing for a holy war. "Drive them out," he declared of the settlers.
A confederacy of tribes organized by chiefs who had gained influence by adopting Neolin’s ideas laid plans for a coordinated attack on British frontier posts in the spring of 1763. The principal leader of the resistance was the Ottawa chief Pontiac, renowned as an orator and political leader. “We tell you now,” Pontiac declared to British officials, “the French never conquered us, neither did they purchase a foot of our Country, nor have they a right to give it to you.”

In May 1763, the Indian confederacy simultaneously attacked all the British forts in the West. Warriors, in a surprise attack, overran Fort Michilimackinac, at the narrows between Lakes Michigan and Huron, by scrambling through the gates supposedly in pursuit of a lacrosse ball, cheered on by unsuspecting soldiers. In raids throughout the backcountry, Indians killed more than 2,000 settlers. At Fort Pitt, General Amherst proposed that his officers “send the smallpox among the disaffected tribes” by distributing infected blankets from the fort’s hospital. This early instance of germ warfare resulted in an epidemic that spread from the Delawares and Shawnees to the southern Creeks, Choctaws, and Chickasaws, killing hundreds of people. Although they sacked and burned eight British posts, the Indians failed to take the key forts of Niagara, Detroit, and Pitt. Pontiac and his followers fought on for another year, but most of the Indians sued for peace, fearing the destruction of their villages. The British came to terms because they knew they could not overwhelm the Indian peoples. What became known as Pontiac’s Rebellion thus ended in stalemate.

Even before the uprising, the British had been at work on a policy they hoped would help to resolve frontier tensions. In the Royal Proclamation of 1763, the British government set aside the region west of the crest of the Appalachian Mountains as
“Indian Country.” It was “essential to our interest,” the Proclamation declared, “that the several nations or tribes of Indians with whom we are connected, and who live under our protection, should not be molested or disturbed.” The specific authorization of the crown would be required for any purchase of these protected Indian lands.

Colonists had expected that the removal of the French threat would allow them to move unencumbered into the West, regardless of the wishes of the Indian inhabitants. They could not understand why the British would award territory to Indian enemies who had killed more than 4,000 settlers during the previous war. In an act emblematic of the anger backcountry settlers felt about these restrictions, a mob of Pennsylvanians known as the Paxton Boys butchered twenty Indian men, women, and children at the small village of Conestoga on the Susquehanna River in December 1763. When colonial authorities moved to arrest them, 600 frontiersmen marched into Philadelphia in protest. Negotiations led by Benjamin Franklin helped to prevent a bloody confrontation.

In fact, the British proved unable and ultimately unwilling to prevent the westward migration that was a dynamic part of the colonization of British North America. Within a few years of the war, New Yorkers by the thousands were moving into the northern Green Mountain district known as Vermont. In the middle colonies, New York settlers pushed ever closer to the homeland of the Iroquois, while others settled within the protective radius of Fort Pitt in western Pennsylvania. Hunters, stock
herders, and farmers crossed over the first range of the Appalachians in Virginia and North Carolina, planting pioneer communities in what are now West Virginia and eastern Tennessee.

Moreover, the press of population growth and economic development turned the attention of investors and land speculators to the area west of the Appalachians. In response to demands by settlers and speculators, British authorities were soon pressing the Iroquois and Cherokees for cessions of land in Indian Country. No longer able to play off rival colonial powers, Indians were reduced to a choice between compliance and resistance. Weakened by the recent war, they chose to sign away lands. In the Treaty of Hard Labor in 1768, the Cherokees ceded a vast tract on the waters of the upper Tennessee River, where British settlers had already planted communities. In the Treaty of Fort Stanwix of the same year, the Iroquois gave up their claim to the Ohio Valley, hoping thereby to deflect English settlement away from their own homeland.

The individual colonies were even more aggressive. Locked in a dispute with Pennsylvania about jurisdiction in the Ohio country, in 1773, Virginia governor John Murray, Earl of Dunmore, sent a force to occupy Fort Pitt. In 1774, in an attempt to gain legitimacy for his dispute with Pennsylvania, Dunmore provoked a frontier war with the Shawnees. After defeating them, he forced their cession of the upper Ohio River Valley to Virginia. The Iroquois and Ohio Indians angrily complained about the outcome of what came to be known as Dunmore’s War. The English king, they argued, had guaranteed that the boundary between colonial and Indian land “should forever after be looked upon as a barrier between us.” But the Americans “entirely disregard, and despise the settlement agreed upon by their superiors and us.” They “are come in vast numbers to the Ohio, and [give] our people to understand that they would settle wherever they pleased. If this is the case, we must look upon every engagement you made with us as void and of no effect.” This continuing struggle for the West would be an important issue in the coming American Revolution.

The Imperial Crisis in British North America

No colonial power of the mid-eighteenth century could match Britain in projecting imperial power over the face of the globe. During the years following its victory in the Seven Years’ War, Britain turned confidently to the reorganization of its North American empire. This new colonial policy plunged British authorities into a new and ultimately more threatening conflict with the colonists, who had begun to develop a sense of a separate identity.

The Emergence of American Nationalism

Despite the anger of frontier settlers over the Proclamation of 1763, the conclusion of the Seven Years’ War had left most colonists proud of their place in the British empire. But during the war, many had begun to note important contrasts between themselves and the mother country. The soldiers of the British army, for example, shocked Americans with their profane, lewd, and violent behavior. But the colonists were equally shocked by the swift and terrible punishment that aristocratic officers used to keep these soldiers in line. Those who had witnessed such savage punishments found it easy to believe in the threat of Britain enslaving American colonists.

Colonial forces, by contrast, were composed of volunteer companies. Officers tempered their administration of punishment, knowing they had to maintain the
enthusiasm of their troops. Discipline thus fell considerably below the standards to which British officers were accustomed. “Riff-raff,” one British general said of the colonials, “the lowest dregs of the people, both officers and men.” For their part, many colonial officers believed that the British ignored the important role the Americans had played in the Seven Years’ War. Massachusetts, for example, lost between 1,500 and 2,000 fighting men. This mutual suspicion and hostility was often expressed in name calling: British soldiers called New Englanders “Yankees,” while colonists heckled the red-coated British with taunts of “Lobster.” It was during the war that many colonists began to see themselves as distinct from the British.

The Seven Years’ War also strengthened a sense of identity among the colonies. Farmers who never before had ventured outside the communities of their birth fought in distant regions with men like themselves from other colonies. Such experiences reinforced a developing nationalist perspective. From 1735 to 1775, while trade with Britain doubled, commerce among the colonies increased by a factor of four. People and ideas moved along with goods. The first stage lines linking seaboard cities began operation in the 1750s. Spurred by Postmaster Benjamin Franklin, many colonies built or improved post roads for transporting the mails.

The Press, Politics, and Republicanism

One of the most important means of intercolonial communication was the weekly newspaper. Early in the eighteenth century, the colonial press functioned as a mouthpiece for the government. Editors who criticized public officials could land in jail. In 1735, New York City editor John Peter Zenger was indicted for seditious libel after printing antigovernment articles. But as it turned out, the case provided the precedent for greater freedom of the press. “Shall the press be silenced that evil governors may have their way?” Zenger’s attorney asked the jury. “The question before the court is not the cause of a poor printer,” he declared, but the cause “of every free man that lives under a British government on the main of America.” Zenger was acquitted. By 1760, more than twenty highly opinionated weekly newspapers circulated in the British colonies, and according to one estimate, a quarter of all male colonists were regular readers.

The midcentury American press focused increasingly on intercolonial affairs. One study of colonial newspapers indicates that intercolonial coverage increased sixfold over the four decades preceding the Revolution. Editors of local papers increasingly looked at events from what they called a “continental” perspective. This trend accelerated during the Seven Years’ War, when communities demanded coverage of events in distant colonies where their men might be fighting. During these years the British colonists of North America first began to use the term “American” to denote their common identity. More than any previous event, the Seven Years’ War promoted a new spirit of nationalism and a wider notion of community. This was the social base of the political community later forged at the First Continental Congress.

The pages of the colonial press reveal the political assumptions held by informed colonists. For decades governors had struggled with colonial assemblies over their respective powers. As commentary on the meaning of these struggles, colonial editors often reprinted the writings of the radical Whigs of eighteenth-century England, pamphleteers such as John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, political theorists such as...
as John Locke, and essayists such as Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift. They warned
of the growing threat to liberty posed by the unchecked exercise of power. In their
more emotional writings they argued that a conspiracy existed among the power-
ful—kings, aristocrats, and Catholics—to quash liberty and institute tyranny. Outside
the mainstream of British political opinion, these ideas came to define the political
consensus in the British colonies, a point of view called “republicanism.”

Republicanism declared that the truly just society provided the greatest possi-
ble liberty to individuals. As the power of the state, by its very nature, was antitheti-
cal to liberty, it had to be limited. John Locke argued that the authority of a ruler
should be conditional rather than absolute and that the people had the inherent
right to select their own form of governance and to withdraw their support if the
government did not fulfill its trust. The best guarantee of good government, then,
was the broad distribution of power to the people, who would not only select their
own leaders but vote them out as well. In this view, republican government depended
on the virtue of the people, their willingness to make the health and stability of the
political community their first priority, and was possible only for an “independent”
population that controlled its own affairs. As Thomas Jefferson once wrote, “. . .
dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and pre-
pares fit tools for the designs of ambition.” Individual ownership of property, espe-
cially land, he argued, was the foundation of an independent and virtuous people.

This was a political theory that fit the circumstances of American life, with its
wide base of property ownership, its tradition of representative assemblies, and its his-
tory of struggle with royal authority. Contrast the assumptions of republicans with those
of British monarchists, who argued that the good society was one in which a strong
state, controlled by a hereditary elite, kept a vicious and unruly people in line.

**The Sugar and Stamp Acts**
The emerging sense of American political identity was soon tested by British mea-
asures designed to raise revenues in the colonies. To quell Indian uprisings and stifle
dissent among the French and Spanish populations of Quebec and Florida, 10,000
British troops remained stationed in North America at the conclusion of the Seven
Years’ War. The cost of maintaining this force added to the enormous debt Britain had
run up during the fighting and created a desperate need for additional revenues. In
1764, Chancellor of the Exchequer George Grenville, deciding to obtain the needed
revenue from America, pushed through Parliament a measure known as the Sugar Act.

The **Sugar Act** placed a duty on sugar imported into the colonies and revital-
ized the customs service, introducing stricter registration procedures for ships and
adding more officers. In fact, the duty was significantly less than the one that had been
on the books and ignored for years, but the difference was that the British now
intended to enforce it. In anticipation of American resistance, the legislation increased
the jurisdiction of the vice-admiralty court at Halifax, where customs cases were
heard. These courts were hated because there was no presumption of innocence
and the accused had no right to a jury trial. These new regulations promised not
only to squeeze the incomes of American merchants but also to cut off their lucra-
tive smuggling operations. Moreover, colonial taxes, which had been raised during
the war, remained at an all-time high. In many cities, merchants as well as artisans
protested loudly. Boston was especially vocal: in response to the sugar tax, the town
meeting proposed a boycott of certain English imports. This movement for nonim-
portation soon spread to other port towns.

James Otis Jr., a Massachusetts lawyer fond of grand oratory, was one of the first
Americans to strike a number of themes that would become familiar over the next

---

**Class Discussion Question 6.3**

In this excerpt, Benjamin Franklin testified before Parliament against
the Stamp Act (1766) and described the heavy taxes already levied on
American colonists.

There are taxes on all estates, real and
personal; a poll tax; a tax on all offices,
professions, trades, and businesses,
according to their profits; an excise on all
wine, rum, and other spirit; and a duty
of ten pounds per head on all Negroes
imported, with some other duties.

**Republicanism** A complex, changing
body of ideas, values, and assumptions,
closely related to country ideology, that
influenced American political behavior
during the eighteenth and nineteenth
centuries.

**Sugar Act** Law passed in 1764 to raise
revenue in the American colonies. It low-
ered the duty from 6 pence to 3 pence per
gallon on foreign molasses imported into
the colonies and increased the restrictions
on colonial commerce.
fifteen years. A man’s “right to his life, his liberty, his property” was “written on the heart, and revealed to him by his maker,” he argued in language echoing the rhetoric of the Great Awakening. It was “inherent, inalienable, and indefeasible by any laws, pacts, contracts, covenants, or stipulations which man could devise.” He declared that “an act against the Constitution is void.” There could be “no taxation without representation.”

But it was only fair, Grenville argued in return, that the colonists help pay the costs of the empire, and what better way to do so than by a tax? Taxes in the colonies were much lower than taxes at home. In early 1765, unswayed by American protests, he followed the Sugar Act with a second and considerably more sweeping revenue measure, the Stamp Act. This tax required the purchase of specially embossed paper for all newspapers, legal documents, licenses, insurance policies, ship’s papers, and even dice and playing cards.

**The Stamp Act Crisis**

During the summer and autumn of 1765, the American reaction to the Stamp Act created a crisis of unprecedented proportions. The stamp tax had to be paid in hard money, and it came during a period of economic stagnation. Many colonists complained of being “miserably burdened and oppressed with taxes.”

Of more importance for the longer term, however, were the constitutional implications. Although colonial male property owners elected their own assemblies, they did not vote in British elections. But the British argued that Americans were subject to the acts of Parliament because of “virtual representation.” That is, members of Parliament were thought to represent not just their districts, but all citizens of the empire. As one British writer put it, the colonists were “represented in Parliament in the same manner as those inhabitants of Britain are who have not voices in elections.” But in an influential pamphlet of 1765, *Considerations on the Propriety of Imposing Taxes*, Maryland lawyer Daniel Dulany rejected this theory. Because Americans were members of a separate political community, he insisted, Parliament could impose no tax on them. Instead, he argued for “actual representation,” emphasizing the direct relationship that must exist between the people and their political representatives.

It was just such constitutional issues that were emphasized in the Virginia Stamp Act Resolutions, pushed through the Virginia assembly by the passionate young lawyer Patrick Henry in May 1765. Although the Virginia House of Burgesses rejected the most radical of Henry’s resolutions, they were all reprinted throughout the colonies. By the end of 1765, the assemblies of eight other colonies had approved similar measures denouncing the Stamp Act and proclaiming their support of “no taxation without representation.”

In Massachusetts, the leaders of the opposition to the Stamp Act came from a group of upper- and middle-class men who had long opposed the conservative leaders of the colony. These men had worked years to establish a political alliance with Boston craftsmen and workers who met at taverns, in volunteer fire companies, or at social clubs. One of these clubs, known as the Loyall Nine, included a member named Samuel Adams, an associate and friend of James Otis, who had made his career in local politics. Using his contacts with professionals, craftsmen, and laboring men, Adams helped put together an anti-British alliance that spanned Boston’s social classes. In August 1765, Adams and the Loyall Nine were instrumental in organizing a protest of Boston workingmen against the Stamp Act.

---

**Stamp Act** Law passed by Parliament in 1765 to raise revenue in America by requiring taxed, stamped paper for legal documents, publications, and playing cards.

**Virtual representation** The notion that parliamentary members represented the interests of the nation as a whole, not those of the particular district that elected them.

**Actual representation** The practice whereby elected representatives normally reside in their districts and are directly responsive to local interests.
Whereas Boston’s elite had prospered during the eighteenth century, the conditions for workers and the poor had worsened. Unemployment, inflation, and high taxes had greatly increased the level of poverty during the depression that followed the Seven Years’ War, and many were resentful. A large Boston crowd assembled on August 14, 1765, in the shade of an old elm tree (soon known as the “Liberty Tree”) and strung up effigies of several British officials, including Boston’s stamp distributor, Andrew Oliver. The crowd then vandalized Oliver’s office and home. At the order of Oliver’s brother-in-law, Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson, leader of the Massachusetts conservatives, the town sheriff tried to break up the crowd, but he was pelted with paving stones and bricks. Soon thereafter, Oliver resigned his commission. The unified action of Boston’s social groups had had its intended effect.

Twelve days later, however, a similar crowd gathered at the aristocratic home of Hutchinson himself. As the family fled through the back door, the crowd smashed through the front with axes. Inside they demolished furniture, chopped down the interior walls, consumed the contents of the wine cellar, and looted everything of value, leaving the house a mere shell. As these events demonstrated, it was not always possible to keep popular protests within bounds. During the fall and winter, urban crowds in commercial towns from Halifax in the North to Savannah in the South forced the resignation of many British tax officials (see Map 6-3).

In many colonial cities and towns, groups of merchants, lawyers, and craftsmen sought to moderate the resistance movement by seizing control of it. Calling themselves the Sons of Liberty, these groups encouraged moderate forms of protest. They circulated petitions, published pamphlets, and encouraged crowd actions only as a last resort; always they emphasized limited political goals. Then in October 1765, delegations from nine colonies (New Hampshire and Georgia declined the invitation to attend, and the governors of Virginia and North Carolina prevented their delegates from accepting) met at what has been called the Stamp Act Congress in New York City, where they passed a set of resolutions denying Parliament’s right to tax the colonists, arguing that taxation required representation. They agreed to stop all importations from Britain until the offending measures were repealed. But the delegates also took a moderate stance, declaring that the colonies owed a “due subordination” to measures that fell within Parliament’s just ambit of authority. The Congress thus defused the radicals, and there were few repetitions of mob attacks, although by the end of 1765 almost all the stamp distributors had resigned or fled, making it impossible for Britain to enforce the Stamp Act.

Repeal of the Stamp Act

Pressured by British merchants, who worried over the effects of the growing nonimportation movement among the colonists, in March 1766, Parliament repealed the Stamp Act and reduced the duties under the Sugar Act. This news was greeted with celebrations throughout the American colonies, and the nonimportation associations were disbanded. Overlooked in the mood of optimism, however, was the fact that the repeal was coupled with a Declaratory Act, in which Parliament affirmed its full authority to make laws binding the colonies “in all cases whatsoever.” The notion of absolute parliamentary supremacy over colonial matters was basic to the British theory of empire. Even Pitt, friend of America that he was, asserted “the authority of this kingdom over the

Nonimportation movement A tactical means of putting economic pressure on Britain by refusing to buy its exports to the colonies.

Declaratory Act Law passed in 1776 to accompany repeal of the Stamp Act that stated that Parliament had the authority to legislate for the colonies “in all cases whatsoever.”

QUICK REVIEW

- Cost of troops in North America pushed Britain to seek new revenue.
- 1764: passage of the Sugar Act.
- Opponents of the tax linked it to larger issues of political rights.

MAP 6-3

Demonstrations Against the Stamp Act, 1765 From Halifax in the North to Savannah in the South, popular demonstrations against the Stamp Act forced the resignation of British tax officials. The propaganda of 1765 even reached the breakfast table, embazoned on teapots.

No Stamp Act teapot, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.
colonies to be sovereign and supreme, in every circumstance of government and legislation whatsoever.” The Declaratory Act signaled that the conflict had not been resolved but merely postponed.

“SAVE YOUR MONEY AND SAVE YOUR COUNTRY”

Colonial resistance to the Stamp Act was stronger in urban than in rural communities, stronger among merchants, craftsmen, and planters than among farmers and frontiersmen. When Parliament next moved to impose its will, as it had promised to do in the Declaratory Act, imposing new duties on imported goods, the American opposition again adopted the tactic of nonimportation. But this time resistance spread from the cities and towns into the countryside. As the editor of the Boston Gazette phrased the issue, “Save your money and you save your country.” It became the slogan of the movement.

The Townshend Revenue Acts

During the 1760s, there was a rapid turnover of government leaders that made it difficult for Britain to form a consistent and even-handed policy toward the colonies. In 1767, after several failed governments, King George III asked William Pitt to again become prime minister. Pitt enjoyed enormous good will in America, and a government under his leadership stood a good chance of reclaiming colonial credibility. But, suffering from a prolonged illness, he was soon forced to retire, and his place as head of the cabinet was assumed by Charles Townshend, Chancellor of the Exchequer.

One of the first problems facing the new government was the national debt. England suffered massive unemployment, riots over high prices, and tax protests. The large landowners forced a bill through Parliament slashing their taxes by 25 percent. The Townshend government feared unrest at home far more than opposition in America. So as part of his plan to close the budget gap, in June 1767, Townshend proposed a new revenue measure for the colonies that placed import duties on commodities such as lead, glass, paint, paper, and tea. By means of these new Revenue Acts, Townshend hoped to redress colonial grievances against internal taxes such as those imposed by the Stamp Act. For most colonists, however, it proved to be a distinction without a difference.

The most influential colonial response came in a series of articles by wealthy Philadelphia lawyer John Dickinson, Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania, that were reprinted in nearly every colonial newspaper. Posing as a humble farmer, Dickinson conceded that Parliament had the right to regulate trade through the use of duties. It could place prohibitive tariffs, for example, on foreign products. But, he argued, it had no constitutional authority to tax goods in order to raise revenues in America. As the preface to the Revenue Acts made clear, the income they produced would be used to pay the salaries of royal officials in America. Thus, Dickinson pointed out, since colonial assemblies were no longer paying their salaries, colonial administrators would not be subject to the financial oversight of elected representatives.

Other Americans warned that this was part of the British conspiracy to suppress American liberties. Their fears were reinforced by Townshend’s stringent enforcement of the Revenue Acts. He created a new and strengthened Board of Commissioners of the Customs, and established a series of vice-admiralty courts at Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston to prosecute violators of the duties—the first time those hated institutions had appeared in the most important American port cities. To demonstrate his power, he also suspended New York’s assembly. That body

HOW DID political and economic problems in Britain contribute to unrest in the colonies?

Lecture Suggestion 6.1, Americans’ Response to British Actions

In this excerpt, John Dickinson responds to British actions with a call to his countrymen in a firm and peaceful manner.

I hope, my dear countrymen, that you will in every colony be upon your guard against those who may at any time endeavour to stir you up, under pretences of patriotism, to any measures disrespectful to our sovereign and our mother country. Hot, rash, disorderly proceedings injure the reputation of a people as to wisdom, valour and virtue, without procuring them the least benefit. . . .

John Dickinson, from Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania (1768)

had refused to vote public funds to support the British troops garrisoned in the colony. Until the citizens of New York relented, Townshend declared, they would no longer be represented.

In response to these measures, some men argued for violent resistance. But it was Dickinson’s essays that had the greatest effect on the public debate, not only because of their convincing arguments but also because of their mild and reasonable tone. “Let us behave like dutiful children,” Dickinson urged, “who have received unmerited blows from a beloved parent.” As yet, no sentiment for independence existed in America.

**Nonimportation: An Early Political Boycott**

Associations of nonimportation and nonconsumption, revived in October 1767 when the Boston town meeting drew up a long list of British products to boycott, became the main weapon of the resistance movement. Over the next few months other port cities, including Providence, Newport, and New York, set up nonimportation associations of their own. Artisans took to the streets in towns and cities throughout the colonies to force merchants to stop importing British goods. The associations published the names of uncooperative importers and retailers. These people then became the object of protesters, who sometimes resorted to violence. Coercion was very much a part of the movement.

Adopting the language of Protestant ethics, nonimportation associations pledged to curtail luxuries and stimulate local industry. These aims had great appeal in small towns and rural districts, which previously had been uninvolved in the anti-British struggle. In 1768 and 1769, colonial newspapers paid a great deal of attention to women’s support for the boycott. Groups of women, some calling themselves Daughters of Liberty, organized spinning and weaving bees to produce homespun for local consumption. The actual work performed at these bees was less important than the symbolic message. “The industry and frugality of American ladies,” wrote the editor of the *Boston Evening Post*, “are contributing to bring about the political salvation of a whole continent.” Other women renounced silks and satins and pledged to stop serving tea to their husbands. Nonimportation appealed to the traditional values of rural communities—self-sufficiency and independence—and for the first time brought country people into the growing community of resistance.

Nonimportation was greatly strengthened in May 1769 when the Virginia House of Burgesses enacted the first provincial legislation banning the importation of goods enumerated in the Townshend Acts, and slaves and luxury commodities as well. Over the next few months, all the colonies but New Hampshire enacted similar associations. Because of these efforts, the value of colonial imports from Britain declined by 41 percent.

**The Massachusetts Circular Letter**

Boston and Massachusetts were at the center of the agitation over the Townshend Revenue Acts. In February 1768, the Massachusetts House of Representatives approved a letter, drawn up by Samuel Adams, addressed to the speakers of the other provincial assemblies. Designed largely as a propaganda device and having little practical significance, the letter denounced the Townshend Revenue Acts, attacked the British plan to make royal officials independent of colonial assemblies, and urged the colonies...
from a way “harmonize with each other.” Massachusetts governor Francis Bernard condemned the document for stirring up rebellion and dissolved the legislature. In Britain, Lord Hillsborough, secretary of state for the colonies, ordered each royal governor in America to likewise dissolve his colony’s assembly if it should endorse the letter. Before this demand reached America, the assemblies of New Hampshire, New Jersey, and Connecticut had commended Massachusetts. Virginia, moreover, had issued a circular letter encouraging a “hearty union” among the colonies and urging common action against the British measures that “have an immediate tendency to enslave us.”

Throughout this crisis there were rumors and threats of mob rule in Boston. Because customs agents enforced the law against smugglers and honest traders alike, they enraged merchants, seamen, and dockworkers. In June 1768, a crowd assaulted customs officials who had seized John Hancock’s sloop Liberty for nonpayment of duties. So frightened were the officials that they fled the city. Hancock, reportedly the wealthiest merchant in the colonies and a vocal opponent of the British measures, had become a principal target of the customs officers. In September the Boston town meeting called on the people to arm themselves, and in the absence of an elected assembly it invited all the other towns to send delegates to a provincial convention. There were threats of armed resistance, but little support for it in the convention, which broke up in chaos. Nevertheless the British, fearing insurrection, occupied Boston with infantry and artillery regiments on October 1, 1768. With this action, they sacrificed a great deal of good will and respect and added greatly to the growing tensions.

The Politics of Revolt and the Boston Massacre

The British troops stationed in the colonies were the object of scorn and hostility over the next two years. There were regular conflicts between soldiers and radicals in New York City, often focusing on the Sons of Liberty. These men would erect “liberty poles” festooned with banners and flags proclaiming their cause, and the British troops would promptly destroy them. When the New York assembly finally bowed to Townshend in December 1769 and voted an appropriation to support the troops, the New York City Sons of Liberty organized a demonstration and erected a large liberty pole. The soldiers chopped it down, sawed it into pieces, and left the wood on the steps of a tavern frequented by the Sons. This led to a riot in which British troops used their bayonets against hundreds of New Yorkers armed with cutlasses and clubs. Several men were wounded.

Confrontations also took place in Boston. Sam Adams played up reports and rumors of soldiers harassing women, picking fights, or simply taunting residents with versions of “Yankee Doodle.” Soldiers were often hauled into Boston’s courts, and local judges adopted a completely unfriendly attitude toward these members of the occupying army. In February 1770, an eleven-year-old boy was killed when a customs officer opened...
fire on a rock-throwing crowd. Although no soldiers were involved, this incident heightened the tensions between citizens and troops.

A persistent source of conflict was the competition between troops and townspeople over jobs. Soldiers were permitted to work when off duty, putting them in competition with day laborers. In early March 1770, an off-duty soldier walked into a ropewalk (a long narrow building in which ropes are made) in search of a job. Instead of receiving an offer for work, he was rudely rejected and sent away. The soldier left but returned with his friends, and a small riot ensued. Fighting continued over the next few days in the streets between the wharf and the Common, where the soldiers were encamped. On the evening of March 5, 1770, a crowd gathered at the Customs House and began taunting a guard, calling him a “damned rascally scoundrel lobster” and worse. A captain and seven soldiers went to his rescue, only to be pelted with snowballs and stones. Suddenly, without orders, the frightened soldiers began to fire. Five of the crowd fell dead, and six more were wounded; two of these dying later. The first blood shed was that of Crispus Attucks, whose mother was Indian and father was African American. The soldiers escaped to their barracks, but a mob numbering in the hundreds rampaged through the streets demanding vengeance. Fearing for the safety of his men and the security of the state, Thomas Hutchinson, now governor of Massachusetts, ordered British troops out of Boston. The Boston Massacre became infamous throughout the colonies, in part because of the circulation of an inflammatory print produced by the Boston engraver Paul Revere, which depicted the British as firing on a crowd of unresisting civilians. But for many colonists, the incident was a disturbing reminder of the extent to which relations with the mother country had deteriorated. During the next two years, many people found themselves pulling back from the brink. “There seems,” one Bostonian wrote, “to be a pause in politics.”

The growth of American resistance was slowed as well by the news that Parliament had repealed most of the Townshend Revenue Acts on March 5, 1770—the same day as the Boston Massacre. In the climate of apprehension and confusion, there were few celebrations of the repeal, and the nonimportation associations almost immediately collapsed. Over the next three years, the value of British imports rose by 80 percent. The parliamentary retreat on the question of duties, like the earlier repeal of the Stamp Act, was accompanied by a face-saving measure—retention of the tax on tea “as a mark of the supremacy of Parliament,” in the words of Frederick Lord North, the new prime minister.

**From Resistance to Rebellion**

There was a lull in the American controversy during the early 1770s, but the situation turned violent in 1773, when Parliament again infuriated the Americans. This time it was an ill-advised **Tea Act**, and it propelled the colonists onto a swift track from resistance to outright rebellion.

**Intercolonial Cooperation**

In June 1772, Governor Hutchinson inaugurated another controversy by announcing that henceforth his salary and those of other royally appointed Massachusetts officials would be paid by the crown. In effect, this made the executive and judiciary branches of the colony’s government independent of elected representatives. In October, the Boston town meeting appointed a Committee of Correspondence to communicate with other towns regarding this challenge. The next month, the

**Boston Massacre** After months of increasing friction between townspeople and the British troops stationed in the city, on March 5, 1770, British troops fired on American civilians in Boston.

In this excerpt, the Daughters of Liberty urge Americans to boycott British goods.

Young ladies in town, and those that live round,
Let a friend at this season advise you:
Since money’s so scarce, and times growing worse,
Strange things may soon hap and surprise you;
First then, throw aside your high top knots of pride,
Wear none but your own country linen,
Of Economy boast, let your pride be the most
To show clothes of your own make and spinning.

**Tea Act of 1773** Act of Parliament that permitted the East India Company to sell through agents in America without paying the duty customarily collected in Britain, thus reducing the retail price.
meeting issued what became known as the Boston Pamphlet, a series of declarations written by Samuel Adams and other radicals, concluding that British encroachments on colonial rights pointed to a plot to enslave Americans.

In March 1773, the Virginia House of Burgesses appointed a standing committee for correspondence among the colonies "to obtain the most early and authentic intelligence" of British actions affecting America, "and to keep up and maintain a correspondence and communication with our sister colonies." The Virginia committee, including Patrick Henry, Richard Henry Lee, and young Thomas Jefferson, served as a model, and within a year all the colonies except Pennsylvania, where conservatives controlled the legislature, had created committees of their own. These committees became the principal channel for sharing information, shaping public opinion, and building cooperation among the colonies before the Continental Congress of 1774.

The information most damaging to British influence came from the radicals in Boston. In June 1773, the Boston committee obtained from Benjamin Franklin in London a set of letters Hutchinson had sent to the ministry. The letters had come to Franklin anonymously, and to protect himself he asked that the committee keep them private, but they were soon published in the local press, resulting in Franklin’s dismissal from his position as colonial postmaster general. But the British cause in the colonies suffered much more than Franklin’s reputation. The letters revealed Hutchinson’s call for “an abridgement of what are called English liberties” in the colonies. “I wish to see some further restraint of liberty,” he had written, “rather than the connection with the parent state should be broken.” This statement seemed to be the “smoking gun” of the conspiracy theory, and it created a torrent of anger against the British and their officials in the colonies.

**The Boston Tea Party**

It was in this context that the colonists received the news that Parliament had passed a Tea Act. Colonists were major consumers of tea, but because of the tax on it that remained from the Townshend duties, the market for colonial tea had collapsed, bringing the East India Company to the brink of bankruptcy. This company was the sole agent of British power in India, and Parliament could not allow it to fail. The British therefore devised a scheme in which they offered tea to Americans at prices that would tempt the most patriotic tea drinker. The radicals argued that this was merely a device to make palatable the payment of unconstitutional taxes—further evidence of the British effort to corrupt the colonists. In October, a mass meeting in Philadelphia denounced anyone importing the tea as “an enemy of his country.” The town meeting in Boston passed resolutions patterned on those of Philadelphia, but the tea agents there, including two of Governor Hutchinson’s sons, resisted the call to refuse the shipments.

The first of the tea ships arrived in Boston Harbor late in November. Mass meetings in Old South Church, which included many country people drawn to the scene of the crisis, resolved to keep the tea from being unloaded. Governor Hutchinson was equally firm in refusing to allow the ship to leave the harbor. Five thousand people on December 16, 1773, crowded into the church to hear the captain of the tea ship report to Samuel Adams that he could not move his ship. “This
meeting can do nothing more to save the country,” Adams declared. This was the signal for a disciplined group of fifty or sixty men, including farmers, artisans, merchants, professionals, and apprentices, to march to the wharf disguised as Indians. There they boarded the ship and dumped into the harbor 45 tons of tea, valued at £10,000, all the while cheered on by Boston’s citizens. “Boston Harbor’s a tea-pot tonight,” the crowd chanted.

Boston’s was the first tea party, but other incidents of property destruction soon followed. When the Sons of Liberty learned that a cargo of tea had landed secretly in New York, they followed the example of their brothers in Massachusetts, dressed themselves as Indians, and dumped the tea chests into the harbor. At Annapolis, a ship loaded with tea was destroyed by fire, and arson also consumed a shipment stored at a warehouse in New Jersey. But it was the action in Boston at which the British railed. The government became convinced that something had to be done about the rebellious colony of Massachusetts.

The Intolerable Acts

During the spring of 1774, an angry Parliament passed a series of acts—called the Coercive Acts, but known by Americans as the Intolerable Acts—that were calculated to punish Massachusetts and strengthen the British hand. The Boston Port Bill prohibited the loading or unloading of ships in any part of Boston Harbor until the town fully compensated the East India Company and the customs service for the destroyed tea. The Massachusetts Government Act nullified the colonial charter: delegates to the upper house would no longer be elected by the assembly, but henceforth were to be appointed by the king. Civil officers throughout the province were placed under the authority of the royal governor, and the selection of juries was given over to governor-appointed sheriffs. Town meetings, an important institution of the resistance movement, were prohibited from convening more than once a year except with the approval of the governor, who was to control their agendas. With these acts, the British terminated the long history of self-rule by communities in the colony of Massachusetts. The Administration of Justice Act protected British officials from colonial courts, thereby encouraging them to vigorously pursue the work of suppression. Those accused of committing capital crimes while putting down riots or collecting revenue, such as the soldiers involved in the Boston Massacre, were now to be sent to England for trial. Additional measures affected the other colonies and encouraged them to see themselves in league with suffering Massachusetts. The Quartering Act legalized the housing of troops at public expense, not only in taverns and abandoned buildings, but in occupied dwellings and private homes as well.

Finally, in the Quebec Act, the British authorized a permanent government for the territory taken from France during the Seven Years’ War (see Map 6-4 on page 184). This government was both authoritarian and anti-republican, with a royal government and an appointed council. Furthermore, the act confirmed the feudal system of land tenure along the St. Lawrence. It also granted religious toleration to the Roman Catholic Church and upheld the church’s traditional right to collect tithes, thus, in effect, establishing Catholicism as the state religion in Quebec. To the American colonists, the Quebec Act was a frightening preview of what imperial authorities might have in store for them, and it confirmed the prediction of the Committees of Correspondence that there was a British plot to destroy American liberty.

In May, General Thomas Gage arrived in Boston to replace Hutchinson as governor. The same day, the Boston town meeting called for a revival of nonimportation measures against Britain. In Virginia the Burgesses declared that Boston was enduring
a “hostile invasion” and made provision for a “day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer, devoutly to implore the divine interposition for averting the heavy calamity, which threatens destruction to our civil rights and the evils of civil war.” For this expression of sympathy, Governor Dunmore suspended the legislature. Nevertheless, throughout the colony on the first of June, funeral bells tolled, flags flew at half mast, and people flocked to the churches.

**The First Continental Congress**

It was amid this crisis that town meetings and colonial assemblies alike chose representatives for the **Continental Congress**. The delegates who arrived in Philadelphia in September 1774 included the most important leaders of the American cause. Cousins Samuel and John Adams, the radicals from Massachusetts, were joined by Patrick Henry and George Washington from Virginia and Christopher Gadsden of South Carolina. Many of the delegates were conservatives: John Dickinson and Joseph Galloway of Philadelphia and John Jay and James Duane from New York. With the exception of Gadsden, a hothead who proposed an attack on British forces in Boston, the delegates wished to avoid war and favored a policy of economic coercion.

After one of their first debates, the delegates passed a Declaration and Resolves, in which they asserted that all the colonists sprang from a common tradition and enjoyed rights guaranteed “by the immutable laws of nature, the principles of the English constitution, and the several charters or compacts” of their provinces. Thirteen acts of Parliament, passed since 1763, were declared in violation of these rights. Until these acts were repealed, the delegates pledged, they would impose a set of sanctions against the British. These would include not only the nonimportation and nonconsumption of British goods, but also a prohibition on the export of colonial commodities to Britain or its other colonies.

To enforce these sanctions, the Continental Congress urged that “a committee be chosen in every county, city, and town, by those who are qualified to vote for representatives in the legislature, whose business it shall be attentively to observe the conduct of all persons.” This call for democratically elected local committees in each community had important political ramifications. The following year, these groups, known as Committees of Observation and Safety, took over the functions of local government throughout the colonies. They organized militia companies, called extralegal courts, and combined to form colonywide congresses or conventions. By dissolving the colonial legislatures, royal governors unwittingly aided the work of these committees. The committees also scrutinized the activities of fellow citizens, suppressed the expression of Loyalist opinion from pulpit or press, and practiced other forms of coercion. Throughout most of the colonies, the committees formed a bridge between the old colonial administrations and the revolutionary governments organized over the next few years. Committees began to link localities together in the cause of a wider American community. It was at this point that people began to refer to the colonies as the American “states.”

**Lexington and Concord**

On September 1, 1774, General Gage sent troops from Boston to seize the stores of cannon and ammunition the Massachusetts militia had stored at armories in Charlestown.
and Cambridge. In response, the Massachusetts House of Representatives, calling itself the Provincial Congress, created a Committee of Safety empowered to call up the militia. On October 15, the committee authorized the creation of special units, to be known as “minutemen,” who stood ready to be called at a moment’s notice. The armed militia of the towns and communities surrounding Boston faced the British army, quartered in the city. It was no rabble he was up against, Gage wrote to his superiors, but “the freeholders and farmers” of New England who believed they were defending their communities. Worrying that his forces were insufficient to suppress the rebellion, he requested reinforcements. The stalemate continued through the fall and winter.

But King George was convinced that the time had come for war. “The New England governments are in a state of rebellion,” he wrote privately. “Blows must decide whether they are to be subject to this country or independent.” In Parliament, Pitt proposed withdrawing troops from Boston, but was overruled by a large margin. Attempting to find a balance between hard-liners and advocates of conciliation, Lord North organized majority support in the House of Commons for a plan in which Parliament would “forbear” to levy taxes for purposes of revenue once the colonies had agreed to tax themselves for the common defense. But simultaneously Parliament passed legislation severely restraining colonial commerce. “A great empire and little minds go ill together,” Edmund Burke quipped in March 1775 in a brilliant speech in Parliament opposing this

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legislation</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sugar Act</td>
<td>1764</td>
<td>Placed prohibitive duty on imported sugar; provided for greater regulation of American shipping to suppress smuggling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stamp Act</td>
<td>1765</td>
<td>Required the purchase of specially embossed paper for newspapers, legal documents, licenses, insurance policies, ships’ papers, and playing cards; struck at printers, lawyers, tavern owners, and other influential colonists. Repealed in 1766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declaratory Act</td>
<td>1766</td>
<td>Asserted the authority of Parliament to make laws binding the colonies “in all cases whatsoever”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Townshend Revenue Acts</td>
<td>1767</td>
<td>Placed import duties, collectible before goods entered colonial markets, on many commodities including lead, glass, paper, and tea. Repealed in 1770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tea Act</td>
<td>1773</td>
<td>Gave the British East India Company a monopoly on all tea imports to America, hitting at American merchants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coercive or Intolerable Acts</td>
<td>1774</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston Port Bill</td>
<td></td>
<td>Closed Boston Harbor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts Government Act</td>
<td></td>
<td>Annullled the Massachusetts colonial charter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration of Justice Act</td>
<td></td>
<td>Protected British officials from colonial courts by sending them home for trial if arrested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quartering Act</td>
<td></td>
<td>Legalized the housing of British troops in private homes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quebec Act</td>
<td></td>
<td>Created a highly centralized government for Canada</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Map 6-4
The Quebec Act appointed an anti-republican government for Canada and confirmed the privileges of the Catholic Church, establishing Catholicism as the state religion in Quebec. By enlarging the boundaries of Quebec, the American colonists were prohibited to settle the newly acquired Ohio River Valley, land won in the French and Indian War. The American colonists were angry that they lost access to land they successfully fought a war for and saw this enlargement of Quebec as a violation of colonies sea-to-sea boundaries of many colonial charters.

Committee of Safety Any of the extralegal committees that directed the revolutionary movement and carried on the functions of government at the local level.

Minutemen Special companies of militia formed in Massachusetts and elsewhere beginning in late 1744.
Bill. "Let it be once understood that your government may be one thing and their privileges another, that these two things may exist without any mutual relation." Then he declared in prophetic words, "The cement is gone, the cohesion is loosened, and everything hastens to decay and dissolution."

In Virginia, at almost the same moment, Patrick Henry predicted that hostilities would soon begin in New England. "Gentlemen may cry peace, peace!—but there is no peace," he thundered in prose later memorized by millions of American schoolchildren. "Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!" Three weeks later, on April 14, General Gage received orders to strike at once against the Massachusetts militia.

On the evening of April 18, 1775, Gage ordered 700 men to capture the store of American ammunition at the town of Concord. Learning of the operation, the Boston committee dispatched two men, Paul Revere and William Dawes, to alert the militia of the countryside. By the time the British forces had reached Lexington, midway to their destination, some seventy armed minutemen had assembled on the green in the center of town, but they were disorganized and confused. "Lay down your arms, you damned rebels, and disperse!" cried one of the British officers. The Americans began to withdraw in the face of overwhelming opposition, but they took their arms with them. "Damn you, why don’t you lay down your arms!" someone shouted from the British lines. "Damn them! We will have them!" No order to fire was given, but shots rang out, killing eight Americans and wounding ten others.

The British marched on to Concord, where they burned a small quantity of supplies and cut down a liberty pole. Meanwhile, news of the skirmish at Lexington had spread through the country, and the militia companies of communities from miles around converged on the town. Seeing smoke, they mistakenly concluded that the troops were burning homes. "Will you let them burn the town!" one man cried, and the Americans moved to the Concord bridge. There they attacked a British company, killing three soldiers—the first British casualties of the Revolution. The British immediately turned back for Boston, but were attacked by Americans at many points along the way. Reinforcements met them at Lexington, preventing a complete disaster, but by the time they finally marched into Boston, 73 were dead and 202 wounded or missing (see Map 6-5). The British troops were vastly outnumbered by the approximately 4,000 Massachusetts militiamen, who suffered 95 casualties. The engagement forecast what would be a central problem for the British: they would be forced to fight an armed population defending their own communities against outsiders.

**Deciding for Independence**

"We send you momentous intelligence," read the letter received by the Charleston, South Carolina, Committee of Correspondence on May 8, reporting the violence in Massachusetts. Community militia companies mobilized throughout the colonies. At Boston, thousands of militiamen from Massachusetts and the surrounding provinces besieged the city, leaving the British no escape but by sea; their siege would last for nearly a year. Meanwhile, delegates from twelve colonies reconverged on Philadelphia.

**The Second Continental Congress**

The members of the Second Continental Congress, which opened on May 10, 1775, represented twelve of the British colonies on the mainland of North America. From
New Hampshire to South Carolina, Committees of Observation and Safety had elected colonywide conventions, and these extralegal bodies in turn had chosen delegates. Consequently, few conservatives or Loyalists were among them. Georgia, unrepresented at the first session of the Continental Congress, remained absent at the opening of the second. The newest mainland colony, it depended heavily on British subsidies, and its leaders were cautious, fearing both slave and Indian uprisings. But in 1775, the political balance in Georgia shifted in favor of the radicals, and by the end of the summer the colony had delegates in Philadelphia.

Among the delegates at the Continental Congress were many familiar faces and a few new ones, including Thomas Jefferson, a plantation owner and lawyer from Virginia, gifted with one of the most imaginative and analytical minds of his time. All the delegates carried news of the enthusiasm for war that raged in their home provinces. “A frenzy of revenge seems to have seized all ranks of people,” said Jefferson. George Washington attended all the sessions in uniform. “Oh that I was a soldier,” an envious John Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail. The delegates agreed that defense was the first issue on their agenda.

On May 15, the Second Continental Congress resolved to put the colonies in a state of defense, but the delegates were divided on how best to do it. They lacked the power and the funds to immediately raise and supply an army. After debate and deliberation, John Adams made the practical proposal that the delegates simply designate as a Continental Army the militia forces besieging Boston. On June 14, the Congress resolved to supplement the New England militiamen with six companies of expert riflemen raised in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. The delegates agreed that in order to emphasize their national aspirations, they had to select a man from the South to command these New England forces. All eyes turned to George Washington. Although Washington had suffered defeat at the beginning of the Seven Years’ War, he had subsequently compiled a distinguished record. On June 15, Jefferson and Adams nominated Washington to be commander-in-chief of all Continental forces, and he was elected by a unanimous vote. He served without salary. The Continental Congress soon appointed a staff of major generals to support him. On June 22, in a highly significant move, the Congress voted to finance the army with an issue of $2 million in bills of credit, backed by the good faith of the Confederated Colonies. Thus began the long and complicated process of financing the Revolution.

During its first session in the spring of 1775, the Continental Congress had begun to move cautiously down the path toward independence. Few would admit, even to themselves, however, that this was their goal. John Adams, who was close to advocating independence, wrote that he was “as fond of reconciliation as any man” but found the hope of peaceful resolution unreasonable. “The cancer is too deeply rooted,” he thought, “and too far spread to be cured by anything short of cutting it out entire.” Still, on July 5, 1775, the delegates passed the so-called Olive Branch Petition, written by John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, in which they professed their attachment to King George and begged him to prevent further hostilities so that there might be an accommodation. The next day they approved a Declaration of the Causes and Necessities of Taking Up Arms, written by Jefferson and Dickinson. Here the delegates adopted a harder tone, resolving “to die freemen rather than to live slaves.” Before the Second Continental Congress adjourned at the beginning of August, the delegates appointed commissioners to negotiate with the Indian nations in an attempt to keep them out
of the conflict. They also reinstated Benjamin Franklin as postmaster general in order to keep the mails moving and protect communication among the colonies.

**Canada, the Spanish Borderlands, and the Revolution**

How did the rest of North America react to the coming conflict? The Continental Congress contacted many of the other British colonies. In one of their first acts, delegates called on “the oppressed inhabitants of Canada” to join in the struggle for “common liberty.” After the Seven Years’ War, the British treated Quebec as a conquered province, and French Canadians felt little sympathy for the empire. On the other hand, the Americans were traditional enemies, much feared because of their aggressive expansionism. Indeed, when the Canadians failed to respond positively and immediately, the Congress reversed itself and voted to authorize a military expedition against Quebec to eliminate any possibility of a British invasion from that quarter, thus killing any chance of the Canadians’ joining the anti-British cause. This set a course toward the development of the separate nations of the United States and Canada.

There was some sympathy at first for the American struggle in the British island colonies. The legislative assemblies of Jamaica, Grenada, and Barbados declared themselves in accord with the Continental Congress, but the British navy prevented them from sending representatives. A delegation from Bermuda succeeded in getting to Philadelphia, but the Americans were so preoccupied with more pressing matters they were unable to provide any assistance, and the spark of resistance on the island sputtered out. The island colonies would remain aloof from the imperial crisis, largely because the colonists there were dependent on a British military presence to guard
against slave revolts. Things at first seemed more promising in Nova Scotia (not then a part of Canada), where many New Englanders had relocated after the expulsion of the Acadians. There had been Stamp Act demonstrations in Halifax, and when the British attempted to recruit among the Nova Scotians for soldiers to serve in Boston, one community responded that since “almost all of us [were] born in New England, [we are] divided betwixt natural affection to our nearest relations and good faith and friendship to our king and country.” The British naval stronghold at Halifax, however, secured the province for the empire. Large contingents of British troops also kept Florida (which Britain had divided into the two colonies of East and West Florida) solidly in the empire.

In Cuba, some 3,000 exiled Spanish Floridians, who had fled rather than live under British rule in 1763, clamored for Spain to retake their homeland. Many of them were active supporters of American independence. (Two centuries later, there would be thousands of Cuban exiles in Florida.) Spanish authorities in Cuba, who also administered the newly acquired colony of Louisiana, were somewhat torn in their sympathies. They certainly felt no solidarity with the cause of rebellion, which they understood posed a great danger to monarchy and empire. But with painful memories of the British invasion of Havana in 1763, they passionately looked forward to working revenge on their traditional enemy, as well as to regaining control of the Floridas and eliminating the British threat to their Mexican and Caribbean colonies. In 1775, Spain adopted the recommendation of the Havana authorities and declared a policy of neutrality in the looming independence struggle.

Secretly, however, Spain looked for an opportunity to support the Americans. That presented itself in the late spring of 1776, when a contingent of Americans arrived in Spanish New Orleans via the Mississippi River bearing a proposal from patriot forces in Virginia. British naval supremacy was making it impossible to obtain supplies from overseas. Would the Spanish be willing to quietly sell guns, ammunition, and other provisions to the Americans in New Orleans and allow them to be shipped by way of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers? If they were cooperative, the Americans might be willing to see the Spanish retake possession of the Floridas and administer them as a “protectorate” for the duration of the independence struggle. Authorities forwarded the proposal to Spain, where a few months later the Spanish king and his ministers approved the plan. Havana and New Orleans became important supply centers for the patriots.

**Fighting in the North and South**

Both North and South saw fighting in 1775 and early 1776. In May 1775, a small force of armed New Englanders under the command of Ethan Allen of Vermont surprised the British garrison at Fort Ticonderoga on Lake Champlain, demanding—“in the name of Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress”—that the commander surrender. The Continental Congress, in fact, knew nothing of this campaign, and when news of it arrived, members of the New York delegation were distressed at this New England violation of their territorial sovereignty. With great effort, the Americans transported the fort’s cannon overland to be used in the siege of Boston.

At Boston, the British hastened to reinforce Gage’s forces and by the middle of June 1775 had approximately 6,500 soldiers in the city. By that time the American forces had increased to nearly 10,000. Fearing Gage would occupy the heights south of town, the Americans countered by occupying the Charlestown peninsula to the north. On June 17, British ships in the harbor began to fire on the American positions, and Gage decided on a frontal assault to dislodge them. In bloody fighting that, although it occurred at Breed’s Hill, has since been known as the Battle of Bunker Hill, the
The Connecticut artist John Trumbull painted *The Battle of Bunker Hill* in 1785, the first of a series that earned him the informal title of “the Painter of the Revolution.” Trumbull was careful to research the details of his paintings, but composed them in the grand style of historical romance. In the early nineteenth century, he repainted this work and three other Revolutionary scenes for the rotunda of the Capitol in Washington, DC.

The Granger Collection.

British finally succeeded in routing the Americans, killing 140 men, but not before suffering over a thousand casualties of their own, including 226 dead. The fierce reaction in England to this enormous loss ended all possibility of any last-minute reconciliation. In August 1775, King George rejected the Olive Branch Petition and issued a royal proclamation declaring the colonists to be in “open and avowed rebellion.” “Divers wicked and desperate persons” were the cause of the problem, said the king, and he called on his loyal subjects in America to “bring the traitors to justice.”

In June 1775, the Continental Congress assembled an expeditionary force against Canada. One thousand Americans moved north up the Hudson River corridor, and in November, General Richard Montgomery forced the capitulation of Montreal. Meanwhile, Benedict Arnold set out from Massachusetts with another American army, and after a torturous march through the forests and mountains of Maine, he joined Montgomery outside the walls of Quebec. Unlike the assault of British General Wolfe in 1759, however, the American assault failed to take the city. Montgomery and 100 Americans were killed, and another 300 were taken prisoner. Although Arnold held his position, the American siege was broken the following spring by British reinforcements who had come down the St. Lawrence. By the summer of 1776, the Americans had been forced back from Canada.

Elsewhere there were successes. Washington installed artillery on the heights south of Boston, placing the city and harbor within cannon range. General William Howe, who had replaced Gage, had little choice but to evacuate the city. In March, the British sailed out of Boston harbor for the last time, heading north to Halifax with at least 1,000 American Loyalists. In the South, American militia rose against the Loyalist forces of Virginia’s Governor Dunmore, who had alienated the planter class by promising freedom to any slave who would fight with the British. After a decisive
defeat of his forces, Dunmore retreated to British naval vessels, from which he shelled and destroyed much of the city of Norfolk, Virginia, on January 1, 1776. In North Carolina, the rebel militia crushed a Loyalist force at the Battle of Moore’s Creek Bridge near Wilmington in February, ending British plans for an invasion of that province. The British decided to attack Charleston, but at Fort Moultrie in Charleston Harbor an American force turned back the assault. It would be more than two years before the British would try to invade the South again.

**No Turning Back**

Hopes of reconciliation died with the mounting casualties. The Second Continental Congress, which was rapidly assuming the role of a new government for all the provinces, reconvened in September 1775 and received news of the king’s proclamation that the colonies were in formal rebellion. Although the delegates disclaimed any intention of denying the sovereignty of the king, they now moved to organize an American navy. They declared British vessels open to capture and authorized privateering. The Congress took further steps toward de facto independence when it authorized contacts with foreign powers through its agents in Europe. In the spring of 1776, France, hoping that the creation of a new American nation might provide the opportunity of gaining a larger share of the colonial trade while also diminishing British power, joined Spain in approving the shipping of supplies to the rebellious provinces. The Continental Congress then declared colonial ports open to the trade of all nations but Britain.

The emotional ties to Britain proved difficult to break. But in 1776, help arrived in the form of a pamphlet written by Thomas Paine, a radical Englishman recently arrived in Philadelphia. In *Common Sense*, Paine proposed to offer “simple fact, plain argument, and common sense” on the crisis. For years, Americans had defended their actions by wrapping themselves in the mantle of British traditions. But Paine argued that the British system rested on “the base remains of two ancient tyrannies,” aristocracy and monarchy, neither of which was appropriate for America. Paine placed the blame for the oppression of the colonists on the shoulders of King George, whom he labeled the “royal Brute.” Appealing to the millennial spirit of American Protestant culture, Paine wrote: “We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now.” *Common Sense* was the single most important piece of writing during the Revolutionary era, selling more than 100,000 copies within a few months of its publication in January 1776. It reshaped popular thinking and put independence squarely on the agenda.

In April, the North Carolina convention, which operated as the revolutionary replacement for the old colonial assembly, became the first to empower its delegates to vote for a declaration of independence. News that the British were recruiting a force of German mercenaries to use against the Americans provided an additional push toward what now began to seem inevitable. In May, the Continental Congress voted to recommend that the individual states move as quickly as possible toward the adoption of state constitutions. When John Adams wrote, in the preamble to this statement, that “the exercise of every kind of authority under the said crown should be totally suppressed,” he sent a strong signal that the delegates were on the verge of approving a momentous declaration.

---

**Declaration of Independence** The document by which the Second Continental Congress announced and justified its decision to renounce the colonies’ allegiance to the British government.

**Class Discussion Question 6.6**

Understanding that the coming struggle would require the steady support of ordinary people, in the Declaration of Independence, the upper-class men of the Continental Congress asserted the right of popular revolution and the great principle of human equality.

The Granger Collection.

**Royal Proclamation of Rebellion (1775)**

*Common Sense* was the single most important piece of writing during the Revolutionary era, selling more than 100,000 copies within a few months of its publication in January 1776. It reshaped popular thinking and put independence squarely on the agenda.
**The Declaration of Independence**

On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia offered a motion to the Continental Congress: “That these united colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British crown, and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.” After some debate, a vote was postponed until July, but a committee composed of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, and Robert Livingston of New York was asked to prepare a draft declaration of American independence. The committee assigned the writing to Jefferson.

The intervening month allowed the delegates to sample the public discussion and debate and receive instructions from their state conventions. By the end of the month, all the states but New York had authorized a vote for independence. When the question came up for debate again on July 1, a large majority in the Continental Congress supported independence. The final vote, taken on July 2, was twelve in favor of independence, none against, with New York abstaining. The delegates then turned to the declaration itself and made a number of changes in Jefferson’s draft, striking out, for example, a long passage condemning slavery. In this and a number of other ways, the final version was somewhat more cautious than the draft, but it was still a stirring document.

Its central section reiterated the “long train of abuses and usurpations” on the part of King George that had led the Americans to their drastic course; there was no mention of Parliament, the principal opponent since 1764. But it was the first section that expressed the highest ideals of the delegates:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights,

---

**1713**  France cedes Acadia to Britain

**1745**  New Englanders capture Louisburg

**1749**  French send an expeditionary force down the Ohio River

**1753**  French begin building forts from Lake Erie to the Ohio

**1754**  Albany Congress

**1755**  British General Edward Braddock defeated by a combined force of French and Indians

**1756**  Seven Years’ War begins in Europe

**1757**  William Pitt becomes prime minister

**1758**  Louisburg captured by the British for the second time

**1759**  British capture Quebec

**1763**  Treaty of Paris

**1764**  Sugar Act

**1765**  Stamp Act and Stamp Act Congress

**1766**  Declaratory Act

**1767**  Townshend Revenue Acts

**1768**  Treaties of Hard Labor and Fort Stanwix

**1770**  Boston Massacre

**1772**  First Committee of Correspondence organized in Boston

**1773**  Tea Act

**1774**  Intolerable Acts

**1775**  Fighting begins at Lexington and Concord

**1776**  Americans invade Canada

**1776**  Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*

---

In this excerpt, Thomas Paine directly blames King George III for colonial suffering. Paine urges his readers to abandon the king. To the evil of monarchy we have added that of hereditary succession; and as the first is a degradation and lessening of ourselves, so the second, claimed as a matter of right, is an insult and an imposition on posterity. For all men being originally equals, no one by birth could have a right to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others for ever . . .
that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

There was very little debate in the Continental Congress about these principles. The delegates, mostly men of wealth and position, realized that the coming struggle for independence would require the steady support of ordinary people, so they asserted this great principle of equality and the right of revolution. There was little debate about the implications or potential consequences. Surely no statement would reverberate more through American history; the idea of equality inspired the poor as well as the wealthy, women as well as men, blacks as well as whites.

But it was the third and final section that may have contained the most meaning for the delegates: “For the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.” In voting for independence, the delegates proclaimed their community, but they also committed treason against their king and empire. They could be condemned as traitors, hunted as criminals, and stand on the scaffold to pay for their sentiments. On July 4, 1776, these men approved the text of the Declaration of Independence without dissent.

On July 9, 1776, shortly after the Declaration of Independence was signed, General Washington gathered his troops at the present-day City Hall Park in Manhattan and had the document read to them. An unruly group of soldiers and townspeople then marched to the south end of Broadway and pulled down a large gilded lead statue of King George III. The head impaled upon a stake and the rest hauled to Connecticut to be melted down for bullets. The event became a favorite scene for historical painters of the nineteenth century.

The Bostonians Paying the Excise-Man, or Tarring and Feathering

Political cartoons played an important role in the public controversy leading to the American Revolution. This print, published in London in 1774 and sold on the streets for a few pennies, depicts the violent attack of a Boston mob on customs commissioner John Malcolm several weeks after the “Tea Party.” Malcolm, an ardent Loyalist, had been the frequent target of protests. That night a mob dragged Malcolm from his house and covered him with tar and feathers, a ritual of public humiliation. Hot tar produced painful blistering of the skin, and the effort to remove it made the condition worse. The feathers made the victim into an object of ridicule. Hauled to the Liberty Tree in Boston Common, Malcolm was threatened with hanging if he did not apologize and renounce his commission. When he did he was allowed to return home. The pro-Loyalist print includes a number of telling details. Malcolm is attacked by a group that includes a leather-aproned artisan. A broadside announcing the Stamp Act is posted upside down on the Liberty Tree. A hangman’s noose dangles from a branch. The Boston Tea Party takes place in the background. In the foreground is a tar bucket and a pole topped by a “liberty cap,” a symbol of freedom adopted by American protesters (and later an icon of the French Revolution). These details were intended to mock the Americans. But when the print found its way to North America it was embraced by Patriots and became an enduring American favorite. In the nineteenth century it was reprinted as a celebration of the righteous violence of the Revolution.

How could this image, intended to ridicule and shame the American patriots, have been embraced and celebrated by them?

Conclusion

Great Britain emerged from the Seven Years’ War as the dominant power in North America. Yet despite its attempts at strict regulation and determination of the course of events in its colonies, it faced consistent resistance and often complete failure. Perhaps British leaders felt as John Adams had when he attended the first session of the Continental Congress in 1774: how could a motley collection of “ambassadors from a dozen belligerent powers” effectively organize as a single, independent, and defiant body? The British underestimated the political consensus that existed among the colonists about the importance of “republican” government. They also underestimated the ability of the colonists to inform one another, to work together, to build a sentiment of nationalism that cut across the boundaries of ethnicity, region, and economic status. Through newspapers, pamphlets, Committees of Correspondence, community organizations, and group protest, the colonists discovered the concerns they shared, and in so doing they fostered a new, American identity. Without that identity it would have been difficult for them to consent to the treasonous act of declaring independence, especially when the independence they sought was from an international power that dominated much of the globe.

Suggested Answer:
Successful essays should note:
• The definition of “revolution”
• The treatment of British officials in the American colonies (Image p.182, Document A)
• Political propaganda issued in the colonies after the Boston Massacre (Image p.180)
• The status and types of people involved in political upheaval (Document A)
• Who stood to gain the most from American independence (Document A)
• Who are the “enemies of the liberties of America” (Document A)
• Public opinion of women during the era, both in Britain and America (Image p.179 and Document B)
• Women’s advocacy for social change through writing and protests (Document B)
• Roles of minorities: Mulattos, Indians, and African Americans in eighteenth century society (Document C)
• John Dickinson’s words to dissuade independence and aggression (p. 178–179 and Document C)
• Colonist political cartoons released in Britain alluding to their fighting capabilities (Document C)
4th. Resolved, That whether the duties on tea, imposed by this act, be paid in Great Britain or in America, our liberties are equally affected.

5th. Resolved, That whoever shall transgress any of these resolutions, we will not deal with, or employ, or have any connection with him.

—Resolutions of the New York Sons of Liberty, Nov. 29, 1773

The question asks you to determine if the struggle between the colonies and Britain was a revolution. There are three alternatives here. It was a revolution. It was not a revolution. It contained some elements of a revolution and some characteristics were not revolutionary. You will have to arrive at some definition of what revolution means. Look at this declaration of the Sons of Liberty of New York. It has the traditional complaints against the tea tax.

• Who was protesting? Was it the elite of society or the average person?
• Did they want to change society or keep it exactly as it existed? Who signed this document?

Now look at the political broadside on page 182 that protests the tea tax and praises the Boston Tea Party. Look at the people who are tarring the tax collector.

• Are they the upper class?
• Does that have anything to do with the question of a revolution?

Look at the Revere drawing of the Boston Massacre on page 180. Read the textbook account of the event.

• Who were the people involved in the events leading up to the Boston Massacre?
• What issues caused the event? Who were the people who died in that event?
• Did you have people in the lower classes resisting folks from the wealthier classes in these events?
• Who were the “enemies of the liberties of America”?

DOCUMENT B

Look at the political cartoon on page 179 of the Edenton, North Carolina women protesting the tea tax. Printed in Britain in 1775 by Philip Dawes as a satire, titled “A Society of Patriotic Ladies,” it shows American women responding to a 1774 call by the Continental Congress to boycott British goods.

• Was this kind of role typical of women in that day?

Look at these two poems.

Throw aside your topknots of pride,
Wear none but your own country linen.
Of economy boast, let your pride be the most,
To show clothes of your own make and spinning.

Stand firmly resolv’d, and bid Grenville to see,
That rather than freedom we part with our tea,
And well as we love the dear draught when a-dry,
As American patriots our taste we deny.

• Did women take political roles in society in the eighteenth century?

Look back at the Boston Massacre discussion.

• Did mulattos take political roles in society in the eighteenth century?
• Is this a revolution or a rebellion?
This is a pro-American cartoon printed in London by James Gillray in 1782 just after the surrender at Yorktown. The cartoon carries the image of the snake boasting: “Two British Armies I have thus Burgoyn’d, And room for more I’ve got behind.” The sign hanging from the snake’s tale above the third coil claims: “An Apartment to Lett(rent) for Military Gentlemen.” It is portraying a military victory. Look at pages 178–179 at the advice John Dickinson gave his fellow colonists: “Let us behave as dutiful children who have received unmerited blows from a beloved parent.” But, here, the colonists have raised armies and fought their king.

- Was this a revolution?
- Was this a warning to the King and British government that something revolutionary had happened in the thirteen colonies?

**AP* PREP TEST**

Select the response that best answers each question or best completes each sentence.

1. An important task facing the First Continental Congress was:
   a. defining the issues that would justify a declaration of independence from England.
   b. emphasizing the common cause Americans had without compromising local identities.
   c. funding the ongoing war that the patriots were fighting against the British military.
   d. creating a form of republican government that would ensure a more perfect union.
   e. creating a strong federal government at the expense of state autonomy.

2. The Seven Years’ War:
   a. was just the first in a long series of armed conflicts between the French and British.
   b. marked the first open split between Great Britain and the American colonies.
   c. resulted in a military defeat that led to the demise of France as a global power.
   d. came to an end as a result of the Albany Plan that Benjamin Franklin proposed.
   e. had tremendous implications for the French empire and for British North America.

**Answer Key**

1-B 4-C 7-C 10-C 13-E
2-E 5-E 8-A 11-A 14-A
3-D 6-B 9-E 12-B
3. The primary focus in America that led to conflict between France and England in 1754 was:
   a. the effort by British Americans to seize East Florida from France’s long-time ally, Spain.
   b. control over the fishing resources of the Grand Banks near the province of Newfoundland.
   c. disputes between Catholic settlers in Quebec and Congregationalists in New England.
   d. the vast and wealthy region west of the Appalachian Mountains and along the Ohio River.
   e. control of the fur trade in the northeastern Canadian provinces.

4. As a result of the Seven Years’ War:
   a. Great Britain acquired all of the territory east of the Mississippi River except Florida.
   b. the French gave up claims to Canada but continued to hold the Mississippi Valley.
   c. France relinquished to England and Spain all claim to territories in North America.
   e. France relinquished all claims to territories in America, but retained their Canadian provinces.

5. The English set aside an Indian Reserve in North America with the:
   a. Act of Union and Amity.
   b. Indian Removal Program of 1765.
   c. Declaratory Act of 1766.
   d. Treaty of Fort Stanwix.
   e. Royal Proclamation of 1763.

6. During the mid- to late eighteenth century, many Americans came to believe in republicanism, a form of government that:
   a. guaranteed that all people in America would be treated equally.
   b. proposed that individuals should have the greatest liberty possible.
   c. was based on the direct political participation of all white adults.
   d. advocated that the state should control all forms of economic activity.
   e. promoted a good society in which a strong state, controlled by a hereditary elite, kept a vicious and unruly people in line.

7. The constitutional debate that arose out of the Stamp Act Crisis was about:
   a. modern democracy versus traditional republicanism.
   b. separation of power and term limits in government.
   c. virtual representation and actual representation.
   d. monarchial rulers versus participatory government.
   e. the enumerated powers of congress.

8. During the 1760s, the main American weapon of resistance to British policy was:
   a. economic boycotts.
   b. military action.
   c. political petitions.
   d. violent demonstrations.
   e. diplomatic alliances.

9. The Boston Massacre in 1770 was:
   a. a heinous act of British violence committed against all of the American people.
   b. the event that led to the most heightened sense of anti-British sentiment prior to the war.
   c. the most violent act ever committed by American Indians against the British colonies.
   d. the event that led to an immediate break with England and American independence.
   e. an unfortunate and tragic incident that developed out of numerous colonial tensions.

10. The English response to rebellious activity in Massachusetts was the:
    a. Force Bill.
    b. Declaratory Act.
    c. Coercive Acts.
    d. Quartering Bill.
    e. Townshend Acts.

11. The battles of Lexington and Concord:
    a. forecast the violent nature that would characterize the war that followed.
    b. led to the arrests of most of the important and influential patriot leaders.
    c. occurred within just two weeks of the Declaration of Independence.
    d. resulted in a number of American casualties but none for the British.
    e. elicited little immediate response from militia in surrounding communities.
12. In July 1775, the Second Continental Congress:
   a. declared that the colonies had a right to be, and were now, independent states.
   b. continued to look for a peaceful resolution between the colonies and England.
   c. called upon Parliament to depose King George III and thereby avert a war.
   d. formed a military alliance with France and signed trade agreements with Spain.
   e. opened with full participation from all of the British mainland colonies.

13. The pamphlet that reshaped American popular thinking about independence was:
   b. A Seditious Libel by John Peter Zenger.
   c. Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death by Patrick Henry.
   d. Letters from an American Farmer by Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur.
   e. Common Sense by Thomas Paine.

14. A critical event in the years following 1763 was the:
   a. emergence of a unique American identity that helped bring about the movement for independence.
   b. realization by most Americans that they no longer had anything at all in common with the English.
   c. understanding that the English had created the most tyrannical government in the history of the world.
   d. insistence that the only effective government was one that gave all the people a direct role to play.
   e. shared recognition of the equality of all races.