

# The American Revolution: Political Upheaval Led to U.S. Independence

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Continental Army Commander-in-Chief George Washington leads his soldiers in the Battle of Princeton on January 3, 1777. Photo from Wikimedia

The American Revolution (1775 to 1783) is also known as the American Revolutionary War. The conflict arose from growing tensions between residents of Britain's 13 American colonies and the British colonial government. The British king ruled over the colonies from across the Atlantic, in England. In April 1775, fighting began between British troops and colonial rebels, also known as colonists.

By the following summer, the rebels were fighting a war for their independence. Assistance from France helped the Continental Army force the British to surrender in 1781. Americans had won their independence, though fighting would not end until 1783.

## Tensions, resentment and violence

By 1775, tensions had been building between colonists and the British authorities for more than a decade. The British government had been trying to make more money off the colonies. They collected taxes on sugar, stamps, tea and other goods. This was met with anger by many colonists, who resented being taxed, but had no representatives in British government. They demanded the same rights as other British citizens.

Violence erupted in 1770, when British soldiers shot and killed five colonists in Boston, Massachusetts. It became known as the Boston Massacre. In December 1773, a band of Bostonians dressed as Native Americans boarded British ships and dumped 342 chests of tea into Boston Harbor. Afterward, an outraged British Parliament passed a series of cruel measures — known as the "Intolerable" Acts — designed to show that they still held the power in Massachusetts.

In September 1774, a group of colonial leaders — including George Washington, John and Samuel Adams, and Patrick Henry — met in Philadelphia to discuss their dissatisfaction with the British. This First Continental Congress, as it was called, denounced the taxes and the presence of the British army in the colonies. The group issued a declaration of the rights they felt every American citizen deserved, including life, liberty, property, the right to assemble in groups and to a trial in court by a jury.

## First shots fired

The Continental Congress voted to meet again in May 1775 to consider further action. On April 19, local militiamen clashed with British soldiers in Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts — the first shots fired in the Revolutionary War.

Soon, the Second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia. This time, its leaders voted to form a Continental Army, and Washington was named its commander.

On June 17, in the Revolution's first major battle, colonial forces severely hurt the British army at the Battle of Bunker Hill in Boston. The battle was ultimately won by the British, but the colonists fought well and grew confident.

By March 1776, though, the colonial army forced the British to retreat from the base Fort Ticonderoga in New York.

## Declaration of Independence



By now, most colonists had come to want their independence from Britain. On July 4, the Continental Congress voted to adopt the Declaration of Independence. It was written by a committee of men, but mainly by Thomas Jefferson.

That same month, the British were determined to crush the rebellion. They sent a large fleet of ships with troops to New York. In August, Howe's Redcoats defeated the Continental Army on Long Island, forcing Washington to evacuate his troops from New York City.

On Christmas night, Washington fought back with a surprise attack on the British in Trenton, New Jersey. He won another victory at Princeton, New Jersey, which revived the rebels' hopes.

In 1777, the British aimed to separate New England from the other colonies, as the rebellion was popular in New England. British General John Burgoyne's army would march south from Canada toward colonial forces on the Hudson River in New York. Burgoyne's men dealt the Americans a devastating loss in July by retaking Fort Ticonderoga in New York.

The British defeated the Americans at Brandywine Creek, Pennsylvania, on September 11 and entered Philadelphia on September 25. Washington withdrew his troops to settle for the winter around Valley Forge, Pennsylvania.

## Revolution becomes a world war



At one point, Burgoyne's army became exposed near Saratoga, New York. An American force led by General Horatio Gates defeated them in the first and second Battles of Saratoga. This was a turning point in the American Revolution. It prompted France to openly support the Americans. The American Revolution, which had begun as a conflict between Britain and its colonies, was now a world war.

During the long winter at Valley Forge, Washington's troops got training from French military leaders.

On July 8, the French arrived, ready for battle with the British, but the war mostly settled into a deadlock phase in the North.

The Americans suffered setbacks from 1779 to 1781. General Benedict Arnold switched sides, joining the British. In the South, the British occupied Georgia by early 1779 and captured Charleston, South Carolina in May 1780. British forces under Lord Charles Cornwallis crushed Gates' American troops at Camden, New Jersey in mid-August.

## **The end of the revolution**

By the fall of 1781, American forces pushed Cornwallis and his men to Virginia's Yorktown peninsula. Washington moved against Yorktown with a large army. Meanwhile, a fleet of French warships offshore prevented the British from retreating. Trapped and overpowered, Cornwallis was forced to surrender his army on October 19.

British and American negotiators in Paris signed peace terms late that November. On September 3, 1783, Great Britain formally recognized the independence of the United States in the Treaty of Paris.

After eight long years, the American Revolution finally came to a close.

## Quiz

- 1 Which paragraph from the section "Revolution becomes a world war" suggests the British were close to winning the war?
- 2 Which piece of evidence BEST explains what helped the colonists win the war?
- (A) In December 1773, a band of Bostonians dressed as Native Americans boarded British ships and dumped 342 chests of tea into Boston Harbor.
  - (B) In 1777, the British aimed to separate New England from the other colonies, as the rebellion was popular in New England.
  - (C) Washington moved against Yorktown with a large army. Meanwhile, a fleet of French warships offshore prevented the British from retreating.
  - (D) On September 3, 1783, Great Britain formally recognized the independence of the United States in the Treaty of Paris.
- 3 Which of the following MOST influenced the formation of the Continental Congress?
- (A) the 13 colonies
  - (B) the Intolerable Acts
  - (C) the Declaration of Independence
  - (D) the Battle of Saratoga
- 4 Read the section "First shots fired."
- Members of the Second Continental Congress would MOST likely agree with which of the following statements?
- (A) The British were not giving Americans the rights they deserve.
  - (B) American colonists needed to have the right to liberty and a trial by jury.
  - (C) The British government's taxes were too high on goods like tea, sugar and stamps.
  - (D) The American colonists needed a stronger military to defeat the British soldiers.

**Answer Key**

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**Paragraph 19:**

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