

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 and the U.S. War of Independence. The conflict arose from growing tensions between residents of Great Britain's 13 North American colonies and the colonial government, which represented the British crown. Skirmishes between British troops and colonial militiamen in April 1775 kicked off the armed conflict, and by the following summer, the rebels were waging a full-scale war for their independence. After French assistance helped the Continental Army force the British surrender in 1781, the Americans had effectively won their independence, though fighting would not end until 1783.

By 1775, tensions had been building between colonists and the British authorities for more than a decade. The British government attempted to make more money off the colonies, adding taxes on their sugar, stamps, tea and other essential goods. This was met with anger among many colonists, who resented being taxed while having no representatives in British government. They demanded the same rights as other British citizens, in particular demanding "no taxation without representation."

Violence and cruel measures

Violence erupted in 1770, when British soldiers shot and killed five colonists in what was known as the Boston Massacre. In December 1773, a band of Bostonians dressed as Mohawk Indians 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 assert its power in Massachusetts.

In response, a group of colonial leaders met in Philadelphia in September 1774 to discuss their dissatisfaction with the British. This group included George Washington, John and Samuel Adams, and Patrick Henry. This First Continental Congress, as it was called, denounced cruel taxes, as well as the presence of the British army in the colonies without its consent. The group issued a declaration of the rights that every citizen deserved, including life, liberty, property, the right to assemble in groups and to trial by jury.

Continental Congress creates an army

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 delegates — including new additions Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson — voted to form a Continental Army, and Washington was named its commander in chief.

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 engagement ended in British victory, but excited the revolutionary cause.

Throughout that fall and winter, Washington's forces struggled to contain the British in Boston. Soon, though, the colonial army forced the British to retreat from the base Fort Ticonderoga in New York, which helped shift the balance in March 1776.

The Declaration of Independence



By June 1776, most colonists had come to want their independence from Britain, and on July 4, the Continental Congress voted to adopt the Declaration of Independence. It was written by a five-man committee, but mainly by Jefferson.

That same month, the British were determined to crush the rebellion. They sent a large fleet with troops to New York, and in August, British General William Howe and his troops, called the Redcoats (because of their red uniforms), defeated the Continental Army on Long Island, forcing Washington to evacuate his troops from New York City.

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

British strategy in 1777 aimed at separating New England from the other colonies, as the rebellion was popular in the New England region. General John Burgoyne's army would march south from Canada toward colonial forces on the Hudson River. Burgoyne's men dealt a devastating loss to the Americans in July by retaking Fort Ticonderoga. British troops moved southward from New York to confront Washington's army near the Chesapeake Bay.

A turning point

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.



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, which became a turning point of the American Revolution, as it prompted France to openly support the American side. 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 benefited from the training of Prussian and French military leaders.

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

The Americans suffered setbacks from 1779 to 1781. General Benedict Arnold infamously 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.

However, the colonists rebounded when General Daniel Morgan scored a victory at Cowpens, South Carolina in January 1781.

The end of the revolution

By the fall of 1781, American forces pushed Cornwallis and his men to retreat to Virginia's Yorktown peninsula. Washington moved against Yorktown with a large army, while a fleet of 36 French warships offshore prevented the British from recovering. Trapped and overpowered, Cornwallis was forced to surrender his army on October 19.

British and American negotiators in Paris signed preliminary peace terms in Paris 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 According to the introduction, the colonists rebelled because they felt the British government was abusing its power. Which selection from the article BEST supports this idea?
- (A) In December 1773, a band of Bostonians dressed as Mohawk Indians boarded British ships and dumped 342 chests of tea into Boston Harbor.
- (B) This First Continental Congress, as it was called, denounced cruel taxes, as well as the presence of the British army in the colonies without its consent.
- (C) Soon, though, the colonial army forced the British to retreat from the base Fort Ticonderoga in New York, which helped shift the balance in March 1776.
- (D) By June 1776, most colonists had come to want their independence from Britain, and on July 4, the Continental Congress voted to adopt the Declaration of Independence

- 2 Read the selection from the section "A turning point."

The Americans suffered setbacks from 1779 to 1781. General Benedict Arnold infamously 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.

Which of the following can be inferred from this selection?

- (A) The Revolutionary War wasn't a quick win for the colonists since it involved many turns of events and shifts in power.
- (B) General Arnold was tired of losing battles while fighting for the American colonists.
- (C) General Horatio Gates failed to adequately prepare his troops for the barrage of British forces.
- (D) The Continental Congress created the strongest possible military in order to defeat the British.

- 3 Which of the following answer choices would BEST describe the French reaction to the Battle of Saratoga?
- (A) The French were upset but realized there was nothing they could do to stop the British.
- (B) The French were disturbed that the colonists defeated the British so quickly.
- (C) The French felt compelled to publicly show their support for the American colonists.
- (D) The French were skeptical that American colonist forces were capable of winning the war.
- 4 Fill in the blank. The author MAINLY explains the importance of the Revolutionary War by ///_
- (A) emphasizing the key role France played in helping the colonists defeat the British and describing post-war relations between the new allies.
- (B) providing direct quotes from important military generals in the Revolutionary War, and analyzing the relative importance of various battles.
- (C) explaining the root causes of the Revolutionary War and how the ideas promoted during the revolution still affect Americans today.
- (D) describing the buildup of events which ultimately caused colonists to rebel, and describing subsequent events which led to American independence.

Answer Key

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