

# Anchor Text

## V. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The causes of the American Revolution can be traced to the economic, political and military interactions between Great Britain and the colonies during the previous century. Official British economic policy was based on the theory of mercantilism as stated in the Trade and Navigation Acts while unofficially lax British enforcement of the regulations allowed colonists to circumvent the rules with relative impunity. Meanwhile, frequent successful clashes with royal governors prompted an arrogance and defiance in colonial legislatures that fostered a growing British frustration at colonial provincialism. Furthermore, wartime experience had promoted a mutual contempt with the colonists disparaging British military ineptitude and the British voicing their disgust with the lack of military discipline and imperial commitment on the part of the colonies. These long-standing perceptions shaped the context wherein each side judged the other during the events that led to the American Revolution.

The victorious conclusion of the colonial wars of the mid-eighteenth century initiated dramatic changes in political and economic policies that hastened the onset of the American Revolution. For the British, military success had come at a high financial price, plunging the imperial treasury into debt. This financial crisis precipitated the passage of new revenue taxes as well as a stricter enforcement of trade policies. For the American colonies, the elimination of the French threat lessened their dependence for military and diplomatic support on Britain and allowed them to be more vociferous in their objections to British policies. The causes of the American Revolution can be found in the clash of these policies and perceptions within the context of changing political and economic relationships.

The American revolutionaries prided themselves on being more British than the British. The ideals that initiated colonial resistance to British dominance stemmed from the time-honored "rights of Englishmen." Colonial rebels maintained that they were, in essence, seeking to sustain the very rights that the mother country had fought to preserve as part of the unwritten English constitution from the Magna Carta of 1215 to the English Bill of Rights that followed the Glorious Revolution. Colonial leaders, schooled in British law, understood that English subjects enjoyed certain fundamental rights that government could not violate and made their case on this basis.

Colonists, with memories of their wartime sacrifices still fresh, resented the passage of a series of acts following the French and Indian War. Parliament's Proclamation of 1763, the Quartering Act (1765) and the Sugar Act (1764) seemed to testify that English colonists were being deprived of rights they assumed were guaranteed by the English constitution. Many colonists refused to believe that the maintenance of frontier stability and peace with Native Americans required the prevention of settlement west of the Appalachians. This, in turn, necessitated the presence of British troops which, not coincidentally, provided the British government with numerous political patronage appointments. The colonials considered access to western lands as the just deserts of their hard won victory and were shocked when the depleted treasury prompted Parliament to enact the

Sugar Act which imposed a heavy tax on imported sugar and created several new procedures designed to revitalize the customs service and eliminate smuggling. While these three new acts were grudgingly seen as within the authority of Parliament, they were unwelcome intrusions into the daily lives of the colonists. Moreover, they were unenforceable in most colonial circumstances and served only to antagonize. Petitions and boycotts ultimately led to the repeal of the Sugar Act, but the Proclamation and Quartering Act continued to plague imperial relations.

Colonial resistance was galvanized when it was perceived that Parliament had exceeded its authority by passing the Stamp Act, an internal tax purely to raise revenue. Throughout the colonies mob action prevented its implementation through the blockage of docks, the burning of stamps, the destruction of property, and threats against persons associated with the Stamp Act. Other Americans sought political redress through petitions and formal resolutions, ultimately uniting their efforts in the Stamp Act Congress. The Virginia Resolves in particular, written by Patrick Henry and circulated throughout the colonies, energized resistance. The issue polarized Parliament splitting its members along lines of both political interest (commercial v. landed) and constitutional interpretation (virtual representation v. direct representation). Intense American reaction coupled with Parliamentary paralysis forced the repeal of the controversial Stamp Act.

Humbled by this retreat, Parliament passed the Declaratory Act, reasserting its authority over the colonies. The continuing financial crisis forced Parliament to return to the less objectionable taxing of trade. The Townshend Acts imposed an indirect tax on certain enumerated articles such as lead, glass, paint, paper and tea. This less offensive tax elicited a more restrained American reaction in the form of boycotts, petitions and "circular letters" between colonial legislatures. Political crises were initiated in some colonies when colonial governors were ordered to dissolve any legislature that considered the "circular letters." These methods of colonial resistance eventually resulted in the repeal of most of the Townshend Acts.

As the political controversies surrounding the Sugar Act, the Stamp Act, and the Townshend Acts fluctuated in the late 1760s, the presence of large contingents of British troops in New York and Boston became a constant source of irritation. The citizens of those port cities, already angered by British trade regulations, resisted efforts to provide housing (or colonial funding for housing) for the troops. In both cities, the presence of these troops created a variety of political disputes, a series of court cases, and frequent physical confrontations in the streets. British troops became the symbols of imperial oppression as well as convenient targets for radicals to vent their frustrations.

For their part, British troops found themselves in a conundrum: if they remained passive as ordered they promoted perceptions of British weakness and ineptitude; if they responded they confirmed fears of British oppression as well as being legally culpable for their violation of orders. This incendiary situation required only a spark to burst into flames. In Boston, the home of the Sons of

Liberty, several street incidents culminated in a violent confrontation on the night of March 5, 1770, in which five colonists died. The incident became known as the Boston Massacre.

The Boston Massacre became a defining moment. It solidified the views of some concerning British oppression while jarring others to a realization of the violence inherent in imperial confrontation. After the Boston Massacre an uneasy calm settled over the colonies, interrupted by annual commemorations and occasional incidents. Three years later, still desperate to generate revenue, Parliament increased the tax on tea while exempting it from some of the trade regulations that increased shipping costs. The combined effect was an actual reduction in the retail price of tea which, it was hoped, would circumvent colonial opposition to the increased tax on tea. Recognizing this ploy, radical leaders determined to destroy the tea before its tempting low price could fracture colonial resistance against British taxation. On December 16, 1773, the Sons of Liberty delivered those of weaker resolve from temptation by dumping the tea into Boston Harbor.

This audacious act, known as the Boston Tea Party, required a Parliamentary response of equal gravity. Measures were passed such as the closing of the port of Boston, the annulment of the Massachusetts colonial charter, the re-organization of the Massachusetts government to increase the power and authority of crown appointees, the re-establishment of admiralty courts and the issuing of arrest warrants for radical leaders. As if these actions weren't enough, the Quebec Act was seen as an affront to all of the colonies by officially recognizing the Catholic religion and extending Quebec's jurisdiction into the trans-Appalachian territories, an area coveted by many of the colonies. Colonial assemblies and town meetings moved by concern for the Bostonians and fear of similar sanctions on their colony, elected delegates to the First Continental Congress to issue a united condemnation of these "Intolerable Acts."

The confrontation around Boston escalated in September, 1774 when British troops seized the military supplies of the local militia at Charlestown and Cambridge, prompting the creation of local military units known as "minutemen." A similar British operation to Lexington and Concord seven months later was resisted by these minutemen, initiating the American Revolution.