

CONTENT OVERVIEW

Many developments in the colonies during the decades prior to 1776 contributed to the colonists' increasing desire to alter relations with Great Britain. The colonies' population had increased tenfold since 1700; and their economies, particularly in the North, had become more oriented around trade, cities, and even manufacturing.

New ways of thinking accompanied these economic changes. Young men more commonly left home to seek their fortunes away from their fathers' authority, and young men and women alike more often married whom and when they pleased. More and more churchgoers asserted that people could choose salvation, that God alone did not decide who would be saved and who would be damned. Their liberal counterparts spoke more and more optimistically about people's capacity to invent a better stove or a better society without God's direct intervention, and that humans were making all aspects of life better and better. This optimism in people's capacity to shape the world fuelled a growing belief that citizens—not just kings and queens—could exercise political sovereignty.

The American Revolution constituted a sort of marriage between these material and ideological changes. Economic and social developments fitted the colonies for independence. But declaring and seizing that independence required both a series of provocative political events and an underlying sense of political rights that borrowed from the European Enlightenment. This broad intellectual and cultural movement stressed humans' capacity to manage their own affairs reasonably and effectively.

The American Revolution, in fact, generated radical political ideas and changes, often in ways that alarmed conservative patriots. Most Native Americans and many slaves sided with the British for practical reasons. But many African Americans, women, and poor whites in the countryside and cities alike seized upon and expanded the rhetoric of freedom, liberty, and rights. The hotly contested debates around state constitutions—and the final drafts of those constitutions—illustrated the wide differences of opinion on just how far the revolution in political authority should go.

Historians still disagree on how radical the Revolution was—to what extent it established political and social equality. But there is no doubt that it both broke decisively with Great Britain's political practices, and prompted hopes and ideals that Americans and others still strive to achieve.

Theme 1:

The Enlightenment inspired many colonists to challenge England's governance, providing an importance impetus for the Revolution.

Theme 2:

Some African Americans, white women, and white yeoman farmers used political rhetoric to argue for their own rights; Loyalists and most Native Americans found little in these ideals to support their own interests.

Theme 3:

During this period, the writing of state constitutions provided crucial, but contested, opportunities to put democratic concepts into practice.

THEME ONE

Theme One: The Enlightenment inspired many colonists to challenge England's governance, providing an importance impetus for the Revolution.

Overview

For the thirteen colonies to declare their independence from Great Britain in the late 1700s seems, in retrospect, predictable. They had developed economic and political structures contrary to their colonial status. But Great Britain had never accepted these developments. After the Seven Years' War (known in North America as the French and Indian War) ended in 1763, imperial discipline was imposed on its unruly North American colonies.

In 1764, Parliament started to pass bills aimed at establishing increased authority over the colonies and extracting taxes from them. It imposed the Revenue (or Sugar) Act and, a year later, the Stamp Act. Colonial reaction to the Stamp Act varied. Some unhappily submitted, while others stood together in mass opposition. The British government was surprised by the defiance, as were many Americans.

The ensuing struggle between Great Britain and the thirteen colonies would be over ideas as well as power. Growing numbers of colonists of diverse socio-economic backgrounds were advocating a new, radical understanding of government, sharply at odds with European practice. This new, subversive way of thinking was drawn from the European Enlightenment, a diffuse but profound intellectual movement that stressed human rationality and implied (or even asserted) that people could govern themselves rather than submitting to monarchs. This emphasis on humanity's capacities and rights explains why so many patriots insisted on defending their political rights—even to the point of risking their own lives and the lives of many others in a long, bloody conflict.

Questions to Consider

1. What key event or events prompted the Revolution?
2. What ideas did patriots use to justify their revolution?

THEME ONE EXCERPTS

1. Stamp Act Riots

In late 1764, Virginia's House of Burgesses had strenuously objected to the proposed stamp tax, citing the economic hardship it would cause and arguing that it was their "inherent" right to be taxed only by their own consent. [Bostonians destroyed buildings belonging to British officials, acts that alarmed many well-to-do residents who opposed the tax but feared the destruction of property.] . . .

Violent protests against the Stamp Act also wracked New York and Newport, Rhode Island. Leading the resistance were groups calling themselves the Sons of Liberty, composed mostly of artisans, shopkeepers, and ordinary citizens. By late 1765, effigy-burning crowds all over America were convincing stamp distributors to resign . . .

In March 1766, Parliament debated the furious American reaction to the Stamp Act. Lobbied by many merchant friends of the Americans, Parliament voted to repeal it. Some members warned that to retreat before colonial defiance of the law would ultimately be fatal. But the legislators bowed to expediency, though they also passed the Declaratory Act, which asserted Parliament's power to enact laws for the colonies in "all cases whatsoever."

The crisis had passed, yet nothing was solved. Americans had begun to recognize a grasping government trampling its subjects' rights. The Stamp Act, one New England clergyman foresaw, "diffused a disgust through the colonies and laid the basis of an alienation which will never be healed."

Gary B. Nash and others, eds. *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society*, 6th ed. (New York: Pearson Education, 2004), 173–75.

Parliament soon tried again to establish its right to tax the colonies, but the colonists boycotted the taxed goods, which prompted a British occupation of Boston and New York City. In the Boston Massacre of 1770, British troops killed several colonists. Three years later, in the Boston Tea Party, patriots heaved tea that was to be taxed into the harbor. This destruction of private property led Great Britain to close the port of Boston and to restrict people's liberties; steps that in turn provoked hard feelings in the American colonies and, in 1774, the First Continental Congress. In 1775—a full year before the Declaration of Independence was written—armed conflict began outside of Boston when General Gage sent 700 troops to seize a patriot arsenal. Congress again met to authorize a continental army (headed by George Washington) and to petition King George. But Great Britain's leaders concluded that members and followers of the Congress had committed treason. The king declared that the colonies were in "open and avowed rebellion" and sent more troops to end it.