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18th Century

The Road to Revolution   Previous
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On the morning of August 14, 1765 - to protest the Stamp Act, a law obligating Americans to purchase special stamped paper for newspapers and many legal forms - a Boston crowd hanged an effigy of the city's stamp collector, Andrew Oliver, from a tree. When the official failed to resign his position immediately, the mob demolished the stamp collector's warehouse at the city dock, tearing it apart board by board. The crowd then beheaded the effigy and "stamped" it to pieces. After giving the stamp collector time to flee, they ransacked Oliver's house, shattering the windows and smashing the furniture. Three days later, a second house was wrecked in Newport, Rhode Island, after the local stamp distributor failed to resign.

The protests and disorder that broke out in the American colonies in 1765 marked the beginning not only of the American struggle for independence, but of over half a century of popular protest, revolution, and war across the western world. From the Ural Mountains in Russia to the Alleghenies and the Andes in the Americas, rioting, revolutions, and popular struggles against undemocratic rule took place in areas as diverse as France (in 1789), Geneva in Switzerland, Ireland, and Mexico.

Revolution took on an entirely new meaning in 1791, when civil war erupted in San Domingue (Haiti) and slaves in the French colony's northern province rose in revolt. In 1770, a French philosophe, the Abbé Raynal, had called for a "Black Spartacus" to overthrow slavery. Spartacus was a Thracian slave and gladiator who led a great slave revolt against the Romans, in southern Italy in 73-71 B.C.E. Under the leadership of a new Spartacus, Toussaint Louverture, Haiti's slaves defeated the armies of France, Spain, and Britain, and, in 1801, adopted a constitution prohibiting slavery forever. Haiti became independent in 1804 after expelling a second French expeditionary force sent by Napoleon.

The age of revolution culminated with the Latin American wars of independence. In 1790, five European countries--Britain, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain, controlled all of Latin America. But in 1821, Mexico won its independence from Spain, and two years later Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua broke away from Mexico. In South America during the 1820s, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela won their freedom from Spanish rule.

So, the American Revolution was not an isolated event. Despite many significant differences, the popular protests and upheavals of the age of revolution reflected certain common ideals and aspirations that had been unleashed by the American and French revolutions. Unifying all of these revolutions was a shared political language invoking such potent terms as constitutional rights, the sovereignty of the people, and the consent of the governed.

Few in Britain or its colonies could have imagined in 1763 that a war for independence would erupt within a dozen year. The American colonists had a long history of squabbling with one

another, and, before 1765, relations among the colonists were much more quarrelsome than their relations with Great Britain.

Rapid population growth within the colonies was a source of many intercolonial disputes, including conflicts over colonial boundaries. New York clashed with Connecticut and Massachusetts; Pennsylvania with Connecticut and Virginia; and New York and New Hampshire over claims to present-day Vermont.

Westerners and easterners within individual colonies also fought over issues of representation, taxation, Indian policy, and the slow establishment of governmental institutions in frontier areas. In 1764, the Paxton Boys, a group of Scotch-Irish frontier settlers from western Pennsylvania, marched on Philadelphia, and only withdrew after they were promised a greater representation in the Quaker-dominated provincial assembly and greater protection against Indians. In the late 1760s in backcountry South Carolina, where local government was largely non-existent, frontier settlers organized themselves into vigilante groups known as Regulators to maintain order. Only extension of a new court system into the backcountry kept the Regulators from attacking Charleston. In North Carolina, in the early 1770s, the eastern militia had to suppress conflict in the backcountry, where settlers complained about underrepresentation in the colonial assembly, high taxes, exorbitant legal fees, and manipulation of debt laws by lawyers, merchants, and officials backed by eastern planters.

These regional conflicts often coincided with ethnic lines. Many backwoods residents were Scotch-Irish or German in descent, and they deeply resented the Anglo-American establishment of the more settled parts of the colonies. Conflict also surged periodically in areas where wealthy proprietors owned substantial amounts of land. In eastern New Jersey during the 1740s, and New York's Hudson Valley in 1757 and 1766, tenant farmers refused to pay rents and staged insurrections against landlords.

Yet for all their squabbles, the colonists did share certain characteristics in common, which became increasingly apparent during the years leading up to the Revolution. These included the absence of a titled, hereditary aristocracy; a widespread distribution of land; an unprecedented degree of ethnic and religious diversity; and broad eligibility to vote (50 to 75 percent of adult white males, compared to only about 20 percent in England). In contrast to the way Britons conceived of Parliament, the colonists thought of the members of the colonial assemblies as representatives of the people, accountable to their constituents and obligated to follow public instructions.

Certain shared economic grievances also gave a degree of common identity to the colonists, such as dependence on British and Scottish financial agents. The sharing of Protestant religious revivals as well as anti-Catholicism, too, proved to be important elements in an emerging American identity.

During the 1760s and 1770s, all of these conditions, trends, and experiences contributed to a distinctive sense of American identity. Many colonists began to conceive of America as a truly "republican" society. By a republican society, they meant something more than a government based on popular elections. Such a society emphasized personal independence, public virtue, and above all a suspicion of concentrated power as essential ingredients of a free society. Increasingly, Americans contrasted their society with Britain, with its landed aristocracy, political corruption, patronage, and bloated governmental bureaucracy. For decades, various European writers had idealized Americans as an industrious, egalitarian people, content with the simple joys of life. In the years preceding the Revolution, many Americans began to self-consciously reflect on this distinctive republican identity.

In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson traced the causes of the revolution to "a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States." But the revolution was not simply the result of a series of British abuses of power; it was also a product of the way the colonists perceived and interpreted those events.

At the beginning of the imperial crisis, American leaders were not outspoken in their opposition to Britain. They defended the British constitution and assumed that their grievances would be resolved. Gradually, however, they became convinced that wicked and designing ministers were conspiring to deprive them of their liberties. By 1776, they believed that the King himself was part of this conspiracy.

The colonists viewed the events of the 1760s and 1770s through an ideological prism that had been shaped by English thinkers who had tried to deny the throne to Charles II's Catholic brother James between 1679 and 1681. This tradition held that liberty was always fragile and vulnerable, that power was always aggressive and corrupting, and that political liberty required constant vigilance. These ideas had been kept in circulation during the eighteenth century by radical Whig politicians in Britain, including Thomas Gordon and John Trenchard. The colonists avidly read their warnings about the dangers posed by a standing army, the government corruption caused by government officials lusting after power, and the evils caused by public debt. When Parliament began to tax Americans, regulate their trade, station trops in their midst, denied colonists the right to expand westward, many Americans perceived these efforts as part of a design to deprive them of their property and reduce them to slavery.

The Consequences of the Seven Years' War

Between 1759 and 1761, Britain debated whether, at the end of the Seven Years' War, it should claim French Canada or the rich sugar island of Guadeloupe in the Caribbean. Some in Britain believed that the sugar colony offered a greater source of wealth, while others believed that Canada would serve as a expanding market for British manufactured goods. Some worried that without the French presence in Canada, the mainland colonists might begin to seek independence from the British empire. Fatefully, Britain chose Canada in the Peace of Paris of 1763.

The Seven Years' War gave Britain undisputed control of North America east of the Mississippi River. But the war also produced a host of problems and costs that could not be ignored. The most immediate problem was the British debt, which had jumped from 75 million to 137 million pounds during the Seven Years War. To raise revenue, Parliament had imposed a new tax on cider produced in England, but this tax provoked uprisings in apple-growing counties. The British government was determined that the colonists should assume a greater financial burden. At the time, taxes in the colonies were about a shilling per person a year, compared to 26 shilling a year in Britain.

Related to the debt problem was the issue of colonial smuggling. During the Seven Years' War, American merchants had illegally traded with French and Spanish ports in the Caribbean. As a result of flagrant evasions of British navigation acts, the customs system in the colonies cost Britain much more than it raised in revenue. Customs officials' salaries cost the treasury about 8000 pounds a year, more than four times what the officials collected.

Britain was also worried about the financial burden of Indian warfare on the colonial frontier, if the colonists migrated too rapidly onto Indian hunting grounds. In the spring of 1763, Pontiac and an alliance of western tribes had launched attacks on white settlements from New York to Virginia. And while the warfare was ultimately suppressed in the autumn, it revealed the potential costs of unrestrained white settlement.

These problems led to a series of new British policies during the 1760s. To protect the western Indian and fur trades and prevent costly Indian wars, Britain issued the Proclamation of 1763, which restricted colonial settlement west of the Appalachian mountains. To cut down on smuggling, George Grenville, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, stationed British naval vessels in American waters to seize colonial merchants ships suspected of illegal trading activities. And to raise tax revenue and defray the cost of maintaining troops in the British colonies, the British Parliament passed a series of measures. It adopted the Sugar Act of 1764, which cut the duty on molasses in half to encourage colonists to pay the duty rather than evade it by smuggling; the Quartering Act of 1765, which passed responsibility for housing British troops onto the

colonists; and the Stamp Act of 1765, which required payment of a tax on legal documents and newspapers. The Stamp Act was the first direct tax (as opposed to a customs duty) levied on the colonists.