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## The American Revolution

### Why did the American Revolution take place?

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In explaining why the Revolution took place, it is necessary to look both at underlying causes and at the precipitating events.

The Revolution was, in part, the consequence of long-term social, political, and cultural transformations. Between 1680 and 1776, a distinctly American society emerged, a society that differed significantly from Britain. In the course of a century, the colonies had diverged markedly from Britain. A variety of long-run trends gave the 13 American colonies certain common characteristics which made them very different from England.

What were some of these characteristics?

#### 1. The absence of a titled aristocracy

The colonies had no legally privileged social classes, and they did not have many of the other characteristics of a monarchical society. They had no standing army and had a government bureaucracy that was smaller and far less powerful than that found in Britain. While there were wealthy merchants and planters in the colonies, economic stratification was less pronounced than in Britain and membership in this affluent segment of the population was volatile and changing.

To be sure, colonial society in the 18th century was, in certain respects, becoming more aristocratic. Colonial elites increasingly emulated the values and lifestyle of the English aristocracy. They aped the English elites' dress and manners, and copied their furniture and architecture. Nevertheless, compared to Britain, few Americans had fortunes large enough to lead lives of leisure.

#### 2. The widespread ownership of property

Except for slaves, most physical labor was performed by people who owned their own farms or shops or could expect eventually to be economically independent. Relatively few of the colonists were tenant farmers, and most yeomen maintained a remarkable degree of independence. Even in the Chesapeake region or the Hudson River Valley, where much of the land was leased, farmers still could acquire long-term leases on relatively easy terms.

#### 3. Religious diversity

The colonies not only displayed a religious diversity unmatched in the western world, they were also more willing to tolerate religious difference. Four colonies--Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island--had no established church. Five other states disestablished the Church of England even before the Revolution broke out.

#### **4. The relative absence of poverty**

In 18th century England, half the population was at least occasionally dependent on charity for subsistence. Apart from slaves, the American population was far better off. Nothing better illustrates the relative affluence of the white population than the fact that the colonists were on average three inches taller than their English counterparts.

#### **5. A lack of urban development**

In 1760, the largest city in the colonies, Philadelphia, had just 20,000 inhabitants. In that year, the total number of Americans living in cities or towns with more than 3,000 residents was no greater than 70,000. The colonies had few of the attributes of an urban society: there was no large-scale manufacturing, no stock markets, few large cities, and virtually no banks in British North America.

#### **6. A relative lack of deference to authority**

The American colonists were far less deferential and less willing to accept subordination than their British or European counterparts. The colonists enjoyed the broadest suffrage of any people in the western world. Although the right to vote in colonial America was restricted to property owners, property owning was so widespread that roughly 80 percent of white adult males could vote.

Although relatively few men actually voted in elections, the principle of self-government was well-developed. To gain political office, social leaders felt increasingly forced to make direct appeals to the people.

Compared to Britain, popular participation in decision making was much more pronounced. Militia officers were often selected by their companies, and ministers were often hired by their congregations.

#### **7. The presence of slavery**

In 1776, one-fifth of the inhabitants of the American colonies lived in bondage. Most of the growth of slavery had taken place since 1680. In 1680, Africans accounted for just five percent of the population in Maryland and Virginia. But in 1760, enslaved Africans comprised nearly 40 percent of Virginia's population. By 1776, the number of slaves in the colonies had reached 500,000.

Slavery in 18th century America was not confined to the South. Slaves could be found in each of the 13 colonies, and were especially numerous in New Jersey and in New York's Hudson River Valley.

The widespread presence of slavery made adult white males acutely aware of the difference between independence and dependence. Colonial Americans knew what it was like to be subjected to the will, authority, and domination of another person.

By the 1770s, a growing number of Americans had begun to see their society as fundamentally different from European society. Their society was a "republican" society, a society free of many of the trappings of aristocracy and of the corruptions associated with cities and large-scale manufacturing and financial institutions. From this perspective, Americans were simpler, more independent, and more virtuous than Europeans.

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