

Optional Reading: The War of Independence—1776-83

The fighting that took place in 1775 was in itself not enough to convince most colonists that they should break away from the mother country. Even many who had taken up arms continued to hope that ties between the colonies and Britain could be repaired.

What factors shifted the colonists' attitudes towards independence in 1776?

Beginning in 1776 opinion within the colonies steadily shifted toward independence. One of the key events that influenced the public mood was the publication in January 1776 of a slim pamphlet entitled *Common Sense*. The pamphlet's author, Thomas Paine, directed his writing to those who resented Britain's heavy-handed tactics but were wary of independence. Unlike earlier patriot pamphlets, *Common Sense* avoided legal arguments about the British constitution and acts of Parliament. Instead, Paine wrote in everyday English to convince colonists that separation from Britain was, as he put it, a matter of "common sense." Paine himself had arrived in the colonies from England fewer than two years earlier.

The renewal of fighting in the spring of 1776 contributed to the widening gulf between the colonies and Britain. The Continental Army under George Washington, using the cannons captured at Fort Ticonderoga, forced the British and their loyalist supporters to evacuate Boston in March. The victory meant that Boston, Philadelphia, New York City, and Charleston, South Carolina, were under rebel control. In April, the Continental Congress voted to close all colonial ports to British shipping. Meanwhile, the British navy prevented supplies from reaching the rebels.

The rebels were also active in pursuing alliances in Europe. They opened secret negotiations with the French and Spanish to overcome the British naval blockade. The colonists were in particular need of gunpowder, which they could not manufacture in sufficient quantities. Uniforms for the Continental Army were also lacking. Several European

nations were willing to take the risk of trading with the rebels. In most cases, their merchant ships first landed on the small Dutch island of Eustatia in the Caribbean and then tried to outrun the British navy in a race to colonial ports.

What major ideas were expressed in the Declaration of Independence?

The Virginia delegation to the Continental Congress took the lead in pressing for a complete break with Britain. On June 7, Richard Henry Lee proposed that the united colonies "ought to be free and independent states." A committee was formed four days later to draft a "Declaration of Independence." The membership of the committee—Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, John Adams of Massachusetts, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, and Robert Livingston of New York—reflected the efforts of the colonial representatives to bring the colonies together in a united front.

The rough draft of the declaration was the work of Jefferson. On July 2, Lee won approval from Congress for his proposal on independence. After a heated debate, Congress accepted a revised version of the Declaration of Independence on July 4. In the eyes of the rebel leaders, the colonies were now independent states. Although it was too soon to speak of the United States of America, many of the colonists had begun to think of themselves not as English subjects, but as Americans. The Declaration of Independence contrasted sharply with earlier patriot writings. The British Parliament was not mentioned in the document, suggesting to readers that Parliament had never possessed authority over the colonies. Instead, the authors of the declaration specifically charged the king with a long list of offenses. The declaration also made no mention of the rights of the colonists as English subjects.

To justify their independence, the colonists drew on the writings of the British philosopher, John Locke. In line with Locke's

reasoning, the declaration held that the king had broken the contract between himself and the colonists by threatening their life, liberty, and property. As Locke would have argued, the king's actions entitled the colonists to revolt and to establish a new government to protect their rights.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying

its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.”

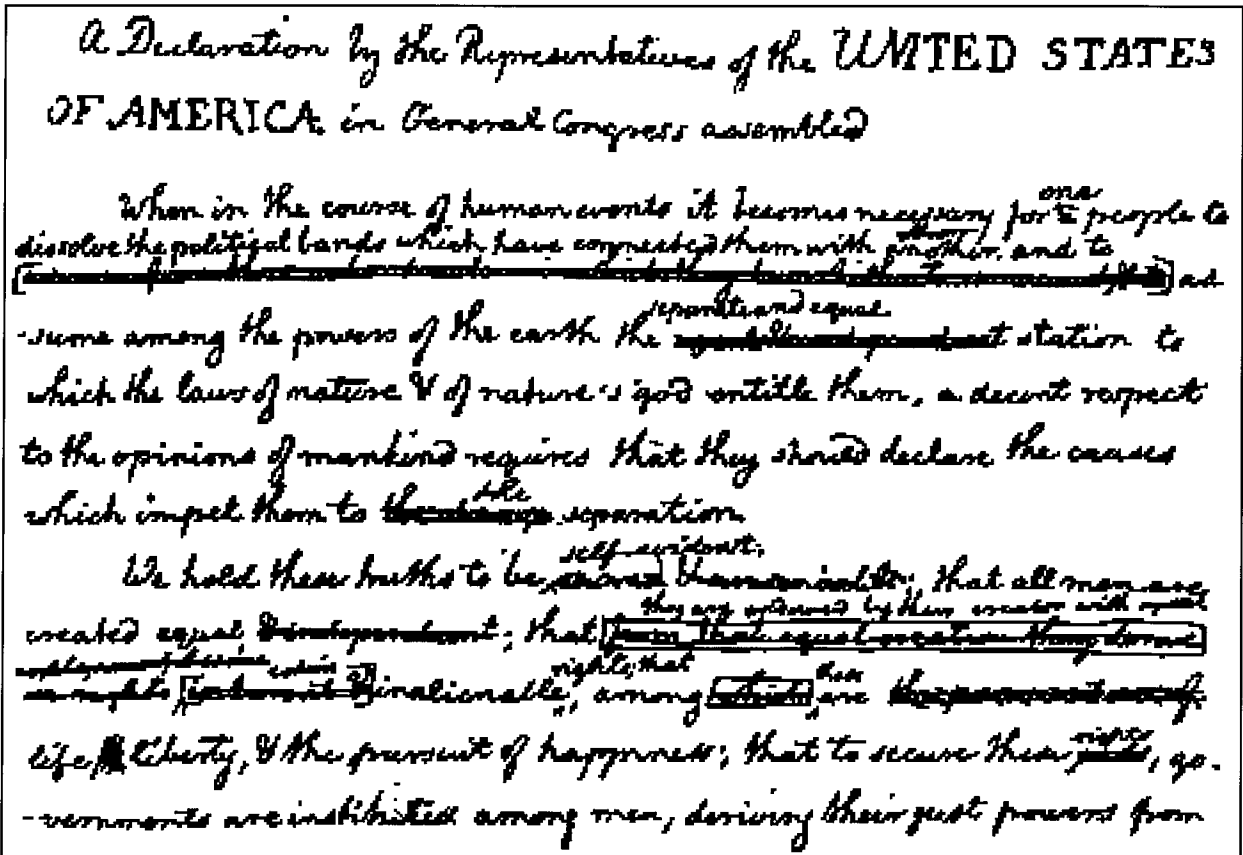
[In the late eighteenth century, “happiness” referred to physical well-being, not an emotional or psychological state.]

—Introduction to the Declaration of Independence

Although colonial newspapers released the text of the declaration immediately, the list of signers was not made public until January 1777 for fear of retaliation. In fact, seven of the men who signed the document were captured and imprisoned by the British during the war.

What happened to the loyalists?

Even with the Declaration of Independence, a large portion of colonists continued to disapprove of Thomas Paine’s arguments



An early draft of the Declaration of Independence, in Thomas Jefferson’s handwriting.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

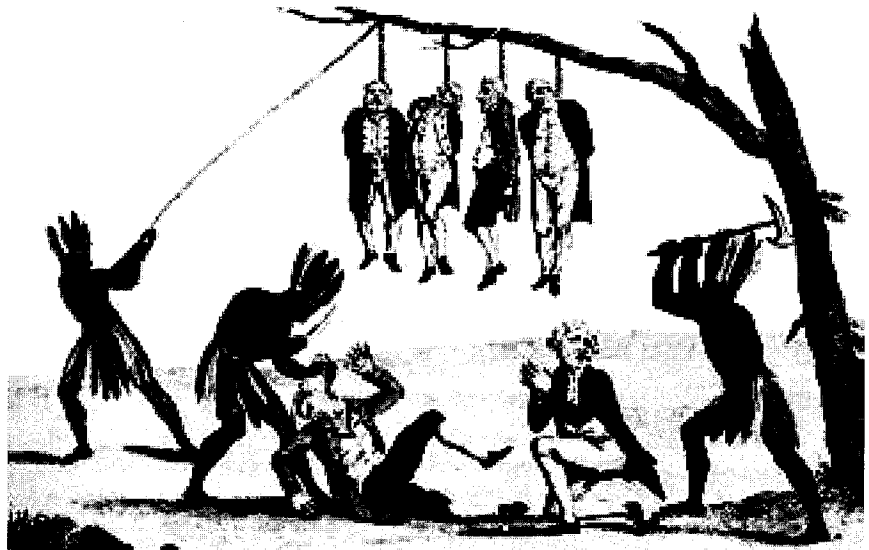
and the decisions of the Continental Congress. Many sought to keep their distance from the conflict, which seldom flared up in more than a few areas at a time. In addition, as much as 20 percent of the colonists actively supported British efforts to put down the rebellion and restore British rule.

Nearly fifty thousand British-American loyalists, known as “Tories” by the patriots, fought on the side of the British during the war. Many were motivated by loyalty to the mother country, while others had economic reasons for favoring British rule. During the course of the war, the number of outspoken loyalists (as well as the number of rebels) rose and fell according to the military fortunes of the British.

Even loyalists who did not fight for the British came under attack. In areas controlled by rebel forces, vocal loyalists were often terrorized. A loyalist in Charleston, for example, was stripped naked, covered with hot tar, feathered, stoned, and thrown into a river by a rebel mob that then burned his house to the ground. Loyalist women were not spared from violence. An elderly widow in Massachusetts saw her house ransacked and burned by rebels. At the same time, loyalist bands were guilty of brutalizing patriot settlements on several occasions.

The hatred between loyalists and patriots intensified as the war dragged on. The conflict convinced many in both camps that hopes for eventually living together in peace were dim. A popular rebel saying defined a loyalist as “someone who has his feet in America, his head in England, and a neck that ought to be stretched!” Captured loyalist soldiers were, in fact, sometimes executed.

By the conclusion of the war, nearly 100,000 loyalists had given up their homes



In the British cartoon above, American colonists, portrayed as Indians, are shown killing loyalists.

From *Redcoats and Rebels: The American Revolution Through British Eyes*.

and property to flee what had been British America. In addition, approximately 20,000 black slaves left America after the fighting.

On the Battlefield

America’s War of Independence was more a contest of wills than of military might. The Continental Army won few clear-cut victories against the highly trained British forces. Nonetheless, their determination to keep up their resistance eventually wore down Britain’s commitment to defeat the rebels.

At several stages in the war, the Continental Army was pushed to the breaking point. The first came in August 1776, when General Washington and his forces were beaten by a British army advancing on New York. After failing to stop the British offensive, the Americans were forced to retreat into Pennsylvania during the fall.

It was all Washington could do just to hold his army together and maintain a sense of morale. On Christmas night, 1776, he staged a daring raid across the icy Delaware River. The attack resulted in the capture of nine hundred Hessians (German mercenaries who fought for the British) and convinced many American troops to continue fighting.

Why was the Battle of Saratoga considered a turning point in the war?

In 1777, the war revolved around a British plan to cut off the New England colonies by seizing control of the Hudson River in New York. The British, however, unwittingly played into the strengths of the Americans. As they marched toward the river, the long columns of British troops were exposed to repeated hit-and-run attacks. At Saratoga, New York, in October 1777, the Americans pinned down the army of General John Burgoyne, forcing the surrender of nearly six thousand troops.

The American victory at Saratoga marked a turning point in attitudes toward the war both at home and abroad. France, which had secretly aided the rebels, officially signed an alliance with the new American nation in February 1778.

News of the alliance with France cheered Washington and his army, which had camped for the winter at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Otherwise, the Continental Army had little to celebrate. The British had defeated Washington twice outside of Philadelphia. British forces occupied Philadelphia, and had driven the Continental Congress out of the capital. Moreover, the army had run desperately short of supplies. Nearly one-third of Washington's troops were unable to fight because of illness.

“I must inform you that what our soldiers have suffered this winter is beyond expression as one half has been bare foot and almost naked all winter; the other half very badly on it for clothes of all sorts. And to complete our misery very short on it for provision [food] not long since our brigade drew but a half day’s allowance of meat in eight days.... The country towns have provided clothing for their men and brought them to camp. But as there has been none from the seaport towns I fear they have lost all their public spirit. I would beg of them to rouse from their stupidity and put on some humanity

and stir themselves before it is too late.”

—Letter from an officer at Valley Forge

What was Britain’s southern strategy?

The British shifted their attention to the southern colonies in 1778. British strategists expected to draw on the strength of loyalist support in Georgia and the Carolinas to isolate the northern colonies. The British force occupying Philadelphia evacuated the city in June 1778 and marched back to New York. Along the way, they clashed with Washington’s army in a bloody but indecisive battle at Monmouth, New Jersey. The encounter proved to be the last major battle of the war north of Virginia.

In December 1778, the British captured Savannah, Georgia, and quickly extended their control over the entire Georgian colony. A joint American-French campaign to dislodge the British from Savannah failed disastrously in 1779. Meanwhile, the financial problems of the American state continued to mount. Despite large loans from France and Spain, the Continental Congress was hopelessly behind in paying troops and suppliers.

The ranks of the Continental Army felt the debt crisis of the Congress. In the winter of 1779-80, Washington’s troops in New Jersey mutinied. They had been living on one-eighth of their normal rations and were owed five months of back pay. Washington was forced to call on his loyal Pennsylvania regiments to restore order.

The Americans were also on the defensive in the south. In May 1780, the British captured 5,400 American troops while taking Charleston. Five months later, the Americans suffered another serious setback at Camden, South Carolina.

How did Washington force Cornwallis to surrender?

The tide began to turn in October 1780, when American frontier troops overran a loyalist outpost in King’s Mountain, South Carolina. Further to the west, at Cowpens, South Carolina, the Americans achieved

Cornwallis TAKEN!

BOSTON, (Friday) October 26, 1781.

This Morning an Express arrived from Providence to HIS EXCELLENCY the GOVERNOR, with the following IMPORTANT INTELLIGENCE, viz.—

PROVIDENCE, Oct. 25, 1781. Three o'Clock, P.M.

This Morning an Express arrived at Six o'Clock the Deputy-Governor's, from Col. Christopher Oney, Commandant on Rhode Island, announcing the important Intelligence of the Surrender of Lord CORNWALLIS and his Army; an Account of which was Printed last Morning at Newport, and is as follows, viz.—

Newport, Oct. 25, 1781.

YESTERDAY Afternoon arrived in this Harbour Capt. Lovett, of the Schooner Adventure, from York River, in Chesapeake Bay, (whence he left the 20th instant) and brought us the glorious News of the Surrender of Lord Cornwallis and his Army Prisoners of War to the allied Army, under the Command of our illustrious General; and the French Fleet, under the Command of His Excellency the Count de Grasse.

An article from the *Boston Gazette* announcing Britain's surrender.

another victory in January 1781. Under increasing pressure in the Carolinas from patriot armies, General Charles Cornwallis marched his British troops toward Virginia. He hoped to regroup his army on Virginia's Yorktown peninsula before setting out on a campaign to put down the rebellion in the interior.

General Washington saw an opportunity to set a trap for Cornwallis. He and a French general, the Count de Rochambeau, joined their forces to gain control of the land approaches to Yorktown. At the same time, a French fleet sailing north from the Caribbean repulsed British warships sent from New York to aid Cornwallis. The British army now had no escape route. After a month-long siege, Cornwallis surrendered his army of 7,500 men in October 1781.

Although the British remained in control of New York, Savannah, and Charleston, their defeat at Yorktown was seen as a crushing blow in London. When British Prime Minister Lord Frederick North received word of Cornwallis' surrender the following month, he declared, "It is all over now!" and resigned from office. While the rebels could hardly

claim military superiority, the British had clearly lost the will to carry on the war.

War's Hidden Face

Aside from the string of battles recorded in the history books, America's War of Independence spilled over into many other arenas. Some were close to home but removed from the front lines. Others were far from America's shores.

How did war affect the home front?

The War of Independence left few colonists untouched. Even areas far from major battle sites were not spared from bloodshed. Atrocities against civilians were committed by both sides on the frontier. In particular, terrorism was a tactic frequently employed by rebels against loyalist sympathizers and by Indians allied with the British. In contrast, the regular troops of the British forces and the Continental Army usually took measures to avoid civilian casualties and limit property damage. Colonial farmers received high prices for their crops from both British and American officers.

To a large extent, women were in charge of the home front in America during the war. Many took over businesses or managed farms in the absence of their husbands. Thousands of other women, both rebels and loyalists, accompanied their husbands to war. They served as cooks, nurses, laborers, and even combat soldiers. A few women, such as Mary Ludwig Hays (better known as "Molly Pitcher"), gained fame among Americans for their heroism in battle. More significant was the medical care women provided. Twice as many deaths in the Continental Army were caused by disease than by battlefield injuries, and even minor wounds could lead to fatal infections.

"I long to hear that you have declared an independence—and by the way in the new code of laws I desire you would remember the ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such

unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any law in which we have had no voice, or representation.”

—Letter by Abigail Adams to her husband, John

The war placed severe strains on the American economy. The British naval blockade sharply reduced imports and trade. Even staple items, such as flour and molasses, were scarce. Attempts to introduce paper currency in the former colonies failed to win public trust. The value of the \$200 million in paper money issued by the Congress in 1779 quickly collapsed. Few colonists were willing to accept the Continental paper dollar, which originally was pegged to the value of the Spanish silver dollar. By 1781, it was worth about half a cent. (In other words, 200 paper dollars bought what a single silver Spanish dollar could buy.) Paper money issued by the states fared even worse. Nonetheless, wages for American soldiers and supplies for the Continental army were usually paid with paper money.

What other European nations were involved in the war?

The war between Britain and the American colonies was soon transformed into a global struggle involving many of the leading powers of Europe. The Caribbean, which had long been a focus of European rivalry and colonization, was the scene of naval battles involving the British, French, and Spanish that were much fiercer than clashes off the American coast.

The Caribbean islands were particularly valuable to the imperialist powers of Europe. Because of the prevailing winds, the Caribbean was easier to reach from Europe than the American colonies and thus served as a center for trade. In addition, the export crops grown on the slave plantations of Cuba, Jamaica, Gua-

deloupe, and other islands greatly enriched the mother countries.

During the course of the war, eight naval bases in the Caribbean changed hands. Fleets of heavily armed “ships of the line”—warships carrying from fifty to more than one hundred cannons—were often lost in battles over key islands.

In what other locations did fighting occur?

The eagerness of France and Spain to press their advantage forced the British to concentrate much of their navy in the Caribbean. As a result, there were many holes in Britain’s naval blockade of the rebellious colonies. Moreover, British ships in America were more vulnerable to attack by the French, as British officers discovered at Yorktown in 1781.

The coast of the Gulf of Mexico served as another front of the war. In the early stages of the fighting, Bernardo de Galvez, the Spanish governor of the vast territory of Louisiana, helped American rebels obtain badly needed supplies of gunpowder, muskets, and cloth. De Galvez’s assistance enabled the Americans to capture a string of British forts along the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. After Spain officially declared war on Britain in June 1779, the Spanish fought to settle their dispute with London over control of Florida. De Galvez himself led the campaign that drove the British out of the territory.

The French and the Spanish briefly threatened the British Isles themselves in late 1779. While bad weather and faulty communications sank the plan for a joint invasion by the French and Spanish fleets, the southeastern coast of Britain was nonetheless put on a war footing to repulse the expected landing. America’s most daring naval captain, John Paul Jones, also succeeded in bringing the war home to the British public. While his raids on English coastal towns produced little damage in themselves, they nonetheless weakened Britain’s resolve. The British grew increasingly frustrated by the costs of the war, which ranged from a drop in trade to a sharp rise in insurance rates for British shipping. Prime

Minister North found his policies coming under harsh criticism in Parliament.

The most distant corners of the British empire could not escape the winds of war. Sea battles were fought off the coast of Africa over domination of slave trading outposts and key ports that supplied ships travelling to Asia. In the Indian subcontinent, fighting involving Britain, France, and local Indian rulers continued after the war in America came to an end.

Who were the privateers?

The British saw their empire largely as a means to promote the trade of the mother country. Not surprisingly, the Americans were determined to strike at British commerce as part of their war effort. A key element in their strategy focused on crippling British merchant shipping.

The Americans lacked the naval strength to challenge Britain’s command of the seas. The entire Continental Navy consisted of fewer than one hundred ships equipped with not more than two thousand guns. Most of the navy was either sunk early in the war or bottled up in American harbors by the British blockade. To compensate for the limitations of its navy, the Continental Congress encouraged private shipowners to arm their vessels and capture British merchant ships.

These “privateers,” as they were known, would then take their prey to neutral ports, where the captured ship and the cargo would be sold. During the war, Congress

commissioned nearly seventeen hundred privateers equipped with fifteen thousand guns. Although outgunned by heavily armed British warships, the privateers typically used their speed and agility to elude the British navy.

While most privateers had American captains and crew, many were captained by Europeans who recruited their crews in European ports. John Paul Jones was in fact a Scottish sea captain who landed in the colonies looking for work shortly after the war began. His largest ship, the *Bonhomme Richard*, never docked in an American port. It was outfitted in France and crewed by French,



American Naval Captain John Paul Jones was depicted as a pirate in the British press.

From *The American Revolution: A Global War*.

Irish, English, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, and a small group of American sailors.

What issues were settled in the peace treaty?

The global dimension of America's War of Independence complicated efforts to reach a peace settlement. America's alliance with France was a particularly difficult sticking point. In February 1782, Parliament voted to stop military operations in the former American colonies. (British forces had, in fact, ended their campaign after the fall of Yorktown.) Nonetheless, the war between Britain and its European rivals continued.

A final treaty was not signed until September 1783, nearly a year after the British and Americans had agreed on the basic terms of the settlement. Under the Treaty of Paris of 1783, Britain recognized the independence of the thirteen colonies and gave up its claims to territory from the Atlantic Coast to the Mississippi River. Another set of thornier issues involving the property and treatment of loyalists, fishing rights off the coast of Canada (which remained in British hands), the evacuation of British frontier forts, and use of the Mississippi River system was not resolved until the next decade.

How does the death rate in the War of Independence compare with other American wars?

More immediate was the human toll of the war. Of the two million whites living in America at the time of the war, at least 250,000 (over half of the men of military age) took part in the fighting. Within the Continental Army, twenty six thousand soldiers died during the conflict, most from disease. (Casualty figures for American loyalist troops are less precise.)

In light of America's small population in 1775-81, the death rate suffered by soldiers



From *Redcoats and Rebels: The American Revolution Through British Eyes*.

An embrace between America (depicted as a Indian woman) and Britain reflects a British view of the Treaty of Paris.

during the War of Independence was relatively high. In comparison, the death rate suffered by U.S. forces during World War II was four times lower. Of America's future wars, only the Civil War would produce a higher death rate.

In addition to personal grief, the war left behind political and economic questions. What had begun as a struggle for the rights of life, liberty, and property had resulted in the independence of the thirteen American colonies. Many of America's main cities, ports, and roads had been seriously damaged. Both sides had spent many times more money fighting than the sum of the taxes they had once disputed. And yet, it remained unclear what the Americans had achieved.