

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In a period of thirteen years, England's colonies were transformed from loyal British subjects into the United States of America. The path to independence was fraught with danger and uncertainty, but against enormous odds—and the might of the British Empire—the Americans secured their independence.

After victory over France in the French and Indian War, England's holdings in the New World stretched from Hudson Bay in the north to the Mississippi River in the west, from the Atlantic Ocean in the east to the Gulf of Mexico in the south. France had lost its entire empire in North America except for a few islands in the Caribbean. Americans streamed into the territory west of the Appalachian Mountains. Pontiac, an Ottawa chief, rallied western tribes and started a war of resistance against the Americans' westward migration. Defending the settlers proved costly to the royal treasury, so to reduce the instances of conflict between settlers and Indians, King George III and Parliament issued the Proclamation of 1763 in an attempt to halt migration west of the Appalachians.

England emerged from the war with France with a huge national debt and sought new ways to replenish its coffers. The permanent stationing of British troops in North America to safeguard British interests and an increase in the costs of administering the empire prompted the revision of Britain's imperial policy. The Crown decided to make the colonies pay their share toward the cost of running the empire and to make the colonies obey the rules and laws of empire.

Parliament passed a series of laws intended to make the colonies pay and obey. The new arrangements required the colonies to shoulder the expense of British soldiers sent to enforce the Proclamation of 1763 and imposed duties on molasses and other imports. The most controversial law was the Stamp Act (1765). It levied a tax on most printed matter—newspapers, commercial licenses, wills, deeds, even playing cards. The colonists claimed that the Stamp Act violated their rights as Englishmen, and they engaged in boycotts of British goods and public acts of defiance, violence, and intimidation to protest the tax. "No taxation without representation" became the popular rallying cry. In written arguments the colonists said that because they were not represented in Parliament, Parliament had no right to levy a direct tax on them without their consent. Within a year, Parliament repealed the Stamp Act but at the same time passed the Declaratory Act, defining Parliament's authority in the colonies as supreme. In 1767 Parliament then approved import duties on goods that the Americans imported from Britain—among them, tea—fueling more conflict.

The center of resistance to British imperial authority was Boston. The presence of uniformed British soldiers stationed in the city to protect customs officials and tax collectors generated discontentment. On March 5, 1770, a disorderly group of Bostonians attacked a customs official. Soldiers arrived to disperse the mob. Tempers flared and snowballs and stones were thrown at the soldiers who fired on the crowd and killed four Bostonians. Crispus Attucks, an escaped slave fighting for his freedom, was one of the casualties. Samuel Adams, a leader and champion of separation from England, wrote a propaganda tract condemning the killing of "liberty's patriots."

Three years later, in 1773, Parliament passed the Tea Acts which granted a monopoly of tea sales to the financially troubled East India Company to prevent it from going bankrupt. Although East India Company tea, even with the import duty, would have been less expensive than the smuggled tea the colonists usually bought, the colonists responded to the Tea Act by boycotting tea. In Boston, men dressed as Indians boarded the company's ships and threw tea worth approximately £10,000 into the harbor—a major loss for a nearly bankrupt company. Parliament responded with the Coercive Acts.

Few colonists regarded separation from England as desirable or even as an option, but the call went out for all colonies to send delegates in September 1774 to a meeting—a Continental Congress—in Philadelphia. The delegates petitioned for a redress of their grievances, but Parliament and the king refused to negotiate. While still professing loyalty to England, the colonies tightened

their boycott of British goods and encouraged the training of colonial militias. In April 1775 at Lexington and Concord, in Massachusetts, British soldiers fired on colonial militias. Their shots were the opening salvos of the War for Independence. Public opinion shifted gradually toward separation. The logic and eloquence of Thomas Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* influenced many people in favor of independence.

Delegates to a second meeting in Philadelphia declared the colonies' independence on July 4, 1776. Warfare raged from Massachusetts to Georgia for seven more years, but with help from France, Americans wore down British resolve in the end.

Early in the war, General George Washington struggled to keep the Continental Army intact despite numerous defeats, and Congress worked to secure foreign allies for the United States. The American victory at Saratoga, New York, persuaded France to enter the war against England.

During those long years of war, American women stepped into nontraditional roles, running the farms and doing other work that men typically performed. Some women followed their menfolk into the campaigns, helping to feed the troops and care for the wounded.

African Americans, too, rendered valuable service. Although at first General Washington excluded them from the conflict, many fought with distinction on the American side in many battles. Denied the opportunity to fight for the United States, some slaves chose to fight for their freedom on the side of England.

In 1781 the Americans, with French help, defeated the British at Yorktown, in Virginia. Thereafter the British public and members of Parliament pushed for an end to the war. The Treaty of Paris of 1783 secured America's independence. The western border of the United States was set at the Mississippi River; the northern border, near its present location; the southern border, near Florida's present-day northern boundary, along the 31st parallel.