

Foreign Relations and the Founding of the American Republic

By H. Edward Phillips, III

The push toward independence in Britain's North American colonies was the result of a gradual change in the view that British-American colonists held toward their government in London, which coincided with merging common interests between Britain's European foes and American patriots.

The seeds of the political movement that resulted in revolution were planted as Britain reacted to the debt it had incurred in the aftermath of the French & Indian War, a.k.a. Seven Years' War, 1756 - 1763. Additionally, the desire of France and Spain to seek revenge for their military defeat against Britain in that war provided the Patriots with two potential allies should a military conflict arise against Great Britain.

Steps taken by the colonists toward independence were viewed with great interest by France and Spain and led to the establishment of diplomatic relations with France and secretive mercantile relations with the Spanish court. [See related article, *The 'Other' European Ally of the Continental Army*, page 14.]

The initial confrontation which sparked the outbreak of the French & Indian War occurred on 28 May 1754, when a young and ambitious Lt. Colonel named George Washington, along with his Virginia militiamen and a detachment of native allies, engaged a French military party on behalf of King George II. Both sides claimed the other had fired first. However, after the smoke had cleared, and the barbarity displayed by the Seneca Chief Tanaghrisson, better known as the Half-King, came to an end, thirteen French soldiers lay dead.

Among those thirteen casualties was Ensign Joseph Coulon de Villiers de Jumonville,¹ the officer charged with carrying French diplomatic correspondence to Virginia's Royal Governor Robert Dinwiddie.

The ultimate British victory in the ensuing war had a significant impact worldwide, including the ballooning of Britain's national debt by £122,000,000.¹¹ Despite the fact that the struggle was fought over three continents and across two oceans, Parliament sought to shift the burden of the war debt to the American colonies. Many in Parliament viewed the expansionist activities of

Watermark in upper left is of the first official seal of the United States, approved in 1794.

American colonists on the frontier, particularly in the Ohio Valley—which spread across modern-day western Pennsylvania, portions of West Virginia, Ohio and eastern Indiana—as the direct cause of the war.

Hostile Legislation & Unresponsive King

Based upon its desire to pay the nation's war debt, Parliament passed a number of acts aimed at raising revenue through taxation, which included taxing various goods that were either needed or wanted in the American colonies. Those acts included the Currency Act, the Sugar Act, the Stamp Act, the Navigation Acts, and the Townshend Acts. This intolerable string of legislation created a sense of outrage in the American colonists because, for the better part of seven generations, these British subjects in North America had been fairly autonomous and relatively untouched by direct legislative action from Parliament.

In addition to these new taxes, the Crown began to enforce existing laws related to navigation and trade in the Americas, which had a harsh impact on port cities, especially Boston. Further, petitions by the colonies' assemblies sent to Parliament and the King were being ignored. Worse still, government posts in the colonies, which had been established by the Crown, began to be left vacant, including open seats on the judiciary. Business affairs, legal matters, and personal endeavors were all now being affected by an unresponsive government in London.



Chief Tanaghrisson, a.k.a. Half-King.



George Washington, 1722.

Meanwhile, Patrick Henry of Virginia, a firebrand and young trial lawyer, was the first in the Thirteen Colonies to actually condemn the King publically. In 1763, Henry argued before the Hanover County court, in a trial presided over by his father, that the King was bound by law to protect his people.^{III} Therefore, when the King refused to proclaim the Virginia Assembly's Two Penny Act as an approved piece of legislation, his actions equated a tyrannical abuse of authority. While the elder Henry ruled against his son, Patrick's words regarding the British Crown could not be unuttered; a spark of an argument now existed.

Founding Fathers Stand Up

Throughout the American colonies, resentment toward official British action—and inaction—took on a more confrontational tone in no small part because of men such as Virginia's Henry and Boston's Samuel Adams. Colonists and their leaders became more aware that their liberty could be quashed at any time and that they were now engaged in a fight concerning economic survival and the meeting of basic human needs.

On 23 March 1775, Patrick Henry rose once again to meet the occasion. This time he stood in the center aisle of Henrico Parrish Church (now St. John's) in Richmond, Virginia to address his colleagues of the Second Virginia Convention. He laid out what was a prophetic message related to the tensions in Boston and how the British response in that colony could easily be turned upon the other twelve.

His message carried forth the proposition that the war had already begun and that "[t]he next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the resounding clash of arms!"^{IV} Further, in an effort to allay fears, Henry bade that Virginia prepare itself for war and when pushed as to how the colonists would engage the most powerful nation in the world, he was quick to state "[b]eside sir, we shall

not fight our battles alone. There is a just God who presides over the destinies of nations; and who will raise up friends to fight our battles for us."

The stage for rebellion was now set, and countries like France and Spain were cautiously eyeing the events. All of the Founders knew foreign powers hostile to England would consider aiding the rebels in a war if certain conditions were met. Top secrecy was one of them. A formal Declaration of Independence was another.^V

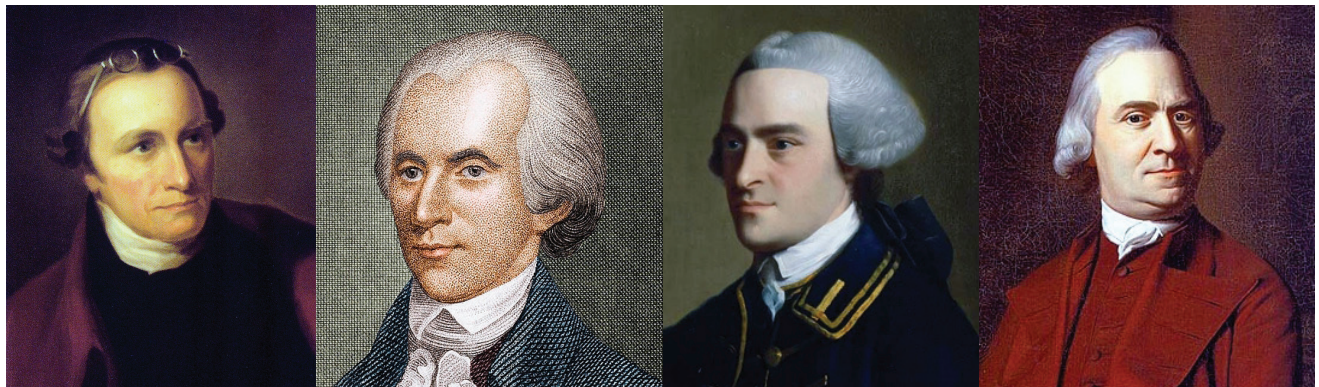
Less than a month later, Patriots engaged British Regulars in the villages of Lexington and Concord on the 19th of April. The Revolution had begun, and the move toward independence was now more palpable. Nevertheless, the risks in forming any alliances with Britain's foes were extremely high for all parties potentially involved. For the colonists, the penalty for treason was death. For potential allies supporting the rebels, they risked upsetting Old World alliances firmly in place, which would most likely have caused warfare on other fronts.

Work of the Continental Congress

Through 1775 and 1776, secrecy and security were essential. The fifty-six men meeting as part of the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia were now "wanted" men and some of the meetings and committee sessions had to be conducted behind closed doors. This was especially true of discussions Congressional representatives had with France and/or Spain.

Traditional teaching of the period suggests that the Continental Congress was ineffectual in supporting the war effort. It has long been taught that while Washington and the Continental Army were fighting for survival, a dysfunctional and weak Congress appeared to only muster ineffective requests for money. The reality, however, was that Congressional response *ensured* that the struggle for independence would be lasting and effectual.

Members of Congress were preoccupied with



Patrick Henry

Richard Henry Lee

John Hancock

Samuel Adams

how they would be viewed by the world, especially potential allies.^{vii} As a result, on 6 April 1776, Congress passed an act that made the colonial ports in America open to any and all nations seeking to establish international trade with the Americans. From that point forward, trading partners outside the sphere of British influence were welcome to begin relations with the Americans, in hopes that such relationships would yield financing and supplies for the American war effort.

While Congress had no real legal authority to raise money vis-à-vis taxation or any ability to require the thirteen independent colonies to pay for the war effort, it worked tirelessly to form military and trade alliances that would support the quest for independence. On 15 May 1776, it also passed a resolution requiring American colonies that had governments remaining loyal to the Crown be suppressed and replaced with extralegal Patriot-led assemblies. The resolution stated in part that:

“[I]t appears absolutely irreconcilable to reason and good Conscience, for the people of these colonies now to take the oaths and affirmations necessary for the support of any government under the crown of Great Britain, and it is necessary that the exercise of every kind of authority under the said crown should be totally suppressed, and all the powers of government exerted, under the authority of the people of the colonies, for the preservation of internal peace, virtue, and good order, as well as for the defence of their lives, liberties, and properties, against the hostile invasions and cruel depredations of their enemies. . . .”

As a result of this resolution, loyal governments in Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania were replaced with governments supporting the move toward independence. The most dramatic was the dissolution of the colonial government of New Jersey and the arrest of Royal Governor William Franklin, the son of Benjamin Franklin. With the passage of this resolution, Congress was clearing the way for the final volley in its political assertions against the Crown.^{viii}

Diplomacy of the Declaration

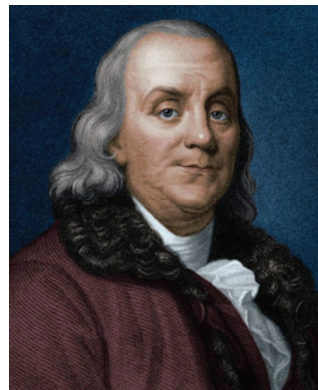
Taken as a whole, Congressional action that opened American ports and dissolved unfriendly colonial governments made ripe Richard Henry Lee's motion calling for independence on 7 June 1776. The boldest act now faced the delegates – the question of independence itself.

Most assuredly, as Congress pushed toward independence, it had the foresight to understand the necessity of developing economic and political



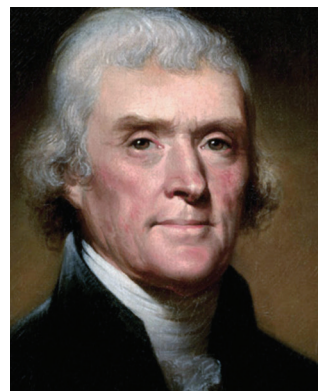
Independence Hall, Philadelphia.

relationships outside the traditional bonds it once shared with the British Empire. The most important step toward such relationships came from the



Ben Franklin

sessions of Congress from 28 June - 4 July 1776, when Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration of Independence was revised and adopted.^{ix} The changes made by Congress to Jefferson's draft were made to ensure it would be unanimously adopted by the entire body.



Thomas Jefferson

On 2 July 1776, the vote adopting the Declaration of Independence signaled to potential allies that the war being waged by the Americans was not another English civil war.^x Thus, from that point forward, France, Spain and other potential allies could discuss mat-

ters of trade, supply and military aid with the Continental Congress as they would with other foreign governments. Nevertheless, such discussions and efforts still occurred outside of the public eye.

After independence had been declared, French and Spanish efforts to supply armaments and even-important gunpowder for the American war effort were funneled through Rodriquez Hortalez & Company, under the supervision of Caron de Beaumarchais.^{XI} This is consistent with their designs to seek retaliation against England and help drive an irreversible wedge between the colonists and their Mother Country.

In advance of the efforts taken by Rodriquez Hortalez & Company, which came after the adoption of the Declaration, a French agent by the name of Julien Achard de Bonvouloir arrived in late 1775 in the city of Philadelphia. During his visit, he met with Benjamin Franklin, who later introduced him to the Congress' Committee of Secret Correspondence. Predictably, when Bonvouloir met with the members of the Committee, each member was required to take a different route to the meeting place to ensure the utmost secrecy and to avoid detection by British spies.^{XII}

It is important to note that discussions with France and Spain were within the purview of the Committee, whose members were tasked with establishing an alliance with foreign powers. The re-

sult of Congressional efforts would yield the greatest boon to the American war effort—the formal treaty of alliance between the United States and France in 1778.

The historical record supports the fact that both France and Spain supplied money and material support for the Americans. Furthermore, France's entering the struggle as an ally made the Revolutionary War winnable. After France committed her military, by separate treaty Spain also committed her military support, chiefly in the Gulf of Mexico. Our Founding Fathers knew that diplomatic relationships had to be established with these foreign powers in order to effectively wage war against the British Empire.

As such, the real story of the American Revolution is how political leaders, business leaders, and military leaders from across the Thirteen Colonies collectively used foreign relations and secret international commerce to help give birth to Lady Liberty. ■

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Footnotes to 'Foreign Relations and the Founding of the American Republic'

^I Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency George Washington*, Random House (2004), pp. 12-15; Stephen Brunwell, *George Washington Gentleman Warrior*, Quercus (2012), pp. 37-38, 43, 53-55.

^{II} American Memory Timeline, *The American Revolution 1763-1783: British Reforms and Colonial Resistance, 1763-1766*, Library of Congress website, <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/amrev/britref/>

^{III} A.J. Langguth, *Patriots – The Men Who Started the American Revolution*, Simon and Schuster (1988), p. 46.

^{IV} Lillian Goldman Law Library, *Patrick Henry: Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death*, The Avalon Project–Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy, Yale Law School website, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/patrick.asp

^V Kevin Phillips, *1775: A Good Year for the Revolution*, Penguin Group Publishers (2012), pp. 436, 442-443.

^{VI} Ibid.

^{VII} Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, W. & T. Bradford, Philadelphia (Feb 14, 1776), p. 86

^{VIII} Phillips, pp. 440-441.

^{IX} Jon Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson – The Art of Power*, Random House (2012), pp 105-108; Langguth, pp. 358 - 361.

^X Phillips, pp. 440-445.

^{XI} Ed Butler, "Spain's Involvement in the American Revolutionary War," *The SAR Magazine*, Summer 2009, Vol. 104, No.1, pp. 20-25.

^{XII} Langguth, pp. 323 - 326.

^{XIII} Ellis, pp. 221-223.

Following the Revolution . . .



Edmond Charles Genêt
in 1810

tary ally.

In 1793, France dispatched Edmond-Charles Genêt, an experienced diplomat, as minister to the United States. In front of the Americans, he called himself "Citizen Genêt." In addition to trying to extract war support, Genêt was also to obtain advance payments on debts that the U.S. owed to France, to negotiate a commercial treaty between the United States and France, and to implement portions of the 1778 Franco-American treaty which allowed attacks on British merchant shipping using ships based in American ports.

His argument? According to terms of the Franco-American Treaty of Alliance of 1778, the United States and France were "perpetual allies," and America was "obliged" to help France defend the West Indies. But last thing the young country could afford was to get absorbed into another costly war. Just as France and Spain had been very careful in supporting the Colonies prior to American independence, now it was America's turn to take extreme precaution with both France and Britain.

Yet Genêt was indifferent to the Washington administration's wishes. Instead of reporting immediately to Philadelphia, Genêt landed first in Charleston, South Carolina on 8 April 1793 and there began issuing privateering commissions with the consent of South Carolina Governor William Moultrie. The commissions authorized the bearers (of any country) to seize British merchant ships and their cargo for personal profit, with the approval and protection of the French government.

These actions were in flagrant opposition to the neutrality that President Washington's administration pursued. By the time Genêt made it to Philadelphia, President Washington had already issued an official proclamation of neutrality. Thomas Jefferson personally informed Genêt that he must

stop involving the U.S. in France's war.

Corresponding with the envoy's arrival in Philadelphia, Henry Knox sent a memo to President Washington advising him that the U.S. could not withhold the ships that Genêt outfitted, as doing so would be perceived by the British as showing favoritism toward France in the ongoing war. Therefore, Washington held firm to the path of neutrality: Since the French monarchy no longer existed, he asserted, the former alliance between the two countries was no longer binding.

Jefferson's admonition fell on deaf ears; Genêt continued preparing American ships for battle. The entire Cabinet agreed he should be recalled. Washington sent notification to Paris requesting his recall, but later the President relented and allowed Genêt to remain in the U.S. and become an American citizen. The radical Jacobins had come to power in Paris by then and had issued an arrest warrant for him. A compassionate Washington administration acquiesced on expelling him from the country.

In the aftermath of this crisis, the end result was that the U.S. formulated a consistent policy on the issue of neutrality. On 3 Aug 1793, Washington's administration signed a set of rules regarding policies of neutrality. The rules were formalized into law when Congress passed a neutrality bill on 4 June 1794. That legislation, according to the State Department, formed the basis for America's neutrality policy throughout the nineteenth century. As the old saying goes, "For every bad, there is a good to come from it. ■

—H. Edward Phillips, III



President Washington confronts Genêt.

—Source: Britannica.com