

Chapter 8 -- America Declares Its Independence



Dates:
1775-1777

Sections:

- “The Shot Heard Round The World” At Lexington
- The Second Continental Congress Convenes to Confront The Crisis
- An American Militia Band Capture Ft. Ticonderoga
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Time: April 19, 1775

“The Shot Heard Round The World” At Lexington



(1793-1872)

The Revolutionary War begins at the village of Lexington, roughly ten miles west of Boston on the road to Concord. There, around 5AM, some 80 colonists exchange fire with British Regulars, before being driven away, after suffering eight men killed and ten others wounded.

The red-coats reassemble and march another six miles to the town square in Concord, which the local militia has abandoned in favor of higher ground, to the west. When a unit of roughly 90 British Regulars cross over the Concord River at the North Bridge, they are attacked and overwhelmed by 400 militiamen storming down from the hills.

The colonists have won their first organized battle with the mighty British army!

John Burns of Gettysburg

*By the rude bridge that arched the flood
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled
Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world.*

*Concord Hymn (1837)
Ralph Waldo Emerson*

The shocked and alarmed Lt. Colonel Smith decides to retreat from Concord around noon—but his movement is vexed by continuous harassment from the colonials, whose forces reach over 2,000 strong as the day wears on.

All that saves the Redcoats is a rescue contingent of 1,000 men under Earl Percy that meets them around 2:30PM in Lexington and opens cannon fire to momentarily stem the militia attacks. Still the skirmishing continues back to Boston, with the infuriated red-coats ransacking homes and stores along the way as retribution for their losses.

By nightfall they are securely entrenched within the city, despite the remarkable assembly of some 15,000 armed militiamen who surround it by daybreak.

The battles at Lexington and Concord are no more than minor skirmishes when it comes to real warfare.

But April 19 casts yet another die against any hope for reconciliation with Britain.

Time: May 10, 1775

The Second Continental Congress Convenes To Confront The Crisis



Independence Hall, Philadelphia

The colonists must now figure out what to do next.

They begin by convening the Second Continental Congress on May 10, 1775, in Philadelphia at the Pennsylvania State House, subsequently known as Independence Hall.

While many delegates are hold-overs from the prior meeting eight months earlier, some important new faces include John Hancock, from Massachusetts, who succeeds an ailing Peyton Randolph as President of the Congress, along with Ben Franklin, the 69 year old writer, inventor, publisher and political operative from Pennsylvania, and the youthful Thomas Jefferson, of the Virginia House of Burgesses.

As before, the Loyalists in the chamber muster enough support to block the “radical faction,” who continue to call for an immediate declaration of independence from Britain.

Still, after the April 19 bloodshed at Concord and the city of Boston surrounded by angry militiamen, all delegates recognize the importance of some united decisions and actions.

The first priority is national defense, in case the violence intensifies. The delegates agree to form a Continental army to be funded by domestic and foreign borrowing, with each state expected to contribute a fair share of money, men and materials.

The Loyalists balance the military initiatives with what becomes known as the “Olive Branch Petition,” written by the intensely principled Quaker pacifist, John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, whose 1768 plea calls for a unified front among the colonialists:

Then join hand in hand, brave Americans all! By uniting we stand, by dividing we fall.

The Petition criticizes Parliament (not King George) for onerous taxing policies, but expresses hope for a peaceful resolution with America remaining in the British Empire. This will be one of many back and forth entreaties on both sides of the dispute over time, none of them healing the breach.

Once this Second Congress opens, it will function continuously until March 1, 1781, an almost six year period that sees 343 delegates cycling in and out of the meetings and 13 different men serving as President.

Despite the lack of formal legal authority to govern, the Second Continental Congress will muddle its way to the policies and procedures that determine the destiny of the fragile new nation

Time: May 10, 1775

An American Militia Band Capture Ft. Ticonderoga



A Typical Fortress Guarding a River

On the same day the Second Continental Congress convenes to map out a unified strategy, an independent band of New Hampshire militiamen known as The Green Mountain Boys capture Ft. Ticonderoga, at the southern tip of Lake Champlain, some 300 miles northwest of Boston.

This raid is led by two firebrands, Ethan Allen, leader of the Boys, and Benedict Arnold, of Massachusetts, who joins the initiative at the last second.

The main goal is to prevent the British from using Ticonderoga as a staging area to mount an attack from behind on the American militia men surrounding Boston. They also hope to capture the fort’s weapons, and to encourage Canada to ally with the colonies in rebellion against the crown.

A force of 200 raiders approach the fort at daybreak on May 10, ready for action.

The outcome, however, is comical rather than heroic.

Ft. Ticonderoga, so pivotal in the French & Indian Wars, has been left essentially unprotected by the British.

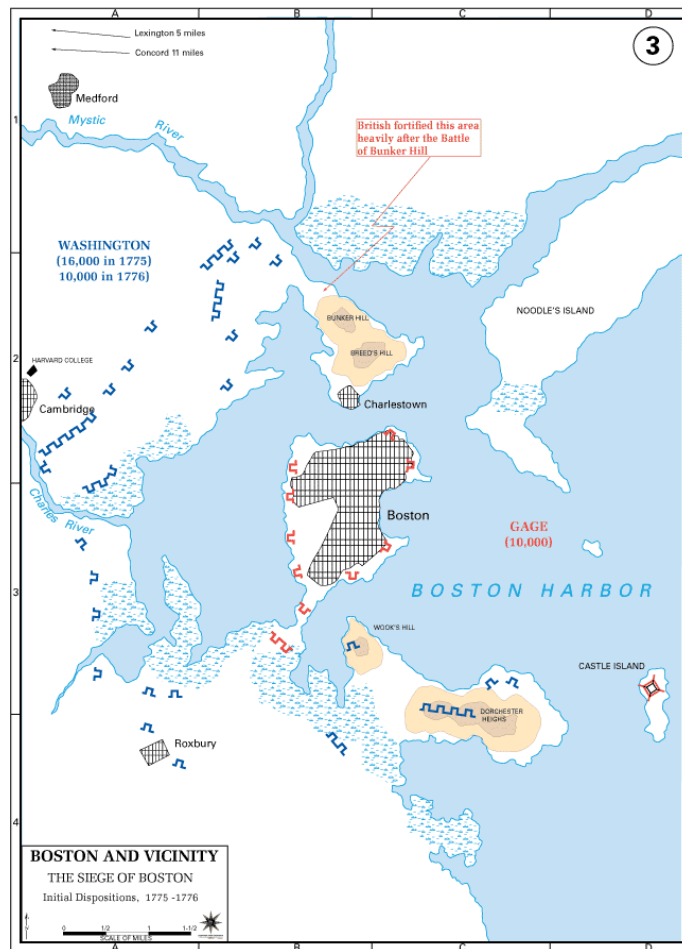
The raiders finally corral a sentry who announces the American's presence to the fort's commander who, in turn, surrenders his sword.

Unlike Concord, the rebels never fire a single shot to record another victory, and one with strategic importance.

The colonials now control a critical stepping stone into Canada and the long-range French cannon and mortars they will utilize later on.

Time: April to June 1775

The Siege Of Boston Gets Under Way



Gage's Forces Surrounded the City of Boston

Back in Boston, the battered redcoats have retreated from Concord to their city enclave, where General Gage is tardily plotting his strategy. He has 6,500 troops at the moment, and a Royal Navy which controls sea lanes that almost totally envelop Boston. He faces more than twice that number of militiamen arrayed across the various land approaches to the city from the east and south.

When word of the Concord defeat reaches England, King George III ships off three top field generals to support, then replace Gage – the conspicuously courageous, but sometimes tardy Lord William Howe; his second in command and often adversary, Henry Clinton, who has grown up in New York City; and “Gentleman John” Burgoyne, aristocrat, playwright, rake and military man, ambitious for glory.

On June 14, the Continental Congress counters by naming George Washington commander in chief of the colonial American. Washington is given \$2million to fund an army, and orders to consult closely with Congress on all major operations. The new commander has served in the British army for seven years, demonstrating remarkable courage and leadership during the French & Indian Wars, before resigning in 1759 at age twenty-seven. His life since then has been that of an English aristocrat, running a vast plantation in Virginia and mastering politics as a local Burgess.



His Continental Army is a motley crew, short on weapons, gunpowder, training, even uniforms – with its officers distinguished by colored ribbons pinned to their vests – pink for Brigadiers, purple for Major Generals, and blue for the commander in chief. In the beginning they enlist simply to “stand up for their basic rights as Englishmen.” But soon enough, in response to the King declaring them “traitors,” this swings to the “Glorious Cause of America” and independence from the crown.

Washington arrives on the scene with two initiatives in mind: drive the British out of Boston by siege, and out of Canada by striking at Quebec City. The key to the siege will lie in controlling the high ground encircling the city – Bunker and Breed’s Hills to the north on the Charleston peninsula and the Dorchester Heights east of the “Boston neck.”

General George Washington (1732-1799)

On June 17, 1775, Washington moves in the north at the Battle of Bunker Hill, a bloody affair that ends with the British controlling the field, but at a cost of over 1,000 casualties. Henceforth there will be no doubt in Howe’s mind about the determination of the rebels.

Time: March 17, 1776

The British Are Forced Out Of Boston



Bunker Hill Monument, Boston

The Bunker Hill battle ushers in a nine month period of essential stalemate around Boston. Washington lacks the long range cannon needed to threaten Gage’s troops in the city – while Gage is able to re-supply his force from British ships entering the harbor unmolested.

So Washington’s focus now shifts south, to Dorchester Heights, which threatens both the city itself and the shipping lanes. But to succeed, Washington needs artillery with two mile range, and obtaining them will require a minor miracle.

The miracle is performed by 25 year old Colonel Henry Knox.

His feat lies in transporting 54 heavyweight mortars and cannon from the captured Ft. Ticonderoga some 300 miles, down Lake George and then overland, across the Berkshire Mountains, to Boston. The task is one of brute force, made doubly difficult by severe winter conditions, snow, ice and bitter cold. But, after a seven week trek, Knox and his guns reach Boston on January 27, 1776.

Once they arrive, Washington throws all his resources into constructing a surprise redoubt and battery on Dorchester Heights. His engineers work secretly and silently throughout the night of March 4 – and when the British in Boston wake the next day they see the guns of Ft. Ticonderoga pointed their way.

Washington now hopes that Howe will come out to attack him, but with his fleet vulnerable to the shore batteries, evacuation becomes the only option. On March 8, Howe signals Washington that he will not burn Boston if he is allowed to leave unmolested. Washington accedes, and on March 17, some 120 craft carry 8900 troops and just over 2,000 women, children and Loyalists out to sea, headed for Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Boston is now back in the hands of the rebels.

Time: August 1775 to October 1776

America Advances And Retreats In Canada



Two-Pronged American Invasion of Canada

Soon after the June 1775 battle at Bunker Hill, Washington decides to go on the offensive by invading Canada.

The prize here is the British citadel at Quebec City, scene of their famous victory over the French in 1759. The additional hope, which will prove futile, being that once the fighting begins the British settlers in Canada will join the rebel cause

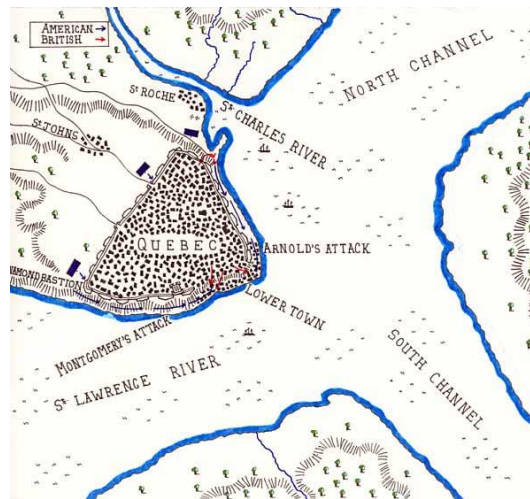
Overall command of the invasion is given to Major General Philip Schuyler, a member of the Second Continental Congress from New York, who fought previously for England in the French & Indian Wars.

Field command falls to General Richard Montgomery, who moves northeast up the St. Lawrence, taking Ft. Ticonderoga on May 10, 1775 and Montreal on November 14.

He is joined there by a precocious 19 year old, Aaron Burr, who interrupts his study of law, to engage in frontline combat against Britain over the next four years. Montgomery immediately promotes Burr to the rank of Captain, and selects him as his aide-de-camp.

On December 2, these two join up below Quebec with Benedict Arnold, who has slugged his way overland from the southeast. Between them they have 900 men to throw against the 1,000 British troops under Major General, Guy Carleton, recently appointed to defend the stronghold.

On the snowy night of December 30, 1775, the Americans begin to move against Quebec City, with Arnold's 600 men advancing on the left toward the Palace Gate and Montgomery's 300 men coming up on the right, across the Plains of Abraham.



Montgomery and Arnold Attack Quebec City

But the American assault fails. Arnold is shot in the ankle and turns command over to Brigadier Daniel Morgan. Montgomery is killed by the first English volley, and Burr, along with his disheartened troops, turns back. By dawn on New Year's Eve, Carleton retains control of the city, with casualties of only 18 men against the American losses of 60 killed or wounded and some 426 others captured.

A lackluster siege of the city follows, but the American momentum has run its course – and the British soon begin their roll-back of America's incursion into Canada.

Naval control around Quebec allows Carleton to be reinforced by 7,000 Regulars and 3,000 German mercenaries, bringing his muster up to 11,000 men. Over the next 10 months he throws them against an expanded force of 6,000 retreating Americans, under Schulyer and General Horatio Gates, who succeeds the dead Montgomery.

Back come the rebels, exiting Montreal in June 1776, with even the belligerent Arnold voicing his dismay.

The junction (with) Canada is now at an end. Let us quit (here) and secure our own country before it is too late.

But the English chase him, sailing another 75 miles down Lake Champlain to a victory on October 11 at Valcour Island, over a ramshackle “fleet” of mostly flat-bottomed, single-masted, three gun boats scrounged up by Arnold.

Both sides now pause for the winter, Carleton back north at St. John’s Island, Schuyler, Gates and Arnold south to their final stronghold at Ft. Ticonderoga.

Time: August to November 1775

Britain Increases The Pressure



General Washington (1732-1799)

The siege of Boston and the initial American move into Canada provokes a sharp response from Britain.

On August 23, 1775, King George declares that an “*open and avowed*” rebellion is under way in America and refuses to even receive the so-called “Olive Branch Petition” offered by the Second Continental Congress.

In early October Admiral Samuel Graves, overall commander of the British fleet in North America, orders Lt. Henry Mowat to conduct reprisal raids on colonial seaports associated with the rebellion.

Mowat assembles a five ship fleet, heads out of Boston Harbor, and drops anchor about 115 miles up the coast at Falmouth Harbor. On October 18, he informs the townspeople that he intends to mete out punishment for their defiance of the crown, to commence in two hours. When the locals refuse to pledge allegiance to the King, Mowat begins an eight hour bombardment of the now abandoned city, followed by a landing party of marines instructed to burn everything left standing. In the end some 400 buildings and homes are destroyed.

The King then takes another signal step against the colonists on October 27, 1775 in a hard line speech delivered to the opening of Parliament. He states that the rebels have broken their vows of allegiance to the crown – in effect calling them traitors – and that he intends to use his own forces, as well as foreign alliances, to suppress the conspirators.

So much for the hopes of some for an “Olive Branch” solution.

In November, 1775, the pressure is turned up in Virginia, which the British see rivaling Massachusetts as a center fomenting disobedience.

Ever since 1771 the Governor of the “Province” has been the Right Honourable John Murray, a Scotsman whose formal title is Lord Dunmore.

Dunmore’s approach to governing Virginia lies in ignoring the local council, the House of Burgesses, and acting on his own agenda – which focuses on warfare against the Shawnee Tribe for control over inland territory. His efforts in this regard deplete the Virginia militia and the financial coffers.

When Dunmore turns to the Burgesses in 1773 for more men and money, it responds with a list of complaints about increased taxes in general and his administrative abuses in particular. After which, in 1774, Dunmore dissolves the House of Burgesses.

This infuriates the Virginians, especially Patrick Henry, already known as the “Son of Thunder” for his fiery oratory. On March 23, 1775, Henry’s speech to the Virginia Convention, a de facto House back-up, ends with this stirring plea:

*Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?
Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give
me liberty, or give me death!*

Like General Gage in Boston, Dunmore also chooses April 1775 to deprive rebel access to military supplies. His focus is on gunpowder stored in the armory at Williamsburg, and on April 20 he orders a small band of Royal Navy marines to transfer it to their ship docked on James River. But when the 15 barrels arrive, they are met by a contingent of local militia ordering they be returned, as property of the colony and not the King.

The stand-off boils over shortly. The rebels threaten to storm the Governor’s Palace in Williamsburg. Dunmore announces his intent to impose martial law, free all slaves held by the rebels, and “*reduce the city to ashes.*” As word of the April 19 battle at Concord spreads, more Virginia militiamen appear, eager to drive Dunmore and the British out of Williamsburg.

Two prominent Virginians, Peyton Randolph and George Washington, lobby for a peaceful resolution, but on May 2 the 150 man Hanover County Militia, serving under Patrick Henry, march on the capital. They drive Dunmore and his family out of the palace and extract a 330L payment for the gunpowder from a wealthy Loyalist in town. This temporarily ends the conflict, with Henry off to attend the Continental Congress and Dunmore aboard the HMS Fowey, from which he will direct future attacks against the rebels in 1776 before returning to England.

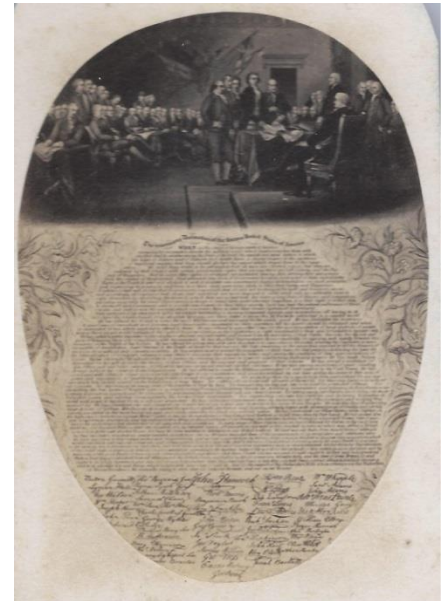
Time: July 4, 1776

The Second Continental Congress Declares American Independence

The summer of 1776 marks fifteen months since the outbreak of fighting at Concord – fifteen months in which the colonies have governed themselves, and roughly held their own in battle against the British Regulars.

Driven by these tailwinds, the “radicals” at the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia are ready to force the issue of a final break with the crown.

The move is reinforced by a widely circulated pamphlet titled *Common Sense*, written by Thomas Paine, formerly a disgruntled tax collector in Britain.



Signing the Declaration of Independence

Paine emigrates to Philadelphia in 1774 on the advice of Ben Franklin, with whom he shares a penchant for science, invention and journalism. He becomes editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine* and soon takes up the cause of the American rebellion. Paine is a visionary, and his stirring rhetoric touches the colonists.

We have it in our power to begin the world over again.

On June 7, 1776, the Virginian Richard Henry Lee, who works hand in glove over time with John Adams of Massachusetts, offers a resolution to that effect.



Resolved: That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.

Thomas Paine (1737-1809)

Seven States immediately support Lee’s resolution, but six others waver -- which leads to a three week hiatus as delegates return home for further local debate.

In the interim, the remaining delegates set up a series of “writing committees” to draft documents directed at gaining credibility and worldwide acceptance for a new nation.

First and foremost is a Declaration of Independence, assigned to a Committee of Five, including John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, who pens a first draft.



Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826)

The tone is restrained and appropriately respectful for an audience including the world’s hereditary monarchs -- George III in England, Louis XVI in France, Charles III in Spain, Frederick II in Prussia – all of whom will be threatened by the content.

It begins with a statement of overall purpose – to explain why America is breaking away from the crown.

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume...the separate station to which the laws of nature entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes..of the separation

From there it sets out a series of beliefs about the nature of man and of government. These beliefs ring out with bold Enlightenment assertions. That all men are born free, and that natural law endows each with an equal right to seek happiness. That the role of government is to support this quest. That the form of government is up to the will of the people and that they may change it any time it fails to meet their needs.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable 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 and abolish it, and to institute new government laying its foundation on principles...most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

The Declaration then moves into a bill of particulars, in effect a formal indictment of the ways in which the King and the British government in the colonies have jeopardized the well-being of the citizenry. The list includes 27 separate counts, among them refusal to pass necessary statutes, obstruction of justice, imposition of taxes without consent, maintaining a standing army in times of peace, arbitrarily suspending local legislatures, cutting off trade with countries abroad, abolishing Charters, imposing martial law, “plundering our seas, ravaging our coasts, burning our towns, and destroying the lives of our people.”

All attempts at redress have failed, leading on to a conclusion:

A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant is unfit to be the ruler of a free people...We, therefore, the representatives of the united States of America...declare that...these United Colonies...are free and independent States...absolved from all allegiances to the British Crown.

And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.

The entire document runs to only 1337 words, and Jefferson’s original draft has been heavily edited by delegates, including the memorable opening sentence.

| Jefferson’s Original | Final Resolution |
|--|--|
| We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable that all men are created equal & independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights, inherent & unalienable, that among which are the preservation of life & liberty and the pursuit of happiness. | We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. |

With a final Declaration in hand, a second vote is taken on the Lee resolution on July 2, with Pennsylvania and New York still hanging in the balance. When both vote “aye,” the motion passes, and the break with Britain becomes official.

Two days later, on July 4, delegates sign the formal Declaration of Independence and the new nation is born.

Once this declaration is made public, Franklin tells his colleagues, “*now we must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately.*”

Time: July 1776

The Declaration’s Telltale Deletion Regarding Slavery



HQ of Price & Birch, Slave Dealers of Alexandria, Va.

Amidst the back and forth editing that goes into the final Declaration, one other change in Jefferson's original draft will come back to haunt the conscience of the new nation down through the ages.

It occurs in the original list of "indictments" against King George – the charge being that he has been responsible for introducing and sustaining slavery in the colonies.

He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither.

This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian King, determined to keep open a market where men should be bought & sold.

He has...suppressed every legislative attempt to prohibit or restrain this execrable commerce.

He is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase the liberty of which he has deprived them by murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them; thus paying former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.

Jefferson's language here is unequivocal.

Slavery is a "crime" committed upon "men" which "violates their sacred rights to life and liberty" – it is an "execrable commerce" which the colonists have tried to "prohibit or restrain."

The irony, of course, being that Jefferson himself is a lifetime slave owner, as are very many of the leaders of the Second Continental Congress.

One can never know what internal debates took place in Jefferson's mind as he wrote these words – nor in the minds of the delegates who had to consider them.

But the fact is that the final Declaration deleted this paragraph on slavery in its entirety.

Perhaps in seeking to indict the King over slavery, too many attendees felt they were indicting themselves.

Time: July 12, 1776 to November 15, 1777

The Articles Of Confederation Are Drafted To Govern The Nation



James Madison (1751-1836)

Along with the Declaration, a separate group of delegates, the Committee of Thirteen, begins work on how a “government of and for the people” will operate in practice. This committee of is chaired by John Dickinson, who authored the Olive Branch Petition a year earlier.

From the beginning the committee and the delegates as a whole are divided over one central issue – the proper size and power of the central government. The two sides become known as Federalists and Anti-Federalists, and each is well represented in the Congress.

Prominent Divisions Over Federalism

| “Federalists” | “Anti-Federalists” |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| John Adams | Sam Adams |
| Alexander Hamilton | George Clinton |
| John Jay | Christopher Gadsden |
| Thomas McKean | Eldridge Gerry |
| James Madison | John Hancock |
| Robert Morris | Benjamin Harrison |
| George Read | Patrick Henry |
| John Rutledge | Thomas Jefferson |
| Roger Sherman | Richard Henry Lee |
| George Washington | George Mason |

The “Federalist” faction argues that a strong central government is needed to create a sense of unity throughout the country, and to act with one purpose in foreign affairs – especially during the current war with Britain.

The “Anti-Federalists” feel that a powerful center compromises the essence of what the rebellion is all about – enabling the common men to decide what government action best suit their needs at the local level. In turn they argue that a strong center will end up like a monarchy – with a distant aristocracy of elites, focused on their own agenda, spending and taxing at will, overruling the wishes of individual states and local citizens.

This debate, however, is far too complex and potentially divisive to resolve in the middle of a war for survival, so the delegates put it off for the moment. Instead the committee comes forward on July 12 with thirteen “Articles of Confederation,” summed up as follows:

1. *The new nation will be referred to as The United States of America.*
2. *Each state will retain control of governing itself, except where specific powers are ceded to the federal level.*
3. *The whole will act together to insure their common defense, secure liberties, support general welfare.*
4. *Citizens will be free to cross state lines and enjoy fair treatment; criminals will be extradited back home.*
5. *Each state will have one vote in a Congress of the Confederation, and 2-7 delegates chosen by the legislature.*
6. *The central government alone conducts foreign policy, declares war, and establishes commercial treaties.*
7. *State militias will be maintained with officers named by the legislature and called out for common defense.*
8. *Central government funding will come from the states, apportioned on assessed real property values.*
9. *Congress declares war, approves treaties, names diplomats, resolves interstate disputes, defines coinage.*
10. *A quorum of nine of the thirteen states is required for Congress to take action.*
11. *If Canada decides to join the Confederation, it will be admitted.*
12. *The Confederation is accountable for paying war debts accumulated before its existence.*
13. *The above articles are perpetual and can be changed only if Congress approves and the states then ratify.*

Aside from failing to resolve the broad philosophical issue of federalism, a host of other shortcomings related to the Articles will become apparent over time. Rules affecting international commerce have not been spelled out. Plans to set and collect taxes remain iffy, and the government is perpetually underfunded. Perhaps most critical in the short run, the center is given little control over individual states when it comes to supplying troops, funds and materials to prosecute the war.

The entire document defining the thirteen Articles runs to only five pages, and begs for greater detail on every point. -- and final ratification will drag on. Ten states ratify the Articles within two years; the last state to approve, Maryland, doesn't do so until February 1781, almost five years later.

Still the Articles, while not "official," will provide the framework for governing the new nation forward from July 1776.

They must do for now. Time for talking is up; time for intensified fighting is on the way.