

The Road to Revolution

by T. H. Breen



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Detail from Paul Revere's engraving of "A View of Boston . . . and British Ships of War," depicting the arrival of British soldiers in 1768, published in May 1770. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

The Peace of Paris (February 10, 1763) marked a glorious moment in the history of the British Empire. France surrendered Canada, ending more than a century of warfare on the northern frontier. At the time, no one seriously thought that the conclusion of the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) would lead in little more than a decade to the creation of an independent state. Thomas Pownall, a respected commentator on economic affairs and former royal governor of Massachusetts, explained to British policy makers precisely why the Americans could never hope to form a government of their own. "The different manner in which they are settled, the different modes under which they live, the different forms of charters, grants, and frame of government," he insisted, ". . . will keep the several provinces and colonies perpetually independent of, and unconnected with each other, and dependent on the mother country."^[1]

Pownall's assertions provide an arresting reminder that the American Revolution was not inevitable. The British colonists faced almost insuperable obstacles in organizing resistance to the most powerful army and navy the world had ever seen. Scattered over a huge territory—over 1,800 miles from New Hampshire to Georgia—they had developed strong local loyalties. The large rice and tobacco plantations of the South relied on slave labor; the northern economy drew upon small family farms. No single sect dominated the religious landscape. It seemed highly unlikely that such a diverse population would even be able to communicate effectively, let alone support a common political agenda. Moreover, in 1763 the great majority of white colonists expressed general contentment with imperial rule. After all, their ties with Great Britain brought commercial prosperity and military security. Considering the manifest benefits of being part of the empire, one should ask not why the colonists mounted a rebellion against the king and Parliament, but rather why they fell out of love so quickly with a political system that had served so well for so long.

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One obvious answer is that after 1763 the king and Parliament changed the assumptions that had defined colonial rule. The British emerged from the Seven Years' War saddled with a huge national debt. English taxpayers had generously supported the struggle against France, but as peace returned, they were in no mood to increase their financial burden. It made good sense, therefore, to ask the Americans to take greater responsibility for their own defense. However, since the colonial governments had made sizeable contributions to the war effort, they did not see why they should produce new revenue. It was not that they rejected the idea that ordinary citizens had an obligation to fund government services. From the beginning of the controversy, the issue was representation, not taxation. Americans rejected out of hand arguments that the members of Parliament—men whom they had not elected—somehow represented the interests of

colonists who lived 3,000 miles from London.

During the early 1760s the leaders of Parliament sought to exploit new sources of American revenue. The Sugar Act of 1764 aimed to raise more money from the molasses trade. And then, in 1765 George Grenville, Chancellor of the Exchequer, guided the Stamp Act through Parliament. The colonists expressed immediate outrage. The act placed a tax on almost all printed materials including legal documents, newspapers, and diplomas. Americans not only refused to purchase the hated stamps but also protested in the streets. Urban mobs forced stamp collectors to resign. British administrators had not anticipated such violent resistance, and in 1766 they reluctantly repealed the Stamp Act. They made it clear, however, that they would never again compromise with the colonists. On the same day that Parliament repealed the Stamp Act, it passed the Declaratory Act, which stated that it had authority to legislate for the Americans in “all cases whatsoever.” The king and his advisors gave not an inch on the question of representation. Within a year, Parliament announced new schemes to tax the colonists.

During the early stages of resistance members of the colonial elite forcefully articulated American grievances. Without the support of ordinary colonists, however, the protest would have involved little more than impassioned rhetoric. The people demonstrated remarkable resolve. They made it clear—especially after 1773—that they were prepared to sacrifice personal comfort to preserve their liberties. In small communities, colonists organized boycotts of consumer goods manufactured in Great Britain. The strategy aimed to put pressure on English merchants and laborers. If these groups concluded that it was in their interest to mollify the Americans, they would then demand that their representatives in Parliament devise a less confrontational colonial policy. American boycotts did not bring down the English economy, but by linking British oppression to the enjoyment of everyday consumer items, the colonists turned personal acts—buying tea, for example—into public testimony of defiance.

Until 1773 able statesmen might have been able to resolve the imperial crisis, but the destruction of a huge cargo of tea owned by the East India Company in Boston harbor dramatically altered the character of the entire contest. The events of the night of December 16, 1773, persuaded Parliament that the situation in America required an extraordinary response. Not only did the British dispatch an army of occupation to Massachusetts, but also punished Boston—regarded in London as the seat of organized resistance—by closing the port to all commerce. Parliament achieved these ends through a series of laws known collectively in Britain as the Coercive Acts, and in the colonies as the Intolerable Acts. They struck ordinary Americans as completely unwarranted, and they reacted accordingly. During the summer of 1774 Crown officials lost control over the New England countryside. An armed insurgency terrorized anyone who defended British policy, and militia units began preparing for an armed confrontation with General Thomas Gage's troops.

Although law and custom barred colonial women from holding civil office, they participated fully in the general mobilization of the American people. They played a key role in the success of the non-importation movement. As almost everyone at the time recognized, if the wives and mothers continued to purchase British manufactured goods, the protest against taxation without representation would fail. They rose to the challenge. “The Ladies” of Newport, Rhode Island, for example, announced, “We are willing to give up our dear & beloved Tea, *for the Good of the Public* . . . provided the Gentlemen will give up their dearer & more beloved Punch, [and] renounce going so often to Taverns.”[2] In Boston women carried subscription lists door to door. Signers pledged to abstain from buying items carrying parliamentary taxes. At moments of military crisis, women actively supported the insurgency. A witness reported that in September 1774 when New Englanders thought that the British navy had bombed Boston, “at every house Women & Children making Cartridges, running Bullets . . . crying & bemoaning & at the same time animating their Husbands & Sons to fight for their Liberties, tho’ not knowing whether they should ever see them again.”[3]

included some of the most respected leaders in the various colonies. These wealthy gentlemen were planters, lawyers, and merchants, and however upsetting the news from New England may have been, they still hoped that they could resolve the imperial crisis without further violence. But growing popular resistance—especially in the northern colonies—forced them to make decisions that energized the rebellion. Congress drafted a document known as the Association, which among other things ordered a universal boycott of British goods. Article eleven was truly radical. It authorized the formation in every town, city, and county in America of an elected committee empowered to punish anyone guilty of ignoring the boycott. At first, these committees concentrated on commercial transgressions, but they soon filled a vacuum left by retreating British officials. By 1775 the committees had transformed themselves into the infrastructure for revolution, punishing ideological enemies and overseeing local government. They also communicated their activities through newspapers so that Americans living in distant places gained a powerful sense that they were part of a larger movement capable of standing up to Great Britain.

Americans of all backgrounds based their revolution within powerful intellectual frameworks. Some elite spokesmen argued that the colonists would not succeed unless they possessed political virtue. They argued that unless the colonists were willing to sacrifice the pleasures of the marketplace and stand vigilant against the excesses of despotic power, they could never hope to achieve freedom and liberty. But ordinary farmers—the men who flocked to Lexington and Concord in April 1775—subscribed to a different set of ideas. They relied on the ideas of the great English philosopher John Locke to explain why they were justified in taking up arms against George III: They believed that all people possessed certain rights and that it was the responsibility of the government to protect these rights. When the government did not do so—when it no longer served the common good—it no longer merited obedience. Many rank-and-file soldiers of the Revolution were evangelical Protestants, and they viewed politics through a highly religious lens. A British officer stationed in New York City, for example, reported that an American minister “told his Congregation, that ‘the Man, who was able in this Country to wield a Sword and did not endeavor to stain it with the Blood of the King’s Soldiers . . . would be renounced by the Lord Jesus Xt at the Day of Judgement.’”[4]

Although the members of the Continental Congress dragged their heels on the question of independence, Thomas Paine informed Americans that the moment had arrived to create a new republic. In January 1776 he published *Common Sense*, which captured the popular imagination. He advanced a brilliant argument, demonstrating not only that monarchy was a fundamentally corrupt form of government, but also that it was high time for the American people to establish an independent republic. As he declared, “The cause of America is in great measure the cause of all mankind.” Slowly, often reluctantly, the members of the Continental Congress accepted the logic of *Common Sense*, and on July 4, 1776, they affirmed Thomas Jefferson’s powerful declaration 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.”

Beating the British on the battlefield proved much harder than most Americans imagined. The stunning victory over General Gage’s forces at Bunker Hill in 1775 persuaded them that courageous yeomen farmers could stand up to well-trained British redcoats. George Washington, who Congress appointed as the commander of the American Army, knew better. He demanded a proper military force, one that understood discipline, and while his lieutenants strove to create the army he desired, Washington avoided direct confrontation with the main British army whenever possible. Critics sometimes charged that Washington was a second-rate general who feared defeat so much that he refused to risk his soldiers in battle. The claim had no merit. Washington waged a defensive war because that was the only option available. He sensed that in the long run the British were in an impossible situation. Their supply lines were too long and vulnerable. They could hold cities, but once they marched to a new location, the Americans quickly returned.

desperately poor—into a formidable fighting force. But without the support of France, the Americans might have lost the contest. After General John Burgoyne surrendered an entire British army at Saratoga, New York, in October 1777, the French negotiated a Treaty of Amity with the United States. Its declared purpose was preserving the “liberty, sovereignty, and independence absolute and unlimited of the United States.” There were as many French soldiers as Americans at Yorktown, the scene in 1781 of the last major battle of the Revolution.

American peace commissioners—John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and John Jay—won a victory of a different sort. Mastering the intricate diplomacy of European courts, they played French ambitions off against British fatigue and in September 1783 negotiated a settlement that awarded the United States all the territory east of the Mississippi River, south of the current Canadian boundary, and north of the thirty-first parallel.

As with all revolutions, the American experience included winners as well as losers. The war itself took a terrible toll. Over 20,000 American soldiers died during the conflict. And when the British finally accepted defeat, 60,000 men and women left the United States. Loyalists took their chances on new homes in distant places rather than become citizens of an independent republic. For Americans Indians, the Revolution was a total disaster. Since many tribes had sided with the British, Americans treated them like enemies and drove them from the lands where they had lived for centuries. African Americans wanted freedom from slavery, and many fled to the British in hope of escaping bondage. They were often betrayed. However passionately white masters spoke of liberty, they did almost nothing to free the slaves. Women too anticipated a new political order that would have awarded them a more significant voice in public affairs. They too were disappointed. Still, despite these setbacks, the Revolution created a republican society—the likes of which the world had never seen—that invited citizens to take responsibility for their own government, to preserve fundamental human rights, and to take seriously the notion that all men are created equal.

[1] Thomas Pownall, *The Administration of the British Colonies*, 5th ed. (London: J. Walter, 1774), 1:97–98.

[2] *Newport Mercury* (RI), December 14, 1767.

[3] Ezra Stiles, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, ed. Franklin Bowditch Dexter (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 1:480.

[4] Ambrose Serle to the Earl of Dartmouth, March 20, 1777, in Benjamin Franklin Stevens, *Facsimiles of Manuscripts in European Archives Relating to America, 1773–1783*, vol. 24 (London, 1895), no. 2052.

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Unruly Americans in the Revolution

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by *Woody Holton*

Nearly all of the blockbuster biographies of the Founding Fathers—whether the subject is George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, or John Adams—portray the vast majority of ordinary Americans as mere bystanders. Although the authors of these bestsellers sometimes pause to honor the common soldiers in the Continental Army, most pay little attention to white men who did not enlist—and none at all to African Americans, American Indians, and women of all ranks.

Meanwhile a host of other historians have been quietly documenting the many ways in which women, slaves, natives, and small farmers—the 95 percent of Americans who were not members of the founding-era gentry—shaped the independence movement and Revolutionary War and were in turn influenced by both. If ordinary colonists really had been as passive as they appear in the most popular histories of the founding era, the American Revolution would have been a very different thing, and it might not have occurred at all.



"Bostonian's Paying the Excise-man, or Tarring and Feathering," print by Philip Dawe, London, 1774. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

TAXES—BUT ALSO TERRITORY

While everyone knows that Parliamentary “taxation without representation” was one of the principal grievances leading to the American Revolution, we sometimes forget that the British government also mounted other assaults against free colonists’ economic well being. Nearly all of the best-known Founding Fathers—from Thomas Jefferson and George Washington in Virginia to Benjamin Franklin and Robert Morris in Pennsylvania and Henry Knox and Abigail (not John!) Adams in Massachusetts—dreamed of vastly enhancing their wealth by speculating in western land. That meant obtaining large grants directly from the government, essentially for free, and then dividing them into smaller tracts to be sold to actual settlers. But in October 1763, the Privy Council in London took out a map of North America and drew a line along the crest of the Alleghany Mountains. Beyond that line, the ministers declared, no colonist would be permitted to settle.

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At first George Washington was confident that the Proclamation Line was only a “temporary expedient” that would soon be repealed. But the British government stood by the 1763 decree for the same reason that it had been promulgated in the first place: in order (as Washington put it) “to quiet the minds of the Indians.” It was not sympathy for the American Indians’ plight that had motivated the Privy Council to turn the area west of the Alleghanies into a giant reservation. Nor was it fear, since of course British officials were in no danger. The issue was financial. Earlier in 1763, more than a dozen Native American nations had joined together in a coalition dedicated to preserving their land. The ensuing revolt is popularly known as Pontiac’s Rebellion, though that label understates the range of the insurgency and exaggerates the role of a single Ottawa headman in a movement where leadership was actually quite dispersed.

If the Indians of present-day Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan had not decided to rebel in 1763, the

Privy Council might never have drawn the Proclamation Line, and land speculators like Washington and Jefferson would have had one less reason to rebel against Great Britain. The Declaration of Independence mentions the well-known issue of taxation once—and Indians and their land three times.

In 1769, the Virginia House of Burgesses (whose members included Thomas Jefferson and George Washington) unanimously adopted a resolution asking the Privy Council to repeal the Proclamation of 1763. British officials never acted on the request, and one reason was their abiding concern that taking the Indians' land would provoke renewed hostilities. Lord Hillsborough, George III's secretary for his American dominions, was determined to keep Britain out of a "general Indian War, the expense whereof will fall on this kingdom." The imperial government's ensuing decision to thwart the land-hungry provincials had the ironic effect of paving the way for an even more expensive war against a coalition of colonists.

INDISPENSIBLE ALLIES

Once the imperial government had announced its intention to clamp down on its North American colonists in the crucial areas of taxation, territory, and trade, the Americans responded with a wide variety of protests. While it was the Franklins, Jeffersons, and Adamses who made the speeches and published the pamphlets, the real work of erecting liberty poles, intimidating colonial officials, tarring and feathering the recalcitrant, taunting British soldiers, and eventually dumping East India Company tea into Boston Harbor fell to ordinary working people. Historians have shown that many of the most famous incidents of the Revolutionary era grew out of deep-seated conflicts that had begun long before the American Revolution formally began.

The best-known incident that grew out of this longstanding animosity was the so-called Boston Massacre. The shootings in King Street on the night of March 5, 1770, were a direct outgrowth of a host of petty conflicts, for instance a shouting match between workers at a ropewalk (where ships' rigging was made) and off-duty—and underpaid—British soldiers competing with them for work.

Less dramatic but more important to the eventual success of the American Revolution was a series of boycotts of trade with Britain. The best-known item on the banned list was tea, a beverage much more popular among women than men. Male patriots understood that the boycotts could not succeed without the help of their mothers, daughters, and wives, and the result was an unprecedented and highly successful effort to involve women in politics, initiated as much by the women themselves as by men.

The most valuable product that the colonists normally imported from the mother country was cloth, and when the patriots extended their boycott to textiles, they created another opportunity for American women. It was up to them to spin the thread (and in some cases weave the yarn) that would replace the fabric once imported from Britain.

"DOMESTIC INSURRECTIONS"

By the fall of 1774, most free colonists in British North America were angry at the imperial government, but very few of them wanted to wrench their colonies out of the British Empire. Most just wanted to turn back the clock—back to 1763, before Parliament and the Privy Council launched their irksome initiatives in the areas of taxation, territory, and trade. In 1775 and early 1776, a host of well-known factors—notably the British use of German ("Hessian") mercenaries, the loss of life at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill, and the publication of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*—conspired to convert free Americans to the cause of independence.

South of the line that Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon had surveyed in the mid-1760s, many colonists turned against the British for a less well-known reason. They were furious at King George III and his

American representatives for forming an alliance with African Americans.

At the time of the American Revolution, about one-fifth of the people in the rebelling colonies—approximately half a million souls—were enslaved. Early in the imperial conflict, black Americans began to perceive that the widening gap between white loyalists and patriots created a space of opportunity for themselves. During protests against the Stamp Act in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1765, white patriots were alarmed to hear their cries of “Liberty” echoed back to them by a group of their slaves. “In one of our Counties lately,” the young Virginian James Madison reported in November 1774, “a few of those unhappy wretches met together & chose a leader who was to conduct them when the English Troops should arrive.”

African Americans kept on conferring all through the winter and spring of 1775. During the third week of April 1775, officials in Williamsburg, the capital of Virginia, received a half dozen reports of slave insurrection conspiracies—more than during any previous week in the colony’s history. At the end of that same week, late in the evening of April 20, 1775, Lord Dunmore, Virginia’s royal governor, ordered the removal of the gunpowder from the powder magazine in the center of Williamsburg. White Virginians believed the governor’s timing was no coincidence—that he had deliberately removed the gunpowder amid the swirl of insurrection rumors in order to leave them vulnerable to the fury of their slaves. When independent military companies began marching toward Williamsburg in order to force the governor to return the gunpowder, Dunmore seemed to confirm his white subjects’ worst fears, declaring that if any top British official was harmed, he “would declare freedom to the slaves & reduce the city of Wmsburg to ashes.”

When a group of slaves offered to fight alongside the governor in return for their freedom, he turned them away and even threatened to have them beaten if they returned. But the slaves kept coming—rallying to the British standard not only in Virginia but in other British colonies as well. On November 14, 1775, Governor Dunmore’s “Ethiopian Regiment” (as he termed his African American troops) fought a battle against militiamen from Princess Anne County (now Virginia Beach) at Kemp’s Landing near Norfolk, and the black soldiers won.

The very next day, November 15, 1775, Dunmore issued an emancipation proclamation that was not too different from the one Abraham Lincoln would publish four score and seven years later. Like Lincoln’s, Dunmore’s proclamation did not free a single slave. He extended his offer only to black Virginians “appertaining to rebels” (Dunmore was himself a large-scale slaveholder) who were “able and willing” to bear arms for their king. Hundreds of slaves joined Dunmore. Within a year, the majority of them would die, primarily from smallpox. But a remnant survived and earned their freedom by serving on the British side throughout the war.

In the capstone grievance in the Declaration of Independence, the Continental Congress alleges that George III has “excited domestic insurrection amongst us.” Actually, given Governor Dunmore’s reluctance to act on his initially empty threat to “declare freedom to the slaves,” it is less accurate to say the British initiated their alliance with the slaves than that the slaves incited the British. Here was another case in which seemingly powerless Americans—the black men and women who are routinely excluded from the mammoth biographies that dominate most modern readers’ understanding of the American Revolution—played a crucial role in the conflict.

AN AMBIGUOUS LEGACY

In their own way (and sometimes inadvertently), Native Americans, enslaved blacks, and ordinary whites all helped propel men like Washington, Hamilton, and Hancock down the road to independence. In turn, the ensuing years of political upheaval and war powerfully influenced each of these groups.

The Americans who suffered the most were, ironically enough, those who had enjoyed the most success in battle: Indians. Despite their military successes, the American Indians lost out where it mattered most—at the bargaining table in Paris, where of course they were not represented. Although British officials had never purchased or conquered the region between the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers (essentially the modern-day Midwest), they nonetheless ceded this region to their former colonists in the peace treaty signed in Paris in 1783. It would be another decade before the US military conquered the Native American coalition striving to defend this land, but the nullification of the Proclamation of 1763 had begun on July 4, 1776.

For African Americans the outcome of the Revolutionary War was more complex. Now that white settlers claimed the Mississippi as their western border, slavery had plenty of room into which to expand—which it did after the invention of the cotton gin, with disastrous results for African Americans. On the other hand, the Revolutionary War permitted thousands of black Americans to claim their freedom. Two northern states, Massachusetts and the new state of Vermont, abolished slavery, and most of the others put it on the road to extinction (although in some cases this would prove to be a very long road). But many more slaves—perhaps 10,000 or more—obtained their freedom by fighting on the British side. After the war, the imperial government settled the bulk of them in Nova Scotia, but continuing discrimination convinced many of these refugees to accept Parliament's offer to move to the new British colony of Sierra Leone in West Africa. Others made their way to British colonies that remained in the imperial fold or to the home island. Some have even been traced to Australia.

Historians of the American Revolution have never been able to reach an agreement about what it did for—or to—free women. Most recently, women's historians have argued that free women did benefit—at least temporarily. They had been politicized during the 1760s and 1770s, as their domestic activities took on political meaning in the boycotts. Moreover, when men left home to become soldiers and statesmen, women took over their farms and businesses. As they mastered activities such as hiring farm workers and selling crops, their self-confidence grew. More than one wife who corresponded with her absent husband went from describing the family farm as “yours” early in the war to declaring it “ours” (and in some case “mine”) several years later.

Free women benefited in another way as well. Americans feared that their new form of republican government would fail unless ordinary men practiced political virtue—a willingness to sacrifice for their country. After the Revolution, reformers turned to women to instill this patriotism in their sons and daughters. Mothering thus became a “civic” act and Republican Motherhood a new ideology for women. With it came a realization that women could not properly instruct their children in virtue if they themselves did not receive a proper education in such fields as political theory, philosophy, and history. “If we mean to have Heroes, Statesmen and Philosophers,” Abigail Adams told her husband in August 1776, “we should have learned women.”

Yet, if these were gains for women, they were offset by the fact that full citizenship, including suffrage, was denied them. And, in many new states women's economic situation worsened as inheritance laws changed and put them at a disadvantage.

Free white men were the clearest winners of the American Revolution, but for the vast majority of freemen, these gains were modest at best. Historians have shown that, especially after the adoption of the US Constitution in 1789, ordinary farmers actually lost ground in some important areas. For instance, control over the money supply—which determined whether debtors gained at the expense of creditors or vice versa—passed from the colonial assemblies, many of which had been elected annually, to a federal government that often seemed beyond the reach of common plowmen.

If the vast majority of Americans of the founding era received few lasting benefits from the American Revolution, the long-term prospect was brighter. Most white men of the founding era chose not to respect

women's, African Americans', and Indians' right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of the happiness, and many members of the gentry class suspected that Jefferson's affirmation that all men are created equal was not even true among white males. And yet the promises of liberty and equality held forth in this document written by a slaveholder have continued to serve as beacons. The 1848 Seneca Falls Declaration of Rights and Sentiments that initiated the women's rights movement was modeled on the Declaration of Independence, and Frederick Douglass harried the consciences of white Northerners by asking, "What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?" Indeed the whole subsequent history of the United States can be summed up as a struggle between the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the circumstances of its creation.

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The War for Independence

by Ray Raphael



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British General Burgoyne (center left) surrenders to General Horatio Gates at Saratoga, NY, October 17, 1777, in this Currier print based on a painting by John Trumbull in the US Capitol (New York, 1852). (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

On July 4, 1774, exactly two years before the United States declared independence, a patriotic club in Worcester, Massachusetts, decided that each member should have in the ready two pounds of gunpowder and twelve flints. With the Massachusetts Government Act, Parliament had just revoked key provisions of the colony's provincial charter (like a constitution), and the people of Worcester vowed they were ready to fight to protect their political rights. Two months later 4,622 militiamen—half the adult population of this rural county—rode or walked for as many as fifty miles to gather along Worcester's Main Street and shut down the governmental machinery at the local level. The show of force was so overwhelming that the British military commander in Boston did not dare send in his troops.

Similar events were staged in other county seats. In Plymouth, some 4,000 patriots were so excited after they closed down the court that they tried to move Plymouth Rock up to the courthouse, but that proved more difficult than unseating government officials. So ended British rule in all of Massachusetts outside of Boston. Then on October 4, 1774, twenty-one months before the Declaration of Independence, the people of Worcester said it was time to start a new government from scratch. The *revolution* had begun.

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But wouldn't the king and his army fight back? To prepare for that seemingly inevitable event, patriots armed and trained through the winter, and when British troops marched on Lexington and Concord the following spring (1775), the patriots were ready. As British soldiers retreated toward Boston along what we know today as Battle Road, they were fired upon not by hick farmers taking potshots with rusty muskets, but by organized companies who had been training for such an event for half a year.

The *war* had now begun. American insurgents, after chasing British redcoats back into Boston, ringed the city and began a siege. This was no easy feat. It required the presence and patience of thousands upon thousands of farmers-turned-soldiers, now organized as the Continental Army. How would these men and teenage boys be fed, clothed, housed, and armed? Could they hold their own in the heat of battle? Come harvest time, would they simply pack up and go home to their farms? Through the next seven years, the Continental Congress and the state governments would find questions of supply and manpower as taxing as the military conflict.

Right from the start, the war proved something of a stalemate. When British forces tried to push the Americans off Breed's Hill (misnamed the Battle of Bunker Hill), 226 of their number were killed and another 826 wounded, just to gain a few hundred yards of dirt. Similarly, when American military and

political leaders, tired of waiting around, sent an expedition to faraway Quebec, the weakly guarded British outpost in Canada, the invaders were trounced. Whichever side took the initiative was likely to suffer a setback. George Washington, who took command of the Continental Army after the Battle of Breed's Hill, wanted to stage a direct attack on Boston, but much to his credit, he allowed himself to be talked out of the move by his war council.

The following March (1776), with the aid of cannons seized from the British at Fort Ticonderoga in upstate New York, Americans finally took a highland promontory known as Dorchester Heights, which overlooked Boston and its harbor. Rather than suffer an expected bombardment, British officers abandoned the city. Americans celebrated, but not for long. Come summer, 23,000 British regulars, 9,000 Hessian mercenaries (hired soldiers from a German state), a few thousand seamen, and 417 seaworthy vessels armed with some 1,200 cannons gathered in New York harbor. This was the largest military force ever assembled by Great Britain for a single expedition until the twentieth century.

Britain's fleet anchored near New York on July 2, 1776, the very day Congress voted for independence in Philadelphia, one hundred miles away. That vote would prove meaningless if the massive British force managed to crush Washington and his much smaller Continental Army. Military strategy is always easier in hindsight, but it would seem foolish for Washington to commit the bulk of his forces to the first line of resistance on Long Island, where, if defeated, they could be cut off from a retreat to the mainland. But rather than show weakness, the man Americans called "The General" did just that, and he and the fledgling nation almost paid a steep price. After a predictable defeat, American soldiers managed to escape from Long Island only because rough seas inhibited British ships from blocking off their line of retreat.

Washington's army was pushed back again, first from Manhattan to the mainland, then across the Hudson River and southward through New Jersey, with a British force at its heels. And winter was coming on. "These are the times that try men's souls," wrote Thomas Paine, who accompanied the Army as it drew back.[1] Early that same year, Paine's *Common Sense* had fueled the movement toward independence; now, in a series of writings called "The Crisis," Paine spurned "sunshine patriots" and urged the ragtag soldiers who remained with the Army to stay on.

They almost didn't. Enlistments were due to expire at the end of the year, and unless something could be done to change the men's minds, many and perhaps most would not re-enlist. That's when George Washington, who had voiced nothing but disdain for greenhorn militiamen, suddenly allied himself with local forces in a daring assault. On Christmas night of 1776, risking all, he staged a three-pronged crossing of the half-frozen Delaware River to surprise and defeat the British advance guard at Trenton. Striking again quickly, Washington and the Continentals, with help from local militias who knew the terrain, achieved another victory at Princeton a week later before settling into winter camp.

These two victories staved off defeat, but even so, the Continental Army found itself undermanned. At the outset men had volunteered, but after the first year they needed to be enticed by bounties, and when even that proved not enough, they were drafted. Each state and town needed to come up with its quota of soldiers. Many local governmental bodies staged lotteries, but when a man's number came up, that did not mean he had to go off and fight. If he had the money, he could hire someone else to take his place, and that is how the Continental Army came to be filled with poor men in need of money or a job and teenage boys out for adventure. They were patriots still, but this crew, for the most part, differed from those who first signed up.

As state and local governments searched for men to fill their quotas, they abandoned their earlier prohibitions against men of color (blacks and mulattoes, whether free or slave) fighting in the Army. Free blacks, often in need of money and a trade, made ready substitutes for white draftees who were willing to pay a price to avoid service. As the manpower shortage worsened, several state governments offered

bounties to masters who allowed their slaves to serve. Sometimes, but not always, slaves were promised their freedom in return for service, and sometimes, but not always, those promises were honored at war's end. As a result of all these measures, the ranks of the Continental Army in the North were filled by a disproportionate percentage of men of color. These patriot soldiers did not rise in the military hierarchy, but they served with honor. The all-black First Rhode Island Regiment of the Continental Army, organized in 1778, fought valiantly in the Battles of Rhode Island, Red Bank, and Yorktown.

Only in South Carolina and Georgia were blacks not recruited by American forces. Instead, to alleviate the manpower shortage, these states offered slaves as bounties to white recruits. Not welcomed in the American Army, thousands upon thousands of slaves fled to the British, who actively recruited them. In the upper South too, British promises proved effective. Lord Dunmore's proclamation of 1775, which offered freedom to slaves who fought on the British side, was followed by General Henry Clinton's offer of "full security" and an "occupation" to "every Negro who shall desert the Rebel standard."^[2] Women as well as men responded to these appeals, but as with patriot promises, British pledges often fell flat. When more slaves fled than British forces could handle, many were turned away to face the wrath of patriot slaveholders. Others were made servants of British officers or taken as slaves to British islands in the Caribbean. Some, meanwhile, turned into professional British soldiers, serving in the West Indies and eventually in the Napoleonic Wars. In 1783, when the British evacuated New York, 3,000 blacks who had fled for their freedom departed to Canada, where they were granted small plots of mostly poor land. Totalling almost half a million in number, almost 20 percent of the total population, African Americans held at least a share of the balance of power in the American Revolution, and as both sides contended with this truth, the lives of free blacks and slaves were significantly altered.

Women, too, played significant roles in the conflict. Because they were not subject to the same level of scrutiny, female riders were able to carry messages across contested terrain. Thousands traveled with the Continental Army, filling everyday functions necessary to military campaigns. They cooked and cleaned, they hauled supplies, and they worked on artillery teams. Most of the tasks required to keep an army in the field could be filled by woman power as well as man power, and in the Revolutionary War they were.

Women contributed on the home front as well. With men off to war and laborers scarce, they had to work that much harder. Wartime shortages forced them to weave more cloth, stretch food resources, and find ingenious ways to make do on limited budgets. In a war of attrition, which the Revolutionary War turned out to be, such everyday tasks took on military significance. If one side could not hold out, that side would lose.

As the war dragged on, a pattern emerged. The British were able to grab and hold New York and other port cities like Newport and Philadelphia, which they could resupply by sea. Whenever they journeyed into the interior, however, they confronted a small but dedicated Continental Army beefed up by homegrown militias that functioned, in the words of military historian John Shy, like "sand in the gears, . . . a great spongy mass that could be pushed aside or maimed temporarily but that had no vital center and could not be destroyed."^[3] That's certainly what happened in 1777 when the British General John Burgoyne set out with 8,000 soldiers from Canada down Lake Champlain and the Hudson River toward New York City, hoping to disunite the United States by cutting the new nation in two. With Washington and the main force of the Continental Army far to the south, local militiamen quickly came to the aid of the Northern Army, swelling its ranks to more than twice the British total and defeating the invaders handily.

Burgoyne's surrender at a place called Saratoga proved to France that the United States stood a chance at defeating Great Britain, its archenemy for the past hundred years. This had two consequences that altered the course of the war. First, France sent aid in the form of money, men, munitions, and eventually vessels that could challenge British command of the seas. Second, but equally important, it led to a renewal of armed hostilities between France and Great Britain, not only in America but also across the globe. In 1779 Britain was forced to defend against a combined French and Spanish fleet that gathered in 9/15/15, 8:16 AM

the English Channel. The following year the Dutch joined with France and Spain, and by 1781 Britain found itself engaged in armed conflict against these allies in the North Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, the southern tip of Africa, India, and the East Indies. With British forces spread this thinly, Washington, the Continental Army, and local militias stood a far better chance of prevailing in America.

Even so, the Americans could not disengage the British from their coastal enclaves, any more than the British could take and hold the interior. Aided by French support from the sea, they tried to dislodge a British fleet and army of occupation from Newport in 1778 but failed. Washington also wanted to attack the enemy in New York, but he once again ceded to better council and simply waited and watched from his outpost north of the city at West Point.

In 1779 Washington took aim at an easier target: Iroquois who had allied with British soldiers to stage attacks in Pennsylvania and western New York. He ordered General James Sullivan and 4,500 troops “to lay waste” to Indian towns “in the most effectual manner, that the country may not be merely overrun, but destroyed.”[4] Houses, orchards, and fields were burned, but that did not stop Indian resistance and the war in the west continued.

Five years into the war, there appeared no endgame for either side. The primary job for each army was to remain on duty, and even that proved difficult. To gather supplies, the British needed to raid American farms, thereby alienating local people, or ship goods across three thousand miles of ocean. American soldiers relied on civilians who already felt overburdened by the war, and the civilians did not always come through. The hard winter at Valley Forge (1777–1778) was followed by even harder times at Morristown, New Jersey (1779–1780, the coldest winter on record for the eastern seaboard of the United States), where soldiers were reduced to eating dogs and shoe leather. It was a war of endurance, to be lost rather than won.

Hoping to break the stalemate, British generals shifted their attention southward, where they expected to receive support from local loyalists. They took Savannah in 1778, held it against an American siege the following year, and in May of 1780, after a prolonged siege of their own, gained control of the South’s major port, Charleston. British soldiers then marched inland, where the fighting became notably brutal. Prisoners on both sides were not taken but slaughtered. The local population divided, some supporting the Americans and others the British, and entire battles were fought with hardly a redcoat in sight. Amid all this, slowly, a British army under General Charles Cornwallis made its way northward into Virginia, winning battles and gaining ground but losing many men.

Back at West Point, meanwhile, Washington’s patience was tried. In 1780 French allies landed in Newport, which the British had just abandoned to head south, but Washington could not interest the French commanders in a combined assault on New York. Finally, in May of 1781, he heard that a large French fleet under Admiral Comte de Grasse would soon be headed to the West Indies and available for short-term support on its way. In August, he learned further that the fleet was about to arrive in the Chesapeake Bay, in close proximity to Cornwallis and his southern army. Seizing the moment, he rushed the bulk of his troops southward, and the French force from Newport followed. The timing worked well. Expecting aid from British vessels, Cornwallis had parked his troops at Yorktown, Virginia, on a vulnerable peninsula. While the French fleet kept British ships from delivering supplies, Washington, the Comte de Rochambeau, and a combined American and French army staged a successful siege on land. Outnumbered, outmaneuvered, and with food growing scarce, Cornwallis offered to surrender on October 17, 1781, and two days later 7,000 soldiers under his command marched between the American ranks and laid down their arms.

According to most accounts, Yorktown marked the end of the War for Independence, but that is not exactly correct. Although Lord North, the British prime minister, remarked “Oh, God, it’s all over!” upon hearing the news, King George III thought it was not. His countrymen, after they recovered from the

“shock” of the loss, would certainly “find the necessity of carrying on the war,” he said.[5] In fact, there were still 47,000 British soldiers—more than four times as many men as served at that moment in the Continental Army—stationed in Canada, New York, South Carolina, Georgia, and the West Indies, and these could have been redeployed to continue the war. That’s exactly what worried George Washington, who warned Congress that failure to keep the Army in a state of preparation would “expose us to the most disgracefull disasters.”[6]

The war lingered on for almost another year. More Americans lost their lives in battle during that time than during the eventful first year of the war, which had included the notable battles of Lexington, Concord, Bunker Hill, and Quebec. In the end, though, the British conceded, not simply because of Yorktown, but because they were suffering losses in the Mediterranean, Africa, and India as well. The British Empire was simply spread too thin, and it was time to pull back. By giving up the fight in America, Britain would be better able to solidify its authority elsewhere.

And that is how the United States managed to double its size in the 1783 Treaty of Paris, which formally ended the war. Had Great Britain held onto the vast territory between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River, it would have accumulated great expenses and quite possibly found itself embroiled in future wars on the North American continent. On the other hand, by ceding this land to the United States, Britain would facilitate the growth of a new power that could challenge its traditional adversaries, France and Spain, for control of the American interior, thereby placing a strain on *their* resources. This is the global perspective so often lost in telling the tale of our national origins. The War for Independence was won not only because of the grit of the Americans; that was a necessary but not sufficient component. The war was won, and a new nation created, because the mother country had become so overextended it needed to contract.

[1] Thomas Paine, “The American Crisis,” No. 1, December 19, 1776, in *Thomas Paine Reader*, eds. Michael Foot and Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin, 1987), 116.

[2] Sir Henry Clinton, Phillipsburg Proclamation, June 30, 1779, quoted in Ray Raphael, *A People’s History of the American Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 331.

[3] John Shy, *A People Numerous & Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 238.

[4] George Washington to John Sullivan, May 31, 1779, in *The Writings of George Washington*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, DC: United States George Washington Bicentennial Commission, 1926) 15:189–93. Accessible on the Web at “Washington Resources at the University of Virginia Library, <http://etext.virginia.edu/washington/fitzpatrick/>.

[5] William Baring Pemberton, *Lord North* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1938), 335; King George III to Lord North, November 28, 1781, in *The Correspondence of King George III with Lord North* (London: W. Bodham Donne, 1867), 2:393.

[6] Washington to President of Congress, October 17, 1781, in Washington, *Writings*, 23:297.

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