

The American War of Independence

Although they were unaware of it at the time, on April 19, 1775, the War of Independence began in Massachusetts. Fearing insurgency, members of the British Regular Army (as opposed to local militias) were sent to the town of Concord to take any military provisions that were being held there. Colonial militiamen resisted in both Concord and Lexington, forcing the British Regulars to retreat to Boston, which was then attacked by colonials.

A Second Continental Congress was convened that appointed George Washington as commander of the Continental army recognizing that he had much work to do with limited resources; this army was composed of untrained soldiers who had not yet been organized. Washington's social status and reputation as a successful officer in the French and Indian War made him the right choice to organize and oversee the army. In March 1776, the Continental army's cannons pointed at Boston and forced the evacuation of the British Regulars to Halifax, Nova Scotia. Knowing that he had the numerical advantage, Washington tried to force a fast victory by attacking the British in Montreal (Quebec). The colonial force lacked the strength for a sustained siege, so once the British retreated into the walled city, the colonials were at a loss. When reinforcements reached the British, the American army had to retreat to New York.

In 1776, it appeared that the British were gaining strength as they took both New York City and Philadelphia. Their strategy was to divide and conquer: the intent was to separate New England from the middle and southern colonies and then tackle one area at a time. Recognizing the military genius of Washington, they wanted him to remain isolated from other strong leaders.

Unfortunately for the British, the colonists used the type of warfare that worked to their advantage: guerrilla warfare. The Americans knew the territory well, and in particular could use the forested areas for refuge and attack. The British were often stumbling across natural barriers such as lakes or rivers that they didn't know of; making it necessary to reroute the soldiers, often into enemy areas where they were then ambushed. In 1777, General John Burgoyne suffered from this calamity and his battalion was forced to surrender at the battle of Saratoga.

While the fighting continued, the British offered conciliatory measures and there were offers for peace. After July 1776, however, the Americans were unwilling to accept any offer that did not include independence. Lexington and Concord were the turning points in which American colonists no longer desired autonomy; they now wanted complete freedom from the British Crown. This was articulated in the Declaration of Independence.

Declaration of Independence, 1776

At the beginning of the War of Independence, the objectives of the colonists were not entirely clear, even to those fighting. Once again, the Continental Congress was convened to decide the collective war aims for the 13 colonies. It was determined that the colonies had to present a united front, and that unanimity would be necessary for any decision: there were 56 representatives from the colonies with diverse and often disparate viewpoints represented. In June 1776, the Congress named the Committee of Five to write a statement of common action with the understanding that all representatives must approve the document for it to be released. The Committee included John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston and Roger Sherman, but the true author of the draft would be Thomas Jefferson, a representative from Virginia. The draft was presented to the Congress which debated the terms and edited it so that they could reach consensus. The final product left most of Jefferson's words intact; this was to become the Declaration of Independence, which was approved on July 4, 1776. The Declaration was a formal statement of the liberation of the 13 colonies from Britain and the creation of a new country—the United States of America. The Declaration showed the commitment of these colonies to merge into one political unit that would work collectively to overthrow British rule. It also gave the rationale for independence and explained the grievances that the colonists had against King George III and the mother country.

Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826)

The third president of the United States and main author of the Declaration of Independence was born to wealthy landowners in the colony of Virginia. He attended the College of William and Mary and studied law. In 1772, he married Martha Wayles Skelton and went to his home in Monticello to run the estate.

He was a member of the House of Burgesses and then the Continental Congress; while a quiet member of Congress, he was an eloquent writer who used his talent to sway people to the cause of colonial autonomy. In 1774, he wrote "A Summary View of the Rights of British America" in which he criticized the Coercive Acts and justified colonial actions such as the Boston Tea Party not just on legal grounds but also as part of the natural rights of British Americans. At the age of 33, this "silent member" of the Congress was asked to draft the Declaration of Independence with the assistance of four others.

During the war he served as Governor of Virginia. In 1785, he replaced Benjamin Franklin as the US Minister to France and served as Secretary of State until his endorsement of the French Revolution led to conflict with other members of Washington's Cabinet, so he resigned in 1793.

As American politicians became polarized on the issue of the French Revolution and the nature of government, Jefferson became a supporter of the Democratic-Republicans against the Federalists. He was an opponent of strong central government and wrote vehement articles advocating states' rights. He ran for president in 1796 and lost to John Adams by three votes, becoming vice president, and in 1800 he was elected president by one vote. In his first term, the US acquired the Louisiana Purchase from France (1803) and he supported the Lewis and Clark expedition to explore the territory between the United States and the Pacific Ocean. In his second term, he confronted more pressing domestic issues in the wake of US expansion and sought to avoid his country's participation in the war between France and Great Britain. After his second term he retired to Monticello, selling his books to the US government to form the Library of Congress and founding the University of Virginia, the first non-sectarian university in the United States. He died on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the document that made him famous.



Activity

Extracts from the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

Source A

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume ... the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

Questions

- 1 In this passage, what is Jefferson explaining?
- 2 What does Jefferson mean when he wrote that "all men are created equal"?

Source B

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 or to abolish it, and to institute new Government ... Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes. ... But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. ... The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States.

Questions

- 1 How are people allowed to pursue "unalienable rights"?
- 2 What are the "repeated injuries and usurpations" that Jefferson refers to?

Source C

We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies solemnly publish and declare, 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; and that, as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do.

Questions

- 1 What is Jefferson stating in this concluding paragraph?
- 2 What rights do the "United Colonies" have?

General discussion

- 1 How does the Declaration reflect the historical context in which it was written?
- 2 Who was the primary intended audience?
- 3 What makes this so revolutionary for the time?

The Battle of Saratoga

The Battle of Saratoga represented a key turning point in the Revolutionary War. The advance of troops began when the British decided to send an army from Canada to take upstate New York and the Hudson River, to divide the Americans in New England from the rest of the colonies. After successfully taking Fort Ticonderoga from the patriots, the 6,000-man royalist army led by Major General Burgoyne advanced to the city of Albany which they found protected by 7,000 Americans led by Major General Gates.

September 19, 1777, marked the first Battle of Saratoga. The British attacked the patriots at Freeman's Farm and drove them into a retreat to Bemis Heights with substantial casualties on both sides. The British kept up their assault on the patriots but this only served to wear them down, so on October 7 the patriots decided to counterattack. The full-on attack stunned the British who were then forced to retreat; when they reached Saratoga, Burgoyne surrendered to the patriots.

The British never managed to sever ties between New England and the rest of the colonies, and seeing the success of the patriots, the French decided to support the cause of American independence. The colonies consolidated their control over the north, and the British switched their efforts to fighting in the south where they thought there was a greater chance of victory.

Foreign intervention: France, Prussia, Spain

At the beginning of the war, the Continental Congress met with the French to try and secure an alliance, although France was eager to reverse the fortunes of the British after their victory in the French and Indian War. In 1776, they began the covert support of the revolutionary forces by providing the Americans with armaments and use of their ports. Seeing the American success at Saratoga, the French were convinced of the viability of the American forces and in 1778 signed treaties of commerce and alliance with the newly-created United States of America. Spain and the Netherlands also joined the war on the side of the United States in 1779 and 1780 respectively.

The French proved to be an especially helpful ally on the high seas where the extent of the British Empire had stretched its navy thin, leaving it unable to patrol all areas. French, Spanish and Dutch navies prevented a British blockade of the United States and allowed provisions to continue to arrive, while also interrupting the flow of trade from the West Indies to Great Britain. In 1776 alone, the amount of sugar shipped to Britain was halved. However, the American victory over the British would prove costly to France, and the French Crown in particular; it cost the French more than the three previous wars

it had fought put together. This left the French with a financial crisis that would ultimately end the regime of Louis XVI.

The British also received foreign assistance, with support from the German kingdoms and the Native Americans who feared American expansionism. Various members of the German Confederation provided 30,000 soldiers that served in the US War of Independence. Native Americans attacked frontier settlements in New York and Pennsylvania, often from bases in the Ohio territory to the west. The Continental Army retained control of the highly strategic Fort Pitt (located at the confluence of the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio rivers) and pursued a scorched-earth policy against the natives, destroying villages and crops, and making them a negligible force in the war.

The end of the war and the Treaty of Paris

In 1778, the British felt they needed to change their tactics and focused on the southern states instead. They believed that the southern colonies were more loyal and that resistance would collapse once they felt the force of armed combat in their regions. Once again, the British found themselves the target of guerrilla warfare and while they took the cities of Savannah, Georgia and Charles Town in South Carolina, they were unable to penetrate the inland territories. The American forces successfully undertook a policy of attrition, and while they lost most of the battles, they ultimately succeeded in wearing down the British. In 1781, Lord Cornwallis fought what proved to be the final major battle of the war. At Yorktown (Virginia) Washington and the French General Rochambeau trapped the Cornwallis forces on the peninsula of Yorktown with 17,000 soldiers. The French navy prevented British ships from landing and provisioning or reinforcing the British army, and Cornwallis surrendered his army of 7,000 men in October 1781.

The British government determined that it was more costly to continue the war, especially with French assistance to the Americans. The British agreed to a cease-fire with the Americans, but fighting against the French continued until 1782, when the British defeated the French navy in the Caribbean. In the Treaty of Paris (1783), the British formally recognized the independence of the United States of America and ceded all of its territory east of the Mississippi River and south of the Great Lakes. The United States demanded Canada, but the British rebuffed this and maintained its colonial possessions in America north of the Great Lakes. With this, the United States was now independent and could pursue its own destiny as an independent country. Its influence in the region and the world was yet to be established, but a precedent had been set: colonies could overthrow their imperial powers and establish their own state with its own structure of government. The influence of the mother country would be evident in the new state, but direct oversight was gone.