A More Perfect Union: American Independence and the Constitution

THE **CHOICES** PROGRAM

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History and Current Issues for the Classroom

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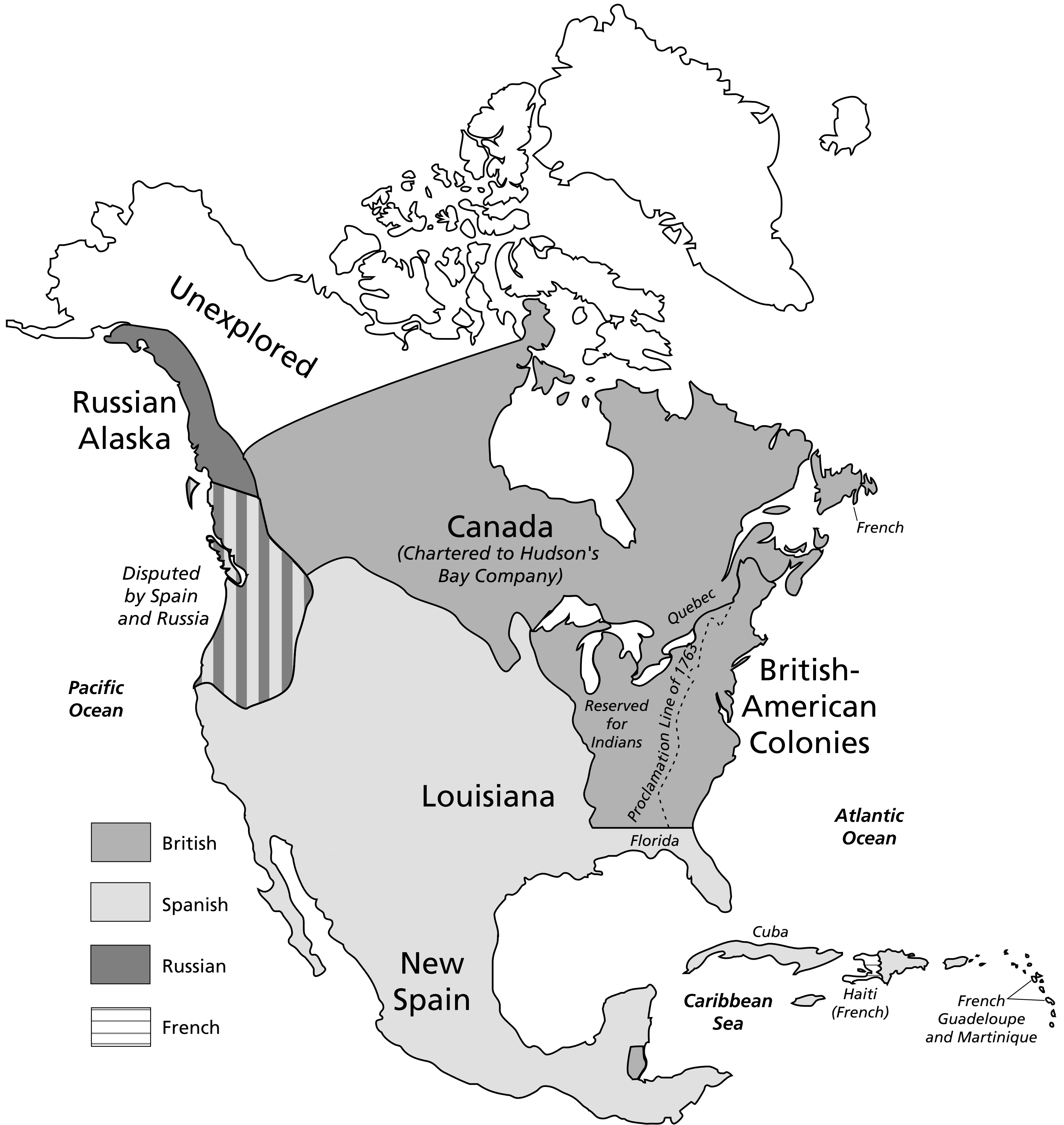
North America in 1763



Part I: In the Beginning—Englishmen in the New World

Christopher Columbus's arrival in the New World in 1492 set off a wave of European discovery and exploration that changed the course of history. Compared to Spain and Portugal, England was a latecomer in the rush across the Atlantic Ocean. Nonetheless, by the end of the sixteenth century the English had laid claim to vast tracts of territory in North America.

The kings and queens of England wanted to encourage their subjects to establish settlements in the New World. They permitted select groups to start colonies, or plantations as they were called, in North America. The colonies were seen largely as business ventures. In some cases, private investors formed a company, much like those listed on stock exchanges today, to launch a colony. The investors supplied the resources and attracted settlers. In other cases, a wealthy aristocrat or the English monarch would sponsor a colony. Often these ventures failed to get off the ground.

Private investors were required to obtain a charter to establish a colony. Through the charter, the English monarch defined the territory assigned to the colony, ensured that the crown would receive a portion of any mineral resources found in the colony, described the procedures by which the colony would be governed, and guaranteed that the settlers would retain the full rights and privileges of Englishmen.

Note to Students

Protests against taxes, armed groups defying the government, threats and terrorist attacks aimed at symbols of power, and heated debates in the media about individual rights and government authority: it all sounds familiar. And yet this turmoil and upheaval describes the circumstances of the two million people living in the original thirteen states during the late 1700s.

The controversies of the eighteenth century about the purpose and limits of government, as well as the violent struggle for independence, represent the birth pangs of our country. They also speak to us today. Like America's founders, we too are engaged in the process of thinking what we want our government to be. The debates of more than two centuries ago help us clarify the choices we as responsible citizens must face.

In *A More Perfect Union: American Independence and the Constitution*, you will experience the events of 1763-88 as Americans of that time experienced them. You will study the political ideas, public statements, and actions that led to the creation of the United States. Most important, you will understand how the founders of our country grappled with the issues of their day.

As is the case today, Americans in 1776 or 1788 were hardly unanimous about framing the political structure of their society. On the contrary, divisions and disagreements ran deep. In these readings, you will examine primary sources to reconstruct the conflicts of the late 1700s. You will be given a special insight into the difficulties confronting our country's founders and the timelessness of the issues they raised. As you will see, this unit is far removed from the portraits of elderly statesmen in frock coats and powdered wigs. Instead, you will discover the fiery radicals, conscience-torn loyalists, and reluctant patriots who, each in their own way, strove to secure life, liberty, and well-being for themselves, their families, and their communities.

You should pay special attention to the primary source documents included in this unit. Although the English language of past centuries poses a challenge for readers today, you should do your best to extract meaning from the documents. Your effort will pay off in a clearer understanding of the emotions and reasoning expressed during the first years of the American republic.

"James, by the Grace of God, King of England, Scotland, France, and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, etc.... vouchsafe unto them [the listed investors] our license to make habitation, plantation, and to deduce a colony of sundry of our people into that part of America commonly called Virginia.... Our subjects which shall dwell and inhabit within every or any of the said several colonies and plantations, and every of their children, which shall happen to be born within any of the limits and precincts of the said several colonies and plantations shall have and enjoy all liberties, franchises, and immunities, within any of our other dominions, to all intents and purposes, as if they had been abiding and born within this our realm of England."

—Charter of the Virginia colony, issued by King James I in 1606

Mercantilism Guides Colonial Policy

The rulers of England and other European nations believed that the colonies in the New World existed to strengthen the "mother country." England pursued a policy known as mercantilism which determined its economic and political relations with the American colonists.

What did the colonies send to England and what did they get in return?

This mercantilist policy led England's rulers to see the New World as a source of raw materials. The American colonies were expected to export food and basic commodities to the mother country and their sister colonies. In addition, the colonies produced indigo, cotton, and furs for the workshops of England. Lumber, tar, and hemp from the colonies equipped England's growing navy. Gold, silver, and even iron ore were shipped to English ports. The law treated colonists as English subjects in their commercial dealings with the mother country and England's other colonial possessions.

Exports from America gave England an edge in its ongoing competition with the other European powers. The colonies contributed to England's wealth and made the mother country less dependent on imports from the European mainland. In times of war, England made use of the ships built in the colonies, drafted colonial sailors to serve in the English navy, and enlisted colonial militias to fight in North America. In return, the colonies were protected by the English military from attacks by England's European rivals and their Native American allies.

What trade restrictions did England impose on the colonies?

England also defined the colonies as closed markets. Only manufactured goods from the mother country could be purchased in the colonies. English rulers hoped to fuel the growth of their domestic industries and increase the national wealth through exports to the colonies.

The Navigation Acts tightly controlled trade in the Americas. Colonial merchants were generally forbidden to import goods from other countries, even if the price of English goods was higher. The few foreign imports that were allowed into the colonies had first to be shipped to an English port, transported across the Atlantic on an English vessel, and resold through an English merchant.

In most years, the value of the finished goods imported from England exceeded the value of the raw materials exported from the colonies. Colonial retail merchants who sold English goods were required to pay their English wholesalers in gold and silver coin. English authorities also demanded that colonial merchants pay taxes on imported items in gold or silver. The gap in trade, referred to as the "balance of payments deficit," meant that the colonies often suffered a shortage of gold and silver coins. Whatever gold or silver the colonists acquired through trade quickly flowed back to England.

Despite the restrictions of British mercantilism, the colonies prospered and grew. By 1766, the population along the Atlantic Coast had risen to about two million. (The population of England and Wales at the same time was roughly seven million.)

The colonists gradually developed an identity that set them apart from Britain. They had created a society that was much more democratic than that of Britain. White men in the colonies were more likely to be involved in the decision-making process of government than their English counterparts. They were also more likely to work for themselves, primarily as small farmers, and to be able to read and write.

What role did smuggling play in the colonies?

In practice, the British exercised lax control over the colonies. Smuggling was a major business up and down the Atlantic seaboard. Illegal trade allowed merchants to market non-British products and avoid paying high taxes. Many reaped huge profits. John Hancock, the richest man in British North America, made much of his fortune through smuggling. In some American ports, smuggled goods accounted for half of the imported cargo of manufactured goods.

Smuggling also involved exports. The colonists illegally sold their cargoes in French, Dutch, and Spanish ports to avoid taxes and regulations. In turn, they were paid in gold or silver, which helped the colonies close the balance of payments deficit with Britain.

The colonists vigorously opposed efforts to curtail smuggling. They pointed out that smuggling was widespread in Britain itself. In fact, the illegal trade in wine and tea in Britain was worth more than three million pounds sterling a year. (The purchasing power of a pound sterling in the 1700s was equivalent to about one hundred dollars today.) The colonists' strong stance led royal customs officials to ignore most smuggling. Not only did British officials fear a backlash from the colonists, but they also recognized the central role of illegal trade in the colonial economy.

"Poor old England endeavoring to reclaim his wicked children."

From *The Cartoon History of the American Revolution.*

What powers did the colonists have in their government?

The principles of mercantilism shaped Britain's trade and tax policy in the colonies. Nevertheless, the colonists were granted substantial authority to govern their affairs in other areas. Most of the colonies were ruled by a governor, a council, and a legislature. Colonists with the right to vote (limited mainly to white men with property) elected representatives to the legislature. The governor, who was appointed by the monarch, could veto the decisions of the legislature. Each colony also had a high court.

While the governors, chief judges, and customs officials in the colonies were accountable to Britain, they usually depended on the colonial legislatures for their salaries. The hold of the colonists over the "power of the purse" gave them an effective tool for influencing Britain's representatives. The Board of Trade, the body within the British government responsible for overseeing the colonies, complained that the colonists often overstepped their authority.

> ***"Thus, although the government of this province [Massachusetts] be nominally in the Crown and the governor appointed by your majesty, yet the unequal balance of their constitution having lodged too great a power in the assembly, this province is likely to continue in great disorder. They [the colonists] do not pay a due regard to your Majesty's instructions; they do not make a suitable provision for the maintenance of their governor and on all occasions they affect too great an independence of their mother Kingdom."***
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> —Report of the Board of Trade to King George II, 1721

To avoid conflict, the British government, much like a permissive parent, often looked the other way when the colonists challenged the mother country. Edmund Burke, a leading member of the British Parliament who sympathized with colonial concerns, described the policy as "salutary [beneficial] neglect."

As the colonies developed, the inhabitants paid increasing attention to political matters. Although the colonists enjoyed the same rights as other English subjects, they did not have a voice in the British Parliament. Ultimately, it was the Parliament, not the colonial legislatures, that established policy on trade, taxation, and other issues that most deeply affected the economic lives of the colonists.

The Rights of Englishmen

In order to understand the colonists' relationship to the British government, it is helpful to look briefly at that government's development. In the 1700s, Britain began the early stages of its own democratic transformation. (In 1707, the Parliament of Great Britain, or Britain, came to govern England, Wales, and Scotland.) The roots of British—as well as American—democracy extend well back into the Middle Ages. As early as 1215, English nobles forced King John to accept limits to his powers in the Magna Carta [Great Charter].

What actions did Englishmen take to gain their rights?

After the Magna Carta, the rights of the king's subjects gradually expanded. The relationship between the state and the people, however, was never written down in a single document, like the U.S. Constitution. Instead, the constitution that governed England evolved over centuries and was shaped by custom, acts of Parliament, judicial decisions, and concessions by the king or queen.

In the 1600s, the development of the English constitution clashed with royal authority. With the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603, James I, the first of four kings from the Stuart clan, came to the throne. The Stuarts embraced the "divine right" of kings—the belief that monarchs were responsible only to God for their actions. The Stuarts resented sharing power with Parliament, which had gained expanded influence under the constitutional system.

The position of the Stuarts met especially sharp resistance in the lower house of Parliament, known as the House of Commons. The lower house represented commoners—English men who were neither nobles nor clergy. Twice during the seventeenth century, the Commons led revolts against the Stuarts. In 1649, the rebels executed King Charles I, and for the next eleven years England remained without a monarch. In 1688, King James II was forced to abandon his throne, paving the way for another branch of the royal family to wear the English crown.

The overthrow of James II had particular political significance. The "Glorious Revolution of 1688," as the revolt was called, encouraged a new generation of philosophers to reassess the purpose of government. One of the most eloquent was John Locke.

What did John Locke mean by a "social contract?"

Locke rejected the divine right philosophy of the Stuart kings. In contrast, he argued that society should be governed by a "social contract" which defined the rights and obligations of both the ruler and the people. He stated that the authority of the government came from the approval of the people.

Locke believed that government was not legitimate without "the consent of society, over whom no body can have a power to make laws but by their own consent." For Locke, this meant that the government should not raise taxes or lay claim to property without the agreement of those affected. Perhaps most radically, Locke concluded that the people had the right to revolt against a ruler who broke the contract between the government and the governed.

"To understand political power right we must consider what state all men are naturally in and that is a state of perfect freedom to order their actions and dispose of their possessions and persons as they think fit, a state also of equality....The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind that all being equal and independent no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions.... Though in the state of nature he hath such a right, yet the enjoyment of it is very uncertain, very unsafe, very unsecure. This makes him willing to join a society with others for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberty and estates. [This is] the great and chief end of men's uniting into common-wealths and putting themselves under government."

—John Locke

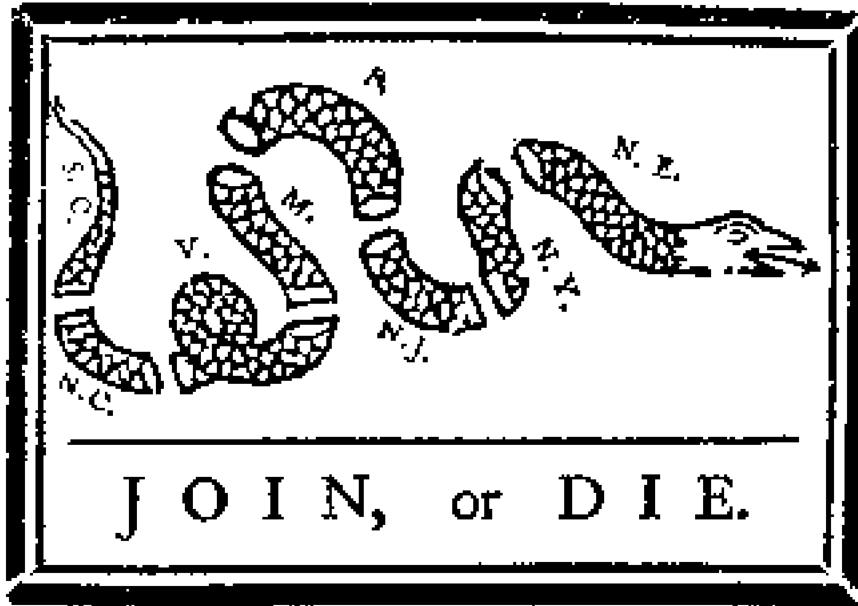
Many of Locke's ideas found their way into the constitutional system that emerged in Britain after 1688. For the first time, Parliament held the lion's share of power in the new arrangement. Top government officials or ministers were still appointed by the king or queen, but they were now members of Parliament who depended on the support of their fellow legislators to maintain authority.

Members of Parliament who sought to increase the legislature's influence at the expense of the monarch were called "Whigs." Those who took the side of the monarch in the power struggle were known as "Tories."

The rise of Parliament eventually heightened the tension between Britain and the colonies. The monarchy, not the Parliament, had originally chartered each of the colonies. Moreover, royal officials in America were responsible directly to the crown. By the mid-1700s, questions about the legitimacy of Parliament's authority in the colonies increasingly cast doubt on Britain's role in America. Like John Locke before them, colonists began to ask if they were obligated to obey laws passed without their consent.

Wars of Empire

During much of the seventeenth century, the American colonists were frequently called



A wood engraving in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, published by Benjamin Franklin, 1754.

on to defend the interests of the British empire, especially as France strengthened its claims in the New World. Queen Anne's War (1702-13) included fighting between English settlers west of the Appalachian Mountains and French forces, who were joined by their Indian allies.

By the time King George's War (1744-48) broke out, the colonists had come to believe that France's presence in North America was the chief obstacle to their safety, expansion, and economic development. Colonial militia forces achieved one of the most decisive victories of the conflict, capturing the French fortress on Cape Breton Island (now part of Canada), which guarded the approaches to France's holdings in North America. During peace negotiations, however, Britain returned the fortress to France, leaving the colonists bitterly disappointed.

The settlement that ended King George's War was in fact typical of the period. Most of the wars among Britain and its European rivals were limited conflicts. The high cost of maintaining a professional army and navy stretched the economic resources of even the most powerful nations. In the global chess match involving the European powers, colonial possessions were often swapped like pawns.

What was the major cause of the French and Indian War?

The next Anglo-French war marked a break with the past. Not only was the war much more destructive than earlier confrontations, but American colonists were responsible for starting it. The fighting began when a group of Virginia land speculators received a grant of 200,000 acres in the Ohio River Valley. Because the land was also claimed by the French, a small colonial force under the command of Major George Washington was sent in 1754 to capture a French fort in western Pennsylvania. The colonists were easily defeated by the French. The Virginia legislature responded by requesting help from Britain. London ordered General Edward Braddock, the new commander-in-chief of British forces in North America, and fifteen hundred regular British troops to counter the French. In 1755, French forces and their Indian allies killed Braddock in an ambush.

As the events west of the Appalachians unfolded, representatives from seven colonial legislatures met in Albany, New York, in 1754 to coordinate their defense. Benjamin Franklin, a delegate from Pennsylvania, proposed that the colonies form a "grand council," whose members would be appointed by the colonial legislatures. Legislators rejected Franklin's "Albany Plan of Union," as it was called, because they feared the loss of local control. The British government also opposed the plan, seeing it as a threat to London's rule over the colonies.

What was the outcome of the French and Indian War?

The outbreak of fighting between Britain and France changed attitudes on both sides of the Atlantic. By 1756, what was known in the colonies as the French and Indian War had spread to Europe. (In Britain, the conflict was known as the Seven Years' War.) After a string of setbacks, the British rallied under the leadership of a new prime minister, William Pitt. With help from the colonists, British forces overran France's key fortresses in Canada. They also captured French islands in the Caribbean.

With the French in retreat, an intense debate erupted in the British press about what demands should be placed on the French. Britain had no intention of destroying France. Rather, the goal of British policy was to maintain a stable balance of power on the European mainland. The question at hand focused on which prizes of war Britain should claim.

On one side were those who wanted to hold onto the Caribbean islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, where the French had set up plantations to grow sugar, cotton, and indigo. They favored returning captured territory in Canada to France, arguing that driving the French out of Canada would reduce the need for Britain's protection of the American colonies. According to their line of reasoning, the colonists would begin thinking about establishing their independence from Britain if the French threat was eliminated. On the other side were those who contended that Canada was more important to British interests than the Caribbean islands. Their position was supported by the colonists.

In the Treaty of Paris of 1763, the British forced the French to give up Canada while allowing them to retain Guadeloupe and Martinique. The consequences for Britain's American empire were to be disastrous.

Part II: The Widening Split—1763-65

In few other periods of American history does the pace of events compare to the years immediately after the French and Indian War. Within a decade, relationships that had been built up over 170 years between the colonies and the mother country were ruptured. The "salutary neglect" of an earlier era was forgotten. Minor disagreements often escalated into bitter, even violent, confrontations. Towns and villages throughout the colonies were thrown into turmoil, frequently pitting neighbor against neighbor and brother against brother.

The Price of Empire

Much of the turmoil that followed the French and Indian War was directly related to the outcome of the conflict. Even in victory, Britain was left with war debts of more than 140 million pounds. The financial burden on Britain was considerable. The mother country looked toward the colonies to help pay the costs of maintaining the British empire. To British officials, their expectations seemed reasonable. After all, the French and Indian War had been sparked by the colonists and its results had greatly benefited them.

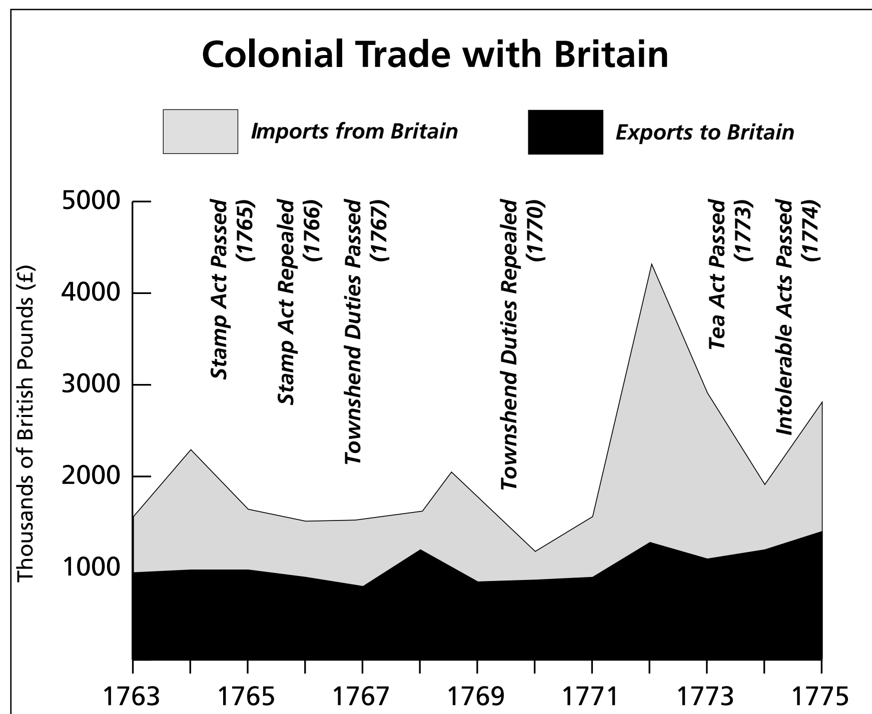
The colonies, in fact, were in a good position to lend support to the empire. Within a few years, colonial legislatures collected sufficient taxes to pay their own much smaller war debts. Furthermore, the colonists paid much less in taxes than their counterparts in Britain.

The French defeat also opened the door to westward expansion by the colonists. The movement west brought them into conflict with the Native Americans of the Great Lakes region. In 1763, Native American forces under the leadership of Chief Pontiac overran seven British forts before being pushed back.

How did Britain tighten control on the American colonists?

The quickening pace of colonial expansion alarmed London. British officials worried that colonial ties to the mother country would weaken as colonists settled further inland. To slow the westward expansion and avoid further trouble with the Indians, Britain issued the Proclamation of 1763. The decree forbade colonists from settling west of the Appalachians. The colonists objected to the restrictions drawn up by London and for the most part ignored them.

Meanwhile, the British increased the number of troops stationed along the frontier to seventy-five hundred. To pay for the soldiers, which cost about 320,000 pounds a year, the British imposed the Sugar Act in the colonies in 1764 to collect taxes on imported molasses. In 1765 they also passed the Stamp Act.



Data from *The Great Republic: A History of the American People.*

The Sugar Act in fact lowered the official tax on imported molasses from six pence a gallon to three pence. What changed was the level of enforcement. Before 1764, taxes on molasses imported from the French sugar-growing islands of the Caribbean were rarely collected in the colonies. The colonists relied on molasses as their main sweetener and as the basis for rum, their favorite alcoholic beverage.

In "The Wise Men of Gotham and their Goose," a British cartoonist pokes fun at efforts by Parliament to squeeze more revenue out of the American colonies.

From *The Cartoon History of the American Revolution.*

To stop the smuggling of molasses, Britain gave its navy more power to seize merchant vessels. British naval courts, rather than local courts with juries, tried suspected smugglers.

The Stamp Act required that all legal documents in the colonies bear a tax stamp that could be purchased only from official tax collectors. Bills of sale, wills, shipping invoices, even playing cards and newspapers had to carry the tax stamp. Prime Minister George Grenville, the author of the Stamp Act, offered to repeal the new tax if another source of revenue could be found. "[I] am not set upon this tax," Grenville remarked. "If the Americans dislike it and prefer any other method of raising the money themselves...and if they choose any other mode I shall be satisfied, provided the money be raised."

How did the colonists protest against British controls?

The Sugar Act and the Stamp Act raised revenue which was earmarked specifically to offset the cost of stationing British troops in North America. The announcement of the new taxes provoked a hornet's nest of protest in the colonies.

Colonial legislatures and towns declared the taxes to be "unlawful," "unconstitutional," and "without precedent." The colonists were particularly upset that they had no voice in developing tax policy. They contended that the new taxes denied them their basic rights as English subjects by taking away their property against their will.

Opponents of British policy called themselves patriots. James Otis, John Dickinson, and other patriots argued that the new taxes violated the principles of the British constitution. They conceded that Parliament had the right to regulate trade in the empire through taxes on imports. However, the patriots held that Parliament had crossed a crucial line by

imposing taxes designed specifically to raise revenue, since the colonists were not represented in the legislature.

> ***"For if our trade be taxed why not our lands and everything we possess and make use of? This we apprehend annihilates our charter Right to govern and tax ourselves. It strikes at our British privileges, which as we have never forfeited them we hold in common with our fellow subjects who are natives of Britain. If taxes are laid upon us in any shape without our having a legal representation where they are laid, are we not reduced from the character of free subjects to the miserable state of tributary slaves?"***
>
> —Resolution adopted in Boston, May 1764

When officials in London suggested that parliamentary representation for the colonies might be considered, patriot leaders made it clear that was not the solution they had in mind. The legislatures of Virginia and South Carolina went so far as to pass resolutions rejecting the idea of colonial representation in Parliament. In effect, patriot spokesmen were saying that the colonies could be taxed only by their own colonial legislatures.

Meanwhile, groups of patriots calling themselves the "Sons of Liberty" harassed local tax collectors. The first outbreak of violence took place in Boston in 1765, when a mob destroyed the home of Andrew Oliver, a wealthy colonist who had been appointed as a stamp tax agent. The patriots carried out their attack under the rallying cry "liberty, property, and no stamp." A local garrison of sixty British troops did not attempt to intervene. Two weeks later, another mob led by the Sons of Liberty looted the house of the Massachusetts lieutenant governor, whose family had lived in the colony for several generations. Again, no one was punished for the attack.

Most worrisome for London was a boycott of British goods organized by colonial merchants. The merchants vowed that they would not import British products for resale in the colonies until the Stamp Act was repealed. Because the two million colonists represented a substantial market, British manufacturers were sure to feel the boycott. The boycott also made financial sense for many merchants. Cutting off imports would allow them to sell their existing stocks of merchandise at higher prices as supplies dried up.

What was Pitt's compromise?

The boycott brought quick results. British business leaders petitioned Parliament to repeal the Stamp Act, pointing out that colonial merchants not only refused to import British goods, but were unable to repay the nearly five million pounds they owed British suppliers. Whig leaders in Parliament, led by William Pitt, joined in the criticism of their country's tax measures toward the colonies.

Pitt genuinely sympathized with the complaints of the colonists. He shared their opposition to imposing taxes on citizens who had no voice in Parliament. More important, Pitt feared that the new taxes would loosen Britain's hold over its restless colonies in America and undermine trade (amounting to more than two million pounds a year) between the colonies and the mother country.

> ***"I stand up for this kingdom. I maintain, that the Parliament has a right to bind, to restrain America....When two countries are connected together, like England and her colonies, the one must necessarily govern, the greater must rule the less; but so rule it as not to contradict the fundamental principles that are common to both."***
>
> —William Pitt

As Pitt recommended, the Stamp Act and the Sugar Act were repealed in 1766. British legislators then passed the Declaratory Act, stating that Parliament had full authority to make laws binding on the colonies "in all cases whatsoever."

Both sides of the Atlantic celebrated the end of the confrontation. Pitt won widespread praise. The inscription on a medal cast in his honor hailed him as, "The man who, having saved the parent, pleaded with success for her children."

In reality, the Stamp Act and the Sugar Act raised central issues that had not been resolved. The limits of colonial self-government remained unclear. So did the extent of the mother country's determination to curb the independent spirit of her colonial children.

Taxation without Representation

In 1767, the British government, now led by Chancellor of the Exchequer Charles Townshend, tried once more to raise revenue from the colonies to help pay for the administration and protection of British North America. The government placed new taxes on the import of glass, lead, paint, paper, and tea. The "Townshend Duties," as the taxes came to be known, were expected to cover about 10 percent of Britain's expenses in North America.

Unlike the Stamp Act, which affected thousands of colonists conducting everyday business, the Townshend Duties were to be collected from colonial merchants before their imports could be unloaded in American ports. Townshend hoped that crafting a narrowly focused tax on the colonial merchant class would enable him to avoid the controversy kicked up by the Stamp Act. He was wrong.

How did the colonists react to the Townshend Duties?

News of the Townshend Duties triggered a new round of protests in the colonies. Merchants again staged boycotts of British goods. Pamphlets asserted that the new taxes denied the colonists their rights as English subjects and reduced them to the status of slaves. Patriot mobs enforced the boycott by burning the shops and merchandise of merchants who continued to trade with Britain.

In Boston, the most unruly of the colonial capitals, customs officers were attacked. Patriots seized a British patrol boat in Boston Harbor, carried it to the city commons, and publicly burned it. To maintain order, the British stationed four regiments in Boston.

The British pledged in 1769 to do away with the Townshend Duties, but Boston remained tense. In 1770, a street mob challenged British troops guarding Boston's customs house. The troops opened fire, leaving five colonists dead. Although patriots labeled the killings a "massacre," a colonial court found the British officer commanding the troops not guilty of a criminal offense.

Townshend's death in 1770 was followed by the formal repeal of the Townshend Duties. The colonial minister's replacement, Lord Frederick North, recognized that the costs of collecting new taxes in the colonies were often greater than the revenue raised. The British, however, were not willing to give up their authority to pass laws governing the colonies. Britain left a small tax on tea in the colonies in place to symbolize the power of the mother country.

Patriot leaders understood what was at stake. Colonial spokesmen such as Benjamin Franklin declared that the colonies were independent of Parliament and owed their allegiance only to the monarch. Franklin conceded that the colonies in the past had accepted laws passed by Parliament, but in the future he advised the colonists to "never adopt or acknowledge an Act of Parliament but by a formal law of our own [legislatures]."

Boston patriot Samuel Adams held that the colonies had enjoyed the right of self-government from the beginning. He contended that the original settlers of Massachusetts had made a compact with the king in which they agreed "to become his voluntary subjects, not his slaves."

"[When] did they [the colonists] enter into an express promise to be subject to the control of the parent state? What is there to show that they were in any way bound to obey the acts of the British Parliament.... No body can have the power to make laws over

a free people, but by their own consent."

—Samuel Adams

What caused the Boston Tea Party?

The Tea Act brought tensions in the colonies to a boiling point in 1773. The dispute had its roots in the financial troubles of the British East India Company, which produced tea in British colonial possessions in South Asia. To prevent the company from going bankrupt, Parliament granted it permission to sell tea directly to the colonies, bypassing the British and colonial merchants who acted as middlemen.

Direct sales would allow the East India Company to reduce its costs. Even after paying the small tax on imported tea, the company would be able to beat the prices of smuggled Dutch tea. (At the time, at least 75 percent of the tea consumed in the colonies and 60 percent of the tea in Britain was smuggled in from Dutch colonies.) British officials assumed that the new regulations would not meet resistance. They reasoned that colonial consumers would welcome the lower prices. By their calculations, the only losers in the new arrangement would be colonial traders who had smuggled Dutch tea.

From *The Annals of America.*

Colonists tar and feather a customs house official for accepting a shipment of tea.

Patriots, however, saw the Tea Act as another means to force the colonists to pay a tax on tea. Even patriot merchants who had been willing to pay the duty when they were unable to buy smuggled Dutch tea, such as John Hancock, joined the protest.

The most dramatic blow against the Tea Act occurred in Boston in December 1773, when patriots dressed as Indians boarded three East India Company ships in Boston Harbor. As 2,000 onlookers cheered, the patriots dumped 342 chests of tea overboard.

The "Boston Tea Party" was followed by similar disturbances in other colonial port cities. Colonists who acted as sales agents for British tea found themselves the targets of violence. Particularly cruel was the practice of "tarring and feathering," in which the victim's body was smeared with hot tar and then coated with feathers. Tarring and feathering

usually resulted in permanent scars and could produce crippling injuries or even death.

The mob actions concerned many of the patriot leaders. Economically and socially, most had much in common with the persecuted officials. They were well-educated and prosperous, with views and tastes that were similar to those of upper-class Whigs in Britain. The patriot leaders worried that the movement they had initiated would aggravate tensions between wealthy colonists and the craftsmen, dock workers, day laborers, and indentured servants who made up the lower classes. John Adams, a cousin of the outspoken Samuel Adams, warned that the "lower orders" standing up to British rule might eventually turn against his own class.

How did the Intolerable Acts backfire on Britain?

The British government's response to the Boston Tea Party was swift and uncommonly firm. In May 1774, Parliament closed the port of Boston and suspended the charter of Massachusetts. Even former defenders of the American colonists in Parliament agreed that Boston's patriots had to be punished. General Thomas Gage, the commander of British forces in North America, assumed the position of royal governor in Massachusetts and enforced the economic sanctions.

The patriots branded the new restrictions as the "Intolerable Acts." Rather than back down, they were encouraged by the groundswell of support from other colonies. Twenty years after Benjamin Franklin had first urged his fellow colonists to form a council, the colonies were indeed moving toward common action. In the summer of 1774, eleven colonial legislatures voted to send representatives to Philadelphia in September to discuss ways of aiding Massachusetts and presenting a united front in the face of British pressure.

Delegates to the First Continental Congress (which included every colony except Georgia) affirmed their loyalty to King George III while rejecting he authority of Parliament. They also

From *The Annals of America.*

Colonists are shown providing aid to patriots in Boston in defiance of the "Intolerable Acts" imposed by Britain.

set the stage for a collision with British power by voting to boycott trade with the mother country and by urging the colonies to form militias to resist the enforcement of the Intolerable Acts.

The Shot Heard 'Round the World

General Gage tried to minimize friction between his troops and the Massachusetts colonists. Like his predecessor, Gage did not attempt to stop public meetings and demonstrations against the British occupation of Boston. He also did little to block the activities of the militia groups which drilled in small towns throughout New England. (The militias were in fact the outgrowth of British laws that required able-bodied men to own a musket and take part in local militia drills. The policy had been originally intended to defend the colonies against attacks by the French and their Indian allies.)

Reports that the patriots were stockpiling large quantities of weapons and gunpowder did concern Gage. On several occasions, he ordered his troops to locate and seize the stockpiles. Gage scheduled one such mission for April 19, 1775, to take a patriot supply center in Concord, Massachusetts, twenty miles west of Boston.

At dawn, seven hundred British troops dispatched by Gage reached Lexington, five miles short of Concord. Members of local militias, known as "minutemen," had been forewarned of their arrival during the night and seventy of them had assembled on the village green. Shortly after the commanding British officer ordered the minutemen to disperse, a gun went off. No one knew who discharged the first shot, but the British troops responded by opening fire on the militia. Within minutes, eight minutemen lay dead or dying.

News of the bloodshed at Lexington was immediately relayed to Concord. Minutemen decided to counter the British advance at a wooden bridge crossing the Concord River. After coming under fire from the patriots, the British commander elected to return to Boston. The retreating British, however, faced hit-and-run attacks along the route from local minutemen. By the time the British reached the safety of Boston late that night, seventy-three from their ranks had been killed and more than two hundred were wounded or missing. Of the militia troops, about one hundred were killed or wounded.

The battles at Lexington and Concord were a dramatic escalation of the struggle between the British government and the colonists. Whether the clashes were an isolated incident, like the Boston massacre, or the beginning of a larger conflict remained to be seen. Even among the militia forces that had fought at Lexington and Concord, most believed that they were defending their rights as British citizens, not striving for independence.