

# AMERICAN REVOLUTION

The American Revolution began in 1775 as open conflict between the united thirteen colonies and Great Britain. By the Treaty of Paris that ended the war in 1783, the colonies had won their independence. While no one event can be pointed to as the actual cause of the revolution, the war began as a disagreement over the way in which Great Britain treated the colonies versus the way the colonies felt they should be treated.

Americans felt they deserved all the rights of Englishmen. The British, on the other hand, felt that the colonies were created to be used in the way that best suited the crown and parliament. This conflict is embodied in one of the rallying cries of the American Revolution: ***No Taxation without Representation.***

## America's Independent Way of Thinking

**Geographic Considerations** – The distance of the colonies from Great Britain created an independence that was hard to overcome. Those willing to colonize the new world generally had a strong independent streak desiring new opportunities and more freedom.

**Colonial Legislatures** – The existence of colonial legislatures meant that the colonies were in many ways independent of the crown. The legislatures were allowed to levy taxes, muster troops, and pass laws. Over time, these powers became rights in the eyes of many colonists. When they were curtailed by the British, conflict ensued. The future leaders of the United States were born in these legislatures.

**Salutary Neglect** – Even though the British believed in mercantilism, Prime Minister Robert Walpole espoused a view of "*salutary neglect*". This was a system whereby the actual enforcement of external trade relations was lax. He believed this enhanced freedom would stimulate commerce.

**The Enlightenment** – Many of the revolutionary leaders had studied major writings of the Enlightenment including those of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and the Baron de Montesquieu. From these writings, the founders gleaned the concepts of the social contract, limited government, the consent of the governed, and separation of powers.

## Major Events That Led to the American Revolution

The road to revolution built slowly over time. Many events fed the growing desire of the thirteen colonies for independence. Following are the major events that led to the Revolution.

**1754-1763 - French and Indian War:** This war between Britain and France ended with the victorious British deeply in debt and demanding more revenue from the colonies. With the defeat of the French, the colonies became less dependent on Britain for protection.

**1763 - Proclamation of 1763:** This prohibited settlement beyond the Appalachian Mountains. While Britain did not intend to harm the colonists, many colonists took offense at this order.

**1764 - Sugar Act:** This act raised revenue by increasing duties on sugar imported from the West Indies.

**1764 - Currency Act:** Parliament argued that colonial currency had caused a devaluation harmful to British trade. They banned American assemblies from issuing paper bills or bills of credit.

**1764 - Committees of Correspondence:** Organized by Samuel Adams, these helped spread propaganda and information through letters.

**1765 - Quartering Act:** Britain ordered that colonists were to house and feed British soldiers if necessary.

**1765 - Stamp Act:** This required tax stamps on many items and documents including playing cards, newspapers, and marriage licenses. Prime Minister George Grenville stated that this direct tax was intended for the colonies to pay for defense. Previous taxes imposed by Britain had been indirect, or hidden.

**1765 - Stamp Act Congress:** In 1765, 27 delegates from nine colonies met in New York City and drew up a statement of rights and grievances thereby bringing colonies together in opposition to Britain.

**1765 - Sons and Daughters of Liberty:** Colonists tried to fight back by imposing non-importation agreements. The Sons of Liberty often took the law into their own hands enforcing these 'agreements' by methods such as tar and feathering.

**1767 - Townshend Acts:** These taxes were imposed to help make the colonial officials independent of the colonists and included duties on glass, paper, and tea. Smugglers increased their activities to avoid the tax leading to more troops in Boston.

**1770 - Boston Massacre:** The colonists and British soldiers openly clashed in Boston. This event was used as an example of British cruelty despite questions about how it actually occurred.

**1773 - Tea Act:** To assist the failing British East India Company, the Company was given a monopoly to trade tea in America.

**1773 - Boston Tea Party:** A group of colonists disguised as Indians dumped tea overboard from three ships in Boston Harbor.

**1774 - Intolerable Acts:** These were passed in response to the Boston Tea Party and placed restrictions on the colonists including outlawing town meetings and the closing of Boston Harbor.

**1774 - First Continental Congress:** In response to the Intolerable Acts, 12 of the 13 colonies met in Philadelphia from September-October, 1774. One of the main results of this was the creation of The Association calling for a boycott of British goods.

**1775 - Lexington and Concord:** In April, British troops were ordered to Lexington and Concord to seize stores of colonial gunpowder and to capture Samuel Adams and John Hancock. At Lexington, open conflict occurred and eight Americans were killed. At Concord, the British troops were forced to retreat with the loss of 70 men. This was the first instance of open warfare.

**1775 - Second Continental Congress:** All 13 colonies were represented at this meeting in Philadelphia beginning May. The colonists still hoped that their grievances would be met by King George III. George Washington was named head of the Continental Army.

**1775 - Bunker Hill:** This major victory for the Colonists resulted in George III proclaiming the colonies in rebellion.

In the end, the American Revolution grew out of increasing restrictions placed upon the colonies by the British. One interesting side note: It is estimated that only one-third of the colonists were in favor of rebellion. One-third continued to side with the British. The last third were neutral concerning the rebellion and break from Great Britain.

Source: [http://americanhistory.about.com/od/revolutionarywar/a/amer\\_revolution.htm](http://americanhistory.about.com/od/revolutionarywar/a/amer_revolution.htm)

## HISTORIOGRAPHY Basic Causes of the Revolution

The historian must be more than a chronicler, a mere lister of events. For his real task is discovering and setting forth the causal connections between events in human history, the complex chain of human purposes, choices, and consequences over time that have shaped the fate of mankind. Investigating the causes of such a portentous event as the American Revolution is more, then, than a mere listing of preceding occurrences; for the historian must weigh the causal significance of these factors, and select those of overriding importance.

### Constitutional Conflict Historians

What, then, were the basic and overarching causes of the American Revolution? The older view, dominant in the first two or three decades of the twentieth century, laid greatest emphasis on the **conflict of constitutional ideas**, on the fact that the American colonists saw the actions of Great Britain after 1763 as interfering with their constitutional rights *as Englishmen*. The "*Constitutionalists*" and other early writers were closer to the mark in noting the influence of John Locke's libertarian natural rights philosophy. Locke's influence was particularly stressed in Carl L. Becker's *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* and at least mentioned by the other writers. But while the assertion of the natural rights of man could far better stir the passions than mere legal and constitutional differences, there was still a vital missing link: for how many colonists indeed sat down to read the abstract philosophy of John Locke?

### The Progressive Historians and the Economic Dimension

The "*Progressive*" historians, dominant in the later 1920s and the 1930s, added another and exciting dimension to the analysis of the causes of the American Revolution. For they added the important economic dimension — the struggles over the British attempt to impose taxes, mercantile restrictions, and a monopoly over the importation of tea into the colonies. But the Progressive historians did more. Inspired by the overall work on American history of Charles A. Beard, the Progressives also posed a contrast to the constitutional or philosophic American motivations asserted by the older historians: namely, economic motivation and class interests. In short, the American leaders, in particular the wealthy merchants struggled on behalf of their economic interests, against British restrictions and tax levies.

Believing in the inevitability of class conflict, and seeing only the merchants as driven by their economic interests toward rebellion, the Progressives then had to explain two things: the continuing recourse to ideas and ideology by the American leaders, and the adoption of this ideology by the mass of the public. To explain this, the Progressives fell back on the theory of "propaganda" popular in the 1920s and 1930s: that the ideology propounded by the leaders was mere windy rhetoric which they never believed. The "propaganda," they claimed, was used to dupe the masses into going along with the revolutionary agitation.

First, while the economic interpretation is often insightful in gauging the motivations for State action, particularly by small groups of pullers of the levers of State power, it is highly inadequate in explaining the motives of mass actions, especially revolutionary actions, *against* the State — whether by leaders or by the public. For a revolution is a passionate and radical, indeed a *revolutionary* act. It is difficult to believe that a people will wrench themselves out of their habitual lives to risk at a blow "their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor," from a mere chafing at a tax or at mercantile restrictions. There must be more to it than that.

And secondly, the economic interpretation overlooked the very nature of the libertarian ideology that moved the revolutionaries. This ideology integrated moral, political, *and* economic liberty. Therefore it integrated all of these revolutions against what these libertarians saw as British invasions of their rights. Neither the Constitutionalists, stressing the legal and philosophic, nor the Progressives, stressing the economic grievances, saw the nature of the integrated whole of American revolutionary ideology.

### **The Consensus Interpretation**

Neither did the "*Consensus*" school of historians, who became ascendant in the 1940s and 1950s. Just as the Progressives reflected the Marxian outlook of American intellectuals of the 1930s, so the Consensus school reflected the neo-Conservative "*American celebration*" that typified intellectuals in post-World War II America. The Consensus historians were anxious to see consensus rather than conflict in American history. And since both ideology and economic interests can cause conflicts, both were discarded as causal factors in the American past. Instead, the Consensus school saw American history as guided not by "doctrinaire" ideas nor by economic interests but rather by a flexible, pragmatic, ad hoc approach to problem-solving. Since a *revolution* can hardly be a flexible approach to consensus, the American Revolution had to be written off as a mere localized "conservative" resistance to the British government. Furthermore, by deprecating the revolutionary nature of the American Revolution, the Consensus school could isolate it from the indisputably radical French Revolution and other modern upheavals, and continue to denounce the latter as ideological and socially disruptive while seeming to embrace the founding heritage of America.

Thus, by the end of the 1950s, American historians were further away than ever from appreciating the fact that the American Revolution was truly revolutionary. They did not perceive that it was largely animated by a passionately held and radical libertarian ideology that integrated the moral, political, and economic reasons for rebelling against the British imperial regime. But the Consensus historians did make one important contribution. They restored the older idea of the American Revolution as a movement of the great *majority* of the American people. It replaced the view held by Progressives and Imperialists alike that the revolution was a minority action imposed on a reluctant public.

### **Bailyn's Crucial Breakthrough**

The crucial breakout from the miasma of American historiography of the Revolution came from one man. He was able by sheer force of scholarship to overthrow the Consensus and Progressive views and to establish a new interpretation of the causes of the American Revolution. This was Harvard Professor Bernard Bailyn, who, breaking through the hermetic separation of European and American historians, found his inspiration in the great work of Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman*. For Bailyn realized that Professor Robbins had discovered the "missing link" in the transmission of radical libertarian thought after John Locke. She had found it in a group of dedicated writers, inspired by the English Revolution of the seventeenth century, who continued to reject the centrist Whig settlement of the eighteenth century. These writers carried forward the ideals of natural rights and individual liberty. In the course of editing a volume of Revolutionary pamphlets, Bailyn discovered that Americans were indeed influenced, on a massive scale, by these libertarian articles and pamphlets. Many of these publications were reprinted widely in the American colonies, and clearly influenced the revolutionary leaders. The most important shaper of this libertarian viewpoint was *Cato's Letters*, a series of newspaper articles in England in the early

1720s written by John Trenchard and his young disciple Thomas Gordon. The collected Cato's *Letters* were republished many times in eighteenth century England and America.

Trenchard and Gordon, and the other libertarian writers, transmuted John Locke's abstract and often guarded political philosophy into a trenchant, hard-hitting, and radical libertarian creed. Not only did men have natural rights of life, liberty, and property, which governments must not invade, but "Cato" and the other writers declared that government — power — was always and ever the great enemy of liberty, and stood ready to aggress against it. Hence, power must always be diminished as far as possible. Men must watch it continually with utmost hostility and vigilance, lest it break its bonds, and destroy the rights of the individual. "Cato" particularly denounced the propensity for tyranny of the British government of the day. This message found an eager reception in the American colonies.

Thus, Bernard Bailyn established the American Revolution as at one and the same time genuinely radical and revolutionary. He showed that it was motivated largely by firmly and passionately held libertarian ideology, summed up in the phrase "the transforming libertarian radicalism" of the American Revolution. Bailyn's findings were first presented in the "General Introduction" to his edition of *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750–1776, Vol. 1, 1750–1765*. The only volume of pamphlets yet published in the series, it included the works of such revolutionary leaders as the Rev. Jonathan Mayhew, Thomas Fitch, James Otis, Oxenbridge Thacher, Daniel Dulany, and John Dickinson.

An expanded version was published as Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. Also see the companion volume by Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics*, which offered an excellent explanation for the British royal governors being weak in the eighteenth century at the same time that the King was dominant at home. A useful summary of the Bailyn thesis is provided by Bailyn's "The Central Themes of the American Revolution: An Interpretation" in S. Kurtz and J. Hutson, eds., *Essays on the American Revolution*. The scintillating writings of "Cato" have been collected in an excellently edited volume by David L. Jacobson, *The English Libertarian Heritage*.

One problem with the generally correct Bailyn thesis is its exclusive emphasis on ideology, as it affected the minds and hearts of the Americans. Historians find it easy to slip into the view that the deep ideologically motivated hostility to Britain, while genuinely felt, was merely an expression of "*paranoia*." Indeed, Bailyn himself almost fell into this trap in his recent overly sympathetic biography of the leading Massachusetts Tory, *Thomas Hutchinson*. One of the best historians of this period, Edmund Morgan, in the *New York Review of Books* duly noted and warned against the trap in his review of this work.

An excellent corrective to this exclusive concentration on the subjective is the work of the most important political (as contrasted to ideological) historians of the pre-Revolutionary period. In the definitive history of the Stamp Act crisis of 1765–1766, Edmund and Helen Morgan demonstrated the majority nature of the revolutionary movement. They attacked, as well, the actual depredations of Great Britain on American political and economic rights. Edmund and Helen Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution*. Also see the companion source book of documents, Edmund S. Morgan, ed., *Prologue to Revolution: Sources and Documents on the Stamp Act Crisis, 1764–1766*. Particularly important is the monumental and definitive, though densely written, two volume political history of the coming of the American Revolution by Bernhard Knollenberg, *Origins of the American Revolution: 1759–1765*; and *Growth of the American Revolution, 1766–1775*. By examining British archives, Knollenberg shows that the supposed paranoia and "conspiracy theories" of the American colonists were all too accurate. The British officials were indeed conspiring to invade the liberties of the American colonies after the "*salutary neglect*" of the pre-1763 period.

### **New Left/Neo-Progressive Interpretations:**

In the late 1960s and 1970s, “*social history*,” which focused on the lives of everyday persons, became predominant. At the same time, the Civil Rights movement and the feminist movement helped provide a spark for a new generation of historians to study the history of race and slavery in early America, as well as women’s history. Around the same time, young historians—most notably Jesse Lemisch and Staughton Lynd—involved in New Left politics engaged in this “*history from the bottom up*” in an effort to recover the agency of laboring class colonists. Similarly, Mary Beth Norton and Linda Kerber both published books in 1980 about the impact of the Revolution on women. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was a resurgence of interest in class conflict and economic aspects of the Revolution. Neo-Progressive historians such as Gary Nash, Ed Countryman, and Woody Holton have combined the issues of the Progressive interpretation with the social history’s concern for non-elites. They’ve argued that ordinary Americans during the Revolution were quite radical and in pursuit of their own interests, thereby integrating them into the larger political narrative of the Revolution. While neo-Progressives continue to write important works, in the last twenty years there has been no dominant school or interpretation that has defined the study of the Revolution. Rather, there are many sub-fields such as imperial history, Native American history, history of the West, and religion, which are producing exciting works that are broadening our understanding of the Revolution and early America, in general.

### **Founders Chic:**

“*Founders Chic*” is not a historiographical school; it is a pejorative term given to a number of popular histories of the founding that began appearing in the 1990s. In that decade, there was an explosion of interest among the general reading public for books about the founding. The works that resonated most—by authors such as David McCullough, Joseph Ellis, Richard Brookhiser, and Ron Chernow, among others—were often biographies or narratives that focused on the so-called “*character*” of both individual founders and the founding generation. One critic mockingly referred to these works as “*Federalist Chic*” because they tended to glorify Federalists like John Adams and Alexander Hamilton while portraying Republicans in a much more critical and darker light, particularly Thomas Jefferson. A number of academic historians—including Gordon Wood, Edmund Morgan, and John Ferling—wanting to reach a broader audience and upset that works by authors not trained in history were selling millions of copies while their books sold only a few hundred, published many solid works of both narrative and biography, but none found the kind of audience as McCullough or Chernow.

As we can see, the way historians have interpreted the Revolution has inevitably been influenced by the times in which they lived. The English historian, E. H. Carr, wrote, “*Before you study the history, study the historian*” and their own “*historical and social environment*.” This is true in all fields of history. Nevertheless, each of these interpretations made unique contributions to the ways in which we understand the Revolution today...