

ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE

APRIL 1775-JULY 1776



Battle of Lexington, illustration from *Recueil d'Estampes Representant Les Differents Evenemens de la Guerre qui a Procure l'Independancey*, 1784, Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation.

American public opinion was strongly divided in the spring of 1775 on the question of independence from Great Britain. Americans were divided into three camps: Loyalists, Patriots, and Neutrals. Loyalists, also known as Tories, wanted the American colonies to stay loyal to King George III. While Loyalists could be found in every colony, they were especially powerful in the southern colonies of Georgia and South Carolina and the important, pivotal colonies of Pennsylvania and New York. The Patriots, also known as the Radicals, led by men like John Adams of Massachusetts and Patrick Henry of Virginia, contemplated the possibility of a complete break with Great Britain. The Patriots were especially strong in New England and also in Virginia. A number of people were simply undecided on the question of independence and were called Neutrals. Powerful men, like John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, fell into this camp and held out hope there could be reconciliation even though

open fighting had broken out in April 1775. A number of events in the sixteen months after the historic skirmishes at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts in April 1775 would move many of America's Neutrals into the camp of the Patriots and sway the Second Continental Congress to seek a total break with Great Britain by July 1776.

Why were so many Americans reluctant to seek independence?

Even though open-warfare had broken out between Great Britain and her colonies in the spring of 1775, many Americans were still reluctant to see the colonies seek independence from the British government. Many leaders in the colonies saw the struggle as a fight with a corrupt Parliament and still had deep respect for their young king. Besides the strong familial and cultural ties between Great Britain and her American colonies, inclusion within the British Empire offered a number of benefits. First, the American colonies enjoyed the protection of the world's strongest navy and one of the world's best armies. With the British Navy protecting American shores, there was little chance of France or another European power attacking America. This powerful navy also extended its protection to American shipping which could sail the oceans of the world with little fear of being attacked while flying the British flag.

Staying within the British Empire also held certain economic benefits for Americans. While most Americans disliked the economic system of mercantilism imposed on them by the British government, Americans enjoyed the fact that it was the people of Great Britain who bore the great expense of the protection afforded by the British military forces and the government services rendered by the British Government. While many colonists had fought along side the British during the French and Indian War, the British government had carried a far greater burden, financially and militarily, in that long, epic struggle. It was the British Navy which stopped reinforcement of French forces in Canada, while it was the British Army, supported by scattered American forces, which decisively defeated those isolated French forces. The British people paid for these victories with higher taxes on everything from land to cider while the American colonists provided negligible financial aid in the struggle with France.



British regiment marching.

Finally, many colonists suspected the cause of American independence would fail and were fearful of British retaliation. This concern was understandable when one considers how the English Crown dealt with rebellion in the British Isles after the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The Glorious Revolution toppled James II as the King of England and installed William and Mary as the new sovereigns. James II, his son, and their supporters, called Jacobites, would attempt to regain the Crown over the next sixty years. The Jacobites led major uprisings against the new sovereigns. The last major uprising of the Jacobites was brutally crushed in 1745, only thirty years before the American Revolution, with ruthless and thorough efficiency. Many Jacobite rebels were executed while many more had their lands and titles seized. Many rebels were deported to British colonies in the New World. American colonists had good reason to believe the British government would deal with rebellion in its colonies with the same harsh but effective measures.

What efforts did the Second Continental Congress make to seek a peaceful reconciliation with George III and the British government after open warfare began at Lexington and Concord?

There was strong support in the Second Continental Congress to reconcile with King George III. Though a few delegates, like John Adams of Massachusetts, did not believe reconciliation with Great Britain was possible, moderates in Congress were able to convince their fellow delegates to attempt one last reconciliation. There was still a wide-spread belief that the problem was Parliament and an appeal to King George III would resolve those problems. In July 1775, Congress sent a petition to the King seeking a way to end the crisis between the British government and her American colonies. This petition, commonly known as the “Olive Branch Petition”, asked the King to find a way to resolve the crisis and offered the King some possible settlement options for his consideration. Though Thomas Jefferson had drafted the first copy of the Olive Branch Petition, his work was redrafted by the moderate John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, as Dickinson found much of Jefferson’s draft too inflammatory. The Olive Branch petition noted the union between Great Britain and her colonies excited the envy of other nations. The petition did not suggest a solution to the problem but asked the King’s aid to “procure us relief from our afflicting fears and jealousies.....”.



Detail from portrait of King George III, studio of Allan Ramsay, 1762-1784, Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation.

How did George III react to the Olive Branch Petition?

The Olive Branch petition was signed on July 8, 1775 and dispatched to Great Britain on two ships. King George III refused to even accept or consider the Olive Branch petition sent by the Continental Congress. Open fighting at Lexington and Concord had empowered the faction within the British government that wanted to deal with any military action by harsh means. The British losses at Bunker Hill in June 1775 were especially stunning; an incredibly high percentage of British soldiers who participated in the battle were either wounded or killed. The death rate among the British officers was especially high. General Howe, the British commander at Bunker Hill, realized how difficult it would be to suppress the Americans after his shocking losses at Bunker Hill and wrote King George III asking for substantial number of reinforcements and suggesting the possibility of hiring foreign troops.



View of the attack on Bunker Hill and Charles Town burning, 1783 engraving, Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation.

While George III did not respond to the Olive Branch Petition, he did react to the petition by declaring his own Proclamation of Rebellion. This document, issued August 23, 1775, declared certain elements of the American colonies in a state of “open and avowed rebellion”. The Proclamation indicated persons now in open arms and rebellion should be turned over to the government for punishment.

“We, therefore, beseech your Majesty, that your royal authority and influence may be graciously interposed to procure us relief from our afflicting fears and jealousies, occasioned by the system before-mentioned, and to settle peace through every part of our dominions, with all humility submitting to your Majesty’s wise consideration...”

Olive Branch Petition,
July 8, 1775

In December 1775, Parliament passed the American Prohibitory Act, prohibiting all British trade with the American colonies. In addition, all American ships and cargoes were to be treated as if they belonged to an enemy power and were subject to seizure. This act was designed to cripple the colonies economically. The Proclamation of Rebellion in August, followed by the American Prohibitory Act in December, was considered by many Americans to be a declaration of war by Parliament against her American colonies.

“...and we do accordingly strictly charge and command all of our Officers, as well civil as military, and all others our obedient and loyal subjects to use their utmost endeavors to withstand and suppress such rebellion ...”

Proclamation of Rebellion by King George III,
August 23, 1775

There were also recent appointments within the British government which reflected the new bellicose position of the government. Lord George Germaine, a strong hard-liner opposed to any political compromise of the dispute with the colonies, was appointed Secretary of State for the Colonies in November 1775. His appointment marked an increasingly hostile view toward any reconciliation with the colonies until there was a complete submission.

How did the British government respond militarily to the American Rebellion?

Though Great Britain had one of the greatest navies in the world at the beginning of the American Revolution, it did not have a large standing army. The British Parliament had historically opposed such an army during periods of peace. While the high cost of maintaining a large standing army was one factor behind this policy, Parliament also feared how a monarch might use this army to abuse the constitutional rights of the British people.

In addition, available British forces were spread thinly across the globe protecting the empire. Not only was the government required to maintain sufficient forces in the home islands to protect Great Britain from invasion by another European power, the government was required to maintain troops in many parts of its empire including such strategic locations as Gibraltar and the Island of Minorca. Great Britain was also forced to maintain large numbers of forces in the Caribbean to protect its rich sugar islands.

Why did King George III turn to other European rulers to find soldiers to supplement the British Army?

Because of the small number of British forces in North America at the beginning of the American Revolution, the British Army could not suppress the rebellion without major reinforcements. Recruiting a large number of troops and moving those forces to the American colonies before the new Continental Army became trained and ready to fight was important.

One of the quickest and easiest ways for King George III to increase the size of the British forces was to simply acquire troops from other European rulers. Before the rise of large national standing armies in the 18th century, it was common for rulers to simply lease or rent



German military Jaeger rifle, c. 1775, Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation.



American commander General George Washington, 18th-century illustration, Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation.

an army if a ready-made

army was needed. Though George III sought troops from a number of European rulers, it was from the princes of small German kingdoms that he found the troops to augment British forces. In addition to being the King of Great Britain, George III was also the Elector of Hanover, a small German state. With his German title and strong German roots, he enjoyed special connections with other German princes allowing him to hire their soldiers. Hiring out soldiers was a good way for impoverished German princes to supplement their incomes. The decision by the British government to pursue the employment of foreign mercenaries against people who had long considered themselves loyal British subjects caused King George III to lose a great deal of support in the American colonies. The decision to hire foreign troops would be one of the causes specifically referenced in the Declaration of Independence as a factor which contributed to the final break.

How did Congress and General Washington begin to prepare for war?

Though Congress was not prepared to declare America independent of Great Britain in June 1775, it did proceed to make preparation for the defense of the colonies.

On June 14, 1775 Congress ordered the creation of a Continental Army, appointing George Washington, one of its own members, as Commander and other generals to be his subordinates. Washington's selection, proposed by John Adams, reflected a desire by Congress to unify the Northern and Southern colonies in this bold endeavor. General Washington took command of American forces in July 1775 in Boston, Washington and introduced greater discipline into the Army. He did not like the election of officers by the New England militias and began appointing his own senior officers. Washington also ordered a muster to determine the size of the army.

How were the Americans able to take Boston?

Washington also understood the importance of bringing the siege of Boston, Massachusetts to a successful conclusion. Boston had been under continuous siege since the bloody British retreat from Lexington and Concord in April 1775. Washington recognized the city could not be taken without siege guns. Colonel Henry Knox, a former book seller, was dispatched to transport the cannon seized by the Americans during their capture of Fort Ticonderoga and Crown Point, to Boston. These heavy siege guns were transported by heroic effort during the winter of 1775-1776. The difficult movement of heavy guns during the winter gave the budding American Army a reputation for ingenuity and resourcefulness. After Knox delivered the cannon to Boston, General Howe, the British commander, moved up his evacuation plans and departed Boston with his troops and many of the city's Loyalists in March 1776. The British evacuation of Boston was a major victory for the new Continental Army and convinced many Neutrals that an American victory was possible.



British commander Sir William Howe, 18th-century illustration, Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation.



Officer's tent, Continental Army encampment at Yorktown Victory Center.

like Fort Ticonderoga in northern New York in May 1775. The Continental Congress saw an invasion of Canada as a way to free Canada of British influence while adding another British colony to the movement for independence. Seizing Canada would also remove the possibility of a British counter-attack down the strategic Hudson River corridor which would have severed the rebellious New England colonies from the remaining American colonies.

The American attack on Canada was a two-pronged offensive which began in September 1775 with an attack on Fort St. Jean (also known as Fort St. John). One prong of the offensive, led by General Richard Montgomery, traveled up the Hudson River corridor towards Montreal. General Benedict Arnold led the second-prong of the offensive with a difficult cross-country attack on Quebec in the dead of winter. Though the Americans were able to take Montreal, they were not able to take Quebec. General Montgomery would die in the attack on Quebec while Benedict Arnold would also be injured. After being defeated at Quebec, General Arnold was forced to withdraw American forces from Canada. Though the Canadian offensive was unsuccessful, the American's success in taking Montreal coupled with the heroism of the American forces during the short campaign, further instilled patriotic pride in the great undertaking and led many to join the cause of the Patriots.

British raids on American coastal towns in late 1775 also contributed to a general deterioration of relations between Great Britain and her American colonies. On October 18, 1775, the British Navy bombarded and burned the town of Falmouth, Massachusetts (known today as Portland, Maine). Vice-Admiral Graves had been instructed to use the British Navy to suppress the rebellion.

In February 1776, Patriots in North Carolina stopped North Carolina Loyalists from reaching the coast and joining up with British forces at the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge. This decisive battle weakened the strong Loyalist forces in North Carolina and helped drive the colony into the Patriot camp.

“And I do hereby further declare all indented Servants, Negroes, or others, (appertaining to Rebels,) free that are able and willing to bear Arms, they joining His MAJESTY’S Troops as soon as may be...”

Dunmore's Proclamation,
November 7, 1775

How did continued conflict between American Patriots and British soldiers impact on the possibility of peace?

Continued conflict between American Patriots, American Loyalists, and British forces after the Battle of Bunker Hill on the outskirts of Boston decreased the possibility of peace and increased the likelihood of a permanent break between Great Britain and America.

The Continental Congress also took the offensive against British interests in North America by launching a major invasion of Canada in the Fall of 1775. This offensive was made possible by the weakness of British land forces in Canada and the American seizure of critical British forts



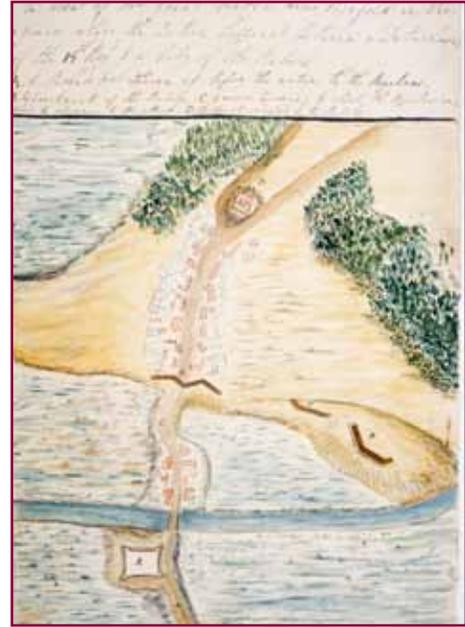
Major General Benedict Arnold, 18th century illustration, Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation.

What early battles in Virginia strengthened the Patriot's position in Virginia?

In Virginia, there were a number of conflicts which consolidated the Patriots' already strong hold on this important colony. In November 1775, John Murray, the Earl of Dunmore and Royal Governor of

Virginia, recognized he was losing total control of America's most populous colony. His earlier attempts to suppress the rebellion by dissolving the House of Burgesses had met with failure. The members of the House of Burgesses simply reconvened in another location and continued to conduct business. Although Dunmore had few British soldiers to maintain Royal control over Virginia, he was confident that the appearance of a few well-disciplined British troops would defeat the Patriot rabble. In order to increase his military manpower, he issued Dunmore's Proclamation, a document which freed the slaves of rebellious masters if the slaves were willing to take up arms for King George III. In a colony where a number of the wealthiest and most powerful men owned slaves, Dunmore's Proclamation was considered economic warfare. Dunmore placed these former slaves in a unit he called Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment. This unit was commanded by white British commissioned and noncommissioned officers. Dunmore also created a military unit composed of white Loyalists called the Queen's Own Loyal Regiment.

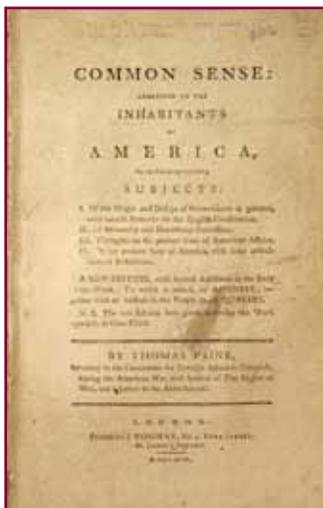
In November 1775 Dunmore's forces were successful in the Battle of Kemp's Landing, a minor skirmish against the militia of Princess Anne County (today known as Virginia Beach). Confident after this skirmish that he could defeat the rebels as they gathered for an offensive south of Norfolk, Virginia, Dunmore ordered his forces against the Patriot position south of Norfolk at the Village of Great Bridge. On December 9, 1775, Dunmore's forces were badly defeated in the Battle of Great Bridge. The British defeat forced Dunmore to evacuate Norfolk, Virginia's largest commercial center and put the British in a defensive posture in Virginia.



Drawing by Lord Rawdon of 1775 Battle of Great Bridge, with permission from the William Clements Library.

How did the publication of “Common Sense” affect public opinion?

In January 1776, a small political pamphlet written by Thomas Paine was published in America. The small pamphlet, entitled “Common Sense”, was written in a style which most Americans could comprehend and outlined arguments why the American colonies should declare independence from Great Britain. Paine had recently immigrated to America from Europe and, with the help of Benjamin Franklin, found employment in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In his historic piece, Paine blamed the kings of the world for all of the problems of the world. Paine noted that, “government by kings was the most prosperous invention the Devil ever set



1792 printing of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation.

on foot for the promotion of idolatry.” Basing many of his anti-monarchical theories on Biblical scripture, Paine criticized exalting one man so greatly above the rest and argued it cannot be justified on the equal rights of nature. Adding to the evil of monarchy, Paine criticized hereditary succession and claimed it was an insult and imposition on posterity. Paine wrote, “In short, monarchy and succession have laid (not this or that kingdom) but the world in blood and ashes.” The small pamphlet enjoyed enormous success and sold 120,000 copies in the first three months and 500,000 in the first year. This small pamphlet went through a number of editions and did much to move large numbers of people from the neutral camp into the Patriot camp.

“ *A government of our own is our natural right.*”

Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*,
January 1776

What factors finally pushed the Second Continental Congress to declare independence in July 1776?

By the spring of 1776 when the Second Continental Congress reconvened in Philadelphia, the Patriots were winning the hearts and minds of many Neutrals and more people were demanding a formal and complete break with the Mother Country. There were several calls for independence across the thirteen colonies.

“Resolved that the delegates for this Colony in the Continental Congress be empowered to concur with the delegates of the other Colonies in declaring Independency...”

Halifax Resolves, April 12, 1776

On April 12, 1776, the North Carolina Provincial Congress sitting at Halifax, North Carolina voted to direct its Congressional delegation to vote for independence. This vote today is known as the Halifax Resolves. This would be the first call by any colonial government to its delegates in Philadelphia to vote for independence. On May 4, 1776, the Colony of Rhode Island declared itself free and independent of Great Britain.

Though North Carolina was the first colony to direct its delegates to vote for independence, the delegates were not specifically instructed to move the Continental Congress to declare itself independent of Great Britain. The first colony to direct its Congressional Delegation to propose independence from Great Britain was Virginia. Meeting in Williamsburg on May 15, 1776, the Virginia Convention, the provisional revolutionary government which had replaced the Royal government in Virginia, voted without opposition to instruct its delegates in Philadelphia to declare “the United Colonies free and independent states.” Richard Henry Lee, one of Virginia’s delegates, presented a three-part resolution to Congress on June 7, 1776. This motion, known today as Lee’s Resolution, proposed that Congress declare independence from Great Britain. The Resolution also sought to form foreign alliances and prepare a plan of colonial confederation. Lee’s motion was seconded by John Adams.

Though the resolution had wide-support in Congress, there was a motion to delay discussion of the resolution for three weeks. One of the many factors that had delayed congressional action was the fact that few delegations had sufficient guidance from their home colonies as to how to vote. In fact, several delegations were under strict orders to vote against independence. It was hoped this period of delay would be utilized by the various delegations to seek guidance from their home governments.

The move for independence by the Second Continental Congress would be consolidated in the final weeks of June. On June 14, 1776, the Connecticut Assembly instructed its delegates to support independence. On June 15, 1776, New Hampshire and Delaware authorized its delegates to join the movement to declare the colonies independent. After having Royal Governor William Franklin, the son of Benjamin Franklin, arrested, New Jersey chose new delegates and authorized them on June 21, 1775 to vote for independence.

As the movement for independence was gathering strength and it appeared likely independence would be approved, Congress appointed a committee of five delegates to actually draft an official declaration of independence. Though composed of five members, most of the writing of the initial declaration was done by Thomas Jefferson.

After waiting for delegations to receive guidance from their home colonies, Congress again considered the question of independence on July 1, 1776. Instead of referring the important question to one particular committee and asking

“Resolved, unanimously, That the Delegates appointed to represent this Colony in General Congress be instructed to propose to that respectable body to declare the United Colonies free and independent States...”

Virginia Resolution for Independence,
May 15, 1776

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

Richard Henry Lee’s Resolution, June 7, 1776

the committee to report back, Congress opted to decide the issue as a committee of the whole body. After debating the issue, Congress voted on the resolution proposed by Virginia. Each colony was given one vote in Congress and delegations voted on the question within their delegations. Nine colonies voted in favor of independence. Pennsylvania and South Carolina voted against declaring independence. The New York delegation had not received guidance from their state as to how to vote and therefore abstained from voting. Delaware was split when one of their delegates voted in favor of independence, one delegate voted against, and the third was absent.



Declaration of Independence broadside, July 1776, Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation.

On July 2, 1776, Congress again took up the question of independence for a final vote. On this decisive day, only the delegation from New York voted to abstain. South Carolina and Pennsylvania reversed their decision from the day before and voted for independence. Caesar Rodney, the third Delaware delegate, who had not voted on July 1 traveled from Delaware to cast the deciding vote within the Delaware delegation. Rodney's action added Delaware to the colonies in support of declaring America independent of Great Britain.

After voting for independence, Congress turned to the wording of the Declaration of Independence. Congress made a number of changes to the draft written by Thomas Jefferson. On July 4, 1776, the final wording of the Declaration of Independence was approved and the document was forwarded to John Dunlap, a printer, for publication.

In the same month, General Howe, who had been forced to abandon Boston in March 1775, returned from Great Britain with the largest British Army ever to land in North America. This army, composed of over 30,000 soldiers, including several thousand Hessians from a number of small German states, began landing on Staten Island. General Washington quickly discovered how difficult it was to defend New York City from an enemy with superior naval and military power. Congress had made the fateful step in July 1776 and declared itself independent of Great Britain. The next seven years would mark America's struggle on the road to independence.

Conclusion

Though it was unlikely that any reconciliation between Great Britain and its American colonies was possible after the outbreak of fighting at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, the events between the spring of 1775 and July 2, 1776 made any reconciliation impossible. The British government's refusal to consider any political compromise of the dispute while calling up military forces, especially from the German states, to suppress the rebellion complicated any chance for peace. Continued military, political and economic warfare after Lexington and Concord also made peace unlikely. The brave but futile invasion of the loyal, British colony of Canada by the Americans polarized the thinking of many who had hoped war with Britain could be avoided. All of these factors contributed to the slow drift to declaring independence in July 1776, over a year after fighting began at Lexington and Concord. Only time would tell if the gamble to seek freedom and liberty in the summer of 1776 would be successful.



© Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation
P.O. Box 1607, Williamsburg, VA 23187

