

## READING #4

### **Philosophical Foundations of the American Revolution**

For Americans, especially those who were in positions of leadership, there was a long tradition of loyalty to the king and Great Britain. As the differences between them grew, many Americans tried to justify this changing relationship. As discussed in Chapter 3, the Enlightenment, particularly the writings of John Locke, had a profound influence on the colonies.

**Enlightenment Ideas** The era of the Enlightenment (see Chapter 3) was at its peak in the mid-18th century—the very years that future leaders of the American Revolution (Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, and Adams) were coming to maturity. Many Enlightenment thinkers in Europe and America were Deists, who believed that God had established natural laws in creating the universe, but that the role of divine intervention in human affairs was minimal. They believed in rationalism and trusted human reason to solve the many problems of life and society, and emphasized reason, science, and respect for humanity. Their political philosophy, derived from Locke and developed further by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, had a profound influence on educated Americans in the 1760s and 1770s—the decades of revolutionary thought and action that finally culminated in the American Revolution.

### **Bunker Hill**

Two months later, on June 17, 1775, a true battle was fought between opposing armies on the outskirts of Boston. A colonial militia of Massachusetts farmers fortified Breed's Hill, next to Bunker Hill, for which the ensuing battle was wrongly named. A British force attacked the colonists' position and managed to take the hill, suffering over a thousand casualties. Americans claimed a victory of sorts, having succeeded in inflicting heavy losses on the attacking British army.

### **The Second Continental Congress**

Soon after the fighting broke out in Massachusetts, delegates to the Second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in May 1775. The congress was divided. One group of delegates, mainly from New England, thought the colonies should declare their independence. Another group, mainly from the middle colonies, hoped the conflict could be resolved by negotiating a new relationship with Great Britain.

### **Military Actions**

The congress adopted a Declaration of the Causes and Necessities for Taking Up Arms and called on the colonies to provide troops. George Washington was appointed the commander-in-chief of a new colonial army and sent to Boston to lead the Massachusetts militia and volunteer units from other colonies. Congress also authorized a force under Benedict Arnold to raid Quebec in order to draw Canada away from the British empire. An American navy and marine corps was organized in the fall of 1775 for the purpose of attacking British shipping.

### **Peace Efforts**

At first the congress adopted a contradictory policy of waging war while at the same time seeking a peaceful settlement. Many in the colonies did not want independence, for they valued their heritage and Britain's protection, but they did want a change in their relationship with Britain. In July 1775, the delegates voted to send an "Olive Branch Petition" to King George III, in which they pledged their loyalty and asked the king to intercede with Parliament to secure peace and the protection of colonial rights.

King George angrily dismissed the congress' plea and agreed instead to Parliament's Prohibitory Act (August 1775), which declared the colonies in rebellion. A few months later, Parliament forbade all trade and shipping between Britain and the colonies.

### **Thomas Paine's Argument for Independence**

In January 1776, a pamphlet was published that quickly had a profound impact on public opinion and the future course of events. The pamphlet, written by

Thomas Paine, a recent English immigrant to the colonies, argued strongly for what until then had been considered a radical idea. Entitled *Common Sense*, Paine's essay argued in clear and forceful language for the colonies becoming independent states and breaking all political ties with the British monarchy. Paine argued that it was contrary to common sense for a large continent to be ruled by a small and distant island and for people to pledge allegiance to a king whose government was corrupt and whose laws were unreasonable.

### **The Declaration of Independence**

After meeting for more than a year, the congress gradually and somewhat reluctantly began to favor independence rather than reconciliation. On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia introduced a resolution declaring the colonies to be independent. Five delegates including Thomas Jefferson formed a committee to write a statement in support of Lee's resolution. The declaration drafted by Jefferson listed specific grievances against George III's government and also expressed the basic principles that justified revolution: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

The congress adopted Lee's resolution calling for independence on July 2. Jefferson's work, the Declaration of Independence, was adopted on July 4, 1776.

### **The Revolutionary War**

From the first shots fired on Lexington green in 1775 to the final signing of a peace treaty in 1783, the American War for Independence, or Revolutionary War, was a long and bitter struggle. As Americans fought they also forged a new national identity, as the former colonies became the United States of America.

About 2.6 million people lived in the 13 colonies at the time of the war. Maybe 40 percent of the population actively participated in the struggle against Britain. They called themselves American Patriots. Around 20 to 30 percent sided with the British as Loyalists. Everyone else tried to remain neutral and uninvolved.

## ***Patriots***

The largest number of Patriots were from the New England states and Virginia. Most of the soldiers were reluctant to travel outside their own region. They would serve in local militia units for short periods, leave to work their farms, and then return to duty. Thus, even though several hundred thousand people fought on the Patriot side in the war, General Washington never had more than 20,000 regular troops under his command at one time. His army was chronically short of supplies, poorly equipped, and rarely paid.

**African Americans** Initially, George Washington rejected the idea of African Americans serving in the Patriot army. However, when the British promised freedom to enslaved people who joined their side, Washington and the congress quickly made the same offer. Approximately 5,000 African Americans fought as Patriots. Most of them were free citizens from the North, who fought in mixed racial forces, although there were some all-African-American units. African Americans took part in most of the military actions of the war, and a number, including Peter Salem, were recognized for their bravery.

## ***Loyalists***

**Tories** The Revolutionary War was in some respects a civil war in which anti-British Patriots fought pro-British Loyalists. Those who maintained their allegiance to the king were also called Tories (after the majority party in Parliament). Almost 60,000 American Tories fought next to British soldiers, supplied them with arms and food, and joined in raiding parties that pillaged Patriot homes and farms. Members of the same family sometimes joined opposite sides. For example, while Benjamin Franklin was a leading patriot, his son William joined the Tories and served as the last royal governor of New Jersey.

How many American Tories were there? Estimates range from 520,000 to 780,000 people—roughly 20 to 30 percent of the population. In New York, New Jersey, and Georgia, they were probably in the majority. Toward the end of the war, about 80,000 Loyalists emigrated from the states to settle in Canada or Britain rather than face persecution at the hands of the victorious Patriots.

Although Loyalists came from all groups and classes, they tended to be wealthier and more conservative than the Patriots. Most government officials and Anglican clergy in America remained loyal to the crown.

**American Indians** At first, American Indians tried to stay out of the war. Eventually, however, attacks by colonists prompted many American Indians to support the British, who promised to limit colonial settlements in the West.

## ***Initial American Losses and Hardships***

The first three years of the war, 1775 to 1777, went badly for Washington's poorly trained and equipped revolutionary army. It barely escaped complete disaster in a battle for New York City in 1776, in which Washington's forces were routed by the British. By the end of 1777, the British occupied both New York and Philadelphia. After losing Philadelphia, Washington's demoralized troops suffered through the severe winter of 1777–1778 camped at Valley Forge in Pennsylvania.

Economic troubles added to the Patriots' bleak prospects. British occupation of American ports resulted in a 95 percent decline in trade between 1775 and 1777. Goods were scarce and inflation was rampant. The paper money issued by Congress, known as continentals, became almost worthless.

### ***Alliance With France***

The turning point for the American revolutionaries came with a victory at Saratoga in upstate New York in October 1777. British forces under General John Burgoyne had marched from Canada in an ambitious effort to link up with other forces marching from the west and south. Their objective was to cut off New England from the rest of the colonies (or states). But Burgoyne's troops were attacked at Saratoga by troops commanded by American generals Horatio Gates and Benedict Arnold. The British army was forced to surrender.

The diplomatic outcome of the Battle of Saratoga was even more important than the military result. News of the surprising American victory persuaded France to join in the war against Britain. France's king, Louis XVI, was an absolute monarch who had no interest in aiding a revolutionary movement. Nevertheless, he saw a chance to weaken his country's traditional foe, Great Britain, by helping to undermine its colonial empire. France had secretly extended aid to the American revolutionaries as early as 1775, giving both money and supplies. After Saratoga, in 1778, France openly allied itself with the Americans. (A year later, Spain and Holland also entered the war against Britain.) The French alliance proved a decisive factor in the American struggle for independence because it widened the war and forced the British to divert military resources away from America.

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<sup>1</sup> *United States History: Preparing for the Advanced Placement Examination* (Des Moines, Iowa: AMSCO Publishing, 2016).