

The Road to Independence

MT.1.01 Ideological origins of the American Revolution, the Founding Fathers' philosophy of divinely bestowed unalienable natural rights

As you saw in the first reading, the Founding Fathers' decision to declare independence was firmly rooted in Enlightenment ideas as well as the colonists' belief in self-government and unalienable rights. However, it was actions taken by the British government that eventually gave the colonists a final push on the road to independence.

The British first began establishing colonies in North America in the 1620s. By the 1760s, there were 13 colonies stretched all along the Atlantic Coast. For much of that time, the 13 colonies were self-governing: they elected their own colonial assemblies, passed their own laws, and collected their own taxes. Great Britain carried on trade with the Colonies and appointed colonial governors, but never interfered directly with the colonies.

This began to change after the French and Indian War. During this war, the British government spent vast sums of money defending the 13 colonies from attacks by the French and their Indian allies. As a result of this war, the British government was deeply in debt. The British King and Parliament decided it was time for the American colonists to begin paying their fair share of taxes and other duties to the British government.

The Stamp Act

In 1765, the British Parliament passed the Stamp Act. This law required the colonists to buy special stamps and place them on all printed materials. This included everything from newspapers to playing cards as well as legal documents like diplomas and wills. (Imagine if before getting your diploma at graduation you had to pay the school a fee for it.) The money raised by the Stamp Act would then be used to pay off the war debt and provide for the future defense of the colonies. This was the first time that the British government had ever placed a direct tax on the colonists.

The Colonists were outraged by this new tax. Many colonial leaders spoke out against the Stamp Act. Some formed groups called the Sons of Liberty to organized meetings and protests against the tax. The colonists were not angry that the tax was too high: the amount charged for the stamps was actually quite low. Instead, they were angry that the law had been passed without their consent. In 1765, none of the colonies were represented in the British Parliament and so none of the colonists had a say in the debate and passage of the Stamp Act. In October of 1765, representatives from nine colonies met for what became known as the Stamp Act Congress. The Stamp Act Congress issued the Declaration of Rights and Grievances. This document stated that only the colonists' political representatives, and not the British Parliament, had the right to raise taxes. The Congress declared that there should be "no taxation without representation."

When the Stamp Act took effect on November 1, 1765, many colonists simply ignored it. They began to boycott all goods made in Britain. They refused to drink British Tea or buy British cloth. Instead of gaining money from the tax, the British began to lose money from trade. Faced with this opposition from the colonists, the British government repealed the Stamp Act in 1766.

The Townshend Acts

Despite the failure of the Stamp Act, the British government was still determined to raise more money from the colonies. In 1767, Parliament passed the Townshend Acts. (These acts were named after Charles Townshend, the leader of Britain's treasury). These laws put new taxes on goods such as glass,

lead, paper, paint and tea imported into the colonies. The acts also increased the punishment for smuggling or trying to avoid paying the taxes.

Once again, the colonists responded with protests. Leaders like Samuel Adams, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson challenged the right of the British to tax the colonies. The British responded by dissolving the colonial assemblies and forbidding the colonists from gathering to protest. To make sure there were no further protests or challenges to British authority, the King sent soldiers to guard the port city of Boston. Separate laws also forced the colonists to provide food and shelter for the British soldiers.

On March 5, 1770, anger turned to violence in Boston. A crowd of colonists began taunting and throwing snowballs at British soldiers standing guard in the streets. Feeling threatened, the British soldiers opened fire and 5 colonists were killed. This event became known as the Boston Massacre. Wishing to avoid further violence, the British government backed down and repealed almost all of the Townshend Acts.

The Tea Act

The one tax that the British Parliament left in place was a tax on tea. The British also passed laws to crack down on colonists who defied British authority. Colonists suspected of breaking laws would be taken back to Great Britain for trial instead of standing trial in the colonies. Colonists believed that this denied them the right to a trial by a jury of their peers. In 1773, the British Parliament passed the Tea Act. This law reinforced the tax on British tea while giving preferential treatment to British tea companies. Again, the colonists were outraged. When shipments of British tea began to arrive, colonists in New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston blocked its delivery. Colonists in the port of Boston took it one step further.

On the night of December 16, 1773, about 150 Bostonians disguised as Indians snuck on board the British ships carrying tea. They dumped 342 chests of tea overboard as several thousand people on the shore cheered. This act of civil disobedience came to be called the Boston Tea Party.

The “Intolerable” Acts

The British government was outraged by the Boston Tea Party. In the spring of 1774, Parliament passed a new set of laws called the Coercive Acts. (The colonists would call them the “Intolerable Acts”). The goal of the laws was to punish Massachusetts and other colonies for challenging British authority. One law shut down Boston’s port until the city paid for the destroyed tea. The laws also banned most town meetings and gave more power to British governors who had been appointed by the King. Later, the British suspended the Massachusetts assembly. The colonists basically lost the right to govern themselves, elect their own leaders, or pass their own laws. To enforce the laws, the British king sent 2,000 more soldiers to the colonies.

This proved to be the last straw for many Americans. Between 1774 and 1775, representatives from all of the Colonies began to meet as a Continental Congress. Their goal was to plan how to respond to British actions. Other colonists began forming militias and preparing to fight the British if necessary. In April 1775, the first shots were fired between Colonial militias and British soldiers: the Revolutionary War had begun. By July 1776, the representatives of the Second Continental Congress decided it was time to break completely with Great Britain. The Congress voted to approve a document written by Thomas Jefferson that dissolved all ties with the British king. The Declaration of Independence proclaimed the 13 colonies to be free and independent on July 4, 1776. With this declaration, the United States was born.