

WHAT CAUSED THE REVOLUTION?



In 1763, the thirteen colonies that would later become the United States of America were part of the British Empire, the largest, most powerful empire on the world at the time. English colonists, who made up the largest group of European settlers in the colonies, had seen a new king crowned just three years before and displayed signs and symbols celebrating his reign in both their homes and in public spaces. And as victors alongside Great Britain in the just-ended French and Indian War, they felt proud of their relationship to Great Britain. So how did so many colonists, many of them English, decide just over ten years later that it was better to declare independence than to remain a part of the British Empire?

UNDERSTANDING THE BRITISH EMPIRE

An empire is a group of nations or separate territories ruled over by a single power. At the heart of the British Empire in the 18th century was Great Britain, which included the countries of England, Wales and Scotland. England was the central country with authority over the others. It had a monarch, a single powerful individual who was in charge of the country. But thanks to an earlier war, in the 17th century, the monarch now shared power with others in a system called a constitutional monarchy. The monarch of England in 1763 was King George III; he shared power with a governing group called Parliament.

Together, Parliament and King George III ruled over England, Scotland and Wales. But the British had also established colonies in other locations in Europe and around the world. In Europe, much of Ireland was under British control. In Asia, the British had colonies in India. In North America and the Caribbean, thanks to the French and Indian War, the British held not only the 13 colonies, but also Canada, Florida and the islands of Dominica, the Grenadines, Saint Vincent and Grenada. Many of these colonies had local governments that handled day-to-day affairs, but Parliament and the King believed that they held the highest power to make whatever decisions for their colonies that they believed were necessary.

As colonies within the British Empire, places like South Carolina, Virginia, New Jersey and Rhode Island had a very specific role. Their job was to provide raw materials for the empire, things like timber from trees, indigo, tobacco, and rice. In fact, in this system, called mercantilism, they were supposed to only sell things to and buy things from Britain. In return, they received protection from the British and access to the same rights to which all British people were entitled. It gave many colonists, especially merchants, a guaranteed source of income, but also felt restrictive to those who wanted more freedom.

THE FRENCH AND INDIAN WAR

The French and Indian War, also known as the Seven Years' War, began as a dispute over land between the British (including their colonists) and the French in North America. When the war ended in 1763, the British claimed all the land from Canada in the north to Florida in the south, and west to the Mississippi River. The war had been a success, but it had also been incredibly expensive. Soldiers had needed to be transported across the Atlantic Ocean, and they required food, weapons, supplies, housing and pay. Furthermore, much of the new land the British claimed was already occupied by Native Americans, many of whom had sided with the French to protect their land and families from British settlers, who were moving further and further west.

After the French and Indian War, King George III attempted to keep the peace between colonists and Native Americans. He established a boundary, called the Proclamation Line of 1763, beyond which colonists were not supposed to move. This way, Native Americans could keep much of their land and continue to live as they wanted to. But for many American colonists, who wanted access to more land in order to earn more money, it felt unfair that they could not have access to land that they felt they had fought for. They continued to fight with Native Americans, especially in the western frontier areas, and Native Americans fought back. To maintain order, the British Army left many soldiers stationed in the North American colonies after the French and Indian War, but this, too, was expensive.

TAXES AND PROTESTS

Where would the British get the money necessary to pay for the soldiers and their supplies as they maintained order in the North American colonies? Taxes. Between 1764 and 1773, British Parliament passed a series of taxes in the colonies meant to put money back in the treasury and make it easier to pay royal employees in British North America. However, many colonists – but not all – took these taxes as unfair attempts to exercise royal authority on colonies that had been operating somewhat independently for decades.

Before the French and Indian War, the British colonies in North America had operated under a system called “salutary neglect,” or “benign neglect.” This meant that they had gone about their business with little oversight or intervention from Parliament and were left to make many of their own decisions. This included trading with places like France, Spain and the Netherlands, even though they weren’t supposed to under the British mercantile system. But with the end of the French and Indian War, and the need for the British government to rebuild its financial strength, the government began to pay much more attention to the colonies. They needed to put a stop to smuggling, ensure that taxes were paid and be able to punish people that resisted, so that they could maintain their authority.

When Parliament began passing taxes like the Sugar Act in 1764, there were colonists who felt that Parliament was taking away the authority of the local governments that had previously been making decisions. They cried, “No taxation without representation!” A tax like the Stamp Act, passed in 1765, brought the same criticism, but many also believed that it was meant to limit the freedom of the press, or the ability of newspapers to write whatever they wanted without being censored. This was because newspaper publishers were heavily hit by the tax on paper, which required a stamp to prove that the tax had been paid. One of the Townshend Duties, passed in 1767, required that people who resisted the taxes be tried in front of a special court that did not include a jury. Upset colonists felt that this was a direct attack upon their rights as British subjects, who deserved a trial by a jury of their peers. And now, the British Army that had been left behind to protect them felt like an occupying force that was meant to police them.

Angry colonists began working together almost immediately to protest the acts and taxes that they didn’t like. Organized in groups like the Sons of Liberty and Daughters of Liberty, they planned boycotts of British goods, refusing to buy, import, or sell products made in Britain or coming through Britain for sale in North America. They intimidated tax collectors into quitting their jobs. They wrote pamphlets and letters meant to be read in the colonies and in Britain arguing their case. And on more than one occasion, they were successful in having the taxes they hated be repealed.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT ERA

King George III, Parliament and their representatives – including tax collectors, British soldiers, and royal Governors – felt that they were acting within their authority when they passed and supported tax acts and the measures to enforce them. The colonies were under the authority of the British Empire, and at the top of the British Empire were the monarch and Parliament. The only authority higher than them was God.

But many colonists, and many in Europe as well, were beginning to think differently about authority. Since the late 1600s, scientists, philosophers and artists had begun to think and write and ask questions about the world and the rights of man. Most importantly, they had begun to question the natural order of hierarchy and authority, the one the King and Parliament clung to. Perhaps, they argued, scientific thinking and proof and evidence should be more valuable than tradition. Perhaps man should be judged on what he himself could do, rather than by the class he was born into. Perhaps men should choose their own rulers. This period of thinking was known as the Enlightenment Era, or the Age of Reason.

WHAT CAUSED THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION?

So what caused the American Revolution? Historians disagree on the answers today, at least when it comes to the most important cause. Was it the inability of colonists to move westward? Or was it the passage

of new taxes in which they did not have any say? Was it anger at the response of the British to colonial protest? Or the sense that the British were not treating colonists as equal British citizens, limiting their right to things like freedom of the press or a trial by jury? Or perhaps it was the idea that there was a new way that a government could be run, with authority coming directly from the people rather than being given by God? In all likelihood it was all of these reasons and more, with answers as varied as the Revolutionaries, Loyalists and British subjects who played a role in it.