CHAPTER 8

America Secedes from the Empire, 1775–1783

# Focus Questions

1. What were some of the military engagements that occurred before independence was declared by the colonists and what was the outcome of each?

2. How did Thomas Paine convince colonists to fight for independence?

3. What were Thomas Paine’s views on government?

4. Why was Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence so inspiring at the time and for future revolutions?

5. Who were likely to be Loyalists? What types of people favored Britain? How were Loyalists treated during the war?

6. What were the major military campaigns after the colonists declared independence?

7. How was French aid secured by American diplomats?

8. How did Old World tensions contribute to the success of American diplomats in securing the Treaty of Paris and its generous provisions?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** When hostilities began in 1775, the colonists were still fighting for their rights as British citizens within the empire, but in 1776, they declared their independence, based on a proclamation of universal, self-evident truths. Inspired by revolutionary idealism, they also fought for an end to monarchy and the establishment of a free republic.

**Theme:** A combination of Washington’s generalship and British bungling in 1776–1777 prevented a quick British victory and brought French assistance, which enabled the Patriots to achieve victory after several more years of struggle.

**Theme:** American independence was recognized by the British only after the conflict had broadened to include much of Europe. American diplomats were able to secure generous peace terms because of the international political scene: Britain’s recently reorganized government that favored peace and France’s inability to make good on its promises to Spain.

chapter summary

Even after Lexington and Concord, the Second Continental Congress did not, at first, pursue independence. The Congress’s most important action was selecting George Washington as military commander.

After further armed clashes, George III formally proclaimed the colonists in rebellion, and Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* finally persuaded Americans to fight for independence as well as liberty. Paine and other leaders promoted the Revolution as an opportunity for self-government by the people, though more conservative republicans wanted to retain political hierarchy without monarchy. Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence deepened the meaning of the struggle by proclaiming its foundation in self-evident and universal human rights.

The committed Patriots, only a minority of the American population, had to fight both Loyalist Americans and the British. Loyalists were strongest among conservatives, city-dwellers, and Anglicans (except in Virginia), while Patriots were strongest in New England and among Presbyterians and Congregationalists.

In the first phase of the war, Washington stalemated the British, who botched their plan to quash the rebellion quickly at Saratoga. When the French and others then aided the Americans, the Revolutionary War became a world war.

American fortunes fell badly in 1780–1781, but the colonial army in the South held on until Cornwallis stumbled into a French-American trap at Yorktown. Lord North’s ministry collapsed in Britain, and American negotiators achieved an extremely generous settlement from the Whigs.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Show how *Common Sense* and the Declaration of Independence changed the meaningof the fighting. Explain why even Patriots were, at first, reluctant to proclaim independence and how they eventually came to link their struggle for rights with the break from Britain. (See boxed quote by Paine on page 139.)

REFERENCE: Pauline Maier, *American Scripture* (1997).

* Show how Washington and his generals essentially pursued a defensive strategy in the early phase of the war, while the British had to try for a quick victory. Explain why the Battle of Saratoga was so crucial politically as well as militarily.

REFERENCES: Bernard Bailyn, *Faces of Revolution: Personalities and Themes in the Struggle for American Independence* (1990); Piers Mackesy, *The War for America, 1775–1783* (1993).

* Consider the political dimensions of the war, particularly the civil war between Patriots and Loyalists and the politics of the French alliance. The focus might be on the role of the American military effort in swinging the neutral population to the Patriot cause.

REFERENCE: John Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence* (1976).

* Consider how the Revolution has been viewed and celebrated in various periods of American history (for example, on Independence Day).

REFERENCE: Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (1988).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Focus on Washington’s dual role as practical military strategist and heroic symbol of the Patriot cause.
* Examine the Declaration of Independence as both historical document and revolutionary propaganda. Discuss the short- and long-term historical significance of the grand rhetoric in the first part and the specific indictment in the second part. (See boxed quotes on page 139 and on page 152.)
* Take the perspective of colonists loyal to the crown and write a Declaration of Loyalty. Model the document on the Declaration of Independence. Begin with a grand rhetorical statement of philosophy and proceed to a list of colonial transgressions against the crown. Determine whether Loyalists could reasonably oppose the Patriots. Discuss whether a Declaration of Loyalty would have been able to effectively counter the arguments found in the Declaration of Independence.
* Consider the role of women in the American Revolution discussed in Chapter 7, including both their part in revolutionary events and the new understandings that began to develop regarding their public role as “daughters of liberty” and the questions that were raised. Link this concept with the 1776 letter by Abigail Adams on page 142 in the "Examining the Evidence" section.
* Compare the American Revolution to other major national revolutions. Comparisons with revolutions and struggles for independence in new nations, such as Mexico, India, and Iran, might be especially illuminating.

# character sketches

## Thomas Paine (1737–1809)

Paine’s Revolutionary propaganda in *Common Sense* and the *Crisis* played a critical role in arousing American patriotism. Because of his later role in the French Revolution and especially his attacks on Christianity in *The Age of Reason,* Paine has long been the most controversial of the revolutionary heroes. Theodore Roosevelt, for instance, once called him a “dirty little atheist.”

After the American Revolution, Paine traveled to Britain and France to promote his iron-bridge invention. He became a French citizen and was elected to the Revolutionary Convention. His stirring work, *The Rights of Man*, a reply to Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France,* sold hundreds of thousands of copies and made him a wanted man in Britain.

Following his return to America in 1801, even his influential friends, like Jefferson, avoided him, and he ended his life in poverty. After his death, a British admirer dug up his bones and shipped them to Britain, where they were lost.

**Quote:** “One of the strongest natural proofs of the folly of hereditary right in kings is that nature disapproves it, otherwise she would not so frequently turn it into ridicule by giving mankind an Ass for a Lion.… But where, some say, is the King of America? I’ll tell you, friend, He reigns above, and doth not make havoc of mankind like the Royal Brute of Great Britain.” (*Common Sense,* 1776)

REFERENCE: Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (1976).

## Richard Henry Lee (1732–1794)

Richard Henry Lee, the most eloquent Revolutionary orator besides Patrick Henry, was the author of the resolution declaring independence in June of 1776.

Lee came from the wealthy and influential Virginia Lee clan. Along with Henry, he gained political influence with his speeches attacking the Stamp Act and British economic domination of the colonies. He was a commanding presence at the Philadelphia Congress; John Adams was awed by him and called him a “masterly man.” His brother, Francis Lightfoot Lee, also signed the Declaration of Independence.

His career declined after the Revolution, and like Henry, he was an Anti-Federalist in the fight over the Constitution. Tall and slender, Lee had receding red hair and a musical voice.

**Quote:** “Why then do we longer delay? Why still deliberate? Let this most happy day give birth to the American republic. Let her arise, not to devastate and conquer, but to re-establish the reign of peace and law.” (Speech to Second Continental Congress, 1776)

REFERENCE: Oliver Perry Chitwood, *Richard Henry Lee: Statesman of the Revolution* (1967).

## John Paul Jones (1742–1792)

A naval hero of the American Revolution, Jones is known as the founder of the United States Navy. Although he professed deep commitment to America, he was a Scottish immigrant who actually spent little time in the United States, preferring to live abroad after the Revolution.

His original name was John Paul. He added the “Jones” in 1773, evidently to conceal his identity after being accused of killing a mutineer aboard a British merchant ship he was commanding. He then came to Virginia, made influential friends like Robert Morris, and received authorization to begin a navy. The heroic fight when he lashed the *Serapis* to his *Bonhomme Richard* made him an international hero, although in Britain, he was considered a pirate because of his raids on coastal towns.

An extremely complex personality, Jones has puzzled historians and has often been the subject of novels, plays, and poems. Despite his service to America’s republican cause, he was devoted to King Louis XIV of France, and near the end of his life, he became an officer in the navy of the despotic czarina of Russia, Catherine II.

**Quote:** “America has been the country of my fond election, from the age of thirteen, when I first saw it. I had the honor to hoist, with my hands, the flag of freedom, the first time it was displayed on the River Delaware; and I have attended it, with veneration, ever since on the ocean.” (1779)

REFERENCE: Samuel Eliot Morison, *John Paul Jones* (1959).

## George Rogers Clark (1752–1818)

Clark was the American frontiersman whose daring exploits won the trans-Appalachian west for the new United States.

Born in Virginia, Clark went west at age nineteen to work as a surveyor along the Ohio River. Clark became a leader of the frontier settlers, who deeply resented the British authorities’ connections with Indians. Clark returned to Virginia in 1776 to receive a militia commission to attack British forts. He hoped to raise at least five hundred men, but only 175 joined him.

After his great successes in the Illinois campaign and the capture of Vincennes, he attempted to capture the British fort at Detroit in 1779 but failed. Besides his skill at frontier warfare, he proved especially adept at persuading many Indians to abandon the British and support the French and Americans or, at least, to remain neutral.

He had little success after the war. Jefferson initially offered him command of the expedition to explore Louisiana, but the position went instead to his brother William.

**Quote:** (Speech to Indians) “The Great Spirit has caused your old Father the French King and other nations to join the big Knife (Washington) and fight with them, so that the English have become like a deer in the woods.”

REFERENCE: Lowell H. Harrison, *George Rogers Clark and the War in the West* (1969).

## QUESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

. What was radical and new in the Declaration of Independence and what was old and traditional? What did statements like “all men are created equal” mean in their historical context and what did they come to mean later?

. Was military strategy or politics the key to American victory in the war? How did the two coincide?

. If the “Model Treaty” that John Adams authored had been the basis for the American alliance with France, would the results of the Revolution have been the same? Do you agree that Benjamin Franklin’s French alliance is an example of “practical self-interest trumping idealism,” as the authors state? In what other situations during the Revolutionary War does practical self-interest trump idealism?

. Did the Loyalists deserve to be persecuted and driven out of the country? What difference does it make to understand the Revolution as a civil war betweenAmericans as well as a war against the British?

. How important were the diplomatic relations between European nations in determining the success of the American Revolution? How significant a role did the French play in securing American independence? How significant a role did the rest of Europe play? How did the American Revolution change diplomatic relations in Europe?

. What has the Revolution meant to later generations of Americans, including our own? Do we still think of the United States as a revolutionary nation? Why or why not?

# makers of america: The loyalists

## Questions for Class Discussion

1. Why have the Loyalists been largely forgotten in American historical memory? Do they deserve to be better known? Do you agree with the text that they were often tragic figures?

2. Did the Loyalists act primarily out of conviction and feelings of patriotism toward Britain, or out of self-interest?

3. If you had been an African American, free or slave, in 1776, would you have tried to back the Patriot cause or the Loyalist cause? Why?

**CONTENDING VOICES: FRIEDRICH VON GENTZ VS. JOHN QUINCY ADAMS**

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. How did von Gentz in 1800 contrast the American Revolution with the French Revolution?

2. Why did Adams so approve of von Gentz’s analysis?

# varying viewpoints

**Expanding the View**

* Carl L. Becker, *Beginnings of the American People* (1915).

A “progressive” view of the Revolution as the product of social conflict among colonial groups:

“It was the opposition of interests in America that chiefly made men extremists on either side.… Those men who wished to take a safe middle ground, who wished neither to renounce their country nor to mark themselves as rebels, could no longer hold together.”

* Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967).

An “ideological” view of the Revolution as resulting from the colonists’ ideas about liberty and power:

“The colonists believed they saw emerging from the welter of events during the decade after the Stamp Act a pattern whose meaning was unmistakable.…They saw about them, with increasing clarity, not merely mistaken, or even evil, policies violating the principles upon which freedom rested, but what appeared to be evidence of nothing less than a deliberate assault launched surreptitiously by plotters against liberty both in England and in America.…This belief transformed the meaning of the colonists’ struggle, and it added an inner accelerator to the movement of opposition.… It was this…that was signaled to the colonists after 1763, and it was this above all else that in the end propelled them to Revolution.”

# Questions for Class Discussion

1. According to each of these viewpoints, what provided the fuel that drove the colonists from particular political disagreements to revolutionary assertion of independence?

2. How would each of these historians interpret the common view of the American Revolution as a fight for liberty?

3. How would the sequence of events leading up to the Revolution (for example, the Stamp Act and the Boston Tea Party) be treated according to each of these perspectives?