CHAPTER 7

The Road to Revolution, 1763–1775

# Focus Questions

. What role did mercantilism play in creating discord between British authorities and the colonists?

. How did the colonies respond to Grenville’s laws, specifically the Stamp Act?

. What events resulted in British soldiers landing in Boston and being involved in the Boston Massacre?

. How did the British respond to the Boston Tea Party?

. Where did the British soldiers and American colonists clash in April 1775?

. What were the advantages and disadvantages of Britain on the eve of the American Revolution?

. What were the advantages and disadvantages of the American colonists on the eve of the American Revolution?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** Tension between the colonies and Britain centered on the issues of mercantilism and its implementation. The British Empire attempted to more strictly enforce laws aimed at maintaining a system of mercantilism, while colonists objected to this change from the earlier salutary neglect.

**Theme:** The American Revolution occurred because the American colonists, who had long been developing a strong sense of autonomy and self-government, furiously resisted British attempts to impose tighter imperial controls and higher taxes after the end of the French and Indian War in 1763. The sustained conflict over political authority and taxation, enhanced by American agitators and British bungling, gradually moved Americans from asserting rights within the British Empire to openly warring with the mother country.

**Theme:** At the outset of the Revolutionary War, Britain appeared to be a mighty empire, but it was weaker than it seemed at first glance. Poor leadership in London, along with second-rate generals in the colonies, reduced the impact of the larger British population and its naval supremacy. Americans, on the other hand, had many advantages such as George Washington’s leadership and fighting a defensive war. However, the colonists also faced disorganization, jealousy, and economic difficulties.

chapter summary

The American War of Independence was a military conflict fought from 1775 to 1783, but the American Revolution was a deeper transformation of thought and loyalty that began when the first settlers arrived in America and finally led to the colonies’ political separation from Britain.

One source of long-term conflict was the tension between the considerable freedom and self-government the colonists enjoyed in the American wilderness and their participation in the British Empire’s mercantile system. While British mercantilism actually provided economic benefits to the colonies, along with certain liabilities, its limits on freedom and patronizing goal of keeping America in a state of perpetual economic adolescence stirred growing resentment.

The short-term movement toward the War of Independence began with British attempts to impose higher taxes and tighter imperial controls after the French and Indian War. To the British these were reasonable measures, under which the colonists would simply bear a fair share of the costs of the empire. To the colonists, however, the measures constituted attacks on fundamental rights.

Through well-orchestrated agitation and boycotts, the colonists forced repeal of the Stamp Act of 1765 as well as the Townshend Acts that replaced it, except for the symbolic tax on tea. A temporary lull in conflict between 1770 and 1773 ended with the Boston Tea Party, conducted by a network of Boston agitators reacting to the Massachusetts governor’s attempt to enforce the law.

In response to the Tea Party, the British imposed the harsh Intolerable Acts, coincidentally passing the Quebec Act at the same time. These twin actions aroused ferocious American resistance throughout the colonies and led directly to the calling of the First Continental Congress and the clash of arms at Lexington and Concord.

As the two sides prepared for war, the British enjoyed the advantages of a larger population, a professionally trained militia, and much greater economic strength. The greatest American asset was the deep commitment of those Patriots who were ready to sacrifice for their rights.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Explain how the colonists had gradually developed very strong ideas of rights and liberty that differed considerably from the meaning of those terms within the context of the eighteenth-century British Empire. Show how, as a result, actions that the British considered moderate and reasonable were seen by the colonists as evidence of a vast conspiracy by a corrupt aristocracy to deprive them of their basic freedoms.

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

* Examine the crucial issues in the conflict, perhaps focusing on the colonial cry of “No taxation without representation.” Point out that this slogan actually revealed how strong a sense of self-government the colonists had already developed, since they did not really wantrepresentation in the British Parliament (even had it been offered). The same goes for the tricky distinction between internal and external taxation.

REFERENCE: Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763–1789* (1982).

* Explain, more fully, how patriotic groups like the Sons and Daughters of Liberty used boycotts, agitation, propaganda, and sometimes violence or near-violence to keep the Revolutionary movement alive, even in periods of seemingly improved relations. (See boxed quote on page 123.) The focus might be on the constant spiral of action and reaction that gradually moved the conflict from an ideological and political debate to open violence and warfare.

REFERENCES: Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution* (1972); Edward Countryman, *The American Revolution* (1987).

* Develop an appreciation of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the two sides by focusing on their typical military representatives: the British redcoats and the American minutemen (militia). Point out how the professional British army came to be seen as a hostile occupying force (for example, in the Boston Massacre), while the strong American preference for the citizen-soldier militia reflected a love of liberty and dislike of powerful authority.

REFERENCES: Robert Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (1976); John Sly, *Toward Lexington: The Role of the British Army in the Coming of the American Revolution* (1965).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Focus on the question of the inevitability of the War of Independence by asking whether independence might have come without a war. Use Canada as a counterexample to show that British colonies in America did not haveto revolt but might have developed autonomy (and eventually independence) peacefully within the empire.
* Examine the issue of whether the Revolution was a true revolution in the political and social order or whether it was instead a conservative movement, in the sense of defendinga status quo Americans had long ago accepted as their natural birthright. A good way to sharpen this question is to discuss whether the Revolution should be viewed primarily as a change from monarchy to republic, as a fight to preservecolonial rights, or as the separation of the colonies from England.
* Focus on one of the dramatic episodes of the early revolutionary struggle: The Stamp Act crisis, the Boston Massacre, the Boston Tea Party, or Lexington and Concord. Discuss how the particulars of the event (for example, rock throwing at British soldiers, dumping the tea) fit into the larger political context of the movement toward Revolution.
* Discuss the role of African Americans and Indians in the Revolution, both in support of the Patriot cause and as Loyalists drawn to back the British. Consider the tensions and contradictions in the Patriots’ language of rights and liberty in relation to their treatment of slaves and others whom they did not consider part of their communities. (See boxed quote on page 133.)
* Reexamine the conditions and events leading up to the Revolution from a British perspective, including the system of mercantilism and the imposition of taxes. Discuss why the British might have thought they were being quite generous to the colonists (for example, in defending them from France almost for free) while seeing the Americans as ungrateful and hostile to all authority.

# character sketches

## Samuel Adams (1722–1803)

Samuel Adams was the principal political activist for American liberty and rebellion in the early 1770s. As organizer of the committees of correspondence, he strongly influenced the movement toward American independence.

Adams came from a moderately well off and ambitious clan that included his second cousin, John Adams. Samuel failed badly after taking over his father’s brewery and ended up deeply in debt. But he turned out to be as good at politics as he was bad at business. By 1763, he was the leader of the “Whipping Post Club,” a political group that had a strong local influence. Adams took the democratic side against royal Governor Thomas Hutchinson and his wealthy political allies. While Adams never endorsed mob violence, he proved a master at turning popular passions to the advantage of the radical cause. When the tea crisis began, Adams organized the rousing public meetings at Faneuil Hall that culminated in the Boston Tea Party.

Although he served in both Continental Congresses, Adams possessed the skills of an agitator, not a legislator, and he rapidly lost influence once the war began. His later career was confined to Massachusetts (where he served as governor from 1794 to 1797), and he remained deeply suspicious of all forms of centralized power.

**Quote:** “Driven from every other corner of the earth, freedom of thought and the right of private judgment in matters of conscience direct their course to this happy country as their last asylum.” (1776)

REFERENCES: Pauline Maier, *The Old Revolutionaries: Political Lives in the Age of Samuel Adams* (1980); Dennis Fradin, *Samuel Adams: The Father of American Independence* (1998).

## Abigail Adams (1744–1818)

Abigail Adams was one of the most thoughtful and articulate American women of the revolutionary era and an early advocate of a larger public role for women.

The daughter of a well-known Massachusetts family, she received almost no formal education, like many women of the time, but she taught herself a good deal by reading on her own, including French and English literature. After marrying John Adams at age twenty (he was twenty-nine), she bore five children between 1765 and 1772. During the ten years of revolutionary upheaval (1773 to 1783), she and her husband, though mostly apart, maintained a constant correspondence that shows Abigail to have been astute and strong-minded. During John’s absence she also managed the family businesses, including their farm in Braintree, Massachusetts.

After the war, when her husband became president, she defended his policies so actively that some of Adams’s political opponents sarcastically called her “Mrs. President.”

**Quote:** “Remember the ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power in the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have not had voice or representation.” (Letter to John Adams at the Second Continental Congress, 1776)

REFERENCE: Lynne Withey, *Dearest Friend: A Life of Abigail Adams* (1981).

## Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette (1757–1834)

Lafayette was the French nobleman who joined the American Revolution and promoted the Franco-American alliance. His strong sympathy for the Revolution made him an international liberal hero, while in America he has symbolized Franco-American friendship and devotion to freedom. His youthful decision to join the American cause was made partly because he was genuinely stirred by the revolutionary appeal to liberty, but also because the American war offered heroic adventure.

In his first combat, at Brandywine, the teenage general Lafayette was shot in the leg. He also commanded one of the divisions at Valley Forge. After persuading the French government to make a substantial commitment to the American cause, he played a crucial role as a commander of the Continental army in Virginia in the months preceding Cornwallis’s surrender.

A leader of the early phase of the French Revolution of 1789, Lafayette lost power when the Revolution turned more radical, and he ended up in prison. His status as an honorary American citizen was used to gain his release. In 1824, he returned to America for a triumphant tour, during which huge crowds turned out everywhere and greeted him warmly.

**Quote:** “The moment I heard of America I loved her. The moment I knew she was fighting for freedom, I burned with a desire of bleeding for her; and the moment I shall be able to serve her, at any time or in any part of the world, will be the happiest one of my life.”

REFERENCE: Jean Fritz, *Why Not, Lafayette?* (1999).

## Paul Revere (1735–1818)

Paul Revere, remembered especially for his “midnight ride” in April 1775 to warn that “the British are coming,” was a notable American artisan as well as an active patriot in the Revolutionary cause.

Revere’s father was a French Huguenot refugee, and Paul took up his father’s trade as a highly skilled silversmith. Revere fought in the French and Indian War and afterward became active in many patriotic groups such as the Sons of Liberty and the North End caucus. He became well known for his anti-British cartoons and engravings, including one of the Boston Massacre. He was one of the leaders of the Indians who carried out the Boston Tea Party.

On their famous ride, Revere and William Dawes successfully roused the colonial militia and alerted John Hancock and Samuel Adams to go into hiding to avoid arrest. Revere and Dawes were finally stopped by British patrols just before they got to Concord, but they were released. Revere later designed and printed the first Continental money and achieved the rank of lieutenant colonel in the revolutionary army.

**Quote:** (To a British officer) “You’re too late. I’ve alarmed the country all the way up. We should have five hundred men at Lexington soon.”

REFERENCES: JoAnn Grote, *Paul Revere: American Patriot* (2000); David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere’s Ride* (1994).

## Questions for Class Discussion

. Evaluate the system of mercantilism. What were the benefits for Britain and for the colonies? What were the costs to Britain and to the colonies? (See boxed quote on page 119.) Is the system of mercantilism sustainable or will colonies inevitably revolt?

. Was the American Revolution inevitable? Could America have gradually and peacefully developed independence within the British Commonwealth, as Canada later did, rather than engaging in a violent revolt? At what point in time, if any, was a violent revolt inevitable? What could the British have done to stop the Revolution?

. Were all the American grievances really justified, or were the British actually being more reasonable than most Americans have traditionally believed?

. What was the Revolutionary movement, at its core, really all about? Was it about the amountof taxation, the rightof Parliament to tax, the political corruption of Britain and the virtue of America, the right of a king to govern America, or the colonies’ growing sense of national identity apart from Britain? Was the Revolution truly a radical overturning of government and society—the usual definition of a revolution—or something far more limited or even conservative in its defense of traditional rights?

. In 1775, which side would a neutral observer have expected to win—Britain or the colonies? Why?

## Suggested Student Exercises

* Examine the biographies of some of the better-known Loyalists, and consider why they remained loyal to Britain while others in similar positions did not. Governor Thomas Hutchinson of Massachusetts and Benjamin Franklin’s son William, governor of New Jersey, are good examples. (Even General Benedict Arnold came to be considered a belated Loyalist.)
* Trace the history and continuing influence of the Loyalists who migrated to Canada after the Revolution. Examine their impact on subsequent Canadian history and political theory.

**CONTENDING VOICES: JOHN DICKINSON VS. THOMAS PAINE**

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. How did Dickinson think the colonists should respond to the Stamp Act and other measures?

2. Contrast Dickinson’s views with the path argued by Paine in *Common Sense*.

**THINKING GLOBALLY: IMPERIAL RIVALRY AND COLONIAL REVOLT**

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. How did conflicts over taxation by imperial authority have parallels in both North and South America in the second half of the 1700s?

2. What comparisons can be drawn in how both England and Spain responded to global developments at this time?

3. What factors help explain why the thirteen North American colonies of England broke away from the mother country while Spain’s colonies failed to do so in the 1700s?