

About the Handout

Source: This Handout is an excerpt from American History_ A Very Short Introduction (Chapter 02)

Objectives & Aims: This supporting learning material is for consolidating, reinforcing and expanding M01 students Learning Experience of Civilization Classes.

Subject Covered Themes:

- The American Revolutionary War
- The War of Independence
- New Nation's Governing Framework

Further Reading: 1) American History_ A Very Short Introduction

2) A People and a Nation_ A History of the United States, Volume I _ To 1877, Brief Ninth Edition.

The path to independence

Saddled with debt from the Seven Years' War, Parliament set out to extract more revenue from the colonies. From London's perspective this seemed fair, since British troops had defeated the colonists' French foes. These postwar taxes and other measures angered many colonists, however, since the colonies lacked representation in Parliament.

In the Sugar Act (1764), the first of these measures, Parliament lowered duties on molasses the colonists imported from the French West Indies but increased duties on other imported goods. To thwart smuggling, the act tightened inspection of colonial merchant ships and shifted smuggling cases from lenient local magistrates to Admiralty Courts headed by British judges.

Next came the Stamp Act (1765), requiring colonists to purchase special stamped paper for newspapers, diplomas, and legal documents, and even taxing dice and playing cards! While the Sugar Act served the dual purpose of raising revenue and regulating trade, the Stamp Act's sole aim was to increase taxes. As a further irritant, the 1765 Quartering Act required colonial taxpayers to house and feed British troops stationed in America.

British authorities pointed out that the colonists, while enjoying military protection and trading privileges, paid lower taxes than did Britons at home. But without representation, colonists protested, any tax violated their rights. In Virginia's House of Burgesses, Patrick Henry introduced resolutions denouncing the Act. Protests turned violent in Boston, where a mob hanged the tax collector in effigy and trashed the residence of Chief Justice Thomas Hutchinson, a Stamp Act defender. In October 1765, delegates from nine colonies met in New York City. Affirming colonial solidarity, this "Stamp Act Congress" passed resolutions denying Parliament's right to tax the colonies. Amid mounting protests, Parliament in 1766 repealed the Stamp Act but passed a "Declaratory Act" affirming its authority over the colonies.

Tensions eased with the Stamp Act's repeal and the advent of a new prime minister, William Pitt, who was popular in the colonies. But parliamentary leadership soon passed from the ailing Pitt to a hard-nosed Chancellor of the Exchequer, Charles Townshend. In a 1767 act dubbed the Townshend Duties, Parliament slapped duties on various products imported by the colonies and created a new revenue-collection bureaucracy, the American Board of Customs Commissioners. Attempting to appease colonists' sensitivities, Townshend differentiated these "external taxes" from "internal taxes" such as the Stamp Act. But in an influential 1767 pamphlet misleadingly titled *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*, the Philadelphia lawyer John Dickinson rejected this distinction.

As the dispute deepened, Boston's Samuel Adams distributed the Massachusetts Circular Letter to all the colonies denouncing Parliament's action. When several colonial legislatures endorsed Adams's letter, the royal governors dissolved them. The Sons of Liberty, a loose-knit organization originally formed to oppose the Stamp Act, revived, urging a boycott of British imports. In June 1768, a Boston mob attacked customs officials who had seized a ship- appropriately called *Liberty*-owned by merchant John Hancock. Partially relenting, Parliament repealed most of the Townshend Duties in 1770 but again asserted its authority by retaining the tax on tea the colonists imported. Ominously, London also ordered 4000 troops to Boston.

On March 5, 1770, British troops guarding the Boston customs house fired on stone-throwing protesters, killing five, including Crispus Attucks, an African American seaman. Outrage over the "Boston Massacre" quickly spread, fed by an inflammatory engraving of the incident by Boston silversmith Paul Revere. In 1772, prodded by Samuel Adams, Massachusetts towns set up Committees of Correspondence to coordinate resistance and publicize colonial grievances "to the World." Other colonies followed suit. Ignoring the warning signals, Parliament in 1773 passed the Tea Act to help the struggling East India Company dispose of its surplus tea. While lowering (but not removing) the import duty, the act gave the East India Company monopolistic authority to sell its tea in America through special agents, undercutting local merchants.

Boston again became the flashpoint of opposition. On the night of December 16, 1773, after a tumultuous town meeting, some fifty men disguised as Indians boarded a British ship and dumped 342 chests of tea into the harbor. The "Boston Tea Party" outraged British authorities. Parliament passed a series of Coercive Acts (called the "Intolerable Acts" in America) closing Boston harbor and subjecting the colony to direct royal rule. Further alarming Protestant colonists, Parliament extended the boundaries of Catholic Quebec to include the trans-Appalachian west.

In September 1774, delegates from all thirteen colonies except Georgia gathered in Philadelphia. This first Continental Congress denounced the Coercive Acts, approved a boycott of British imports, and authorized

military preparations. But the delegates also professed loyalty to George III and urged him to resist Parliament's oppressive measures.

Building a case for independence

As colonial politicians, pamphleteers, and preachers furiously produced pamphlets, newspaper essays, and sermons; some favored independence, others negotiation and compromise. Massachusetts's Thomas Hutchinson, now governor, argued that the economic and military benefits of being part of the British Empire surely outweighed "what are called English liberties." Most, however, denounced Parliament's taxes and regulatory measures. Tellingly, they drew their arguments from England's own history, especially the Glorious Revolution of 1689, which had repudiated the absolutist claims of James II and established a limited monarchy. Echoing some English radicals, they argued that the now-landed aristocrats in Parliament were conspiring with the Crown to trample individual rights. Just as Parliament had resisted the Crown in 1689, now Parliament must be resisted. They especially admired John Wilkes, a London journalist and member of Parliament who favored reforming that body to make it more representative.

As protests mounted, war drew closer. Ignoring conciliatory proposals defending the colonists cause, Parliament on February 7, 1775, declared Massachusetts in rebellion. General Thomas Gage, commander of the British troops in Boston, was authorized to crush the uprising. On April 19, seven hundred Redcoats marched from Boston toward nearby Concord, to seize a cache of hidden weapons. Racing ahead on horseback, Paul Revere and William Dawes warned of the British approach. In Lexington, armed townsmen confronted the troops. As shooting erupted, eight colonists died. Finding no weapons, the Redcoats returned to Boston under a hail of gunfire. By nightfall, the British had endured more than 270 casualties and the colonists nearly 100. On June 17, the Redcoats attacked armed colonists occupying Bunker Hill and Breeds Hill overlooking Boston. The colonists suffered more than 300 casualties, the British more than 1,000.

In Philadelphia, the Continental Congress sent a final appeal to George III, the so-called Olive Branch Petition, again expressing loyalty but urging a ceasefire in Boston, repeal of the Coercive Acts, and negotiations over disputed issues. King and Parliament rejected this gesture by issuing the Proclamation of Rebellion, aware that Congress had also authorized a Continental army under George Washington.

The war for independence

"[T]hese United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, free and Independent States." So proclaimed a declaration drafted in spring 1776 by a Continental Congress committee, with Thomas Jefferson, a Virginia planter and political leader, as principal author. It listed the "abuses and usurpations" by which George III had

tried to impose an “absolute tyranny,” denying the colonists’ natural right to “life, liberty, and property.” In the revision process, Congress changed “property” (John Locke’s formulation) to the more resonant “pursuit of happiness.” On July 4 Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence, now enshrined at the National Archives. In its first official act of diplomacy, Congress dispatched Benjamin Franklin as emissary to Paris. A respected Philadelphia politician, civic leader, and statesman, Franklin secured vital French loans and, ultimately, military support for the infant nation.

The drive for independence divided Britain’s American colonies. Canadians rejected Congress’s plea to join the cause. The sugar planters in Britain’s Caribbean colonies showed no interest. Even in the thirteen mainland colonies, around 20 percent of the white population, called Loyalists, opposed independence for economic, career, or personal reasons, including lingering attachment to England or fear of revolutionary chaos. Facing ostracism and even violence, many Loyalists fled to England or Canada.

As hostilities began, each side had strengths and weaknesses. The British possessed a powerful navy and a disciplined army, both commanded by seasoned officers and buttressed by hired German mercenaries. But despite some Loyalist support, the British were fighting in enemy territory, with dangerously long supply lines, under conditions unsuited to conventional military tactics or set-piece battles.

The Continental army relied on poorly paid citizen-soldiers prone to drift away when their enlistment ended or farm duties called. But the colonists had crucial advantages. They were fighting on their home turf, and in George Washington they had a commander whose tactical skills steadily improved. Above all, Britain’s European rivals, France, Spain, and the Netherlands, provided critical strategic support. Foreign volunteers were important as well. The twenty-year-old Marquis de Lafayette, arriving from France, joined Washington as aide-de-camp. The Prussian general Friedrich von Steuben played a vital role in training Washington’s undisciplined soldiers and preparing a standard manual of arms and maneuvers.

After the Concord and Bunker Hill debacles, the British left Boston and, under General William Howe, shifted to Long Island, intent on driving a wedge between Virginia and Massachusetts. A naval fleet under Admiral Richard Howe (William’s brother) hovered off shore. Besting Washington’s army in several skirmishes, Howe in September 1776 occupied New York City, a Loyalist stronghold.

Retreating across New Jersey, Washington’s army crossed the Delaware River into Pennsylvania. Successful counterattacks on British garrisons in New Jersey boosted Patriot morale, but in September 1777 Howe defeated the Continental army at Brandywine Creek and occupied Philadelphia. As Congress retreated, Washington’s ragged troops spent a miserable winter at nearby Valley Forge. “These are times that try men’s souls,” wrote Thomas Paine in a new pamphlet, *The Crisis*.

Meanwhile, British troops under General John Burgoyne marched from Quebec southward along Lake Champlain and the Hudson River, hoping to join Howe, moving up the Hudson from New York, and a British-Iroquois force advancing from the west, cutting off New England. But Burgoyne's invasion faltered under attack by local militias and a Patriot army commanded by General Horatio Gates. On October 17, 1777, at Saratoga, New York, Burgoyne surrendered. With this defeat, the French (already secretly providing funds) recognized American independence and pledged direct military aid. The Netherlands and Spain backed the American cause as well.

Abandoning their northern strategy, the British looked southward. In 1778–79 they gained control of Georgia, and in May 1780 captured Charleston. At the Battle of Camden, South Carolina (August 1780), General George Cornwallis's army defeated an American force. But Patriot troops under General Nathanael Greene turned the tide in brutal fighting in the Carolina backcountry that included torture and civilian massacres.

In spring 1781, Cornwallis marched his weakened army to Virginia's Yorktown peninsula to await reinforcements and supplies. Here they were trapped by Washington's Continental army, redeployed from Pennsylvania. A French fleet brought fresh troops and blocked a British escape by sea. On October 19, 1781, as a military band played "A World Turned Upside Down," Cornwallis surrendered. The peace commission, meeting the British negotiators in Paris, included an odd couple, dour, moralistic John Adams of Massachusetts and the worldly Benjamin Franklin. But negotiations went forward, and in the Treaty of Paris (1783), the British recognized American independence.

Creating a nation

Having proclaimed their independence, Americans confronted the challenge of self-government. In 1777, with the war still raging, Congress adopted the Articles of Confederation. Under this framework, Congress recorded some notable achievements, including the Treaty of Paris, securing American independence, and the Northwest Ordinance (1787), providing for the surveying, settlement, and formation of states in the territory bounded by the Appalachians, the Great Lakes, and the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. One notable provision funded public education through land sales. The ordinance prohibited slavery in the region and pledged to honor Indian treaties—the latter provision soon violated.

Despite these achievements, the confederation proved weak. With no executive or judicial branches, it had only a unicameral Congress, elected annually, with one vote per state, whatever its population. Congress could issue currency, deliver mail, and negotiate treaties but could not impose taxes, regulate trade, or raise an army. With memories of parliamentary excesses still raw, the Articles of Confederation deliberately created a feeble

central government, preserving full sovereignty to the states. A postwar depression highlighted these weaknesses. Social unrest and demands for debt relief, culminating in Shays's Rebellion, a 1786 uprising by Massachusetts farmers, alarmed conservatives and the wealthy, increasing pressures for a stronger central government.

In February 1787, Congress invited the states to send delegates to Philadelphia to revise the articles. All responded except Rhode Island, fearful of losing the power to impose import duties. Convening in May, the delegates abandoned the articles entirely and set about crafting a new Constitution. Through the hot summer they debated, defending their states' interests, trading political and social views, and drawing upon the colonies' long experience of self-government. They resolved differences between large and small states by creating a bicameral Congress: a Senate with two senators from each state, and a House of Representatives with each state's delegation determined by its population.

The document that emerged reflected the delegates' fear of tyranny. Dividing power between the federal government and the states, it also carefully parceled out the federal government's own powers among three branches: the bicameral legislature; an executive branch headed by a president; and a judiciary with a Supreme Court chosen by presidential nomination with Senate approval. Counterbalancing restraints limited each branch's power. The president could veto a congressional bill, for example, but Congress could overturn a veto by a two-thirds vote. In an age of monarchies and hereditary aristocracies, the Constitution, beginning "We the people of the United States," established a republic, answerable to the people through elections. But it also revealed the delegates' suspicions of "democracy"—a term generally associated with mob rule. Senators would be elected by state legislatures, not by popular vote. Citizens would not vote for presidents or vice presidents directly, but for "electors" who would make that decision. Only male property owners would vote in federal elections. (The Constitution granted federal voting rights to everyone qualified to vote for the lower house of their state legislature. At this time, every state imposed property requirements for voting.) At slaveholders' insistence, slavery was embedded into the nation's founding charter. (Embarrassed about mentioning slavery in a document establishing a republic, the delegates referred euphemistically to "all other Persons" [Art. I, Sec. 2] and "Persons held to service or labor" [Art. IV, Sec. 2].) The Constitution required that slaves escaping from one state to another be returned to their masters; counted three-fifths of the slave population in apportioning representation in the House of Representatives; and even permitted the slave trade to continue for twenty years.

In September, when Congress submitted the Constitution to the state legislatures for ratification, suspicions ran high. Small farmers feared urban commercial and banking interests. Vocal opponents, including Virginia's Patrick Henry, charged that the Constitution failed to safeguard individual or states'

rights, raising the specter of despotism. But the Constitution's supporters, known as Federalists, included the most prominent Revolutionary leaders. Addressing the opponents' fears, they pledged to support a Bill of Rights, which in fact was added to the Constitution in 1791 in the form of ten amendments, including one reserving to the states or to the people all powers not specifically granted to the federal government.

The most notable contribution to the ratification debate, and to the vast literature of political theory, was *The Federalist*— eighty-five essays published in New York City newspapers under the pseudonym “Publius” and written mostly by Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, with a few by John Jay. While Hamilton made the case for a strong federal government, Madison explained the Constitution's checks and balances. Addressing fears that a republican government could not succeed in a large nation, Madison in “Federalist 10” argued just the reverse. America's diverse economic, geographic, and other interests would counterbalance each other, he contended, assuring overall stability.

Opinion gradually turned favorable, and by summer 1788 the required nine states had ratified, including Massachusetts, Virginia, and even doubtful New York. In the first federal elections that November, George Washington emerged as the unanimous choice for president. On April 30 in New York City, wearing a plain brown suit rather than his military uniform, Washington took the oath of office. Various honorific titles were proposed, but Washington made his preference clear: “Mr. President.”

In a remarkable thirteen years, thirteen British colonies had won independence and established a new nation. The 1787 Constitution, though a document of its time, and stained by references to slavery, stands as a remarkable achievement, creating the first modern republican government. In coming centuries it would prove adaptable to changed circumstances, yet faithful to the founders' vision.