

Towards a More Perfect Union: The March to Freedom

By the middle of the 18th century the British Parliament, along with various British interests were extremely concerned about and interested in the burgeoning prosperous colonies and more alarmed by what they perceived as the confused and chaotic behavior of the colonials. Royal officials complained incessantly of the colonists' increasing defiance of authority and their continued evasions of the navigation acts. The colonial population was growing faster than anyone could have imagined and becoming an ever larger and more important financial part of the British empire. In 1700 the American colonial population had been only one-twentieth of the British and Irish populations combined. By 1770 the colonial population constituted nearly one-fifth of the British empire. Within a span of twenty years (1745-1765) the value of colonial exports to Britain doubled and their imports from Britain rose even faster. This growth caused British officials great consternation and the view that these remote "half-savage" North American provinces were becoming the most important and expanding segment of the British empire—already one-half of all British shipping was engaged in American commerce. The colonists aware of their growth, took prided in themselves and interpreted their achievement as a sign of their future destiny. Ben Franklin predicted that sooner or later the metropolitan center of Britain would shift to America.

It was in the context of heightened concern for the North American colonies that Britain prepared for a renewal of war with France. Since the 17th century, as Europeans competed against each other for control of Europe and the New World, England had been engaged in repeated conflict with France and Spain—conflicts into which the colonists would ultimately be drawn. By 1750 it became clear to all of the antagonists that North America would be the central theater for the next phase of European competition and warfare. France, alarmed by the growth of the British colonies, tried to hold on to the Ohio Valley by building a string of forts. The colonies resisted and unofficial fighting broke out.

In 1754, in a meeting in Albany, British officials attempted to organize the colonists against the French and Indian threat, but the plan of such a union was rejected by the colonists. That such a plan should have been drawn up, however, suggested the unprecedented nature of the developing crisis. In 1755 Major General Edward Braddock, Commander in-Chief of the British forces in America suffered a disastrous defeat at the hand of the French and their Indian allies and the war in America became a titanic struggle for the empire. After a series of setbacks, the British government reorganized itself under the leadership of William Pitt and the superiority of British wealth and colonial numbers slowly began to tell. With Brigadier General James Wolfe's capture of Quebec in 1759, a British victory followed. By the Peace of Paris of 1763, Britain took control, from the defeated powers France and Spain, all of Canada, Nova Scotia, East and

West Florida and millions of fertile acres between the Appalachians and the Mississippi. Since France was forced to cede to Spain the huge territory of Louisiana in compensation for Spain's entrance in the war—France—Britain's most fearsome enemy was removed from the North American continent once and for all. Britain now controlled an empire that was as large and prosperous as any since the fall of Rome.

The consequences of the Seven Year War (or the French and Indian War, as it was called in America) eventually proved to be the undoing of the British empire. The newly acquired territory had to be policed, and the Indians in the trans-Appalachian area had to be protected from land-hungry settlers, (not to mention that the British treasury needed much to be replenished). Consequently the British troops could not be sent home and had to be retained in western posts at tremendous expense. When this expense was added to the £137 million war debt, the overall cost of the war and peace became a staggering financial problem for the British government. It was therefore natural for the British government to look to its colonies to help provide revenue to support the newly enlarged empire. Following a royal proclamation in 1763 that prohibited white settlement in the trans-Appalachian West and reserved it for the Indians, Parliament enacted a momentous series of measures. In just a few short years, Great Britain attempted to centralize its decentralized empire and to reverse a half-century of Edmund Burke call the "salutary neglect" (for a period of

approximately a period of 156 years, the British government, left the colonies alone to determine their own destinies) of its colonies. Under that neglect the colonists had developed too keen a sense of their local rights and privileges to accept any intrusion on them lying down. They were driven first to resistance and finally into revolution.

In 1764, Parliament enacted the Sugar Act, a wide ranging successor to the great navigation acts of the 17th century. This act not only added duties to a number of products imported by the colonies, but it also tightened up the navigation system in a variety of ways with the aim of curbing colonial evasion and smuggling. In 1765 came the Stamp Act, the first direct tax levied against the colonists by Parliament. The act produced resistance and protest in the colonies. The Act was repealed in 1766. In 1767, Parliament, under the leadership of Chancellor of the Exchequer Charles Townshend, tried to raise revenue by levying still more taxes, while at the same time the bureaucracy of the empire was further strengthened and many of the British were moved to the coastal ports to protect the government's business interest.

These acts provoked the colonists into agreement that they would not continue to import British goods until the duties were withdrawn. Conflict with the British army in Boston in 1770 erupted into a riot in which the troops killed five (5) civilians— an event we know as the “Boston Massacre.” Although the Townshend acts were eventually repealed (with the exception of tea), by the early

1770s the relationship between the British government and colonists had been frayed. When the colonists in December, 1773 dumped £10,000 worth of tea into the Boston Harbor, the crisis was on. Britain retaliated in 1774 with a series of coercive acts, including the closing of the port of Boston. A clash of including the closing of the port. A clash of arms followed in April, 1775 at Lexington and Concord, and Britain and its colonies were at war.

The American Revolution, i.e., the war went on for eight years. The American lost many of the battles under George Washington's leadership they kept their faith in the cause and their army in the field. They defeated the British when it counted, at Saratoga in the fall of 1777, which brought France into the war against Britain, and finally Yorktown in 1781. This victory led inevitably to the peace of 1783. In this treaty, Britain recognized the independence of the United States and agreed to generous boundaries for the new country—in the west, the Mississippi—in the south, the Spanish-held Florida—in the north, roughly the present boundary with Canada. The American peace agreement, negotiated by Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and John Jay even stunned the French.

But the peace of 1783 was only a part of the American Revolution. What had begun in the 1760s as a struggle within the British empire for colonial autonomy became in the end a world-shattering event that well beyond a simple colonial war for independence. During the imperial debates in the 1760s and 1770s the colonists felt compelled to explain why they were so different from

Britain and other European countries. In the process they began to realize that those differences were not bad and shameful as they had so often had been made to believe. All of the American social characteristics had been seen by the British and other European countries as deficiencies—the incomplete development of an establish church, the chaos of religious groups, the lack of titled nobility, the unfinished social hierarchy, the insufficiency of elegance and luxury, the general immaturity and mediocrity of colonial life—all these characteristics now, at least in the minds of the colonists were seen as good and desirable. For many enlightenment reformers, the colonists in North America, in their simplicity, prosperity and freedom became a symbol of an ideal young republican society that stood in glaring contrast to the corruption decadence of monarchical and aristocratic Europe. Now in the crisis of the revolution, Americans came to believe that they were not in the backwaters of history and on the remote edges of civilization—but were in fact a people with a special mission--to show the world the republican way toward equality and freedom.

Long before the colonists declared its independence from Britain on July 4, 1776, they had begun to create republican state constitutions. The formation of these separate state constitution in the place in the place of the former royal colonial governments was as expressed by Thomas Jefferson in 1776, “the whole objective of the present controversy.” The aim of the Revolution was not just to free Americans from British tyranny but to prevent future tyrannies. In written

documents, each state incorporated in their constitution the principles of checks and balances and separation of power, and in doing so prescribed the power of government and the rights of the citizen. These new state governments without hesitation moved to embrace the liberal values of 18th century Enlightenment thought—by expanding the suffrage and popular representation in government—by equalizing the laws of inheritance—by prohibiting monopolies and other forms of privilege—by reforming the law and softening the harsh traditional penal code—by drawing up plans for popular education—by at least attempting to seriously discussing the republican woman and more importantly, by beginning to attack the institution of slavery. For more than a century slavery had existed in America without substantial criticism and now in the libertarian spirit of the Revolution, slavery was suddenly seen to be an aberration—the “peculiar institution” that could no longer be accepted as a part of the nature order of things,—if slavery were to continue as it did in the South, it would now have to be anxiously defended and for the first time the South began to be self-conscious of its distinctiveness as a region.

As the new republican states created their separate government, Americans formed a confederation of these governments, The United States of America. Yet it must be understood that each of the states were reluctant to surrender their independence to any superintending body. This explains why the Articles of Confederation in the failed in the end. Nevertheless, the states ratified,

in 1781, the Articles creating a “firm league of friendship” among the states. Although the confederation gained substantial power, there was a caveat, the powers to tax and regulate commerce remained with the individual states. In effect the central government did not have the power to enforce any of its mandates. By the time the peace treaty with Britain, 1783, was to be signed, the government showed itself too impotent to govern. The location and decentralized nature of American life that baffled the British for decades now threaten to unravel this experiment in republican liberty even as it got started. Was this the real beginning of the American Revolution?