

Ten Things You Probably Did Not Know About the American Revolution

- Professor Stephen Conway

The American Revolutionary War (1775-83) began when representatives from 13 North American colonies of the kingdom of Great Britain sought more autonomy within the British Empire. But when did the French intervene? How close did the British come to winning the war? And how tyrannical was the rule of King George III?



Early American Patriotic Flag

1. Independence was not the Americans' original aim

When the war began in April 1775, the colonies sought more autonomy within the British Empire, not complete separation. The Continental Congress, which led American resistance, petitioned King George III that summer, denying that independence was the Americans' objective, and appealing to him to protect the colonies.



At this critical juncture, British ministers, and the king, rebuffed the Americans, and started to treat them as open and avowed enemies, making many of the colonists think that independence was the only option.

2. George III was not trying to impose a tyrannical regime in the colonies

Despite the accusations made in the Declaration of Independence, George III was not determined to create an authoritarian system in the colonies. Indeed, in the constitutional disputes before the fighting began he urged moderation on his ministers, rather than encouraging them to take a hard line.

In 1775, George III disappointed the Americans by siding unambiguously with his government; but he saw the war as the struggle for the rights of parliament, not as an attempt to increase his own power.

3. For enslaved people, the British, not the Americans, represented freedom

The rhetoric of the revolution presented the Americans as staunch defenders of liberty and the British as a threat to that liberty. But for enslaved people in the colonies, it was the *British* who represented liberty, not the white Americans.

In November 1775, Lord Dunmore, the last royal governor of Virginia, offered freedom to enslaved people who helped him put down the rebellion. Thereafter, thousands of slaves flocked to the British lines throughout the war. Many were to be disappointed, but at least some secured their freedom. Dunmore's actions may well have helped the revolutionary cause in the south, where many conservative plantation-owners reacted badly to his undermining the slave system.



4. The British nearly won the war in 1776

In late summer 1776, the British army inflicted a major defeat on Washington's forces at the battle of Long Island (also known as the battle of Brooklyn). The British then went on to

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occupy New York City and chased the disintegrating remnants of the American army across New Jersey to the Delaware River.

By mid-December, many British officers assumed that the rebellion was on the verge of collapse. But just after Christmas, Washington boldly counter-attacked, reviving American spirits and ensuring that the war continued. Contemporaries blamed General Howe, the British commander, for not seizing the opportunity to crush the rebellion when he had the chance.

Historians have been kinder, recognizing that, even in the 1776 campaign, the British faced major logistical challenges supplying their army at such a distance from home, and that Howe had no wish to alienate Americans further by using brutal methods.



America rejects the mother country: a 19th-century engraving depicts the moment the Declaration of Independence was read out at Philadelphia in 1776. (Photo by Art Archive)

5. A significant number of white Americans remained loyal to the British crown

The conflict was more of a civil war than a conventional international contest. Estimates vary, but probably somewhere around a fifth of white colonists refused to accept a complete break with Britain.

Many of them had supported resistance to the claims of the British parliament to tax the colonies, but they could not stomach a rejection of the link with the British crown. Some of these loyalists took up arms on the British side, and many of them migrated to Canada at the end of the war, providing the basis for its Anglophone population.

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6. The French government helped the American rebels almost from the beginning of the war

Some French politicians feared the example a successful colonial rebellion might offer to their own overseas possessions, but the dominant view in Paris was that France should take advantage of Britain's difficulties. Less than a year after the fighting started, the French government decided to support the Americans.

The rebels first received French arms and ammunition; these vital supplies were followed by large injections of cash, which continued throughout the war.

7. When the French formally intervened in 1778, the war became a global struggle

The French became belligerents in 1778, turning a war that had begun as a struggle in and for America into something much bigger. The British and French clashed in every area of the globe where they were in competition – in the West Indies, which became a major theatre of operations; West Africa, where each side tried to seize the other's slave trading bases, and in India, where the rival East India Companies struggled for dominance.

Most importantly for the British, French intervention threatened the home territories with invasion. As the British redeployed their forces to meet the challenges of this wider war, their chances of recovering the rebel colonies diminished greatly.

8. The Spanish and Dutch joined the war in 1779 and 1780

French intervention was bad enough for the British, but their task became still more difficult when the Spanish entered the war as French allies in 1779. The French and Spanish fleets combined outgunned the Royal Navy.

In the summer of 1779, a Franco-Spanish armada controlled the Channel. Only disease on board the allied ships, and disagreements between the French and Spanish admirals, prevented an invasion.

At the end of 1780, the Dutch joined the conflict, too. While they posed little threat to the British on their own, their involvement extended the geographical range of the war even further, and so made the struggle in America still more of a secondary consideration for British politicians.

9. The French navy was responsible for British defeat in America itself

French intervention made the British position in America much more vulnerable. Until 1778, the British army had been able to rely on the dominance of the Royal Navy. British troops could be conveyed anywhere along the Atlantic coast of the colonies, and British generals had no need to fear for their extended Atlantic supply line.



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But once the French joined the war, their navy posed an immediate threat. If French ships could co-operate with American troops on land, isolated British outposts could be captured.

At first, the French and Americans failed to co-ordinate their operations, but at Yorktown, Virginia, they succeeded to dramatic effect in autumn 1781. General Cornwallis's British army was trapped by American and French troops and cut off from relief by the French navy. Cornwallis's surrender effectively ended the war in America.

10. The British emerged from the wider war much stronger than looked likely in 1781

The Battle of Yorktown [a decisive Franco-American victory ending on October 19, 1781] may have finished the conflict in America, but it did not end the wider war.

In April 1782, the British fleet decisively defeated the French and Spanish in the West Indies, saving Jamaica from invasion. The Mediterranean garrison of Gibraltar, besieged from 1779, held out right to the end of the fighting, withstanding repeated attempts by the Spanish and French to take it. These triumphs strengthened the British hand in the peace negotiations and meant that the outcome was not as disastrous as had looked probable immediately after Yorktown.

One might even argue that the American aspect of the war was not the unmitigated British defeat that most accounts suggest. By the 1790s, the essential features of the old colonial relationship had been restored, at least in economic terms. The British sent more manufactured goods to the US than before independence, and received back a new American agricultural export, raw cotton, which supplied the textile mills of Lancashire and the Clyde Valley.

The British, in other words, retained the benefits of empire – a major export market and access to valuable raw materials – without having to pay the defense and administrative costs.



About the Author

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