

Topic 3.3

Taxation Without Representation

The people, even to the lowest ranks, have become more attentive to their liberties, more inquisitive about them, and more determined to defend them.

John Adams, 1765

Learning Objective: Explain how British colonial policies regarding North America led to the Revolutionary War.

What caused American colonists in the 1760s to become, as John Adams expressed, “more attentive to their liberties”? The chief reason for their discontent in these years was a dramatic change in Britain’s colonial policy. Britain began to assert its power in the colonies and to collect taxes and enforce trade laws much more aggressively than in the past. While some colonists accepted these changes, others grew angry in defense of what they viewed as violations of their political rights and their ability to carry on trade and commerce freely. As anger spread, colonists from Massachusetts to Georgia began to unite in protest of British actions.

British Actions and Colonial Reactions

The Proclamation of 1763 was the first of a series of acts by the British government that angered colonists. From the British point of view, the acts were justified as a fair, proper method for protecting its colonial empire and making the colonies pay their share for such protection. From the colonists’ view, each act represented an alarming threat to their liberties. Colonists combined a desire to defend long-established practices in Britain of representative government, local self-rule, and individual rights with the influence of the newer ideas of the Enlightenment (see Topic 3.4). One of the core issues dividing the British and the colonists was the idea of representation:

- Colonists pointed out that they could not directly elect representatives to **Parliament**, so they had no way to consent to or oppose British actions.
- The British responded that the colonists, like all British citizens, had virtual representation in the government. According to this theory, all members of Parliament represented the interests of the entire empire, not just the small district that chose them.

New Revenues and Regulations

In the first two years of peace, King **George III**'s chancellor of the exchequer (treasury) and prime minister, Lord George Grenville, successfully pushed through Parliament three measures that aroused colonial suspicions of a British plot to subvert their liberties.

The Sugar Act (1764) This act (also known as the Revenue Act of 1764) placed duties on foreign sugar and certain luxuries. Its supporters wanted to regulate the sugar trade and to raise revenue. A companion law also provided for stricter enforcement of the Navigation Acts to stop smuggling. Those accused of smuggling were to be tried in admiralty courts by crown-appointed judges without juries.

The Quartering Act (1765) This act required the colonists to provide food and living quarters for British soldiers stationed in the colonies.

The Stamp Act In an effort to raise funds to support British military forces in the colonies, Lord Grenville turned to a tax long in use in Britain. The **Stamp Act**, enacted by Parliament in 1765, required that revenue stamps be placed on most printed paper in the colonies, including all legal documents, newspapers, pamphlets, and advertisements. This was the first direct tax—collected from those who used the goods—paid by the people in the colonies, as opposed to the taxes on imported goods, which were paid by merchants.

Reaction to the Stamp Act

People in every colony reacted with indignation to news of the Stamp Act. A young Virginia lawyer named **Patrick Henry** spoke for many when he stood up in the House of Burgesses to demand that the king's government recognize the rights of all citizens—including the right not to be taxed without representation. In Massachusetts, James Otis initiated a call for cooperative action among the colonies to protest the Stamp Act. Representatives from nine colonies met in New York in 1765 to form the so-called **Stamp Act Congress**. They resolved that only their own elected representatives had the legal authority to approve taxes.

The protest against the Stamp Act took a violent turn with the formation of the **Sons and Daughters of Liberty**, a secret society organized for the purpose of intimidating tax agents. Members of this society sometimes destroyed revenue stamps and tarred and feathered revenue officials.

Economic Pressure Boycotts against British imports were the most effective form of protest. It became fashionable in the colonies in 1765 and 1766 for people not to purchase any article of British origin. For example, instead of buying imported British cloth, colonial women proudly made their own. Faced with a sharp drop in trade, London merchants put pressure on Parliament to repeal the controversial Stamp Act.

Declaratory Act In 1766, Grenville was replaced by another prime minister, and Parliament voted to repeal the Stamp Act. When news of the

repeal reached the colonies, people rejoiced. Few colonists at the time noted that Parliament had also enacted a face-saving measure known as the **Declaratory Act** (1766). This act asserted that Parliament had the right to tax and make laws for the colonies “in all cases whatsoever.” This declaration of policy would soon lead to renewed conflict between the colonists and the British government.

Second Phase of the Crisis, 1767–1773

The British government still needed new revenue. To obtain it, the newly appointed chancellor of the exchequer, Charles Townshend, proposed another tax measure.

The Townshend Acts In 1767, Parliament enacted new duties, known as the **Townshend Acts**, to be collected on colonial imports of tea, glass, and paper. The revenue would be used to pay crown officials in the colonies, thus making the officials independent of the colonial assemblies that had paid their salaries. The Townshend Acts also provided for the search of private homes for smuggled goods. All that an official needed to conduct such a search would be a **writ of assistance** (a general license to search anywhere) rather than a judge’s warrant to search a specific property. A related act suspended New York’s assembly for its defiance of the Quartering Act.

At first, most colonists accepted the taxes because they were indirect, meaning they were paid by merchants who then raised their prices to cover the additional costs. They were not direct taxes that consumers paid on their purchases.

However, leaders soon protested the new duties. While they accepted Parliament’s right to regulate trade as legitimate, they rejected taxation without representation as a violation of an essential principle of English law. In 1767 and 1768, **John Dickinson** made these points in *Letters From a Farmer in Pennsylvania*. He argued that Parliament could regulate colonial commerce, but if it wanted to tax colonists, it had to have the approval of assemblies that included colonial representatives.

In 1768, **James Otis** and **Samuel Adams** jointly wrote the *Massachusetts Circular Letter* and sent copies to every colonial legislature. It urged the colonies to petition Parliament to repeal the Townshend Acts. British officials in Boston ordered the letter retracted, threatened to dissolve the legislature, and increased the number of British troops. Responding to the circular letter, the colonists again conducted boycotts of British goods. Merchants increased their smuggling to avoid the Townshend duties.

Repeal of the Townshend Acts Meanwhile, in London, there was another change in the king’s ministers. **Lord Frederick North** became the new prime minister. He urged Parliament to repeal the **Townshend Acts** because they damaged trade and generated a disappointingly small amount of revenue. The repeal of the Townshend Acts in 1770 ended the colonial boycott and, except for an incident in Boston (the “massacre” described below), there was a three-year respite from political troubles as the colonies entered into a period

of economic prosperity. However, Parliament retained a small tax on tea as a symbol of its right to tax the colonies.

Boston Massacre Most Bostonians resented the British troops quartered in their city to protect customs officials from attacks by the Sons and Daughters of Liberty. On a snowy day in March 1770, a crowd of colonists harassed the guards near the customs house. The guards fired into the crowd, killing five. Among them was Crispus Attucks, a dockworker of mixed African and American Indian heritage, who would later become a symbol for the antislavery movement. At their trial for murder, the six soldiers were defended by colonial lawyer John Adams. They were acquitted of murder, but two were convicted on the less serious charge of manslaughter. Adams' radical cousin, Samuel Adams, angrily denounced the shooting incident as a "massacre" and used it to inflame anti-British feeling.

Renewal of the Conflict

Even during the relatively quiet years of 1770–1772, Samuel Adams and a few other Americans kept alive the view that British officials were undermining colonial liberties. A principal device for spreading this idea was by means of the **Committees of Correspondence** initiated by Samuel Adams in 1772. In Boston and other Massachusetts towns, Adams began the practice of organizing committees that would regularly exchange letters about suspicious or potentially threatening British activities. The Virginia House of Burgesses took the concept a step further when it organized intercolonial committees in 1773.

The Gaspee One incident frequently discussed in the committees' letters was that of the *Gaspee*, a British customs ship that had caught several smugglers. In 1772, it ran aground off the shore of Rhode Island. Seizing their opportunity to destroy the hated vessel, a group of colonists disguised as American Indians ordered the British crew ashore and then set fire to the ship. The British ordered a commission to investigate and bring guilty individuals to Britain for trial.

Boston Tea Party The colonists continued their refusal to buy British tea because the British insisted on their right to collect tax on it. Hoping to help the British East India Company out of its financial problems, Parliament passed the **Tea Act** in 1773, which made the price of the company's tea—even with the tax included—cheaper than that of smuggled Dutch tea.

Many Americans refused to buy the cheaper tea because to do so would, in effect, recognize Parliament's right to tax the colonies. A shipment of East India Company tea arrived in Boston harbor but found no buyers. Before the royal governor could bring the tea ashore, a group of Bostonians, mostly artisans and laborers, took action. Disguised as American Indians, they boarded the British ships and dumped 342 chests of tea into the harbor. Colonial reaction to this incident (December 1773) was mixed. While many applauded the Boston Tea Party as a defense of liberty, others thought the destruction of private property too radical.

Intolerable Acts

In Great Britain, news of the Boston Tea Party angered King George III, Lord North, and members of Parliament. In retaliation, the British government enacted a series of punitive acts (the Coercive Acts), together with a separate act dealing with French Canada (the Quebec Act). The colonists were outraged by these various laws, which were given the epithet “**Intolerable Acts**.”

The Coercive Acts (1774) There were four **Coercive Acts**, directed mainly at punishing the people of Boston and Massachusetts and bringing them under control.

- The **Port Act** closed the port of Boston, prohibiting trade in and out of the harbor until the destroyed tea was paid for.
- The Massachusetts Government Act reduced the power of the Massachusetts legislature while increasing the power of the royal governor.
- The **Administration of Justice Act** allowed royal officials accused of crimes to be tried in Great Britain instead of in the colonies.
- The Quartering Act was expanded to enable British troops to be quartered in private homes. It applied to all colonies.

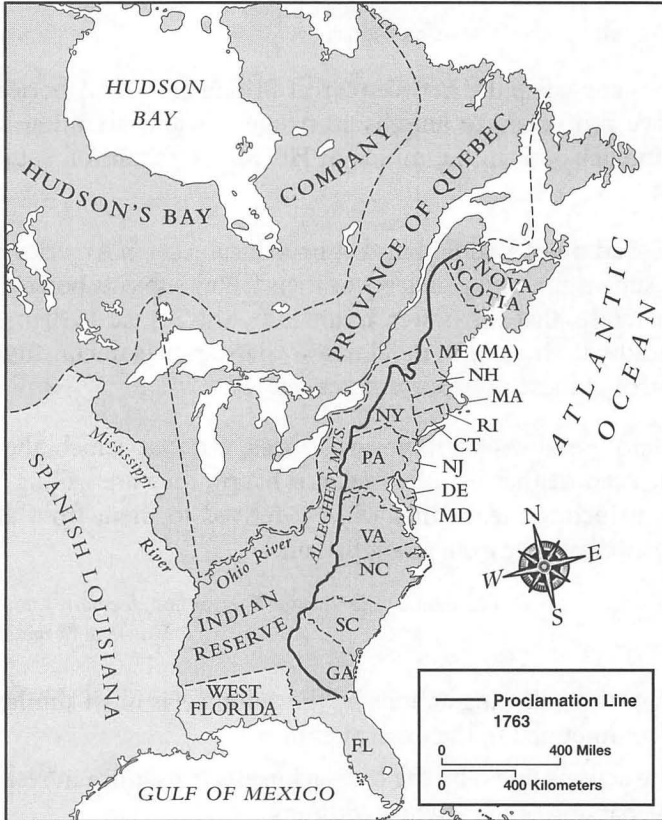
Quebec Act (1774) When it passed the Coercive Acts, the British government also passed a law organizing the Canadian lands gained from France. To satisfy the French-speaking Canadians, the act established Roman Catholicism as the official religion of Quebec. It also set up a government without a representative assembly and extended Quebec’s boundary to the Ohio River. The plan, accepted by French Canadians, was resented in the 13 colonies.

The colonists viewed the **Quebec Act** as a direct attack on the American colonies because it took away lands that New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Massachusetts, and Connecticut claimed along the Ohio River. They also feared that the British would attempt to enact similar laws in America to take away their representative government. Further, the predominantly Protestant Americans resented the recognition given to the Roman Catholic Church.

The Demand for Independence

Britain’s intensifying crackdown on resistance to its policies forced more and more colonists to take sides. Supporters of the British response included many wealthy merchants in New York and Philadelphia and planters in the southern colonies. Opponents, from Virginia to Massachusetts, challenged the British with harsh criticisms. These words were supported by hostile actions towards the British throughout the colonies, but particularly in Boston and New England. As violence increased, enough people were willing to speak out publicly, participate in mass protests, and donate money that the movement for independence grew stronger.

THE PROCLAMATION LINE AND THE QUEBEC ACT



REFLECT ON THE LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Explain how the changes in British policies toward the colonies led them to rebellion.

KEY TERMS BY THEME

Colonial Unrest (NAT, POL)

Patrick Henry
Stamp Act Congress
Sons and Daughters of Liberty
John Dickinson; *Letters From . . .*
James Otis
Samuel Adams
Massachusetts Circular Letter

Committees of Correspondence
Intolerable Acts
Rulers & Policies (WXT)
Parliament
George III
Whigs
Lord Frederick North
Empire (POL, GEO)
Sugar Act (1764)
Quartering Act (1765)

Stamp Act (1765)
Declaratory Act (1766)
Townshend Acts (1767)
writ of assistance
Tea Act (1773)
Coercive Acts (1774)
—Port Act
—Massachusetts Government Act
—Administration of Justice Act
Quebec Act (1774)

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

Questions 1–2 refer to the following excerpt.

“The unhappy disputes between Great Britain and her American colonies . . . have proceeded to lengths so dangerous and alarming as to excite just apprehensions in the minds of His Majesty’s faithful subjects of this colony. . . .

It cannot admit of a doubt but that British subjects in America are entitled to the same rights and privileges as their fellow subjects possess in Britain; and therefore, that the power assumed by the British Parliament to bind America by their statutes in all cases whatsoever is unconstitutional, and the source of these unhappy differences. . . .

To obtain a redress of these grievances, without which the people of America can neither be safe, free, nor happy, they are willing to undergo the great inconvenience that will be derived to them from stopping all imports whatsoever from Great Britain.”

Statement by the Virginia Convention, formerly known as the
House of Burgesses, 1774

1. Which of the following actions by the colonists is most similar to the one recommended in the excerpt above?
 - (A) The actions taken by the Massachusetts legislature in response to the passing of the Townshend Acts
 - (B) The colonists’ actions in Boston that led to the Boston Massacre
 - (C) The formation of the Committees of Correspondence because it fostered colonial unity against the British
 - (D) The Boston Tea Party because it involved destroying property that was a symbol of British authority
2. The statement that “British subjects in America are entitled to the same rights and privileges as their fellow subjects possess in Britain” indicates that the writers of this document believed that colonists should
 - (A) purchase more goods from British merchants
 - (B) declare independence before the British took any further actions
 - (C) have representation in setting their own internal economic policies
 - (D) demand that Parliament reduce their overall level of taxes

SHORT-ANSWER QUESTION

1. “The colonists believed they saw . . . what appeared to be evidence of nothing less than a deliberate assault launched surreptitiously by plotters against liberty both in England and in America. The danger to America, it was believed, was in fact only the small immediately visible part of the greater whole whose ultimate manifestation would be the destruction of the English constitution with all the rights and privileges embedded in it. . . .

It was this—the overwhelming evidence, as they saw it, that they were faced with conspirators against liberty determined at all costs to gain ends which their words dissembled [portrayed falsely]—that was signaled to the colonists after 1763, and it was this above all else that in the end propelled them into Revolution.”

Bernard Bailyn, historian, *The Logic of Rebellion*, 1967

“The Americans, ‘born the heirs of freedom,’ revolted not to create but to maintain their freedom. American society had developed differently from that of the Old World. . . . While the speculative philosophers of Europe were laboriously searching their minds in an effort to decide the first principles of liberty, the Americans had come to experience vividly that liberty in their everyday lives. . . . The Revolution was thus essentially intellectual and declaratory: it ‘explained the business to the world, and served to confirm what nature and society had before produced.’ ‘All was the result of reason. . . .’ The Revolution had taken place not in a succession of eruptions that had crumbled the existing social structure, but in a succession of new thoughts and new ideas that had vindicated that social structure. . . . The Americans revolted not out of actual suffering but out of reasoned principle.”

Gordon S. Wood, historian, *The Idea of America*, 2011

Using the excerpts, answer (a), (b), and (c).

- Briefly explain ONE major difference between Wood’s and Bailyn’s historical interpretations of why the American colonies rebelled against the British.
- Briefly explain how ONE historical event or development in the period 1754 to 1776 that is not explicitly mentioned in the excerpts could be used to support Bailyn’s interpretation.
- Briefly explain how ONE historical event or development in the period 1754 to 1776 that is not explicitly mentioned in the excerpts could be used to support Wood’s interpretation.