# American Revolution: 1754 - 1789

Take a look at a $100 bill. If you don't have one lying around, click [here](http://www.marshu.com/articles/images-website/articles/presidents-on-us-paper-money/one-hundred-100-dollar-bill.jpg). That's the face of a visionary.Because in 1754, Benjamin Franklin suggested the first union of the colonies—the **Albany Plan of Union**that would establish a government to oversee all the colonies and collect taxes for the colonies' defense. Union was necessary for survival,he said. It was "join or die." That's exactly what he wrote on [the famous political cartoon he sent around](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Benjamin_Franklin_-_Join_or_Die.jpg).

However, the colonies just weren't ready. They liked their independence from each other, and they didn't like the idea of not controlling their own taxes. Fortunately for them, Franklin wasn't right about the whole joining or dying thing: **the Seven Years' War** (also called the **French and Indian War**)—the whole reason he suggested that a union was needed in the first place—ended with British and American victory.

It was only afterthe war that the word "union" and even "independence" started to be heard in colonial taverns and parlors, bedrooms and town halls. However, we need to rewind to the Seven Years' War. That conflict is what historians point to as the starting point for almost all of the issues that began to arise between the British rulers and the American colonists

### The Seven Years' War

In the 1750s, the **Ohio Territory**, now roughly around present-day Ohio, eastern Indiana, Western Pennsylvania, and northwestern West Virginia, was salivated over by Americans, French, and Native Americans. The soil was rich, the furs plentiful, and the land unsettled—except by Native Americans, but Europeans tended to ignore this fact. The French and Americans competed with each other to build forts there, and sent each other threatening messages to stay away.

Finally, a battle took place in **Jumonville Glen**in the Ohio Valley, between a group of French troops led by a man called Jumonville and a group of Americans led by a young major called **George Washington.**He was only 22 at the time. Long story short, the glen is named after the French leader because he died in a shoot-out between the two groups. Immediately, war erupted between the French and Americans, complemented by a war against the British and French (and a whole lot of other European powers) in 1756.  
  
The war dragged on for—you guessed it—seven years. It's called the French and Indian War because most Native Americans decided to ally with the French. After all, the French in general were not as land-hungry as the British, and had way better relations with the Native Americans.

The Brits finally won for two main reasons: first, when **William Pitt**became Prime Minister of Britain and changed the war policy to the conquering of Canada. Second, when the Americans convinced various Indian tribes to come over to their side. The **Treaty of Paris**kicked all the French out of the continent. That was a huge deal: now the Brits were the colonial power on the continent. The American colonists were excited indeed.  
  
The Native Americans, however, were not. Before, they had been able to play the French and English off of each other, changing sides when it suited them. A North America ruled only by the British spelled disaster for the Native Americans: British colonists were terribly land-hungry, didn't care overmuch about trading with the Native Americans, raised the price of the goods they gave them, and ran roughshod over them.

In 1763, an Ottawa chief called **Pontiac**got mad enough to rally a group of tribes and attack British outposts in the Ohio Valley. **Pontiac's Rebellion**was eventually put down, but it succeeded in scaring the daylights out of the British. They issued the **Proclamation of 1763**to forbid American colonists to settle west of the Appalachians into Indian land.

The Americans were hopping mad. They felt they had gone and won a whole warfor the British, and they were repaid by being restricted from the very lands they had fought for. Low blow. Plus, it came with other government measures that the colonists saw as completely unfair.

To add insult to injury, many colonists felt that British officers had been rude to them when they had come over to fight the war in the first place. They had treated the Americans like country bumpkins, quartered themselves in their homes, ordered around the colonial militias like slaves, punished them severely when they disobeyed British military orders, and generally acted like bullies on a playground.

After the war, the colonists were proud of themselves—they wanted the British to turn around and high-five them for victory. Instead, the British government had decided that American government was way too slack and disobedient, and needed to be whipped into shape.

Plus, they decided that America was rich compared to war-depleted Britain. So, when Britain found itself in HUGE debt after the war, they decided that the best thing to do would be to tax the colonies.   
  
Although it wanted high-fives, America received kicks instead. No wonder **anti-British sentiment** started spreading in America.

### Lead-up to Revolution

First, **King George III**and his prime minister, **George Grenville,**passed the **Sugar Act**of 1764. Funny thing was, it actually loweredthe tax on sugar. The thing that irked American merchants was that it cracked down on smuggling, which (remember the **Navigation Acts**) was essentialto New England trade. Plus, people who were caught smuggling were tried in **vice-admiralty courts**without juries.That seemed tyrannical to Americans.

Parliament also passed the **Currency Act,**which said the colonies weren't allowed to print paper money, and the**Quartering Act,**which forced colonists to make room for British soldiers in their homes. The colonists became increasingly angry—especiallythe merchants—but these acts didn't affect enoughof them to cause rebellion.   
  
That would come with the **Stamp Act**in 1765. It was a tax on every legal document and license: newspapers, wills, mortgages, checks even playing cards.

Colonists' indignation was summarized by a Virginian lawyer called **Patrick Henry**, who apparently coined the phrase "no taxation without representation." Basically, the colonies had no representative in Parliament: if Parliament wanted to pass any crazy tax (or other law) on them, they had no friend in London who could say, "Hey that's not fair. We didn't agree to that."

**James Otis,**who was from Massachusetts, organized representatives from 9 out of the 13 colonies to meet in what was called the **Stamp Act Congress,**where they all agreed that coloniesshould only be able to tax themselves. They decided that **"external taxes"—**imposed throughout the empire on goods—were doable, but "**internal (or direct) taxes**"—imposed directly on a specific people of a region—were out of the question.

Colonists were ready to oppose this tax with everything they had. One especially bold individual named **Samuel Adams**organized **The Sons and Daughters of Liberty,**who went around bullying tax collectors. They attacked their houses, burned little dolls of them (voodoo style.), burned down warehouses where the taxes were collected, and even poured hot tar on them and then covered them in feathers.

They also protested the tax by boycotting British goods, showing that they didn't needBritish trade if the Brits were going to be mean enough to tax their goods. The Daughters of Liberty had spinning parties where they all gathered together and made their own clothes (called **homespun**), showing that they didn't need fancy British textiles.

It all worked: Britain repealed the Stamp Act, but they weren't happy about it. They also issued the **Declaratory Act,**which didn't doanything, but did state that the British government had the right to tax the colonies whenever they wanted to. It was kind of a way to say "Fine, we take it all back—but not because we're wrong—we retain therightto do it all again later if we want."  
  
And…they did.   
  
In 1767 a new leader in the British government, Charles Townshend, passed the **Townshend Acts**: taxes on stuff like tea, glass, and paper. To add insult to injury, these also gave British officials **writs of assistance**to search any home they wanted for smuggled goods. The colonists were now raging mad, but these wereexternal and not internal taxes—so were they as bad?

"Yes," said Sam Adams, in his **Massachusetts Circular Letter—**Parliament couldn't be allowed to push anytaxes on the colonists without their consent. So, another round of boycotts, rebellions, and all that good stuff resulted. And, again, the British repealed the second round of acts.

Then everyone lived happily ever after, right? Sadly not. Because the colonists had gotten the idea into their heads that the British were conspiring against their liberties. They decided that the members of Parliament were tyrants. Even when things had calmed down, Sam Adams and his Sons and Daughters of Liberty kept the spirit of rebellion alive: boycotts, homespun movements, and publications denouncing British policies were organized by**Committees of Correspondence.**These were networks of colonists who circulated new of British doings and organized rebellions against them, feeding the fires of conspiracy and rebellion.

The colonial leaders used a lot of the rhetoric of the **Enlightenment:**they started talking a lot about ideas of political philosophers like **John Locke,**who wrote that every man had **natural rights**that no one—not even a king—could challenge, and that if a ruler proved tyrannical the people had the right to boot him out. All these ideas—radical at the time—began to make sense to the colonists

The British didn't help things. In 1770, for example, a group of British troops in Boston fired on a crowd of people who threw snowballs at them. Just snowballs. The rabble-rousers were annoyed at the Quartering Act. Sam Adams immediately jumped on the event and called it the **Boston Massacre**—propaganda against it flooded the colonies.  
  
Then the British passed the **Tea Act**in 1773. It actually loweredthe price of tea, but the colonists sniffed danger because the Brits were interfering again. Dressed as Native Americans, the Sons of Liberty boarded the ship and dumped its cargo of tea into Boston Harbor. It must have been quite a hilarious sight, but the British were notamused.  
  
Prime Minister **Lord North**decided it was time to crack down on those restive colonists. Hepassed the **Coercive Acts**(also known as the **Intolerable Acts**) which, among other things, closed Boston Harbor, revoked Massachusetts's Charter, banned town meetings, quartered troops in local homes, and replaced the governor with a military governor—**General Thomas Gage.**

They also passed the **Quebec Act**,which gave Canadians control over the Ohio Territory (where a lot of Americans were living) and made Catholicism (which the majority of Americans hated and distrusted) the official religion of the area. Why was that such a crazy move? Colonists, already convinced of a conspiracy against their liberties, decided Parliament was fueling a Catholic conspiracy and takeover as well.

Those acts were the final straw for the colonists. The other colonies looked at poor old Massachusetts and became scared: if Parliament could do that to one of the most powerful colonies, what would it do to all the others? Representatives from 12 colonies met in the **Continental Congress**to discuss strategy. The issue was not yet "How do we achieve independence," but simply, "How do we stop this madness?"  
  
First, the colonists decided that **Committees of Observation**would become shadow governments of various colonial towns, and organize general boycotts of British goods. They would also monitor the behavior of British officials there and communicate with each other about strategies for protest. These committees became incredibly powerful: they started replacing the British-organized assemblies and even organizing militias and stockpiling weapons.   
  
Again, remember that colonists weren't yet talking independence. All they wanted was for the Brits to leave them alone like all the good old years of salutary neglect. The Congress issued the **Declaration of Rights and Grievances**in which it listed all the things that had made the colonists mad, asked for them to be taken away, and assured the king and Parliament that they were loyal citizens who wanted to be treated right.

However, King thought they all had acted atrociously, and needed to be punished like disobedient children. He ignored their grievances and prepared for a crackdown.

### The Battle Begins

The first battle of the Revolution broke out in **Lexington and Concord,**where American militiamen fought against British troops who were going to Concord to find a rumored stash of weapons. BANG. "The shot heard 'round the world" was fired—and the Revolution began.

**The Second Continental Congress**convened right after the battle. They created the **Continental Army**(led by General George Washington—he had come a long way since Jumonville Glen.)printed money, and organized a kind of government.

Still, though, they weren't ready for independence. They even sent the **Olive Branch Petition**to England, telling the King that they would immediately end the war if Britain would only agree to listento their problems and stop issuing such unfair taxes. King George, though, was mad as a hornet. He was going to squash those rebellious colonists like roaches under his royal leather boot.

Ironically, it was the British Thomas Paine, who finally convinced Americans that independence was the only way. In 1776 he published a pamphlet called **Common Sense**that listed all the reasons independence was not only the only option, but also the best. He argued that republican government was way better than a monarchy, and that an independent America would far more powerful and successful than it ever had been under British rule. People were excited—they were in deep at this point and the only way to go forward seemed to be to declare outright revolution.

In June 1776, the Congress had **Thomas Jefferson**write the **Declaration of Independence.**It's crammed with all sorts of Enlightenment philosophy that would eventually go into the creation of an American government—ideas about "natural rights," the equality of all men, and all that good stuff.

Amazingly, even when the Declaration was issued, Americans were stillnot totally united behind the Revolution. Historians think that only around a third were **patriots—**people actually fighting for independence—another third were **loyalists (or Tories),**and still another third were on the fence, or unaffected by the war.

Even just one third was enough: the AP exam won't go into all the details about the war itself, but you can know that guerrilla war tactics, the leadership of George Washington (go ahead and hug a dollar bill—go on, now), the aid of the French and Spanish (who agreed to help mostly because they wanted to give Britain a good kick), and the flagging morale of the British people (who were exhausted and bankrupt from too many wars) led to an American victory.

In 1781, **General Cornwallis**surrendered at the **Battle of Yorktown**and in 1783 the **Treaty of Paris**was signed. America was officially recognized as an independent country, and in turn agreed to repay debts to Britain and not to punish loyalists. RealAmerican history had begun.

### The Articles of Confederation

During the war, America had been organized by a kind of makeshift government and constitution. By 1777, most colonies had their own state constitutions, and in 1781 the **Articles of Confederation**were ratified for the creation of a national government.

The problem with the central government under the articles was that it was awfully weak. It could wage war and make treaties (having been established as a wartime government) but it couldn't tax: it could only borrow money to pay debts. Under the Articles, the states had all the power: after all, they had hated the central government Parliament had tried to impose on them, and didn't want the same nonsense to happen at home. Unfortunately, the Articles had way too many holes.

Before we start ripping into them, though, give the Articles a few snaps. They did some good things. First, they won the war—quite an accomplishment. Secondly, they passed the **Northwest Ordinance of 1787,**which made rules for how new states would be created. As soon as a territory passed about 60,000 people, it could apply for statehood. Plus, it prohibited slavery north of the Ohio River. Good stuff, right?

However, their problems outweighed their triumphs. The central government couldn't tax, so the war debt was massive. Plus, the American economy had taken quite a hit in the war. Congress tried to print a massive amount of new money, but this didn't do anything but add a ton of more paper to everyone's pockets.

Since states could decide how to tax their own people, each did it differently—and many in unfair ways. A lot of states started taxing each other by taxing goods that crossed borders. Others opened debtors' prisons where people who couldn't pay their debts were jailed until they could. (Although how can you pay debt when you're inprison?)

Americans became frustrated and angry. Finally, a yeoman farmer named **Daniel Shays**gathered a group of fellow farmers in a rebellion in 1786 to demand tax relief. The Massachusetts militia had to march in to put them down, and the fledgling American republic was totally appalled. They had just created this new government, and already the states were proving they couldn't protect their people's liberties. Plus, the people themselves seemed to think they had some kind of right to rebellion.

The Big Shots from the different colonies came together and shook their heads. These Articles, they decided, simply would not do.They had to be revised. In 1787, the **Constitutional Convention**met in Philadelphia: 55 delegates from all colonies except Rhode Island. Their intention, they said, was to "revise" the Articles.

They scrapped it completely and created something totally new instead that was unseen in any other government: a document creating a democratic republic buttressed by a complex system of checks and balances that would ensure the smooth running of an incredible country. At least, this is what the Founding Fathers intended. And, we need to admit: it is a cool document.

## Sample Questions

1. One of the main reasons the British won the Seven Years' War was because

A) they were able to convince many Indian tribes to assist them  
B) General Edward Braddock was appointed by the new Prime Minister to lead the war  
C) they had more colonists willing to fight than the French did   
D) the British navy proved itself superior to the French  
E) they managed to fortify the entire area of the Ohio River Valley

The correct answer is (A).

The Seven Years' War didn't start well.Even though the Brits several colonists fighting for them, a superior Navy,andsome nice forts all over the place, they were still losing. General Braddock proved a disaster. He ultimately removed himself (code for "getting shot") in 1755, and Pitt came to power and appointed different military leaders. This was a turning point, but the realdifference came when the Native Americans changed sides. That's important to know—Native Americans weren't pawns in the imperial game; they were key players.

2. The event that finally tipped Americans in favor of independence was

A) the passage of the Stamp Act  
B) the publication of Common Sense   
C) the passage of the Intolerable Acts  
D) the Boston Massacre  
E) the rejection of the Olive Branch Petition

The correct answer is (B).

Seems weird, right? How could one little pamphlet change so many minds? It changed the minds of many well-read, intellectual elites—and these happened to be the leaders of the Revolution. All the other answer options had stretched Americans tighter and tighter—they were mad,but they still wanted to be British citizens. Thomas Paine's argument that they needn't bother, that they were Americansand an independent America would be way better than Britain—snapped their resolve.