

What was the impact of the American Revolution?

Britain had become one of the most powerful countries during the seventeenth century and used this power to take over other parts of the world, including large parts of North America. However, by the mid-1700s the people of America no longer want to be part of the British **Empire**. They considered themselves American, and in the late 1700s fought a war against the British; and they won an unlikely victory. Why did these people want to be free of British rule?

Objectives

- **Explain** why the colonists in America were unhappy with British rule.
- **Analyse** the defeat of the British to show the consequences of this.
- **Compare** and contrast the revolution with past events.

Long-term causes of the American Revolution

The control of large areas of land in North America had been fought over by Britain and France for many years. Britain eventually defeated the French and used the **colonies** there to make money, growing crops like cotton, tobacco and sugar to sell all over the world. By the early 1700s, there were 13 separate English colonies in North America, and by 1775 there were around 2.5 million settlers living in them. Many people also made huge amounts of money buying and selling the slaves that were used in the colonies to farm the land.

Countries such as Britain wanted empires because they could tax the people who lived in the colonies, and ensure that they bought British goods. However, many of the **colonists** in America, despite being of British descent, now considered themselves American.

The American colonists started to resent the economic support they had to give to Britain. One tax they resented was to pay for the British army. The British felt it was acceptable to tax the Americans as the army had, after all, been 'protecting' the colonists from other foreign powers. Throughout the 1760s, the American colonists were also forced to comply with Navigation Acts, which ensured that only British goods were imported into America. There could be no trading with other countries. If Britain produced something, the colonists could not buy it from another country.

In addition, the colonists felt bossed about by the British because they were given boundaries on the land that they could not cross. The British had made these agreements with the **Native Americans** without consulting the colonists. These boundaries stopped them accessing good farmland: the colonists wanted to have more of a say.

No taxation without representation: short-term causes of the revolution

The citizens of America were ruled directly from Britain yet they had no representatives in parliament in London. So they felt there was no-one to speak up for them. Throughout this thematic study, from the barons to the working class, this is a common thread – the desire for representation. People wanted a voice in what was done to them and for them, especially if they were expected to pay for it through taxes! So the colonists, who had started to identify as American rather than as British, stated: No taxation without representation!

One key event considered the spark of the fight against the British was the Boston Massacre of 1770. When some anti-British colonists jeered, and threw snowballs and sticks at the British army on 5 March, the army opened fire and killed some of them. Unrest in Boston continued to grow when some of the colonists, unhappy with the heavily taxed British tea they were forced to buy, boarded a ship and poured the tea out into the harbour. This became known as the Boston Tea Party. This act of defiance scared the British and in retaliation they closed the port of Boston.

By 1775, anti-British feeling was so strong that when the British army tried to seize a supply of gunpowder in Concord they were fired on by 20,000 'minutemen'. These men were local farmers, clerks and ploughboys who had had enough of British rule. This became known as the Lexington incident and marked the start of the revolution against the British.

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Key Words

empire colony colonist
Native American Congress

Declaration of Independence

The Americans were quick to organise themselves. They met in **Congress** to decide what to do, and by 1775 they had made George Washington the leader of their army.

In 1776 Congress had a meeting in Philadelphia where a Declaration of Independence was issued. This stated that the 13 colonies were free and that all control from Britain had ended. This was the easy step; the hard part would come in making the declaration a reality. There would be seven years of fighting before the colonists were victorious and an independent America was a reality.

▼ **SOURCE B** Adapted from the American Declaration of Independence, written by Thomas Jefferson in 1776:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that amongst these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. That whenever any Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it.

Extension



Look back to Chapter 1. In what ways is the American Declaration of Independence similar to Magna Carta? Do you think the Americans are right to compare the two? Think about the quote on the monument at Runnymede.

Work

- 1 **a** Make a list of the reasons the colonists were dissatisfied with British rule. Use **Source B** to help you.
b Colour code your reasons – the factors for unrest – into economic, social and political factors.
- 2 **a** What taxes were the colonists forced to pay?
b In what ways did the colonists lack representation?
c Do you think the British government understood how serious the colonists were?
- 3 **a** In your groups make a list of the rules you would have in the Declaration of Independence.
b How similar is your declaration to the section in **Source B**?

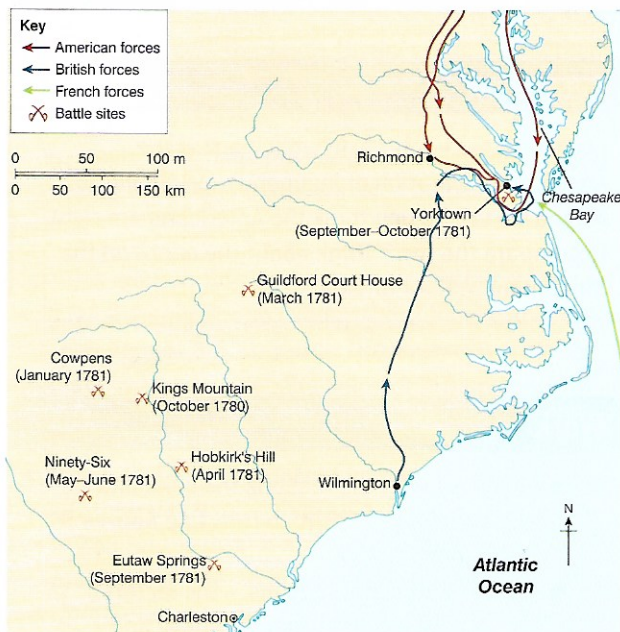
What was the impact of the American Revolution?

It would be astonishing if one of the biggest and best-trained armies in the world were to be defeated by a group of American farmers and clerks. How could this happen, and if it did, what would it mean for Britain's imperial power?

Yorktown and the defeat of the British

The British had won most of the battles during the American War of Independence. They had a world-class army that was well trained and well supplied. However, many of the battles took place in forest and mountain areas, in land the British did not know well.

▼ C A map showing some of the War of Independence battles and the movements of the British, Americans and French that resulted in the British being trapped at Yorktown



The decisive battle of the war was at Yorktown in 1781. The American troops, who were perceived to be weak, had reinforced themselves with 3000 extra men. Added to this they had the support of the French, who had secured control of the waters around Yorktown. This was important as the British needed to get their supplies in from the sea.

The British commander, Charles Cornwallis, unwittingly helped the Americans by moving his troops onto a **peninsula** as they awaited supplies. They were now cut off and in a weak position. George Washington, sensing

the advantage he could have, attacked the British. With few weapons and no supplies the British were forced to surrender.

The battle at Yorktown saw the immediate defeat of the British and the end of the War of Independence. America was now an independent country, and proclaimed itself the 'land of the free'. This was an unprecedented victory. It showed what could be achieved with a clear cause against an opponent that underestimated your ability.

▼ SOURCE D An engraving from 1781 showing British General Charles Cornwallis surrendering to General George Washington, ending America's War of Independence



Consequences for America

The Americans were delighted with their victory. Using their determination they had defeated the most powerful country in the world. However not all of the people in America were happy with the outcome, and many moved north to Canada which was still under the control of Britain.

The Americans set up their own system of government with a written set of rules (called a constitution), a parliament (Congress) and a President. This system still exists today. Americans now had the representation they desired.

However, not everything was perfect. Many poor farmers, who could not afford to buy their land, could not vote. The rich were represented but not the poor. Furthermore, slavery still existed and Native Americans were widely discriminated against: this was not equality. However by the early twentieth century, America had developed into the most powerful independent country in the world.

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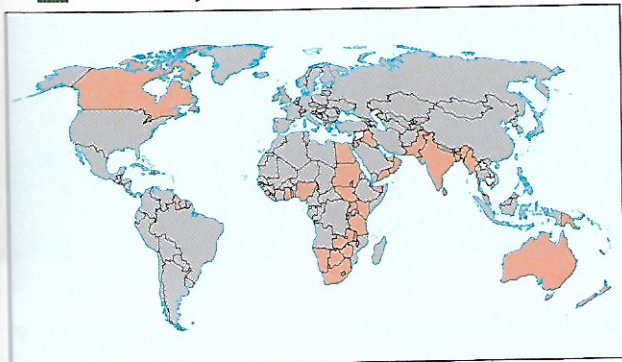
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Consequences for Britain

Britain had spent a lot of money on the war and had lost a lot of men. The involvement of France on the side of the revolution had worsened relations between the two powers. Britain was able to use the strength of its navy to make up for the loss of America by colonising other parts of the world. America had been used as a **penal colony**, where criminals were sent to work on the **plantations** alongside **indentured servants** who worked to pay off the cost of their passage across the Atlantic. Britain now turned its focus to Australia and New Zealand as a place to send convicts.

Relations with America improved as the years went by and the two countries started to trade with each other. The loss of America was not an issue by the late nineteenth century because by then Britain had a colony in every time zone of the world. The sun never set on the British Empire. And although America had once been considered the most important of the colonies it was soon replaced by India: the 'jewel in the crown'. The main problem for Britain's leaders was that the idea of overthrowing authority was one that might spread to Britain itself. With a growing working population this was possible.

▼ E The extent of the British Empire by 1921



Consequences for the world

The success of America and its fight against British authority inspired one of the most important events in European history. The French were fed up with their king, Louis XIV. People were starving while he and his wife ate lavish breakfasts and lived in luxurious palaces. The French people decided to take action, and the French Revolution began. There were many long-term factors that caused this revolution but the success of the American Revolution acted as a spark for the people of France to remove the **autocratic** rule of their king, Louis. This would go on to inspire the working class in Britain when it came to their voting rights and representation in parliament.

Key Words

peninsula penal colony plantation
indentured servant autocratic

Work

- 1 Write a news report to explain how the British lost at Yorktown. Use the sources to help you add detail.
- 2 **a** What were the consequences of American Independence? Create a diagram showing this. You could have three circles, which show the economic, social and political consequences, or you can have a go at creating your own style of diagram.
b Colour code your consequences to show long- and short-term ones.
c Can you think of any other consequences for Britain?
- 3 Write a letter from George Washington to the British government, explaining how Britain should treat its new colonies across the world if it doesn't want another revolution. You should think about what had made the Americans so unhappy.
- 4 Create a grid for every revolt you have studied thus far. Have one column for similarities and one for differences. Which revolt do you think is most closely linked to the American Revolution?

Practice Question

Was the economy the main factor that caused the American Revolution?

16 marks

SPaG: 4 marks

Study Tip

You will need to explain your answer with reference to the economy and other factors. Think about using specific examples that strengthen your points. Can your examples support another judgement? Explain why they support your points more. The Boston Tea Party could support both economic and political factors so you have to use your evidence to say which it supports the most.