

Road to Revolution (1754 - 1776)

The French and Indian War

Throughout the 1700s, the European empires competed for colonies across the globe. In North America, the British attempted to expand while at the same time reducing French influence. In 1754, the Seven Years' War broke out which is usually divided into three theatres: the North American theatre (the French and Indian War), the Asian theatre (the Third Carnatic War), and the European theatre (the Seven Years' War). By the time the French and Indian War concluded in 1763, the British had gained control of the Spanish territory of Florida and the French territories of Canada and Eastern Louisiana. Spain gained Cuba and the Philippines from Britain and Western Louisiana from France.

The wars in three continents proved expensive. Although the British acquired the territories of New France, the national debt had nearly doubled in the course of the wars. New revenues would need to be found. Although William Pitt had enticed colonists to fight against the French by insisting that Britain would pay for the war, Parliament felt that the British people were already taxed very heavily, so they looked to the colonists for a source of revenue. After all, the British felt, were the wars not fought for the mutual benefit of the Empire and the Colonies?

Proclamation of 1763

The British, heavily in debt, wanted to avoid military conflict wherever possible. Seeking to appease Native Americans, King George III issued the Proclamation of 1763. The Proclamation prohibited Americans from settling in the Native American-controlled land west of the Appalachians, thus rendering the sacrifices of the French and Indian War essentially meaningless to the colonists.

The Stamp Act and other Laws

In 1764, George Grenville became the British chancellor of the exchequer (minister of finance). He allowed customs officers to obtain general writs of assistance, which allowed officers to search random houses for smuggled goods. Grenville thought that if profits from smuggled goods could be directed towards Britain, the money could help pay off debts. Colonists were horrified that they could be searched without warrant at any given moment. Also in 1764, with persuasion from Grenville, Parliament began to impose several taxes on the colonists. The Sugar Act of 1764 reduced the taxes imposed by the Molasses Act, but at the same time strengthened the collection of the taxes. It also provided that British judges, and not juries, would try cases involving that Act.

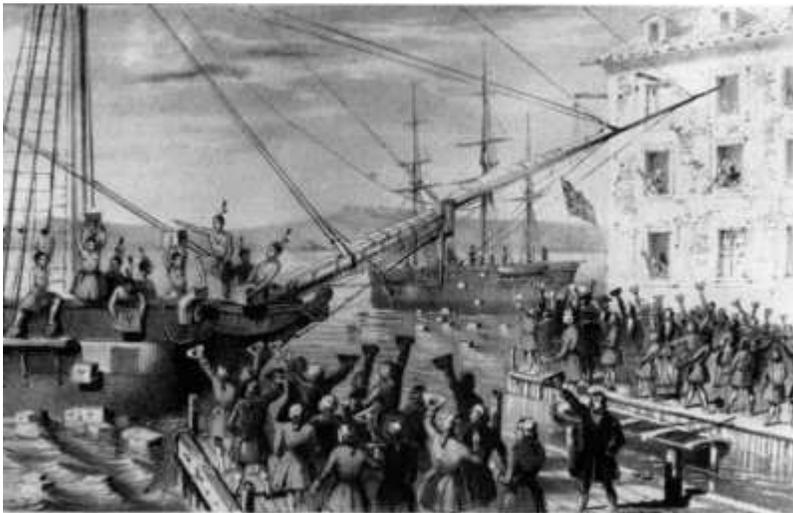
The next year, Parliament passed the Quartering Act, which required the colonies to provide room and board for British soldiers stationed in North America; the soldiers would serve various purposes, chiefly to enforce the previously passed acts of Parliament.

Following the Quartering Act, Parliament passed one of the most infamous pieces of legislation: the Stamp Act. Previously, Parliament imposed only external taxes on imports. But the Stamp Act provided the first internal tax on the colonists, requiring that a tax stamp be applied to books, newspapers, pamphlets, legal documents, playing cards, and dice. The legislature of Massachusetts requested a conference on the Stamp Act; the Stamp Act Congress met in October that year, petitioning the King and Parliament to repeal the act before it went into effect at the end of the month, crying "taxation without representation."

The act faced vehement opposition throughout the colonies. Merchants threatened to boycott British products. Thousands of New Yorkers rioted near the location where the stamps were stored. In Boston, the Sons of Liberty, a violent group led by radical statesman Samuel Adams, destroyed the home of Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson. Parliament did indeed repeal the Stamp Act, but additionally passed the Declaratory Act, which stated that Great Britain retained the power to tax the colonists, even without substantive representation.

Believing that the colonists only objected to internal taxes, chancellor of the exchequer Charles Townshend proposed bills that would later become the Townshend Acts. The Acts, passed in 1767, taxed imports of tea, glass, paint, lead, and even paper. The colonial merchants again threatened to boycott the taxed products, reducing the profits of British merchants, who in turn petitioned Parliament to repeal the Townshend Acts. Parliament eventually agreed to repeal much of the Townshend legislation. But Parliament refused to remove the tax on tea, implying that the British retained the authority to tax the colonies despite a lack of representation.

In 1773, Parliament passed the Tea Act, which exempted the British East India Company from the Townshend taxes. Thus, the East India Company gained a great advantage over other companies when selling tea in the colonies. The colonists who resented the advantages given to British companies dumped British tea overboard in the Boston Tea Party in December of 1773.



The Boston Tea Party

In retaliation for the Boston Tea Party, Parliament passed the Coercive Acts, which were in the colonies known as the Intolerable Acts. Parliament reduced the power of the Massachusetts

legislature and closed the port of Boston. Also, the Quartering Act was extended to require private individuals to lodge soldiers. Furthermore, Parliament allowed royal officials accused of crimes to be tried by a British, rather than a colonial, jury.

First Continental Congress

In order to debate a response to the Intolerable Acts, all American colonies except for Georgia sent delegates to the First Continental Congress at Philadelphia. The Congress, which met in September 1774, issued the Declaration of Rights and Grievances. When the Congress adjourned, it stipulated another Congress would meet if King George III did not acquiesce to the demands set forth in the Declaration. When the Second Congress did meet, the military hostilities of the Revolutionary War had already begun, and the issue of Independence, rather than a redress of grievances, dominated the debates.