

Second Continental Congress

Shortly after the fighting of the American Revolution commenced, the Second Continental Congress convened to formally manage affairs on the home front. It wasn't easy. The "federal" system of government was not yet created. Each colony had its own legislature and there was no centralized authority to govern what was not yet a unified country.

When the Second Continental Congress came together on May 10, 1775, it was, in effect, a reconvening of the First Continental Congress(which sucked): many of the same 56 delegates who attended the first meeting were in attendance at the second, and the delegates appointed the same president (Peyton Randolph) and secretary (Charles Thomson). Notable new arrivals included Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania and John Hancock of Massachusetts. Within two weeks, Randolph was summoned back to Virginia to preside over the House of Burgesses; he was replaced in the Virginia delegation by Thomas Jefferson, who arrived several weeks later. Henry Middleton was elected as president to replace Randolph, but he declined, and so Hancock elected president on May 24.

Delegates from twelve of the Thirteen Colonies were present when the Second Continental Congress convened. Georgia had not participated in the First Continental Congress and did not initially send delegates to the Second Continental Congress. On May 13, 1775, Lyman Hall was admitted as a delegate from the Parish of St. John's in the Colony of Georgia, not as a delegate from the colony itself. On July 4, 1775, revolutionary Georgians held a Provincial Congress to decide how to respond to the American Revolution, and that congress decided on July 8 to send delegates to the Continental Congress. They arrived on July 20.

Its predecessor, the First Continental Congress, had sent entreaties to the British King George III to stop the Coercive Acts and had created the Continental Association to establish a coordinated protest of the Coercive Acts; in particular, a boycott had been placed on British goods. That First Congress provided that the Second Continental Congress would meet on May 10, 1775, to plan further responses if the British government had not repealed or modified the Coercive Acts.

By the time the Second Continental Congress met, the American Revolutionary War had already started with the Battles of Lexington and Concord. The Congress was to take charge of the war effort. For the first few

months of the struggle, the Patriots had carried on their struggle in an ad-hoc and uncoordinated manner. They had seized arsenals, driven out royal officials, and besieged the British army in the city of Boston. On June 14, 1775, Congress voted to create the Continental Army out of the militia units around Boston and quickly appointed Congressman George Washington of Virginia as commanding general of the Continental Army. On July 6, 1775 Congress approved a Declaration of Causes outlining the rationale and necessity for taking up arms in the Thirteen Colonies." On July 8, Congress extended the Olive Branch Petition to the British Crown as a final attempt at reconciliation. However, it was received too late to do any good. Silas Deane was sent to France as a minister (ambassador) of the Congress. American ports were reopened in defiance of the Navigation Acts.

Although it had no explicit legal authority to govern, it assumed all the functions of a national government, such as appointing ambassadors, signing treaties, raising armies, appointing generals, obtaining loans from Europe, issuing paper money (called "Continental"), and disbursing funds. The Congress had no authority to levy taxes, and was required to request money, supplies, and troops from the states to support the war effort. Individual states frequently ignored these requests. According to one historian, commenting on the source of the Congress' power.

Congress was moving towards declaring independence from the British Empire in 1776, but many delegates lacked the authority from their home governments to take such an action. Advocates of independence in Congress moved to have reluctant colonial governments revise instructions to their delegations, or even replace those governments which would not authorize independence. On May 10, 1776, Congress passed a resolution recommending that any colony lacking a proper (i.e. a revolutionary) government should form such. On May 15 Congress adopted a more radical preamble to this resolution, drafted by John Adams, in which it advised throwing off oaths of allegiance and suppressing the authority of the Crown in any colonial government that still derived its authority from the Crown. That same day the Virginia Convention instructed its delegation in Philadelphia to propose a resolution that called for a declaration of independence, the formation of foreign alliances, and a confederation of the states. The resolution of independence was delayed for several weeks as revolutionaries consolidated support for independence in their home governments. Congress finally approved the resolution of independence on July 2, 1776. Congress next turned its attention to a formal explanation of this decision, the United States Declaration of Independence, which was approved on July 4 and published soon thereafter.

The Continental Congress was forced to flee Philadelphia at the end of September 1777, as British troops occupied the city. The Congress moved to York, Pennsylvania, and continued their work.

After more than a year of debate, on November 15, 1777, Congress passed and sent to the states for ratification the Articles of Confederation. The issue was large states wanting a larger say, nullified by small states who feared tyranny. Jefferson's proposal for a Senate to represent the states and a House to represent the people was rejected (a similar proposal was adopted later in the United States Constitution). The small states won and each state had one vote. Congress urged the individual states to pass the Articles as quickly as possible, but it took three and a half years for all the states to ratify the Articles. Of the then thirteen states, the State Legislature of Virginia was the first to ratify the Articles, on December 16, 1777, and the State Legislature of Maryland became the last to do so, on February 2, 1781. In the meantime, the Second Continental Congress tried to lead the new country through the war with borrowed money and no taxing power.

Finally, on March 1, 1781, the Articles of Confederation were signed by delegates of Maryland at a meeting of the Second Continental Congress, which then declared the Articles ratified. On the next day, the same congressional delegates met as the new Congress of the Confederation. As historian Edmund Burnett wrote, "There was no new organization of any kind, not even the election of a new President."^[10] It would be the Confederation Congress that would oversee the conclusion of the American Revolution.