
DBQ WHAT CAUSED THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION?

Historical Background

Too often, the seeds of future wars grow from the results of earlier wars. This certainly was true of the American Revolution.

The earlier conflict was the French and Indian War, which ended in 1763. Britain and its American colonies defeated the French and their Indian allies. This war was the last of a long series of colonial-era wars dating back to 1689. Britain and France fought these conflicts for control of Europe and of their colonies throughout the world. The French and Indian War (1754-1763) was the last of these conflicts. More than the earlier wars, it was waged over the control of North America. People in all the British North American colonies rejoiced at the British victory. In 1763, American colonists were proud to be part of the British Empire.

Yet in 1775, America and Britain were at war. How could Americans, in the space of only twelve years, go from celebrating their membership in the British Empire to waging war against Britain?

Document 1

Wars cost huge sums of money. After decades of war against France, Britain was deeply in debt in 1763. The government desperately needed money. British leaders expected the American colonies to help pay. After all, these wars had been waged, in large part, to protect the Americans from the French and their Indian allies. Raising taxes on the American colonists to help raise the needed funds seemed (to the British leaders) to be only fair and just. Surely, they thought, the Americans would agree.

One of the first taxes imposed by the British Parliament was commonly known as the Stamp Act. It required American colonists to pay fees on all kinds of printed documents. This included legal documents, licenses, newspapers, pamphlets, diplomas, and even decks of playing cards. John Adams was a young lawyer in Braintree, Massachusetts. He wrote a resolution protesting the Stamp Act. Braintree and many other towns in Massachusetts approved this resolution. The following excerpts come from that resolution.

... the Stamp Act ... a very burdensome and, in our opinion, unconstitutional tax is to be laid upon us all.

... this tax [is] unconstitutional. We have always understood it be to a grand and fundamental principle ... that no ... man should be subject to any tax to which he has not given his own consent [by voting for those who pass such a tax].

Adams went on to protest the process by which the Stamp Act was supposed to be enforced. He described what would happen when someone was arrested and charged with violating the law:

In the ... courts one judge presides alone! No juries [are allowed]. This part of the act [violates our liberties and] is directly [opposed to our rights as Englishmen].

Source: Charles F. Adams, *Works of John Adams*, Vol. III, Boston, 1851.

Why were many American colonists outraged by the British Stamp Act? _____

Document 2

American colonists protested the Stamp Act and boycotted British imports. They threatened violence against anyone who tried to collect the taxes. In response, Parliament repealed the Stamp Act in early 1766. Most American colonists rejoiced at this action. They felt proud again to be English subjects. But Americans were alarmed at an official statement approved by Parliament at the time that it repealed the Stamp Act. This statement was called the Declaratory Act. It said that the British Parliament had the power to

... make laws ... to bind the colonies and people of America, subjects of the Crown of Great Britain, in all cases whatsoever.

What angered American colonists about the Declaratory Act? _____

Document 3

The next year, 1767, Parliament passed a new series of taxes called the Townshend Acts. American colonists now had to pay taxes on a number of popular British goods that they imported from England. These included items such as tea, paints, glass, ink, and dyes. Though these taxes were actually quite small, the outcry from many American leaders was huge. John Dickinson was a leading member of Pennsylvania's colonial government. He protested these taxes in a series of newspaper articles. The following excerpts come from those articles.

There is another . . . act of Parliament which appears to me to be unconstitutional, and destructive to the liberty of these colonies. . . .

Most colonists accepted Parliament's authority to regulate trade. But Dickinson and many other colonial leaders were angry that the primary purpose of these taxes was to raise revenue for the British government. Three years earlier, John Adams had protested this in his attack on the Stamp Act. Dickinson agreed. Taxing the American colonists to raise money for the British government was unconstitutional. It was, as Dickinson said:

A violation of our rights . . . to raise money upon us WITHOUT OUR CONSENT. . . .

Later in this article, Dickinson pleaded with his fellow American colonists:

. . . my dear countrymen, ROUSE yourselves, and behold the ruin hanging over your heads. If you . . . admit that . . . Britain may [tax] us, for the purpose of levying money . . . without our consent . . . [then] we are . . . slaves. . . .

Source: John Dickinson, *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies*. Originally published in 1768.

Why, according to Dickinson, was it unconstitutional for Parliament to tax the colonists?

Reread the arguments used by Dickinson in Document 3 and Adams in Document 1. According to these arguments, who (or what) did have the constitutional authority to tax the colonists? _____

Name _____

Document- Based Test Model – Immediate Causes of the American Revolution

Document 1

Why were many American colonists outraged by the British Stamp Act?

Document 2

What angered American colonists about the Declaratory Act?

Document 3

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