

American History



American Revolution:

The American Revolution (1775-83), also known as the Revolutionary War, arose from growing tensions between residents of Great Britain's 13 North American colonies and the colonial government, which represented the British crown. Skirmishes between British troops and colonial militiamen in Lexington and Concord in April 1775 kicked off the armed conflict, and by the following summer, the rebels were waging a full-scale war for their independence. France entered the American Revolution on the side of the colonists in 1778, turning what had essentially been a civil war into an international conflict. After French assistance helped the Continental Army force the British surrender at Yorktown, Virginia, in 1781, the Americans had effectively won their independence, though fighting would not formally end until 1783.

Causes:

For more than a decade before the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1775, tensions had been building between colonists and the British authorities. The French and Indian War, or Seven Years' War (1756-1763), brought new territories under the power of the crown, but the expensive conflict led to new and unpopular taxes. Attempts by the British government to raise revenue by taxing the colonies (notably the Stamp Act of 1765, the Townshend Acts of 1767 and the Tea Act of 1773) met with heated protest among many colonists, who resented their lack of representation in Parliament and demanded the same rights as other British subjects.

Colonial resistance led to violence in 1770, when British soldiers opened fire on a mob of colonists, killing five men in what was known as the Boston Massacre. After December 1773, when a band of Bostonians dressed as Mohawk Indians boarded British ships and dumped 342 chests of tea into Boston Harbor during the Boston Tea Party, an outraged Parliament passed a series of measures (known as the Intolerable, or Coercive Acts) designed to reassert imperial authority in Massachusetts. In response, a group of colonial delegates met in Philadelphia in

September 1774 to give voice to their grievances against the British crown. This First Continental Congress did not go so far as to demand independence from Britain, but it denounced taxation without representation, as well as the maintenance of the British army in the colonies without their consent. It issued a declaration of the rights due every citizen, including life, liberty, property, assembly and trial by jury. The Continental Congress voted to meet again in May 1775 to consider further action, but by that time violence had already broken out.

On the night of April 18, 1775, hundreds of British troops marched from Boston to nearby Concord, Massachusetts in order to seize an arms cache. Paul Revere and other riders sounded the alarm, and colonial militiamen began mobilizing to intercept the Redcoats. On April 19, local militiamen clashed with British soldiers in the Battles of Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts, marking the “shot heard round the world” that signified the start of the Revolutionary War.

Declaration of Independence:

By June 1776, with the Revolutionary War in full swing, a growing majority of the colonists had come to favor independence from Britain. On July 4, the Continental Congress voted to adopt the Declaration of Independence, drafted by a five-man committee including Franklin and John Adams but written mainly by Jefferson. That same month, determined to crush the rebellion, the British government sent a large fleet, along with more than 34,000 troops to New York. In August, Howe’s Redcoats routed the Continental Army on Long Island; Washington was forced to evacuate his troops from New York City by September. Pushed across the Delaware River, Washington fought back with a surprise attack in Trenton, New Jersey, on Christmas night and won another victory at Princeton to revive the rebels’ flagging hopes before making winter quarters at Morristown.

Drawing to a Close:

By the fall of 1781, Greene’s American forces had managed to force Cornwallis and his men to withdraw to Virginia’s Yorktown peninsula, near where the York River empties into Chesapeake Bay. Supported by a French army commanded by General Jean Baptiste de Rochambeau, Washington moved against Yorktown with a total of around 14,000 soldiers, while a fleet of 36

French warships offshore prevented British reinforcement or evacuation. Trapped and overpowered, Cornwallis was forced to surrender his entire army on October 19. Claiming illness, the British general sent his deputy, Charles O'Hara, to surrender; after O'Hara approached Rochambeau to surrender his sword (the Frenchman deferred to Washington), Washington gave the nod to his own deputy, Benjamin Lincoln, who accepted it.

Though the movement for American independence effectively triumphed at the Battle of Yorktown, contemporary observers did not see that as the decisive victory yet. British forces remained stationed around Charleston, and the powerful main army still resided in New York. Though neither side would take decisive action over the better part of the next two years, the British removal of their troops from Charleston and Savannah in late 1782 finally pointed to the end of the conflict. British and American negotiators in Paris signed preliminary peace terms in Paris late that November, and on September 3, 1783, Great Britain formally recognized the independence of the United States in the Treaty of Paris. At the same time, Britain signed separate peace treaties with France and Spain (which had entered the conflict in 1779), bringing the American Revolution to a close after eight long years.



American Civil War:

The Civil War in the United States began in 1861, after decades of simmering tensions between northern and southern states over slavery, states' rights and westward expansion. The election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 caused seven southern states to secede and form the Confederate States of America; four more states soon joined them. The War Between the States, as the Civil War was also known, ended in Confederate surrender in 1865.



The conflict was the costliest and deadliest war ever fought on American soil, with some 620,000 of 2.4 million soldiers killed, millions more injured and much of the South left in ruin.

Outbreak of the Civil War:

Even as Lincoln took office in March 1861, Confederate forces threatened the federal-held Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina. On April 12, after Lincoln ordered a fleet to resupply Sumter, Confederate artillery fired the first shots of the Civil War. Sumter's commander, Major Robert Anderson, surrendered after less than two days of bombardment, leaving the fort in the hands of Confederate forces under Pierre G.T. Beauregard. Four more southern states—Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina and Tennessee—joined the Confederacy after Fort Sumter. Border slave states like Missouri, Kentucky and Maryland did not secede, but there was much Confederate sympathy among their citizens. Though on the surface the Civil War may have seemed a lopsided conflict, with the 23 states of the Union enjoying an enormous advantage in population, manufacturing (including arms production) and railroad construction, the Confederates had a strong military tradition, along with some of the best soldiers and commanders in the nation. They also had a cause they believed in: preserving their long-held traditions and institutions, chief among these being slavery.

In the First Battle of Bull Run (known in the South as First Manassas) on July 21, 1861, 35,000 Confederate soldiers under the command of Thomas Jonathan Jackson forced a greater number of Union forces (or Federals) to retreat towards Washington, D.C., dashing any hopes of a quick Union victory and leading Lincoln to call for 500,000 more recruits. In fact, both sides' initial call for troops had to be widened after it became clear that the war would not be a limited or short conflict.



Union Victory:

In March 1864, Lincoln put Grant in supreme command of the Union armies, replacing Halleck. Leaving William Tecumseh Sherman in control in the West, Grant headed to Washington, where he led the Army of the Potomac towards Lee's troops in northern Virginia. Despite heavy Union casualties in the Battle of the Wilderness and at Spotsylvania (both May 1864), at Cold Harbor (early June) and the key rail center of Petersburg (June), Grant pursued a strategy of attrition, putting Petersburg under siege for the next nine months.

Sherman outmaneuvered Confederate forces to take Atlanta by September, after which he and some 60,000 Union troops began the famous "March to the Sea," devastating Georgia on the way to capturing Savannah on December 21. Columbia and Charleston, South Carolina, fell to Sherman's men by mid-February, and Jefferson Davis belatedly handed over the supreme command to Lee, with the Confederate war effort on its last legs. Sherman pressed on through North Carolina, capturing Fayetteville, Bentonville, Goldsboro and Raleigh by mid-April.

Meanwhile, exhausted by the Union siege of Petersburg and Richmond, Lee's forces made a last attempt at resistance, attacking and capturing the Federal-controlled Fort Stedman on March 25. An immediate counterattack reversed the victory, however, and on the night of April 2-3 Lee's forces evacuated Richmond. For most of the next week, Grant and Meade pursued the Confederates along the Appomattox River, finally exhausting their possibilities for escape. Grant accepted Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House on April 9. On the eve of victory, the Union lost its great leader: The actor and Confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Lincoln at Ford's Theatre in Washington on April 14. Sherman received Johnston's surrender at Durham Station, North Carolina on April 26, effectively ending the Civil War.

