

# Preparing the Revolution

In most of our history courses, students learn about brave patriots who prepared for the Revolutionary War by uniting against a tyrannical king and oppressive English laws. In this well-known story, all Americans united in opposition to England and looked to their enlightened leaders to help them in their valiant struggle for freedom. While there certainly is some truth to this version of the Revolutionary War, a more balanced interpretation includes another perspective—that of the many ordinary colonists who had grown increasingly disillusioned and angry with their unresponsive colonial leaders and did not want to engage in a war for independence designed to benefit the colonial elite.

Some of those unimportant discontented colonists turned to rebellion against their colonial governors. In Chapter 4 of *A People's History*, Howard Zinn includes their perspective, weaving it carefully into the more traditional story and asking questions that must be answered before we can obtain a more accurate understanding of the years prior to the Revolution. The voices in this chapter give credence to the beliefs and behaviors of those imbued with the revolutionary spirit—a spirit full of anger directed at both the colonial elite and the British Crown.

## Document-Based Questions

### THOMAS HUTCHINSON

1. Do you think the Bostonians' reactions to the Stamp Act were treasonous? Why, or why not? Why do you think England responded by repealing the Stamp Act rather than arresting the rebellious colonists?
2. How does Thomas Hutchinson describe the main grievances of "the mob" against the Stamp Act? What are his feelings about "the mob"?
3. Why do you think the town was "under awe of this mob" with "no body

daring to oppose, or contradict” it? What does this tell you about the nature of colonial Bostonian society?

### **SAMUEL DROWNE'S TESTIMONY**

1. Samuel Drowne stated that when the soldiers arrived, most of those gathered were “gentlemen.” Later he stated that those who remained were sailors “and other persons meanly dressed.” Do you think these descriptions indicate class-consciousness in colonial society? Why, or why not?
2. Does Drowne place blame on any group of participants in the Boston Massacre? How and why?
3. Do you think Drowne was a patriot or a loyalist? Support your answer with direct quotes.

### **GEORGE HEWES RECALLS THE BOSTON TEA PARTY**

1. Why do you think the participants in the Boston Tea Party dressed as Indians?
2. How does Hewes describe his relationship with other participants in the Boston Tea Party? Do these descriptions, or any others in his recollection, sound like acts of rebellion? How and why?
3. Why is it important to Hewes and his fellow rebels to “render its [tea] entire destruction inevitable”?

### **NEW YORK MECHANICS DECLARATION**

1. How does the New York Mechanics Declaration compare and contrast with the Declaration of Independence? What words and concepts are similar? Dissimilar?
2. What do you think the mechanics meant when they accused the King because he would “take pleasure in our destruction”? What evidence do they offer to support this belief? Do you agree with their assessment? Why, or why not?
3. Do you think the mechanics’ arguments for independence are persuasive? Why, or why not?

### THOMAS PAINE

1. Why does Thomas Paine argue against “reconciliation”? Are his arguments for independence persuasive? How and why? Are they more or less persuasive than those articulated by the New York Mechanics?
2. Some historians have called *Common Sense* one of the greatest early pieces of political propaganda. What is propaganda? In your opinion, is *Common Sense* propagandistic? How and why?
3. Do you agree with Paine that British rule “sooner or later must have an end” (p. 89)? Why, or why not?

### Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 4, “Preparing the Revolution”

After reading Chapter 4 in *Voices*, students should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points therein. Following are four possible main points.

1. Pre-Revolutionary America witnessed the growth of anti-government beliefs aimed at both the colonial elite and the British Crown.
2. The formal arguments for colonial independence largely focused on England’s tyrannical and oppressive laws and actions.
3. Prior to the eve of the American Revolution, colonial protesters had successfully forced the British Parliament to repeal taxes they believed to be unfair.
4. Only when the King refused to give in to colonial demands did the colonists turn to war.

### Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 4, “Preparing the Revolution,” and in *A People’s History*, Chapter 4, “Tyranny Is Tyranny”

If your students are also reading *A People’s History*, they should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points in chapters 4 in both books. Following are four additional points to be stressed when *Voices* and *A People’s History* are used together.

5. Tyranny and oppression were tools used by both the colonial and British elite against the ordinary American colonists.
6. By 1776, upper-class colonial politicians realized that they could mobilize the lower-class energy that had previously been directed against them and redirect such anger at the British Crown.
7. A totally united prewar effort did not materialize among the colonists; significant colonial resistance occurred both before and during the Revolutionary War.
8. Political, economic, and social divisiveness existed in colonial America—divisiveness that spilled over into the efforts to prepare for war with England.

### General-Discussion Questions for *Voices*

While the following questions are designed for classroom discussion about all the voices read in Chapter 4, they can also be rewritten and included as evaluation tools.

1. Why do you think the English repealed the Stamp Act and removed their troops from Boston after the massacre? What message do you think these British actions sent to the colonists?
2. The Third Amendment of the Constitution declares, “No Soldier shall, in time of peace, be quartered in any house, without the consent of the Owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law.” How do the voices in this chapter help to explain the impetus behind passage of the Third Amendment?
3. Why do you think John Adams, an avowed patriot, defended the British soldiers who were accused of firing into the crowd at the Boston Massacre?
4. What is “taxation without representation”? Do you think the colonists had a real grievance? How and why? How and why did colonial taxation before the French and Indian War differ from taxation after that war?
5. What is treason? Do you think the rebellious actions of the colonists explained in this chapter were treasonous? Why, or why not? If they were treasonous, why do you think the King did not arrest and try them for treason?

6. Some contemporary historians have described the colonial rebellions as acts of terror against the British Crown. What is terrorism? Do any of the voices in this chapter support or refute this assessment? What is your opinion? If American protesters today burned a merchant's home and papers, fired upon American soldiers, or destroyed almost one million dollars of a company's merchandise, would they be considered terrorists? Why, or why not?
7. Do you think the recollection of events that are recorded years later (such as George Hewes' recollection sixty-one years after the Boston Tea Party) should be considered an accurate account of a historical event? Why, or why not?
8. Do the words of Thomas Paine—especially those directed at “those who espouse the doctrine of reconciliation”—support or refute Howard Zinn's contention that the colonial elite turned the anger of ordinary colonists against England rather than risk having such anger aimed at them? How and why?
9. How did the voices in this chapter reinforce any of the four themes listed in “Main Points in *Voices*”?
10. Which of the voices in this chapter did you find most powerful? Least powerful? How and why?

### General-Discussion Questions for *Voices* and *A People's History*

These general-discussion questions are additional questions posed for students who have read Chapter 4 in both books. For all questions, discussion must focus on ways the materials in both chapters help students formulate and articulate their answers.

11. What is tyranny? What is oppression? How do these two chapters help you better understand tyranny and oppression? What is the significance of the chapter title, “Tyranny is Tyranny”? How do the voices in “Preparing the Revolution” reinforce the meaning of the chapter title in *A People's History*?
12. In the first paragraph of “Tyranny is Tyranny,” Howard Zinn makes a case

for the argument he posits in both chapters that by diverting anger that ordinary colonists had focused on the colonial elite to the British Empire, the “important people in the English colonies . . . could take over land, profits, and political power from favorites of the British Empire.” Do you think he proves his case? How and why?

13. What was the Proclamation of 1763? Why did it anger many colonial Americans? What do you think motivated the Crown to pass such a law?
14. Given the voices of discontented colonists and the political and economic realities of the colonists after the French and Indian War, do you think war was inevitable? Why, or why not?
15. What is a town meeting? What role did it play in the politics of colonial America? Do you think town meeting politics influenced the course of the American Revolution? Do town meetings still exist? If so, what role do you think they play in local politics today?
16. What evidence do these chapters provide of class conflict? How does this information support or refute any of your earlier beliefs about American colonists?
17. Why do you think colonial governors, all of whom lived in eastern cities, were either slow to respond or unresponsive to the grievances of ordinary colonists, many of whom lived in the western regions of the growing colonies?
18. What evidence can you find in this chapter that the white urban population in some parts of colonial America was divided? Do you support or refute Howard Zinn’s contention that the colonial leaders convinced the evolving middle class to unite with them against “the biggest problem,” the “propertyless people” (*A People’s History*, p. 65)? How and why?
19. What does Howard Zinn mean when he says that the “myth of the Revolution” was that “it was on behalf of a united people” (*A People’s History*, p. 70)? Do you agree or disagree? How and why?
20. What were the Coercive Acts? Why did the colonists call them the Intolerable Acts? What do these two different terms tell you about the divisions between the colonists and the mother country?

## Evaluation Tools

### SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

These assignments can be adapted to meet any classroom need—homework, short- or long-term research projects, individual or group work. The end product should be flexible, depending on teacher interest and student abilities—papers, journals, oral reports, visual aides, and the like.

1. The consequences of the French and Indian War are often cited as a primary cause of the Revolutionary War. Using a search engine of choice, locate and read at least two documents that support this belief. How do they demonstrate such support? Are their arguments convincing? Why, or why not?
2. Americans have repeatedly protested the payment of taxes. What were the primary anti-tax arguments posed by the colonists between 1763 and 1776? Learn more about at least two other anti-tax movements that occurred in the United States in the late twentieth century or early twenty-first century. What were the goals and consequences of each? How do the contemporary anti-tax movements compare and contrast with those of the colonists?
3. Appeasement has long been a controversial foreign-policy option. What is appeasement? Do you think Parliament's decision to repeal the Stamp Act and the Townshend Acts was intended to appease the colonists? Why, or why not? Provide at least two examples of more contemporary uses of appeasement within the global setting. How does its modern usage compare and contrast with its usage in colonial America?
4. Research the trial of the British soldiers who were involved in the Boston Massacre. What other accounts support or refute Samuel Drowne's interpretation? Read John Adam's defense of the soldiers. What do you think were his most convincing arguments? Least convincing? Do you agree or disagree with the court's opinion? How and why?
5. Boycotts were a common form of protest prior to the Revolutionary War. What is a boycott? Which colonial boycotts do you think were most successful? Least? How and why?
6. Americans continue to use boycotts to influence domestic and international

policies. Learn more about one late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century boycott. What were its goals and accomplishments? Would you have supported this boycott? Why, or why not? Do you think boycotts are an effective way to protest? How and why?

7. Pamphlets such as *Common Sense* provided the main source of political information in colonial America. Find and read the contents of another pamphlet that discusses colonial grievances with the British Crown. How does it compare and contrast with Paine's arguments? Which was more persuasive? Least? How and why?
8. In *A People's History*, Howard Zinn argues that there is a "long history of American politics" in which we have seen the "mobilization of lower-class energy by upper-class politicians, for their own purposes" (p. 61). Research and describe at least two such instances during other periods of American history. In your opinion, were the "upper-class politicians" successful or unsuccessful in achieving their goals? How and why? Were these actions comparable to those of the Founding Fathers? How and why?
9. Who were Ethan Allen's Green Mountain rebels? Who were the North Carolina Regulators? What were their goals and accomplishments? How were their grievances similar to other anti-government rebels in pre-Revolutionary America? Locate information about and study one contemporary anti-government group in America. How do the goals and actions of the contemporary group compare and contrast with those of the colonial groups?

## SUGGESTED ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. In *A People's History*, Howard Zinn asks, "And how could people truly have equal rights, with stark differences in wealth" (p. 73)? How would you answer these questions? How do the voices in "Preparing for Revolution" inform your answer?
2. Support or refute this statement: "[T]he Declaration functioned to mobilize certain groups of Americans, ignoring others. Surely, inspirational language to create secure consensus is still used, in our time, to cover up serious conflicts of interest in that consensus, and to cover up, also, the omission of large parts of the human race" (*People's History*, p. 73).
3. *Common Sense* was one of the most widely read pamphlets in colonial



America. In your opinion, what was its appeal? Do you believe that it was propagandistic? Why, or why not?

4. Do you think the Revolutionary War was inevitable? Do you think reconciliation between the colonies and England may have been possible? How and why?
5. Using specifics from *Voices* (or *Voices* and *A People's History*), support or refute this statement: "[T]he Founding Fathers . . . created the most effective system of national control devised in modern times, and showed future generations of leaders the advantages of combining paternalism with command" (*People's History*, p. 59).
6. Many of the rebels discussed in these chapters developed an anti-government bias. What grievances did they share? Do you think their grievances were valid? How and why? How do their grievances compare and contrast with such anti-government grievances today?
7. What role did impressment, the quartering of British troops, and the publication of *Common Sense* play in gaining support for independence? Why do you think that these actions and voices did not convince all Americans to join the cause?
8. What voices of resistance in chapters 4 in both *Voices* and *A People's History* were of most interest to you? How and why? Which did you find most compelling and why? Least compelling?
9. What does the following phrase from the Declaration of Independence mean to you? "We hold these truths to be self-evident . . . That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government." Do you think that the Founding Fathers supported open rebellion at any time the people no longer felt the government upheld their rights or represented their interests and needs? How and why?
10. Do you think the colonial rebellions against the colonial elite—those described in Chapters 3 and 4 in both *Voices* and *A People's History*—were justifiable? Why, or why not? Was the rebellion of the colonists against the English justifiable? Why, or why not? How do the two rebellions compare

and contrast? Can you think of any contemporary rebellion that is justified? Unjustified?

## **SIMULATIONS AND OTHER CREATIVE APPROACHES**

1. Stage a debate in class over the following issue: “In 1776, the actions of the Founding Fathers were both treasonous and terrorist.” Be certain that both sides define treason and terrorism—in terms that would be understood by late-eighteenth-century colonists. When the debate is over, class discussion should focus on how the terms treason and terrorism are defined today. Then students should discuss whether the actions of the Founding Fathers in 1776 would be considered acts of treason and terrorism in contemporary society.
2. Hold two town meetings. In the first, students will take the role of colonists who are deciding whether or not they should join the movement for independence. Prior to holding the meeting, students must select their town, learn something about its politics, determine the type of people (various classes, socio-economic background, and so forth) who might attend the meeting, and be familiar with New England attitudes about independence. In the second town meeting, students will take the role of contemporary citizens who are attending a town meeting and are discussing an important issue that has arisen in their community. Prior to holding the meeting, students must select an issue and investigate both sides of the community debate.
3. Write a letter to King George III in which you explain your position about a possible war for independence. In your letter, be sure to explain why the Coercive Acts are known as the Intolerable Acts in the colonies; what you believe the King’s role to be in the divisions between England and its colonies; and what you think might be done to avoid war.
4. Write a poem or song that illustrates the emotional impact of the title of Chapter 4, “Tyranny is Tyranny.”
5. Stage a debate about voting in American society. Topics for the debate should include: Voting is a privilege that is taken for granted in American society. Voting privileges have only recently been extended to all American citizens. Voting is both a right and a responsibility. Everyone’s vote matters.