

Challenges of the Revolution

After seven years of fighting British forces and their mercenaries, Americans successfully freed themselves of a tyrannical king and despotic Parliament. However, when American diplomats traveled to France to sign the Treaty of Paris with Britain in 1783, a number of questions loomed large: Could the American union survive in the world? How would the new nation secure credit and forge trade networks? Would internal strife cause disunion? Would the American nation fail and fall under the control of Spain, France, or Britain? During the 1780s and 1790s, the fledgling United States faced these and other challenges, including a lack of governing structure, financial woes, and periodic internal and external threats.

As had been the case since 1776, the America of 1783 was politically inchoate. There was only the pretense of a central government; it could not declare war, levy taxes, or regulate commerce. The Articles of Confederation created an American system that was a loose alliance of sovereign states. But it soon became clear that the union was, as a whole, impotent. Drawn up and enacted during wartime, the Articles of Confederation could not hold the union together during peace. Between the ratification of the Articles of Confederation in 1781 and the implementation of the U.S. Constitution in 1789, America was a weak state teetering on the brink of collapse.

Financial problems were among the greatest challenges posed by the American Revolution. Without access to credit and the guaranteed trade networks of the British Empire, America seemed destined to fail. Currency was problematic between 1775 and 1789. At the beginning of the Revolution, the Continental Congress issued a new currency that was not backed by specie (gold coin) in order to finance the war. Congress adopted the dollar as the national currency. However, private notes continued to be printed. This made monetary chaos inevitable. Debt burdens were another problem. Because colonists had largely used credit to buy property or conduct business, the war left many patriots deeply indebted for decades after the war ended. Trade was another major financial concern. The American Revolution had severed the commercial links that connected Europe and the Americas. In the post-revolutionary period, Americans scrambled to establish diplomatic and trade ties with Italy, France, Portugal, and Spain. Without international trade, the new nation had little chance of surviving.

The new American nation faced internal and external threats throughout the revolutionary period as well. Internal cohesion was problematic. For example, at the outbreak of war with Britain, nearly one-fifth of colonists remained loyal to King George III. Called Loyalists, these men and women were real threats to the revolution because they undermined the claim that a single, unified People supported the Cause. Across the 1780s and 1790s, the rise of political factions within the U.S. (for example, the Federalist and Anti-federalist parties) threatened to pull the union apart. In the aftermath of events in Haiti, many Americans, particularly in the southern states, believed that slaves would mount a large-scale rebellion as well. External threats in the forms of hostile Native American nations and rival European powers challenged American independence. With the U.S. so vulnerable, it was entirely plausible that an

imperial power such as France or Britain would seize America and make it back into colonies.

A persistent, though less tangible, challenge of the post-revolutionary period was defining “the American people” that the Revolution had sought to create. Jefferson’s claim in the opening lines of the Declaration was rhetorical; Americans struggled to articulate a sense of “identity” throughout the post-revolutionary years. The founders, fearing a resurgence of centralized, monarchical power, engineered a state in which power and identity were quite diffuse. Because state power was rarely exercised, there were no institutions around which a single, unified sense of “American-ness” could be elaborated. As a result, Americans increasingly defined themselves in local and sectional terms (as northerners or southerners) and found little they recognized in the “nation” as a whole. In the post-revolutionary period, “We the People” seemed a part of history, a reminder of the collective experience of the American Revolution.

Most European observers believed that the American federal union had no chance of survival. They predicted that it would dissolve into anarchy, break up into smaller republics, or be claimed by a European imperial power. Between 1783 and 1861, these predictions nearly came true many times. It took the American Civil War to seriously address some of the challenges that were not fully taken on during the founding period.