The American Revolution

During the second half of the eighteenth century, North American colonists of the British Empire became increasingly frustrated and disillusioned with being subjected to monarchical rule abroad. Early American social, political, and intellectual transformations during this period led to a growing resentment of aristocratic and oligarchic rule that largely defined the structure of European politics and society. The principles of the Enlightenment, an intellectual movement that originated in Europe, became fundamental in American political and social thought. The concept of republicanism and democracy particularly resonated with a majority of American colonists.

The American Revolution refers to the political changes that occurred during the last quarter of the eighteenth century as thirteen American colonies divorced themselves from England and established a newly formed nation called the United States of America. The American Revolution also encompassed the U.S. War of Independence or the American Revolutionary War. The war lasted from 1775–1783; however, the underlying ideological and politics factors leading to the Revolutionary War had already been underway for years prior to any bloodshed.

The American Revolutionary War began in April 1775 after armed conflict broke out between British troops and colonial militiamen in Lexington and Concord. By July 1776, the American colonists under the Continental Congress issued the United States Declaration of Independence and officially severed ties with Great Britain. With the aid of French troops, the Americans were able to defeat the British by October 1781 and achieved full independence from British entanglement with the Treaty of Paris in 1783. French involvement in the American Revolutionary War was extremely beneficial for the American war effort; however, this involvement effectively destroyed France's economy and drove the country into massive debt. The harsh taxes imposed on the French peoples were one of the leading causes that sparked the French Revolution in 1789.

Political and Economic Factors Leading to the American Revolution

Tensions between the American colonists and the British crown had been rising for over a decade prior to the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. Many American colonists felt mistreated and neglected due to their lack of representation in parliament. The colonists insisted on receiving the same treatment as British subjects living in England. However, in many instances this was not the case, particularly regarding the implementation of taxation. Because the colonies did not have representation in parliament, they were unable to have an impact on deciding how taxes were raised, levied, or spent. There were several instances in which the British government imposed taxes on the colonies without their approval: Stamp Act (1765), Townshend Tariffs (1767), and the Tea Act (1765). The colonists met all of these taxes with strong opposition.
The Stamp Act

The Stamp Act (1765) was one of the first taxes imposed directly on the American colonists against their will. The Stamp Act required a majority of printed materials, such as legal documents, magazines, and newspapers to be produced on stamped paper that was embossed with a revenue stamp produced in London. The justification for the tax was to help pay for the British troops to be permanently stationed in North America following the French and Indian War. Parliament believed that the American colonies were obligated to pay a substantial portion of the expense of stationing troops in North America, because the colonies primarily benefited from their presence.

North American colonists protested and resisted the Stamp Act. Colonial assemblies sent petitions of protest to parliament, arguing that the Stamp Act—or any other tax imposed without colonial consent—was a violation of their rights as Englishmen. Local groups of colonial merchants and landowners established protest movements that extended throughout the colonies. The Stamp Act Congress formed and convened in New York City and sent a petition to parliament as well as the king. This represented the first substantial joint form of colonial action taken against a British measure. As a result of boycotts and demonstrations conducted by the Sons of Liberty—the colonial period group whose demonstrations often evolved into mob violence—the Stamp Act was eventually repealed in March 1766. As part of the repeal of the Stamp Act, parliament issued a Declaratory Act, which formally stated that parliament reserved the right to impose their authority on the North American colonies in the same way that it did in England. Following the Stamp Act, parliament passed a number of other taxes and regulations that continued to foster anger and resentment among the American colonists and played a significant role in precipitating the American Revolution.

Boston Massacre

Following the tensions over unpopular taxation, British troops had been permanently stationed in Boston since 1768 to protect colonial crown officials who were appointed to enforce parliamentary legislation. In March 1770, tensions between the colonists and British soldiers eventually broke out into violence. British soldiers opened fire on a mob of colonists who had been harassing, verbally assaulting, and hurling objects at them. In all, five colonial men were killed and six were left injured. This incident came to be known as the Boston Massacre and was spread widely in the form of propaganda. An engraving by Paul Revere, depicting the episode as innocent colonists being fired upon by angry British soldiers, effectively roused anger throughout the thirteen colonies. The Boston Massacre was considered to be one of the major episodes that prompted the American Revolutionary War.
Boston Tea Party

American colonists continued to reject and protest against British imperial policies. Following an American boycott of taxed British tea in December 1773, and as an act of protest against the crown, a group of colonists from Boston boarded British ships and threw nearly 345 chests of tea into Boston Harbor. Later referred to sardonically as the Boston Tea Party, this act of rebellion infuriated parliament. The British parliament retaliated with a number of measures that were intended to reassert their rule over Massachusetts. This included a measure that shut down Boston’s commerce until the British East India Company was repaid for the tea that had been destroyed. These policies not only harmed Boston but also sent a warning message to the other colonies about what could happen if they rebelled against the crown.

In September 1774, in response to what came to be known as the Intolerable or Coercive Acts, a group of colonial delegates—such as George Washington and Patrick Henry from Virginia and John Adams and Samuel Adams from Massachusetts—convened in Philadelphia and established the First Continental Congress, which officially denounced a number of parliament’s policies such as taxation without representation.

The Declaration of Independence

The First Continental Congress had voted to reconvene the following year in May 1775 to discuss further options for political action; however, by that time violence between the colonies and British troops had already broken out. In April 1775, colonial militiamen and British soldiers fired the first shots of the Revolutionary War in Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts. When the Second Continental Congress met in 1775, the delegates—who now also included figures such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin—established a Continental Army with George Washington appointed as its commander in chief.

The following summer, as the war continued between the Continental Army and the British troops, the Continental Congress finally decided to vote on the issue of gaining independence from Great Britain. A committee of five delegates, including Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson, drafted the Declaration of Independence. On July 4, 1776, the Congress passed the Declaration of Independence, which formally stated its separation from England and established the new sovereign nation of the United States of America.

Foreign Aid during the Revolutionary War

One of the contributing factors to the United States’ victory in the Revolutionary War was the support it received from other European powers—primarily those who were contemporary rivals with England. France, Spain, and the Dutch Republic all covertly provided arms and other military supplies to the American colonists from as early as 1776. Following the American victory at the Battles of Saratoga in 1777, the
French openly entered the war as an official ally of the United States. This helped the American war effort enormously.

Over the course of the next four years France’s allies, Spain, and the Dutch Republic waged war against England as well. This even included a threat to invade England itself. Spain’s involvement was helpful in the North American theater, particularly after Spanish troops successfully repelled British forces from West Florida, protecting the southern borders of the United States. By 1781, the tide had securely turned in favor of the American forces, and following a naval victory by the French in the Chesapeake region, the French and Continental Army were able to successfully lay siege to the southern portion of the British army, causing it to surrender at Yorktown, Virginia in 1781.

**The Treaty of Paris**

In 1782, peace negotiations began before fighting had officially ceased. A year later, the Treaty of Paris was signed and formally ended the American Revolutionary War. The treaty officially recognized the sovereignty of the newly formed nation of the United States of America. Its borders were defined roughly by Florida to the south, the Mississippi River to the west, and Canada to the north. The Treaty of Paris was known for providing extremely generous terms to the United States with regard to enlarged boundaries.

During this time, peace between the European powers was achieved as well. Great Britain signed separate peace treaties with both France and Spain (referred to as the Treaties of Versailles). Great Britain also signed a preliminary treaty with the Dutch Republic, which would lead to the conclusion of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War the following year.

**The Effects of the American Revolution**

The American Revolution and the U.S. War of Independence had long-lasting consequences for the United States and the rest of the world. The American Revolution brought about a representative government that was democratically elected and ultimately responsible to the will of the people. In 1787, the Constitutional Convention adopted the United States Constitution, which created a strong federal government. In 1791, the House of Representatives ratified the first ten amendments to the Constitution, known as the Bill of Rights. Reflecting the core principles of the Enlightenment, the Bill of Rights ensured several natural rights and personal liberties that were considered bedrocks of the revolution. The American Revolution inspired several revolutionary movements over the course of the following decades including the French Revolution and the Haitian Revolution.
Lesson Summary:

- The American Revolution emerged from a number of colonial frustrations with the British Empire. Many colonists became increasingly frustrated that they did not receive the same representation and equality as British subjects living in England.
- The principles and values of the Enlightenment provided the ideological backdrop to the American Revolution.
- Certain episodes and events such as the Stamp Act, the Boston Massacre, and the Boston Tea Party acted as driving factors to the outbreak of the American Revolution. These incidents also engendered unity between the thirteen colonies.
- The US Declaration of Independence officially severed ties between Great Britain and its North American colonies. With the help of foreign aid during the American Revolutionary War, the Americans were able to successfully achieve military victory and establish the United States of America.
- The American Revolution inspired several other eighteenth century revolutions based on the principles of the Enlightenment such as the French and Haitian Revolutions.