What Led the Americans into Open Rebellion?

Scholar after scholar has sought to explain which grievance or set of grievances provoked the colonists and why such provocation led to the shots exchanged at Lexington and Concord. As yet, no one has come forward with a completely convincing explanation. Great moments in history defy simple explanation; they often defy complex explanations as well.

Source 3 Observation of George III, king of England, August 23, 1775

[M]any of Our Subjects in divers Parts of Our Colonies and Plantations in North America, misled by dangerous and ill-designing Men, and forgetting the Allegiance which they owe to the Power that has protected and sustained them, after various disorderly Acts committed in Disturbance of the Publick Peace, to the Obstruction of lawful Commerce, and to the Oppression of Our loyal Subjects carrying on the same, have at length proceeded to an open and avowed Rebellion, by arraying themselves in hostile Manner to withstand the Execution of the Law, and traitorously preparing, ordering, and levying War against Us. . . . [T]here is Reason to apprehend that such Rebellion hath been much promoted and encouraged by the traitorous Correspondence, Counsels, and Comfort of divers wicked and desperate Persons within this Realm.

Source 4 Revolutionary pamphleteer Thomas Paine, *The Crisis*, December 23, 1776

These are the times that try men's souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it NOW, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: 'Tis dearness only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed, if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated. Britain, with an army to enforce her tyranny, has declared that she has a right (not only to TAX) but "to BIND us in ALL CASES WHATSOEVER" and if being bound in that manner, is not slavery, then is there not such a thing as slavery upon earth.

Source 5 Account of former president John Adams, 1818

[W]hat do we mean by the American Revolution? Do we mean the American war? The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments of their duties and obligations. While the king, and all in authority under him, were believed to govern in justice and mercy, according to the laws and constitution derived to them from the God of nature and transmitted to them by their ancestors, they thought themselves bound to pray for the king and queen and all the royal family, and all in authority under them, as ministers ordained of God for their good; but when they saw those people renouncing all the principles of authority, and bent upon the destruction of all the securities of their lives, liberties, and properties, they thought it their duty to pray for the continental congress and all the thirteen State congresses. . . .

Another alteration was common to all. The people of America had been educated in an habitual affection for England, as their mother country; and while they thought her a kind and tender parent, (erroneously enough, however, for she never was such a mother,) no affection could be more sincere. But when they found her a cruel beldam, willing like Lady Macbeth, to "dash their brains out," it is no wonder if their filial affections ceased, and were changed into indignation and horror.

This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people, was the real American Revolution.

Source 6 Salma Hale, *History of the United States*, 1841

Great Britain had, by her laws of trade and navigation, confined the commerce of the colonies almost wholly to herself. To encourage her own artisans, she had even, in some cases, prohibited the establishment of manufactories in America. These restrictions, while they increased her revenues and wealth, greatly diminished the profits of the trade of the colonies, and sensibly impeded their internal prosperity. They were most injurious to New England, where the sterility of the soil repelled the people from the pursuits of agriculture; there they were most frequently violated, and there the arbitrary means adopted to enforce them awakened the attention of a proud and jealous people to their natural rights.

Source 7 Richard Hildreth, *The History of the United States of America*, 1849

[T]he American Revolution made no sudden nor violent change in the laws or the political institutions of America beyond casting off the super intending power of the mother country; and even that power, always limited, was replaced to a great extent by the authority of Congress.

The most marked peculiarity of the Revolution was the public recognition of the theory of the equal rights of man. But this principle . . . encountered in existing prejudices and institutions many serious and even formidable obstacles to its general application, giving rise to several striking anomalies . . . the most startling of all was domestic slavery, an institution inconsistent not only with the equal rights of man, but with the law of England . . . but which at the commencement of the struggle with the mother country, existed nevertheless as a matter of fact in every one of the United Colonies. In half the Union it still exists, preventing, more than all other causes, that carrying out of the principles of the Revolution, that assimilation and true social union toward which the states have constantly tended, but which they are still so far from having reached.

Source 8 George Bancroft, *History of the United States,* 1852

From the intelligence that had been slowly ripening in the mind of cultivated humanity, sprung the American Revolution, which was designed to organize social union through the establishment of personal freedom, and thus emancipate the nations from all authority not flowing from themselves. In the old civilization of Europe, power moved from a superior to inferiors and subjects; a priesthood transmitted a common faith, from which it would tolerate no dissent; the government esteemed itself, by compact or by divine right, invested with sovereignty, dispensing protection and demanding allegiance. But a new principle, far mightier than the church and state of the Middle Ages, was forcing itself into power. Successions of increasing culture and heroes in the world of thought had conquered for mankind the idea of the freedom of the individual; the creative but long latent energy that resides in the collective reason was next to be revealed. From this the state was to emerge, like the fabled spirit of beauty and love out of the foam of the ever-troubled ocean. It was the office of America to substitute for hereditary privilege the natural equality of man; for the irresponsible authority of a sovereign, a dependent government emanating from the concord of opinion; and as she moved forward in her high career, the multitudes of every clime gazed towards her example in hopes of untold happiness, and all the nations of the earth sighed to be renewed.

Source 9 Ralph Waldo Emerson's speech at the Centennial Celebration at Concord, April 19, 1875

We had many enemies and many friends in England, but one benefactor was King George III. The time had arrived for that political severance of America that it might play its part in the history of this globe; and the way of divine Providence to do it was to give an insane king to England. On the resistance of the colonies he alone was immovable on the question of force. England was so dear to us that the colonies could only be absolutely united by violence from England and only one man could compel the resort to violence. So the king became insane.

Parliament wavered, all the ministers wavered; but the king had the insanity of one idea. He was immovable; he insisted on the impossible; so the army was sent. America was instantly united and the nation born.

On the 19th of April 800 soldiers with hostile intent were sent hither from Boston. Nature itself put a new face on that day. You see the rude fields of this morning, but on the same day of 1775 a rare forwardness of the spring is recorded. It appears the patriotism of the people was so hot that it melted the snow and the rye waved on the 19th of April. . . .

In all noble action we say 'tis only the first step that costs. Who will carry out the rule of right must take his life in his hand. We have no need to magnify the facts. Only three of our men were killed at this bridge and a few others wounded; here the British army was first fronted and driven back, and if only three men or only one man had been slain, it was the first victory. The thunderbolt falls on an inch of ground, but the light of it fills the horizon. The British instantly retreated. We had no electric telegraph, but the news of the triumph of the farmers over the king's troops sped through the country to New York, to Philadelphia, to Kentucky, to the Carolinas, with speed unknown before and ripened the colonies to inevitable decision.

Source 10 John Fiske, *The American Revolution,* 1891

The American Revolution, unlike most political revolutions, was essentially conservative in character. It was not caused by actually existing oppression, but by the determination to avoid oppression in the future. Its object was not the acquisition of new liberties, but the preservation of old ones. The principles asserted in the Stamp Act Congress of 1765 differed in no essential respect from those that had been proclaimed five centuries earlier, in Earl Simon's Parliament of 1265. Political liberty was not an invention of the western hemisphere; it was brought to these shores from Great Britain by our forefathers of the seventeenth century, and their children of the eighteenth naturally refused to surrender the treasure which from time immemorial they had enjoyed.

Source 11 Woodrow Wilson, *A History of the American People,* 1902

George III had too small a mind to rule an empire. . . . His stubborn instinct of mastery made him dub the colonists "rebels" upon their first show of resistance; he deemed the repeal of the Stamp Act a fatal step of weak compliance, which had only "increased the pretensions of the Americans to absolute independence." Chatham he called a "trumpet of sedition" because he praised the colonists for their spirited assertion of their rights. The nature of the man was not sinister. Neither he nor his ministers had any purpose of making "slaves" of the colonists. Their measures for the regulation of the colonial trade were incontestably conceived upon a model long ago made familiar in practice, and followed precedents long ago accepted in the colonies. Their financial measures were moderate and sensible enough in themselves, and were conceived in the ordinary temper of law-making. What they did not understand or allow for was American opinion. What the Americans, on their part, did not understand or allow for was the spirit in which Parliament had in fact acted. They did not dream with how little comment or reckoning upon consequences, or how absolutely without any conscious theory as to power or authority, such statutes as those which had angered them had been passed; . . . how unaffectedly astonished they were at the rebellious outbreak which followed in the colonies. And, because they were surprised and had intended no tyranny, but simply the proper government of trade and the adequate support of administration throughout the dominions of the crown, as the ministers had represented these things to them, members of course thought the disturbances at Boston a tempest in a teapot, the reiterated protests of the colonial assemblies a pretty piece of much ado about nothing.

Source 12 Andrew C. McLaughlin, *A History of the American Nation,* 1913

Trivial offenses on the part of government cannot justify revolution. Only oppression or serious danger can justify war. It cannot be said that the people of the colonies had actually suffered much. It might even seem that the mother

country was not at all tyrannical in taxing the colonies to pay for defending them, and beyond question George III and his pliant ministers had no intention of treating the colonists with cruelty. How, then, can the war that followed be justified? The Revolution was justifiable because the colonists stood for certain fundamental principles that were woven into the very fabric of their lives. They were determined that no one should take money from them without their consent, and that their own local governments should be indeed their own and do their will. They carried to a legitimate conclusion the true political principles for which the English people had fought in the great rebellion of the seventeenth century. . . . It is sometimes said that the American Revolution was conservative or preservative. Such it surely was; but it did more than save the principles of English liberty; it built them up and gave them a logical expression in the institutions of a free people made by themselves and changeable at their own discretion.

Source 13 Claude H. Van Tyne, *The Causes of the War of Independence,* 1921

In the very genesis of English settlement, the leaders of the English colonists were liberal and even radical when they first set foot on the shores of the New World. Their early migrations had in the main been caused by the political and religious conflicts of the age. . . .

In the old civilizations like that of Europe, men of radical or even liberal tendencies are held in check by the enveloping conservative forces, by traditions, by the fear of displeasing those in high social positions, by the nearness of government itself; but on the frontier, three thousand miles away, in the case of these American colonies, these restraining forces did not exist, and men moved forward rapidly, even recklessly, on the path of political and social experiment. . . .

Added to the fact of the remoteness was the novelty of life in the American wilderness. If the chains of tradition were ever to be struck off, it must be in this environment so utterly unlike that of England. . . .

Everything in their new environment tended to make the settlers forget the power or even the need of the British Government. The fundamentals of political organization remained the same, but a thousand laws needed to keep order in the highly complex English society became irrelevant and useless in the sparsely settled forest. New laws of the colonists' own making took the place of those discarded. . . . Having little to fear and often able to dispense with government, the colonist became individualistic; . . . he developed hatred of restraint. . . . As time went on and he conquered the wilderness, he might be pardoned a spirit of independence and of confidence.

Source 14 Charles M. Andrews, "The American Revolution: An Interpretation," 1926

Primarily, the American Revolution was a political and constitutional movement and only secondarily one that was either financial, commercial, or social. At bottom the fundamental issue was the political independence of the colonies, and in the last analysis the conflict lay between the British Parliament and the colonial assemblies. . . .

The colonies had developed a constitutional organization equally complete with Britain's own and one that in principle was far in advance of the British system, and they were qualified to co-operate with the mother country on terms similar to those of a brotherhood of free nations. . . . But England was unable to see this fact or unwilling to recognize it, and consequently America became the scene of a political unrest, which might have been controlled by compromise, but was turned to revolt by coercion.

Source 15 James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America,* 1931

Opinions will differ regarding Samuel Adams, but there can be no difference of opinion as to his consummate ability as a plotter of revolution. . . . Even when others had no wish to secede from the empire, but merely to be left in peace or to have certain inimical laws repealed, Adams early conceived the belief that the one end to work for was immediate and complete independence. . . .

From about 1761 until independence was declared by the colonies in 1776, Adams worked ceaselessly for the cause to which he had devoted his life, manipulating newspapers and town meetings, organizing committees of correspondence throughout the colonies, even bringing about happenings which would inflame public opinion. . . .

Public opinion is never wholly united, and seldom rises to a pitch of passion without being influenced—in other words, without the use of propaganda. The Great War taught that to those who did not know it already.

Source 16 John C. Miller, *Origins of the American Revolution,* 1943

It was the invasion of Americans' political rights by Parliament after the Peace of Paris which precipitated the struggle between mother country and colonies and inspired the ideals and slogans of the American Revolution. Economic grievances played a secondary part in the patriots' propaganda; from 1765 to 1776, political issues were kept uppermost. . . . Throughout the colonial period, the rights and privileges of the assemblies were regarded as the first line of defense of American liberty, both political and economic. If they were overthrown, the colonists believed themselves destined to become as "errant slaves as any in Turkey." . . .

Englishmen . . . denied the colonists' contention that there were metes and bounds to the authority of Parliament. The authority of Parliament was, in their opinion, unlimited: the supremacy of Parliament had come to mean to Englishmen an uncontrolled and uncontrollable authority. Indeed, the divine right of kings had been succeeded by the divine right of Parliament. . . . It was the refusal of Americans to bow before this new divinity that precipitated the American Revolution.

The absolutism of Parliament admitted of no divisions of authority within the empire: Parliament must have all power or it had none. In Englishmen's eyes, sovereignty was indivisible: it could not be parceled out between the colonies and the mother country. . . .

Viewed in this light, the colonial assemblies were not local parliaments as Americans supposed, but merely corporations subject to the will of Parliament. . . . This doctrine ruled out the American conception of the British Empire as a federation of self-governing commonwealths.

Source 17 Charles and Mary Beard, *A Basic History of the United States,* 1944

Over against colonial maturity in matters political, religious, social, and intellectual on this continent stood, across the sea, the British system of politics, economy, and ecclesiasticism. The system was an oligarchy collected around the monarch—an oligarchy composed of lords and the clerical hierarchy. There was in Great Britain, to be sure, a "popular" legislative body, the House of Commons; but . . . the oligarchy, through personal influence, wealth, and corruption, was generally able to dominate it. In economic terms, the policy of the British system was mercantilism—the permanent subordination of the colonies to the interests of the British governing class. . . .

[T]he ruling classes of Great Britain were fairly united on one thing: they wanted to keep the British Empire intact and to make it contribute to the wealth and power of the mother country. The American colonies furnished many offices and jobs for British lords, their younger sons, and their hangers-on; the American colonies had vast areas of unoccupied land, huge parcels of which royal favorites could obtain for a song if they had the King's approval. British merchants and shippers found American trade highly profitable and naturally sought to keep as much of it as they could. British manufacturers looked upon the American markets as their own and as necessary outlets for their woolen cloth, hardware, and other finished commodities. The arable lands and forests of America were the objects of great desire to British enterprisers. British capitalists, whether landlords, merchants, manufacturers, or bankers, ever hunting more advantageous places for the investment of their capital, regarded the American colonies as offering almost unlimited opportunities for money-making. . . .

For carrying the ideas of mercantilism into effect, certain definite laws and practices were necessary. The bonds of union between the American colonies and Great Britain must be kept firm and made stronger as the colonies matured in wealth and power. Laws favorable to the interests of British merchants, manufacturers, and investors must be enacted; and the American colonists must be stopped from passing laws and doing other things which interfered with the enforcement of British measures. . . .

But in many matters, American interests ran directly counter to British interests. Most Americans were more concerned with developing the lands and resources right at hand than they were in promoting prosperity in Great Britain or upholding the British interests in India and other distant parts of the world. American artisans and manufacturers wanted to develop their own industries and reap the profits accruing from them. American merchants and shippers longed to enlarge their share of international trade. American farmers and planters believed that they could get better prices for their produce if British merchants exercised less control over the export and import trade; if Dutch, French, and other merchants from the continent of Europe could operate more freely in American markets. . . . American capitalists and enterprisers thought they would have larger opportunities for profitable business if all the lands, forests, and minerals at hand were at the disposal of colonial governments. Farmers and planters on the seaboard looked with hungry eyes toward the vacant lands beyond the near frontier and wanted them thrown open to easy settlement or speculation. Moreover, Americans could scarcely help wanting a larger share of the lucrative offices and jobs filled with appointees of the British King and the colonial governors, whose salaries were paid out of American taxes. . . .

In addition, a highly controversial question arose: Who are to benefit most from the exploitation of Western territories now cleared of the French and opened to development—American or British investors, farmers, land speculators, and fur traders? . . . Both the British and the Americans therefore had logical and legitimate claims regarding all these matters, but there was no high and impartial court above them to which they could appeal for satisfactory adjudication.

Source 18 Winston S. Churchill, *A History of the English-Speaking People,* 1956

Vast territories had fallen to the Crown on the conclusion of the Seven Years' War. From the Canadian border to the Gulf of Mexico the entire hinterland of the American colonies became British soil, and the parcelling out of these new lands led to further trouble with the colonists. Many of them, like George Washington, had formed companies to buy these frontier tracts from the Indians, but a royal proclamation restrained any purchasing and prohibited their settlement. Washington, among others, ignored the ban and wrote his land agent ordering him "to secure some of the most valuable lands in the King's part (on the Ohio), which I think may be accomplished after a while, notwithstanding the proclamation that restrains it at present, and prohibits the settling of them at all; for I can never look upon that proclamation in any other light than as a temporary expedient to quiet the minds of the Indians." This attempt by the British Government to regulate the new lands caused much discontent among the planters, particularly in the Middle and Southern colonies.

Source 19 Lawrence Henry Gipson, *The Triumphant Empire,* 1960

The student of history is fully aware that all great wars in modern times have been followed by great psychological changes—a result equally important to physical modifications of boundaries. When the people of Canada exchanged sovereigns after the Peace of Paris they were forced to modify their outlook. While they bore no love for their new King, neither had they any love for their old King, who, they felt, had turned his back on them in many ways. They would therefore give their blood for neither sovereign. The impact of the outcome of the Great War for the Empire was no less important upon the British colonials—at least those living in North America. Had the British triumph on that continent been less spectacular, less decisive, its effect might have been different. By the same token, had the French dictated the peace—that would surely have enclosed the British colonials firmly within the narrow area between

the Atlantic Ocean and the Appalachian Mountains, as seemed likely at the end of the first four years of the struggle for the heart of North America—the effect on the minds of colonials would have been equally profound, but surely of a very different nature. Had the French troops still been occupying such highly strategic military posts as Forts Louisbourg, Beausejour, Ticonderoga, Crown Point, Niagara, Duquesne, and Mobile, while allied with countless hostile Indians ready and eager to raid British settlements to the south and east, there would have been constant insecurity concerning the British North American position, and the need for maintaining a powerful force of regulars at frontier points would have been apparent. Undoubtedly this would not only have led them to implore the King for continued protection, but also to submit without much grumbling to a parliamentary stamp tax levy, as perhaps the fairest way of distributing responsibility among all colonials for helping to share in the common defense.

Source 20 Carl Degler, *Out of Our Past*, 1970

Though the colonists had long been drifting away from their allegiance to the mother country, the chain of events which led to the Revolutionary crisis was set in motion by external events. The shattering victory of the Anglo-American forces over the French in the Great War for Empire . . . suddenly revealed how wide the gulf between colonists and mother country had become. The very fact that the feared French were once and for all expelled from the colonial backdoor meant that another cohesive, if negative, force was gone. . . . What actual effect the removal of the French produced upon the thinking of the colonists is hard to weigh, but there can be little doubt that the Great War for Empire opened a new era in the relations between the colonies and the mother country.

Great Britain emerged from the war as the supreme power in European affairs: her armies had swept the once vaunted French authority from two continents; her navy now indisputably commanded the seven seas. A symbol of this new power was that Britain's ambassadors now outranked those of France and Spain in the protocol of Europe's courts. But the cost and continuing responsibilities of that victory were staggering for the little island kingdom.

Before the war, the administration and cost of the Empire were primarily, if not completely, a British affair. . . . Under the pressure of the new responsibilities, the British authorities began to cast about for a new theory and practice of imperial administration. . . . It seemed only simple justice to London officialdom that the colonies should share in the costs as well as the benefits to be derived from the defeat of the ancient enemy. At no time, it should be noticed, were the colonies asked to contribute more than a portion of the price of their own frontier defense. . . . It was not injustice or the economic incidence of the taxes which prompted the colonial protests; it was rather the novelty of the British demands. . . . Too many Americans had grown accustomed to their untrammeled political life to submit now to new English controls. In brief, the colonists suddenly realized that they were no longer wards of Britain, but a separate people, capable of forging their own destiny. . . .

As children enjoying a long history of freedom from interference from their parent, the Americans might well have continued in their loose relationship, even in maturity, for they were conservative as well as precocious. History, however, decreed otherwise. Britain's triumph in the Great War for Empire put a new strain on the family relationship. . . .

Measured against the age of Hitler and Stalin, the British overlords of the eighteenth century appear remarkably benign in their dealings with the colonies in the years after 1763. For it is a fact that the colonies were in revolt against a potential tyrant, not an actual one. Much more fearsome in the eyes of the politically sensitive colonials was the direction in which the British measures tended rather than the explicit content of the acts.

Source 21 Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People*, 1971

The Boston Tea Party needled Parliament into passing, and George III into signing, a series of laws that Americans referred to as the Coercive, or Intolerable, Acts. . . . From the day that unhappy law was passed, the question between England and the Thirteen Colonies was one of power; who would rule, or have the last say? All other questions of taxation, customs duties and the like faded into the background. Through all stages of remonstrance, resistance, and outright war, the dominant issue was one of power—should Britain or America dictate the terms of their mutual association, or separation?

Source 22 Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, 1980

Around 1776, certain important people in the English colonies made a discovery that would prove enormously useful for the next two hundred years. They found that by creating . . . a legal unity called the United States, they could take over land, profits, and political power from favorites of the British Empire. In the process, they could hold back a number of potential rebellions and create a consensus of popular support for the rule of a new, privileged leadership. . . .

We have here a forecast of the long history of American politics, the mobilization of lower-class energy by upper-class politicians, for their own purposes. This was not purely deception; it involved, in part, a genuine recognition of lower-class grievances, which helps to account for its effectiveness as a tactic over the centuries.