CHAPTER SIX: FROM EMPIRE TO INDEPENDENCE, 1750-1776

THE SEVEN YEARS’ WAR IN AMERICA
- The Albany Conference of 1754
- Colonial Aims and Indian Interests
- Frontier Warfare
- The Conquest of Canada
- The Struggle for the West

THE IMPERIAL CRISIS IN BRITISH NORTH AMERICA
- The Emergence of American Nationalism
- The Press, Politics, and Republicanism
- The Sugar and Stamp Acts
- The Stamp Act Crisis
- Repeal of the Stamp Act

“SAVE YOUR MONEY AND SAVE YOUR COUNTRY”
- The Townshend Revenue Acts
- Nonimportation: An Early Political Boycott
- The Massachusetts Circular Letter
- The Politics of Revolt and the Boston Massacre

FROM RESISTANCE TO REBELLION
- Intercolonial Cooperation
- The Boston Tea Party
- The Intolerable Acts
- The First Continental Congress
- Lexington and Concord

DECIDING FOR INDEPENDENCE
- The Second Continental Congress
- Canada, the Spanish Borderlands, and the Revolution
- Fighting in the North and South
- No Turning Back
- The Declaration of Independence

CONCLUSION

KEY TOPICS
* The final struggle among Great Britain, France, and Native American tribes for control of eastern North America
* American nationalism in the aftermath of the French and Indian War
* Great Britain’s changing policy towards its North American colonies
* The political assumptions of American republicanism
* The colonies’ efforts to achieve unity in their confrontation with Great Britain

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: THE FIRST CONTINENTAL CONGRESS SHAPES A NATIONAL POLITICAL COMMUNITY In 1774, delegates from 12 colonies met in Philadelphia for the first meeting of the Continental Congress. The Congress nearly broke down over the issue of whose prayers would open the session. Over seven weeks of meetings and social gatherings, a community of national leaders emerged. In this fashion, Congress began the
process of forging a national community. The vignette describes the difficulty of building such a community from America’s diverse local communities.

THE SEVEN YEARS WAR IN AMERICA In 1754, delegates from the various colonies and the Iroquois Confederacy met in Albany in an unsuccessful attempt to address the continuing conflict with New France and the Indians in the interior. Though the Iroquois left the conference, the delegates at the Albany Conference adopted Benjamin Franklin’s plan of union but the colonial assemblies they represented rejected it. The issue of expansion eventually led to war between Great Britain and France. The lack of colonial unity seriously hindered the colonies in their conflicts with the French and their Indian allies. Some Indians allied with the French, but many other tribes remained neutral, playing one European power off the other. In 1756, fighting broke out in the Virginia backcountry when the French defeated two armies, first under George Washington and second under Edward Braddock. The British suffered major defeats during the first two years of the war, taking out their resentment on French-speaking Arcadians in Nova Scotia who were forcibly removed. Three thousand found their way to Louisiana, where they became known as Cajuns.

In an effort to take Canada, the British poured in money and men and settled old disputes with the Iroquois. By 1760 the fall of Montreal ended the French North American empire. Under the Treaty of Paris, France lost all of its North American mainland possessions. Its claims east of the Mississippi went to the British, except for New Orleans which was ceded to Spain; its claims west of the Mississippi went to Spain. Indians in the Ohio Valley felt betrayed. Led by an Ottawa chief, Pontiac, they launched a series of attacks throughout the backcountry, killing 2,000 whites. In an effort to maintain the peace, the English issued the Proclamation of 1763 that set aside the area west of the Appalachian Mountains for Indians. White settlers ignored the line and moved into the Ohio Valley. A series of conflicts and treaties with Indian tribes expanded British lands.

THE IMPERIAL CRISIS IN BRITISH NORTH AMERICA Conflicts between English and Americans grew during the Seven Years War. In addition, the war had promoted nationalism and the idea of a wider American community, strengthening American identity. Newspapers provided a means of widely communicating news of intercolonial affairs and expressing controversial opinions. Americans read the writings of radical Whigs who warned of a government conspiracy to quash liberty and institute tyranny. Only the constant vigilance of free people could protect liberty. Ideas, collectively known as “republicanism” emerged that insisted that only an independent people could control its own affairs. These ideas meshed well with the American colonial experience of property ownership, representative assemblies, and the struggle with royal authority.

The British need for additional revenue tested American unity. The high cost of maintaining troops along the Proclamation Line and the expense of servicing the large debt accumulated in the Seven Years’ War led the British to pass new colonial taxes. The Sugar Act tightened enforcement of customs regulations. Opponents called for a boycott of British goods, an idea which spread throughout the port cities.

In early 1765 the British passed the Stamp Act, requiring tax stamps to be purchased for many items. Americans protested not only the expense but the constitutional implications. The
British claimed that Parliament represented all citizens of the empire—virtual representation. Americans asserted that only their own legislatures could levy taxes. Nine colonies issued denunciations of the act, declaring “no taxation without representation.” In Massachusetts, opposition was led by upper-and middle-class men who successfully mobilized working-class Bostonians. What was intended as a peaceful protest rally turned into a violent attack on those associated with the tax. Mobs successfully intimidated officials from selling the stamps. In many colonial cities, groups calling themselves the Sons of Liberty were organized to control the protest movement. Nine colonies met at the Stamp Act Congress, passing resolutions against Parliament’s right to tax the colonies. The nonimportation movement that boycotted British goods led to the Act’s repeal amid assertions of Parliamentary supremacy.

“SAVE YOUR MONEY AND SAVE YOUR COUNTRY” In 1767, Parliament passed the Townshend Revenue Acts, a new set of import duties collected on such goods as lead, glass, paint, paper, and tea, supporting them with stricter enforcement policies. Led by John Dickinson's arguments, Americans reasserted their opposition to all taxation without representation. Led by Bostonians, Americans in port cities revived their nonimportation agreements. Artisans took to the streets to enforce them. Nonimportation appealed to values of self-sufficiency and independence and brought rural people into the community of resistance. In 1768, the Massachusetts House of Representatives sent out a circular letter denouncing the Townshend Acts. British officials demanded its repeal, Massachusetts leaders refused. The British responded by shutting down the Assembly. Violence against royal officials led the British to station troops in Boston. Periodic incidents between soldiers and citizens escalated until 1770 when soldiers fired into a crowd, killing five. News of the “Boston Massacre” helped galvanize public opinion against the British. The news of the repeal of the Townshend Acts lessened American resistance.

FROM RESISTANCE TO REBELLION Although few great issues appeared until 1773, Americans created committees of correspondence to communicate with other communities. Actions in Massachusetts supported colonial beliefs of British plans for stricter control of the colonies. The 1773 Tea Act prompted mobs in Philadelphia and New York to intimidate potential tea sellers. But Massachusetts Governor Thomas Hutchinson refused to allow the ship carrying tea to leave Boston Harbor. On December 16, 1773 Bostonians dumped the tea into the harbor, an action that was repeated in other cities. Britain punished Bostonians by passing the Intolerable Acts that ended the community’s self-rule. Troops were quartered in private homes. At the same time, the Quebec Act established a highly centralized government for Quebec and toleration for Catholics. This seemed a preview of what was in store for Americans.

In September 1774, delegates arrived in Philadelphia for the first meeting of the Continental Congress. Rather than overt attacks on British authority, Congress endorsed a policy of boycotts against British goods. It called for democratically elected local committees to enforce these policies. Through these committees the resistance movement spread to rural areas. In Massachusetts local communities had organized minutemen to defend communities. Despite opposition in Parliament, the British government decided on military action. When on the evening of April 18, 1775, the British left Boston to capture American ammunition in Concord, the minuteman were ready for them. The battles of Lexington and Concord ignited the war.
DECIDING FOR INDEPENDENCE  By May 1775, the Continental Congress met again. Georgia joined their ranks. Congress organized an army, commanded by George Washington. It issued $2 million in bills of credit. Yet the delegates did not seek independence.

The rest of colonial North America reacted in various ways to the coming war. Because the Americans were traditional enemies, the French Canadians did not support the rebellion. Several British Caribbean islands did support the Continental Congress but the British navy stopped any involvement. Spain adopted a neutral position officially, but secretly sought to help the Americans.

Fighting continued throughout New England. An unsuccessful effort to take Canada ended in the spring of 1776. By March the British had been forced out of Boston. British efforts in the South had also failed. Hopes for reconciliation waned. In a brilliant pamphlet, Thomas Paine helped cut Americans’ emotional ties to Britain and the King. By June 1776, Congress was ready to take the final step. It approved Thomas Jefferson’s revised draft of the Declaration of Independence with no dissenting votes.

CONCLUSION  Americans forged a distinctively “American” identity that enabled them to strike out for independence.

Lecture Suggestions

1. Focus the class’s attention on why Americans responded to the British actions the way that they did. Emphasize that the taxes weren’t so excessive. The key was how Americans perceived the British and the threat they posed. An examination of American political thinking should clarify why Americans saw British actions as proof of a conspiracy against them. Similarly, examine British assumptions about Parliamentary supremacy and virtual representation. Note that each side saw its actions as legitimate.

2. Make the connection between the previous chapter’s discussion of the Great Awakening and the growing cultural independence and sense of moral superiority held by Americans. Examine the process by which Americans turned their resistance to British actions into a movement for independence. Look at what had to exist before a formal break with Britain could take place. The key is that local alternative institutions had to be set up and that emotional ties with England had to be severed. Look at how individual communities were responding. Look at how Thomas Paine’s “Common Sense” helped push Americans over the edge.

3. A close examination of the Declaration of Independence sheds light on how Americans were thinking about their government and society. Examine the assumptions built into the document and show how they fit into the broad framework of enlightenment thought. Gary Wills, Inventing America (Doubleday, 1978) is indispensable on this point.
Discussion Questions

1. In what ways did the Seven Years War lay the groundwork for the American Revolution? Why was it so important for New Englanders and Westerners that the French threat in Canada and the frontier be removed?

2. How did Americans perceive British actions? Why were they convinced that the British were engaged in a conspiracy to deprive them of their liberties?

3. Why did the British start taxing Americans? Why did they believe their actions were legitimate?

4. What kinds of steps did Americans take to resist British authority? Why did they take those kinds of steps?

5. Why was it so difficult to build a unified response across the various colonies?

6. Why did it take Americans so long to push for independence? Why did they finally take that step?

Out of Class Activity

Students could examine the coming of the Revolution in a single community. Robert Gross’s The Minutemen and Their World (Hill and Wang, 1976) is an accessible way of getting a handle on how events in one community led it to support independence. Students could read the book and report on the factors leading up to the rebellion.

If You’re Going to Read One Book on the Subject

It’s old—but Bernard Bailyn, Ideological Origins of the American Revolution (Harvard, 1967) is still the place to go to understand why Americans responded to the British actions.

Audio Visual Aids

“American Revolution: The Background Period” Traces the political, social, and economic conditions that formed the background for rebellion and united the colonists in the cause of freedom. The Proclamation Act, Sugar Act, Stamp Act, and Boston massacre culminate in Lexington and Concord. (Color, 10 minutes, 1975)

“Independence” John Huston directs Eli Wallach as Benjamin Franklin and Anne Jackson as Abigail Adams in a portrayal of events that led to the signing of the Declaration of Independence. (Color, 30 minutes, 1975)

“French and Indian War” The struggle between England and France for control of the North American continent is recreated. It explores the causes and results of the conflict, and shows
highlights of the war, Albany conference, Braddock’s defeat, and Wolfe’s defeat of Montcalm at Quebec. (Color, 59 minutes, 1981)