CHAPTER SEVEN: THE CREATION OF THE UNITED STATES, 1776–1786

THE WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE
- The Patriot Forces
- The Loyalists
- The Campaign for New York and New Jersey
- The Northern Campaigns of 1777
- The French Alliance and the Spanish Borderlands
- Indian Peoples and the Revolution in the West
- The War in the South
- Yorktown

THE UNITED STATES IN CONGRESS ASSEMBLED
- The Articles of Confederation
- Financing the War
- Negotiating Independence
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- The Problem of the West

REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS IN THE STATES
- The Broadened Base of Politics
- The First State Constitutions
- Declarations of Rights
- A Spirit of Reform
- African Americans and the Revolution
- Economic Problems
- State Remedies
- Shays’ Rebellion

CONCLUSION

KEY TOPICS
* The major alignments and divisions among Americans during the American Revolution
* Major military campaigns of the Revolution
* The Articles of Confederation and the role of the Confederation Congress during the Revolutionary War
* The states as the setting for significant political change
* The economic crisis in the aftermath of the American Revolution

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: A NATIONAL COMMUNITY EVOLVES AT VALLEY FORGE
Around 11,000 men and 700 women (including 1,000 blacks) gathered in Valley Forge, drawn from all parts of the country. Amid the suffering from wintry weather and want fostered by greed, men from hundreds of localities found a common identity and created a “band of brotherhood” among themselves. Leaving Valley Forge six months later, Washington commanded a much stronger and united army. The vignette illustrates how the struggle helped to create a national community that served as a popular democratic force counterbalancing the conservatism of America’s elite leadership.
THE WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE  The British assumed the colonial rebellion was the work of a small group of disgruntled conspirators. In fact, resistance was widespread and geography stymied British strategy. Although most white American males served in local militia companies, victory required a disciplined force able to stand up to the brutal assaults of the professionally trained British adversaries. Regiments of the Continental Army suffered casualty rates as high as 40%. Both Continentals and militias played political roles, pressuring Congress when shortages of food and pay erupted. Patriots had seized control of most community militias. This made it more and more difficult to remain neutral. As men marched off to war, women remained at home and ran the family farms and businesses. Many women eventually left homes to join their men and even on rare occasions joined them on the battlefields.

About one-fifth of the population remained loyal to the Crown, including African Americans, Indians, ethnic minorities, tenant farmers, British colonial officials, and Anglican clergy. Patriots cracked down on Loyalists, but as many as 50,000 fought for the king and 80,000 fled the country after the Revolution.

British plans for 1776 called for an attack on New York from that colony and Canada that would divide New England from the rest of the colonies. The British drove Washington out of New York City and pursued him as he fled into New Jersey. Although Washington’s Christmas Eve victory at Trenton salvaged morale, he realized that he would have to avoid confrontations and pursue a defensive strategy to insure survival of the Continental Army. In 1777, the British tried to follow up their victories in New York City by conquering New York. A large British force moved south from Canada, but Patriot militias harassed and then surrounded the British forces, forcing their surrender to the larger Continental army at Saratoga. Less successful were American forces in Pennsylvania who were forced to retreat into Valley Forge. Still, while the Americans could not defeat the British, neither could the British force the Americans to stop fighting.

During the first two years of conflict, French and Spanish loans helped finance the American cause. The victory at Saratoga led to an alliance with France. One year later, Spain joined the war, though without a formal American alliance. Both France and Spain worried about American expansion. The French entry into the colonial conflict forced the British to withdraw troops from the mainland to protect their Caribbean colonies. The war at sea was mainly fought between British and French vessels, but Continental ships raided the British merchant shipping.

Although many Indians preferred a policy of neutrality, their fears of American expansion led many to side with Britain. In the West, Ohio Indians allied with the British and attacked American settlements. George Rogers Clark countered by capturing several British posts.

By the late 1770s, the British had shifted their focus to the South. Capturing Charleston in 1780, the British attempted to gain control over the rural South by implementing a policy of pacification. But their plundering of Americans to feed the army produced angry support for the patriots. Violence between Loyalists and Patriots also created unrest. General Nathanael Greene harassed British forces and drew them out of their base. They were forced to march northward where Washington’s army trapped them along the Virginia coast at Yorktown. The British Army surrendered, leading to a collapse of support in Parliament. The war was over.
The Articles of Confederation created a loose union of autonomous states and granted limited central power to Congress, reserving powers such as taxation to the states. Maryland held up ratification for three years until the eight states with western land claims ceded them to the national government. Though benefiting from foreign subsidies, Congress financed the revolution mainly by issuing $200 million in paper currency, which when added to the $200 million issued by states, led to runaway inflation. Secretary of Finance, Robert Morris, was able to meet interest payments on the debt, but was unsuccessful in persuading Congress to come up with an independent source of income.

Peace negotiations began in 1782 and resulted in a series of separate treaties between Great Britain and the United States, France, and Spain. The United States gained independence, the promise of the withdrawal of British troops, land to the Mississippi River, and fishing rights. But peace brought new problems. Congress had neither paid the soldiers nor delivered the officers their promised pensions. Several officers contemplated action if Congress failed to act, but they were shamed into accepting civilian rule by George Washington.

Western land settlement raised new issues, including land losses for several Indian tribes. Tens of thousands of Americans were rushing into the newly acquired Ohio River Valley. British and Spanish governments plotted to woo the population. Three land ordinances provided for organizing the land for settlement, self-government and eventual statehood. Subsequent ordinances provided for orderly division of land into townships, regular land sales, and the abolition of slavery in the Northwest Territory.

**Revolutionary Politics in the States** Most Americans focused their political attention on their states. Most states had greatly expanded the electorate. By eliminating Tories from politics, there was a shift to the left. Many Americans accepted a new democratic ideology that asserted that governments should directly reflect popular wishes. Conservatives argued for balanced government, fearing majority tyranny could lead to a violation of property rights. The new state constitutions were shaped by the debates between radicals and conservatives.

Democrats had seized power in Pennsylvania in 1776 and drafted a constitution that placed all power in a unicameral assembly elected by all free male taxpayers. In contrast, conservatives controlled Maryland who maintained high property requirements for office-holding. Other states drafted constitutions between these extremes.

States wrote guarantees of free speech, religion, etc. into bills of rights patterned after Virginia’s Declaration of Rights. The revolution raised the question of women but was more related to the family than the political arena. Led by Thomas Jefferson, states abolished aristocratic inheritance customs like entail and primogeniture and established religious freedom. Jefferson proposed other democratic reforms, but was unsuccessful.

The American victory elicited little celebration from African Americans. More than 50,000 slaves were taken away from the South by the British and thousands of others fought for the Patriots and won their freedom. Many whites recognized the contradiction between a revolution for liberty and the continued support for slavery. Northern states began to abolish slavery; the
Upper South relaxed its bans on emancipation. The result was the emergence of a free African-American community with racially defined churches, schools and other institutions. Several prominent Africa-American writers also emerged.

Economic problems like wartime inflation plagued the nation. High prices led to food riots. After the war the key problem was depression. Britain dumped its surplus goods in American markets. The trade imbalance drew hard currency out of the United States, leaving farmers with no cash to pay taxes or debts. Repayment of debt became both a political and economic problem. Farmers called for laws to require creditors to accept goods and commodities and passed laws requiring them to accept a state’s nearly worthless paper currency. Farmers in Massachusetts had been hit hard by the depression. In the spring and summer of 1786 they closed down courts to prevent debt executions, in an action known as Shays’ Rebellion. Conservatives feared that this would spread to other states. A militia from eastern Massachusetts crushed the rebellion, but not before it had led conservatives to conclude that it was time “to clip the wings of a mad democracy.”

CONCLUSION Americans sought to resolve their conflicts by building a strong, new national community, but important questions remained unanswered about the nation’s future.

Lecture Suggestions

1. Examine what each side had to do in order to win the war. Go through each side’s advantages and disadvantages. Look at the nature of each side’s armies—who was being recruited and why the soldiers were fighting. Look at the financial strengths of both sides, the need both sides had for popular support, and the problems each side faced in securing it.

2. Examine the shifting British conceptions of the war. At the onset the British saw the war as largely a police action. By 1776 they had come to see it as a conventional war, fought with conventional armies. By moving to the South, they indicated that they saw the war as a people’s war and that they should go where Loyalism ran strongest.

3. Look at how the war affected the lives of different groups of people. The text provides ample material on women, blacks, Indians. Look at how events of the war and events afterward shaped the lives of farmers, merchants, etc.

4. Make the connection between the events leading up to the war and the events after the war by examining the extent to which the Revolution was conservative or radical. (You’ll need to define your terms.) Examine the aftermath of the Revolution by examining what direction Americans were moving. The text’s suggestion that the withdrawal of Tories from politics led to a massive shift to the left is well worth following up.

Discussion Questions

1. How did the experience at Valley Forge affect the men under Washington’s command? What would have happened if they hadn’t undergone such a harsh experience?
2. How did the British view of the war change over time? Why did they initially conceive of it as a police action? Why did that view change?

3. Who were the Loyalists and why did they not support the Revolution? How did the British use them? How did the Patriots misuse them? Were the Patriots justified in using harsh measures against their fellow citizens just because they disagreed with them?

4. Why was the Revolution so different in different parts of the country? What was the war like in New England, the Middle Colonies, the South, the West?

5. How did the Revolution shape the lives of ordinary people? How did it affect women, African Americans, and Indians?

6. What were the economic problems that resulted from the Revolution? What sorts of remedies were proposed? What sorts of problems would these remedies create?

7. Was the Revolution a radical movement that brought the dispossessed into power or was it a moderate effort that did not seriously challenge the status quo?

Out of Class Activity

Students could be asked to research and portray individuals from the Revolutionary era. The Revolutionary era figures could be asked to explain why they took the actions that they took. Major characters as well as anonymous members of occupational and ethnic groups could be selected. One student might be a Tory Scotch-Irish debtor from the backcountry of South Carolina. Another might be a slave from New York who enlisted in the New York City militia.

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

Edward Countryman, *The American Revolution* (Hill and Wang, 1985) is crammed full of good material for giving lectures.

Audio Visual Aids:

“Deborah Sampson: A Woman in the Revolution” Tells the story of Deborah Sampson who enlisted in Washington’s army under the name of Robert Shurtlieff. (Color, 15 minutes, 1976)

“Victory at Yorktown” Portrays the day-long ritual of the surrender at Yorktown and counterpoints the triumph of the Americans and French with the agony of the British. (Color, 12 minutes, 1975)

“Washington: Years of Trial, 1754–1781” Focuses on Washington himself: childhood, work as a surveyor, role in French-Indian War, and command of Virginia militia. Takes story up to Yorktown. (Color, 32 minutes, 1974)
“Washington: Time of Triumph, 1781–1783” From Yorktown through 1783. Shot as if newsreel camera had been present at the time of events. (Color, 25 minutes, 1974)