

War of Words Erupts into the American Revolution

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Patrick Henry (left, foreground) delivering his famous speech on the rights of the colonies before the Virginia Assembly on March 23, 1775. He concluded his speech with "give me liberty or give me death!" which became a battle cry of the Revolutionary War. Photo from Library of Congress

"No taxation without representation!"

"Give me liberty or give me death!"

These famous sayings lit the spark that started the American Revolution. Many colonists felt they had few freedoms under British rule. Other colonists were not sure if they supported independence. Then they heard the powerful words of patriots such as Thomas Paine, Samuel Adams, Patrick Henry and, eventually, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

The Declaration of Independence in 1776, the American Revolution and the Articles of Confederation created a nation out of a group of colonies.

The Declaration of Independence

In the 1770s, the relationship between Britain and the American colonies grew worse. The colonies called a series of meetings. On July 4, 1776, the delegates approved the Declaration of Independence, giving birth to the United States of America.

Thomas Jefferson, a delegate from Virginia, wrote the Declaration of Independence. It was mainly a list of complaints against the British king. Jefferson's words showed he felt a new government should take shape. He seemed to base them on the writings of John Locke. He was a philosopher who said that governments exist to secure the rights of the people and get their powers from the people. Jefferson reasoned that since the British government had abused these rights, the colonists had the right "to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government."

The Revolution and the Articles of Confederation

The British, of course, did not accept that its American colonies had declared their independence. England continued to send troops to stop the rebellion. The war lasted until 1783, and so the new American government began during wartime.

The Articles of Confederation established that government. It was an agreement among the 13 original states and America's first Constitution. The Articles of Confederation were written in 1776 but not ratified by the states until 1781. Its words were a reaction to the strong central authority of King George III.

Above all, the colonists wanted to preserve their liberties. The Articles of Confederation gave most powers to the states. The central government was weak and consisted only of a legislature. However, its lack of power proved to be a disaster. It could not regulate trade or keep the states from printing their own money. The head of the government could not make any real decisions, and there was no national court to settle disputes among states. Perhaps most importantly, the states could not coordinate to efficiently fight a war, nor pay the debts once the war was over.

Shays' Rebellion and the Constitution

By 1786, the new country was in serious trouble with states quarreling over boundary lines and tariffs. An economic depression left not just the states in trouble. Many ordinary citizens, such as farmers and merchants, were deep in debt as well. Farmers in Massachusetts were being asked to pay high taxes, but their crops had been ruined during the Revolution and they owed money. They had to borrow money to build new farms.

The revolt by angry farmers in western Massachusetts called Shays' Rebellion, symbolized the chaos in the country. Even though the Massachusetts militia finally put the rebellion down, it showed how the central government was unable to maintain law and order. In reaction,

Alexander Hamilton of New York began organizing a meeting in Philadelphia in 1787. This convention would eventually throw out the Articles of Confederation and draft the Constitution to build a stronger government.

In the end, the colonists created a government that preserved their liberties but could not keep law and order. It failed but helped the founders to find the perfect balance between liberty and order within the U.S. Constitution.