

Choosing Sides in the American Revolution

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The American Revolution affected everyone in eastern North America—men and women, colonial elites and indentured servants, backcountry farmers and Native Americans, plantation owners and enslaved people. All participated in the Revolution in a variety of ways, by fighting in organized armies or in guerilla groups, and by participating in politics or in riots. Before deciding what to do, they had to make the most important decision of all: choosing a side.

This tutorial examines the motives and ideas that led colonists to support American independence—or to remain loyal to the British Crown.

1. Lashing Out Against Monarchy

In response to the declaration by King George III that the American colonies were in a state of rebellion, many colonists reacted by attacking any symbol of the Crown that they could find. Some tore down or beheaded statues of King George and destroyed images of the King or the royal seal. Some even confronted Anglican priests who continued to preach in the king's name. In these ways, the colonists challenged notions of monarchy, hierarchy, and deference that had formed the basis of British colonial society.

The willingness to attack symbols of the established order was also evident in two of the most significant political documents of 1776. The first to appear was **Thomas Paine's** *Common Sense*, a pamphlet published in January of 1776.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Thomas Paine

English writer, political activist, and recent immigrant to the colonies who became an influential leader of the American Revolution with the publication of his pamphlet, *Common Sense*, in 1776.



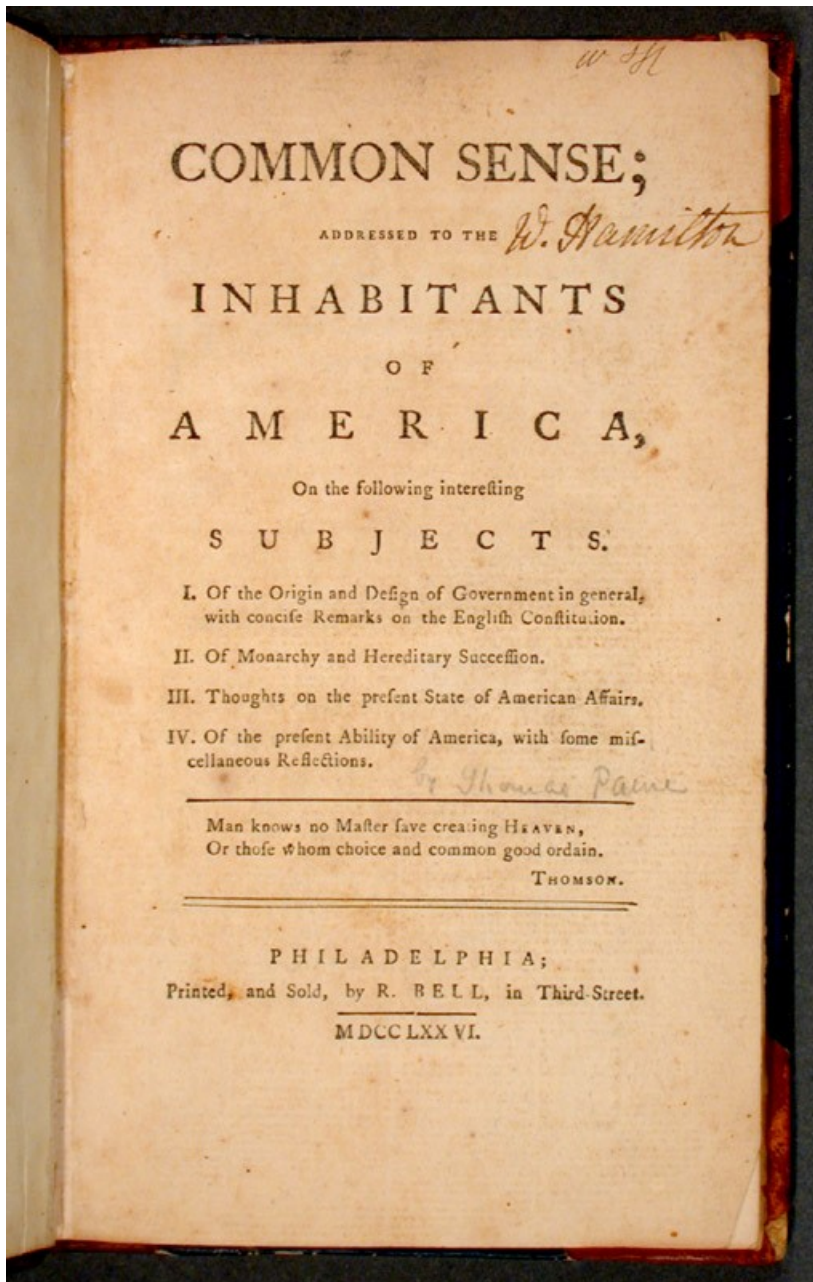
TERM TO KNOW

Common Sense (1776)

A pamphlet written by Thomas Paine that argued for American independence by criticizing the British

monarchy and traditional notions of hierarchy.

Arguably the most radical pamphlet of the revolutionary era, *Common Sense* made a powerful argument for American independence by criticizing the British monarchy and the notions of hierarchy upon which it depended. Paine's pamphlet rejected the monarchy completely, referring to King George III as a "royal brute" supported by a corrupt aristocracy. It questioned the right of an island (England) to rule an entire continent (America).



Paine's pamphlet channeled colonial discontent towards the king himself, not the British Parliament, as had been the case during the Stamp Act and Townshend Act protests. This signaled the desire of some colonists to create a new political order that disavowed monarchy entirely.

Paine argued for the creation of an independent American republic, a state without a king, and extolled the blessings of **republicanism**, a political philosophy that held that elected representatives, not a hereditary monarch, should govern according to the interests of those who elected them. The republic would be based on the idea of **popular sovereignty**, that is, citizens would choose their representatives, and decide on issues, according to majority rule. Republicanism guided revolutionaries during their struggle against the Empire. It demanded adherence to a code of virtue that put the common good above self-interest.



DID YOU KNOW

The word “republic” derives from the Latin phrase *res publica*, which means “the public thing.”



TERMS TO KNOW

Republicanism

A political philosophy that holds that states should be governed by representatives, not a monarch. As a social philosophy, republicanism requires civic virtue of its citizens.

Popular Sovereignty

The process by which citizens decide on issues based on the principle of majority rule.

Paine expressed his ideas in simple, direct language aimed at ordinary people, not just the learned elite. For all of these reasons—context, ideology, and audience—Paine’s pamphlet was immensely popular and was soon available in all 13 colonies. It convinced many colonists to reject monarchy and the British Empire in favor of independence and a republican form of government.

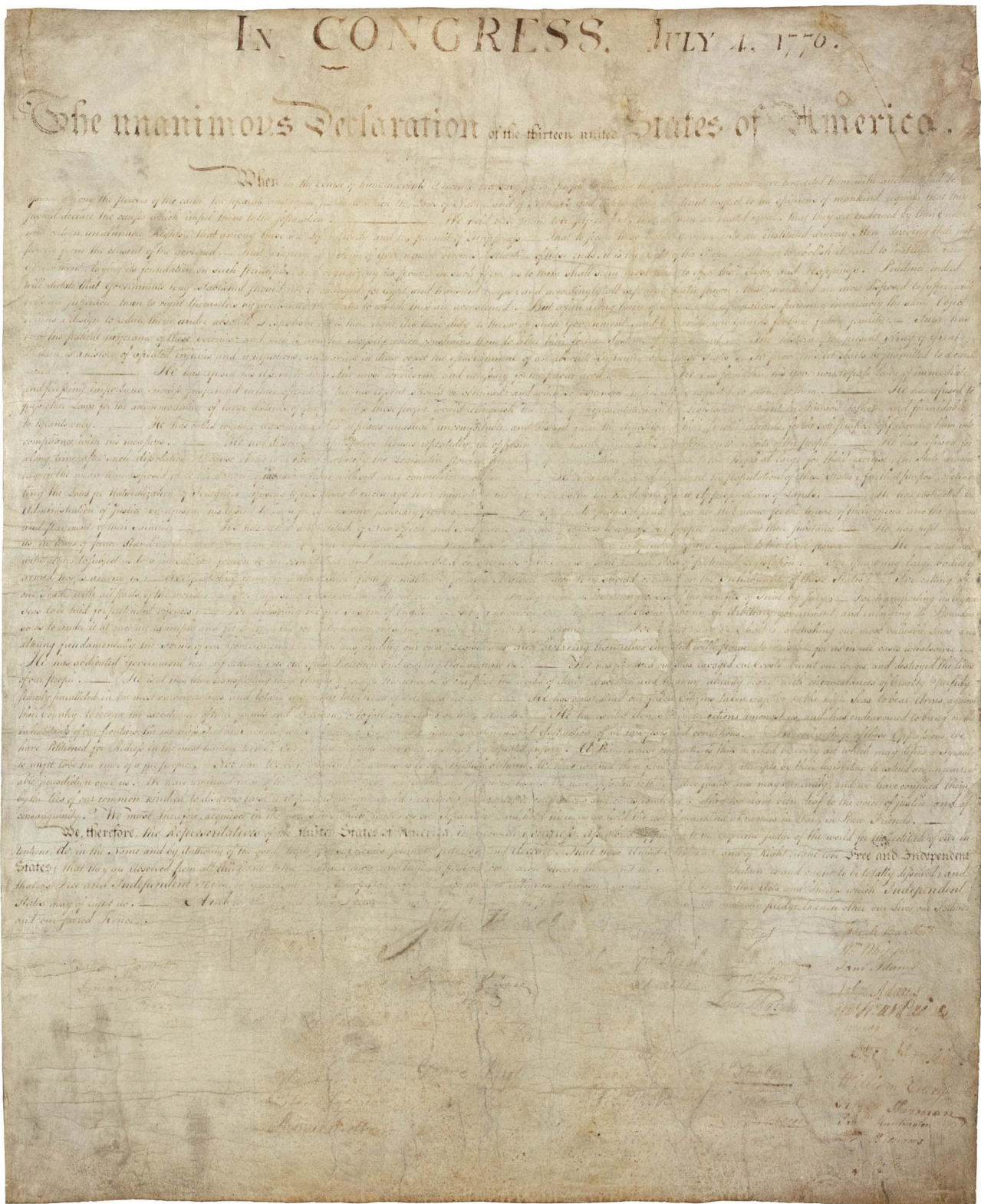
The second document that challenged the colonial order was the **Declaration of Independence**. In the summer of 1776, the Continental Congress met in Philadelphia and agreed to sever ties with Great Britain. Thomas Jefferson of Virginia and John Adams of Massachusetts, with the support of the Congress, articulated the justification for liberty and revolution in the Declaration of Independence.



TERM TO KNOW

Declaration of Independence (1776)

Written primarily by Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration justified American independence from Great Britain by asserting Enlightenment principles of equality and the social contract.



The United States Declaration of Independence, as it appears on display at the National Archives

The Declaration, written primarily by Jefferson, marked the culmination of a transition that redefined ideas about governance within the American colonies. After indicating the need to break with Great Britain, the Declaration asserted Enlightenment principles of natural equality, the social contract, and universal human rights:

The Declaration of Independence

“We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness—That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it.”

The phrase “all men are created equal” counteracted the ideal of hierarchy that had been central to colonial and British societies. The Declaration also lists the conditions that make revolution necessary. It asserts that all governments are based on a social contract; when a ruler fails to perform his part of that contract, the people have little choice but to rebel.

The Declaration includes evidence that King George III had broken his contract with the colonists. Point by point, it outlines his violations, including the stationing of British troops in the colonies and enacting taxes without colonial representation in Parliament. Jefferson presented these grievances as evidence that the King sought to establish “absolute tyranny” over the colonies.

All of the events that comprised the imperial crisis—the French and Indian War; controversies over taxation and representation; violence at Lexington and Concord—could not be attributed to a single individual. However, the charges made by *Common Sense* and the Declaration of Independence had an important rhetorical effect and focused the anger of revolutionary Americans on a specific villain: King George III. In blaming the king, revolutionary Americans provided a simple explanation for all that was wrong.

2. Loyalists (Tories)

Historians disagree on the number of **Loyalists**: colonists who remained loyal to Great Britain during the American Revolution. Most estimates suggest that Loyalists constituted between 20 and 30 percent of the colonial population (which totaled around 2.5 million).



TERM TO KNOW

Loyalists

Colonists who were loyal to Great Britain during the American Revolution.



DID YOU KNOW

At the time of the Revolution, Loyalists were commonly referred to as Tories, which was an English political term that signified one's support of the King over Parliament.

Loyalists were not necessarily individuals who operated in the shadows and plotted with King George III to destroy American freedom. Their motives were often complex. Loyalists were a diverse group; their members were found throughout colonial society. Many were motivated by ideological and personal factors to remain loyal to Great Britain.

Many Loyalists were important officeholders, merchants, or Anglican ministers who had extensive ties to Great Britain. Joseph Galloway of Pennsylvania, who argued for reconciliation with Parliament on the floor of the First Continental Congress, was a prominent Loyalist. Similarly, Virginia minister Jonathan Boucher gave a series of sermons in 1775 to explain his opposition to the revolutionary movement. (He later fled, after receiving threats to his life.) Galloway, Boucher, and similar Loyalists viewed themselves as the rightful and just

defenders of the British Constitution.

Other Loyalists simply resented local businessmen and political rivals who supported the Revolution, viewing them as hypocrites and schemers who selfishly used the break with England to increase their fortunes. Samuel Seabury criticized revolutionaries for depriving others of their liberty by destroying their property, which (to Seabury) was “a flagrant instance of injustice and cruelty committed by a riotous mob” (Seabury, 1774). This mob, led by “half a dozen foolish people” who assumed they spoke for the majority sought only to protect its own interests at the expense of others. In criticizing the actions of the mob, Seabury relied on the same principles of virtue and liberty used by revolutionaries to justify separation from Great Britain.



DID YOU KNOW

William Franklin, Benjamin Franklin’s son, studied law under Joseph Galloway and had close connections with London politicians and businessmen. These connections paid off in 1762 when he was appointed royal governor of New Jersey. He remained loyal to Great Britain during the War for Independence and was never reconciled with his father.

A number of powerful Native American tribes, including the Iroquois Confederacy, sided with the British during the American Revolution to combat colonial settlers who violated their territorial claims and hunting grounds. Among the most notable Native American leaders was a Mohawk named Joseph Brant (Thayendanegea), who rose to prominence while fighting colonists on behalf of the British in northern New York.

The American Revolution offered a unique opportunity for enslaved people to escape from bondage. Both enslaved people and free Black people fought on behalf of the revolution. However, despite the Declaration of Independence (“all men are created equal”), revolutionary leaders were reluctant to grant enslaved individuals their freedom in return for military service. George Washington, who owned more than 200 enslaved men, women, and children during the Revolution, refused to let enslaved people serve in the Continental Army (although he did allow free Black people to do so). Reluctance to accept racial equality on the part of revolutionary leaders revealed that the colonial order that defined freedom by skin color would not die easily. While it is true that people of color made heroic contributions to the cause of American independence, most American revolutionaries clung to notions of Black inferiority.



DID YOU KNOW

In November 1775, the royal governor of Virginia, **Lord Dunmore**, issued a decree known as Dunmore’s Proclamation, which promised freedom to enslaved people and indentured servants who remained loyal to King George III and fought against American revolutionaries.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Lord Dunmore

Royal Governor of Virginia at the outbreak of the American Revolution; extended the promise of freedom to Virginia’s enslaved people and indentured servants in an effort to raise Loyalist forces to combat rebel colonists.

Of the half million enslaved people in the American colonies during the Revolution, historians estimate that approximately twenty thousand joined the British cause. Enslaved people belonging to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and other revolutionaries seized the opportunity for freedom and fled to the British side. At the Battle of Yorktown in 1781, thousands of Black troops fought with Lord Cornwallis. After the British surrender, Continental troops rounded up those who survived and re-enslaved them.

As the war ended and British troops withdrew from the United States, a number of African American Loyalists

3. Patriots (Whigs)

Supporters of the Revolution (whom Americans often refer to as Patriots today) commonly called themselves Whigs, which was a reference to the Glorious Revolution a century earlier. English Whigs had overthrown a corrupt monarch (James II) and invited William of Orange assume the throne. Even though they had declared independence from England, American revolutionaries considered themselves part of this political tradition by overthrowing another corrupt monarch (George III) and establishing a new government in his place.

American revolutionaries were a diverse lot. Among their ranks were some of the richest men in the colonies—including George Washington and John Hancock—who believed in republicanism and considered themselves to be defenders of liberty against imperial encroachment. The revolutionaries also included merchants, craftsmen, farmers, and city inhabitants who had been oppressed by tax regulations or the Coercive Acts.

Others joined the revolutionary cause to improve their place in society. Social mobility was one of the main motivators for joining local militias, or the Continental Army. One revolutionary soldier expressed the hope that if his captain was killed in battle, he would have the opportunity to rise to his rank.

It is important to understand that social and economic status did not dictate one's choice of side during the Revolution. Mixed motives pulled men and women in a variety of directions, and some changed sides with ease.

Benedict Arnold is perhaps the most famous turncoat. He was an officer in the Continental Army. Following his second marriage (his wife was suspected of Loyalist leanings), increasing personal debt, and growing frustrations with other officers, he attempted to surrender West Point to the British in 1780. Arnold's plot was foiled at the last minute, but he escaped and became a British officer.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Benedict Arnold

A leading officer in the Continental Army in the early years of the American Revolution; infamous for changing sides during the war and fighting for the British.

Arnold is an infamous character in American history, but he did what men of lesser rank did repeatedly. Many common soldiers who deserted from the British Army joined the Continental Army or joined it in order to avoid confinement as prisoners of war. British forces included similar recruits.

This occurred more often at sea. Sailor Joseph Bartlett changed sides at least 10 times between 1778 and 1781. Bartlett's actions identify him as someone who was motivated by personal gain, not republicanism.

The ease with which colonists could change sides is not surprising. The American Revolution is remembered as a “war of thirds”. Of colonial America's population of 2.5 million, roughly one third remained loyal to Great Britain, while another third committed themselves to the cause of independence. The remaining third was unaffiliated, or only chose to join a cause at times, while continuing their daily lives as best they could.



SUMMARY

The Declaration of Independence initiated the final break from Great Britain, but the variety of motives

that influenced whether one became a revolutionary or a Loyalist indicate that colonists were unclear about what it meant to be an American. As a result, the American Revolution created multiple civil wars within colonial society. Resentments, antagonisms, and inequalities that predated the Revolution erupted with the outbreak of war and rhetoric concerned with liberty and equality. Loyalty—to Great Britain, or to the revolution—took a variety of forms.

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DATES TO KNOW

1775

Dunmore's Proclamation promises freedom to enslaved people who are loyal to Britain.

January 1776

Thomas Paine writes the pamphlet *Common Sense*.

July 1776

The Declaration of Independence justifies American independence from Great Britain.