In 1763, most American colonists did not want to be independent from the British Empire. So how did they become revolutionaries? Over the next decade, they wrestled with how to secure their British liberties amidst political, civic, and military events that took place throughout the thirteen colonies and beyond. These events helped shape the decision-making of the colonists living in America and, eventually, the Continental Congress when they debated the matter of independence.

From Peace to Protest

When the French and Indian War concluded in February of 1763, Britain controlled the most powerful Empire on the planet and many free colonists living in North America were proud of the Empire's accomplishments. They enjoyed the liberties and prosperity that came with being part of the Empire. However, peace had not fully been attained. As British colonists moved west to claim new lands as the spoils of war, Native Americans grew concerned and angry. King George III had agreed to protect their lands from future settlement and they viewed these settlements as a violation. King George III decided to send soldiers to keep colonists out of native lands. He hoped this plan would help maintain peace in the frontier, but it would also cost money. Parliament decided that colonists living in America should help pay for the costs of this plan.

The Sugar and Stamp Acts in 1764 and 1765 would be some of the first ways that British Parliament attempted to acquire funding to maintain the colonies. But the taxes that were imposed by them were very unpopular with many American colonists. Many colonists argued that it was a violation of their British liberties to tax them without representation. They had paid taxes in the past, but these new ones were coming directly from British Parliament rather than their own legislatures or assemblies in the colonies, and American colonists did not have any of their own elected representatives in Parliament to speak on their behalf. They protested, concerned that Parliament was exercising too much power. In response, Parliament repealed or reduced these taxes to calm the colonists, but they made it clear when they passed the Declaratory Act in 1766 that Parliament believed they had the right to make laws and taxes binding the American colonies “in all cases whatsoever.”

Still, some in Parliament sided with the colonists. Isaac Barré stood in defense of those protesting the Stamp Act, saying “The [American] people, I believe, are as truly loyal as any subjects the king has. But they are a people jealous of their liberties and who will vindicate them if ever they should be violated; but the subject is too delicate and I will say no more.” Colonists expressed their gratitude for support like this, such as when those in Meredith, New Hampshire named their town to honor Sir William Meredith of Parliament for opposing taxes on the colonies. Despite this, many in Parliament continued to search for ways to tax the American colonists that might not trigger protests or disobedience. They attempted to tax glass, tea, paint, paper, and more over the years, but each time there was enough outcry that most or all the taxes were repealed. Most of Parliament became more determined to raise money from the colonies in each case, while
in the eyes of many in Parliament, the colonists that protested seemed to be getting more determined in their opposition to British policies. Do you think it was possible for Parliament to address the objections of the colonists before things got worse?

Many American colonists felt that new acts of Parliament became more intrusive in 1767 and 1768 when Parliament passed several laws that came to be known as the Townshend Acts. In addition to taxing various goods, it began granting special privileges to the **British East India Company** to give it a monopoly on selling tea in America. Parliament also shut down the New York Assembly until they agreed to provide housing, food, and supplies for British soldiers. The final Townshend Act in 1768, established several special courts with judges appointed by and loyal to the crown. The new law permitted colonists to be removed to a different court for trial if royal prosecutors felt they wouldn’t be able to successfully prosecute a case using local judges or juries. These laws challenged colonists in ways beyond simply taxation. To many colonists, shutting down local government or interfering in court proceedings were severe attacks on their British liberties, and their resistance to British policy grew more serious as a result.

Protests against British policies sometimes escalated into destructive or violent confrontations. Confronted by an angry mob of colonists who were upset by the behavior of British soldiers in their town, a cornered group of British soldiers, fired into the crowd, killing five people and further harming the relationship between Britain and the colonies. Colonists rioted and attacked a Sheriff attempting to enforce a long-standing forestry law in New Hampshire. The **HMS Gaspee**, a Royal Navy ship that had been searching merchant ships for illegal goods, was burned by angry colonists. Those who were most opposed to recent British policies in America were growing more and more bold.

Parliament continued to reconsider many of the policies that were being protested in the colonies but refused to remove the tax they had placed on tea. Instead, they expanded the monopoly on tea for the British East India Company in America, hoping they could demonstrate their authority over the colonies with it while saving the failing company that many in Parliament were deeply invested in. In response, colonists in several cities turned away, seized, or destroyed tea in acts of defiance. In Boston, colonists destroyed the modern equivalent of $1-2 million of tea. How would you have responded to news of this event if you were a member of Parliament? What would you have done in response?

British Parliament responded forcefully. They passed a series of laws known as the Coercive Acts that were intended to punish protesting colonists, particularly in Boston. The port of Boston was shut down until the cost of tea destroyed there was repaid and Massachusetts’ charter was taken away to bring it under the direct control of the British government. The Coercive Acts also allowed the new royal Governor to order trials of royal officials to take place outside Massachusetts and to enforce a new Quartering Act to force colonists to supply housing for British soldiers. The severity of the British response led angry colonies to form a Continental Congress in September of 1774, sending delegates from most of the 13 colonies to organize resistance to the Coercive Acts. Though their actual authority was unclear, this First Continental Congress took several actions. In October of 1774 they endorsed the Suffolk Resolves, a set of declarations from local Massachusetts colonists that declared the Coercive Acts to be unconstitutional and encouraged noncompliance with them.

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**Did you know?**

Isaac Barré, a colonial sympathizer from British Parliament coined the term “Sons of Liberty”. The name would end up being adopted by numerous colonists who helped organize resistance against British policy during the Revolutionary era.
They also established boycotts of British goods. The First Continental Congress encouraged local militias to prepare for the possibility of an armed response against British forces. They invited other British colonies in North America, such as Quebec, Nova Scotia, and Florida, in the hopes that they would also send delegates to Congress, strengthening the colonies’ position. Ultimately, those invitations did not succeed, and the 13 colonies would receive little support elsewhere in the empire.

The First Continental Congress adjourned itself with a Petition to the King on October 25th, 1774, requesting that he help overturn the Coercive Acts and restore British Liberties. They made arrangements to meet again in May to continue their work. Meanwhile, Edmund Burke, a member of Parliament, urged Britain to make peace with the colonists, fearing a civil war would develop. But despite his and others’ concerns, the conflict reached a boiling point.

Did you know?

The American Revolution was not the first example of British subjects debating the subject of power and how it should be wielded. English Civil Wars and the Glorious Revolution involved conflict over what the British government should look like and what liberties people were owed. These events pitted British subjects against one another and may have felt familiar to those resisting British policies in America.

Rebellion and Sedition

On April 19th, 1775 New England militia responded to British soldiers with armed resistance. Shots rang out when the two forces collided during a mission by the British Army to seize militia supplies and capture local resistance leaders Samuel Adams and John Hancock. The skirmish between them resulted in the death of British soldiers, the first to be killed by the colonists. A collection of militias from New England pursued British forces back to Boston and laid siege to the city. These militias numbered nearly 20,000 soldiers in all and formed a Grand New England Army before the Continental Congress ever established their own Continental Army. A second battle at Bunker Hill in June illustrated the ability of colonial militia to stand their ground against the professional British army.

For many in Britain, these battles changed the nature of American resistance to full-blown rebellion. Many loyalists in the colonies were equally dismayed by this event. Still, some sympathizers in Britain continued to support the colonists. Members of a trade organization in London issued a document entitled The address, petition, and remonstrance of the city of London, to the King, in favour of the Americans, and their resolves, presented to his Majesty that pressured King George III and Parliament to provide relief to American colonists.

Following these events, the Second Continental Congress would meet amidst continued fighting between British and militia forces. Despite the ongoing violence, the Congress remained focused on trying to reconcile with Great Britain. They issued the Olive Branch Petition on July 5th, 1775, maintaining the loyalty of the American colonies to the Empire and requesting that the King resolve their grievances in order to bring peace between them. They also issued a Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms the next day to justify the colonies’ armed assault on British soldiers. Neither of these messages to King George III was successful. Instead, he made his Proclamation for Suppressing Rebellion and Sedition on August 23, 1775. In his eyes, the colonies were now rebels and traitors. He was committed to crushing their rebellion and restoring them to the Empire through force. Parliament agreed with his decision to crack down on the colonies.
Would you have chosen to go to war if you were King George III? How would you have responded to the King’s **Proclamation** if you were a member of Congress?

British authorities and military forces took action after the King's Proclamation. British Naval forces destroyed the colonial town of Falmouth in present-day Maine and assaulted Hampton, Virginia in the month of October. The following month, Lord Dunmore, the Royal Governor of Virginia, issued a proclamation that promised freedom to enslaved people owned by **Revolutionaries** if they escaped their masters and took up arms against them. The challenges of the ongoing conflict continued to grow for colonists when Parliament passed the Prohibitory Act in December of that year, withdrawing the colonies from the King's protection and forbidding trade with them. Colonists in America were in a difficult situation, disconnected from the rest of the Empire, under military threat, and arguing about what to do next.

**The Season of Independence**

In January of 1776, a new political pamphlet appeared in the colonies. Called **Common Sense** and written by an English-born man named Thomas Paine, it argued to American colonists that monarchies were an inferior form of government, and that instead of seeking **reconciliation** with their King, they should seek independence. These were bold claims. Some colonists distrusted or simply disagreed with these arguments, but many others began to seriously consider the possibility of breaking away from the British Empire. If the colonies were truly going to take this course of action, however, a **consensus** was needed.

In April of 1776, North Carolina made its position clear by officially instructing its delegates to vote in favor of independence, compelling other colonies to do the same and bringing further pressure and clarity to the debate. Soon after, smaller assemblies and organizations would begin to proclaim their stance on independence, such as when a Grand Jury in Charleston, South Carolina agreed that their court's authority to hear laws and cases was independent from royal authority. Still, not all of these **grass-roots** declarations would be in favor of independence. Rhode Island declined to ask its inhabitants to take up the matter, expecting several towns to vote against independence. Instead, the colonial government of Rhode Island renounced its allegiance to Great Britain on May 4th, 1776, bypassing those who would have **dissented**.

Congress eventually acknowledged that royal authority was absent in the colonies due to the state of the conflict with Britain. As a result, they passed a **resolution** that recommended colonies reform or replace their governments with new state governments to fill the roles that the royal government had left behind. Some members of Congress, like John Adams, thought that this was essentially an act of independence, but much work still needed to take place before that became approachable. He and other delegates from Massachusetts asked the inhabitants of their state to debate independence within each town. This type of town governance was not as common outside of New England, but they hoped that their example would prompt towns in other colonies to do the same and exert more pressure on those not yet in favor. Representatives from Taunton, Massachusetts voted to support independence on June 3rd, making them the first of 33 Massachusetts towns to do so during the month of June. Other organizations were compelled to declare their own support for independence during this period as well. New York **craftsmen** belonging to the “**Mechaniks in Union**”, such as Lewis Thibou, voted to support independence at the end of May, while four different militia groups in Pennsylvania voted to support independence on June 10th.

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**Big Idea 3**
Amidst these different declarations of support for independence, an important development took place. Richard Henry Lee, a delegate from Virginia, officially proposed independence on June 7th. Congress took up the vote several weeks later, but additional declarations of support for independence continued to take place throughout the colonies in the meantime. Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, and Maryland all instructed their delegates to vote in favor over the next few weeks, gathering even more momentum for the idea. When delegates finally voted on independence on July 2nd, 1776, twelve of the thirteen colonies voted in favor, with New York abstaining. The lack of dissent made it a unanimous vote.

A final vote approving the wording of the Declaration of Independence took place on July 4th. In just over a decade, British subjects had become American Revolutionaries, peace had turned to protest, and rebellion had turned - through a dynamic “season of independence” - into a full-fledged independence movement.