



Big Idea 4

## Support for Independence

Pursuing **Independence** was dangerous. Defying the most powerful empire in the world meant accepting the great risk that came with doing so. Those that did support independence had a variety of reasons for doing so, and they sometimes found themselves working toward a shared goal with others that they felt they had little in common with. Tensions rose: fights broke out between soldiers from different **colonies**, state leaders refused to pay to feed and clothe soldiers from other states. As war with Britain consumed the colonies, members of the Continental Congress who supported independence recognized that they needed to address this challenge. Popular support for independence was not enough to make it happen. Congress needed to demonstrate unity to the rest of the world, otherwise their efforts to gain their independence would have little meaning.

### Enlightenment Ideals: New Ways of Thinking About the World

Some of the ideas of the Revolution had roots in the Enlightenment, an intellectual movement that had been developing during the 17th and 18th centuries. At the core of this movement were principles of reason, science and religious tolerance. The works of European philosophers like John Locke, Charles Montesquieu, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau had gained attention and popularity in America and influenced the thinking of colonists as they debated their future. Ideas about **inalienable** “natural rights”, equality, “social contracts”, and the separation of powers in government permeated discussion about whether **reconciliation** with Britain was truly possible and, eventually, what Americans should strive for in their own governance.

The theory of natural rights suggested that there was an order to the world, controlled by God and laws of nature. One aspect of these laws was that every person was equal in that they had inalienable rights that were impossible to take away from them. These were often characterized as being the rights to “life, liberty, and property”. In essence, this meant that human life should be preserved, and people should be permitted to do what they want provided it does not infringe on the rights of others. The right to property could refer both to the right to do as one wished with what they owned or apply even more broadly to their personal well-being.

The idea of a “social contract” between people and their government also became more popular during the Enlightenment. This idea suggested that people agreed to their government and its laws in order to enjoy the benefits of society. For a long time, a **monarchy** was considered the best way to achieve this. Britain’s constitutional monarchy placed its power in the hands of a King or Queen as the monarch, the **aristocracy** in **Parliament’s** House of Lords, and the subjects of the Empire represented by the House of Commons. Though this arrangement was more representative than most other governments at the time, many American colonists had come to believe that their local **assemblies** were preferable to Parliament’s House of Commons as a way of representing themselves. This idea caused colonists in North America to consider whether the current system of government in the Empire was serving them well, and some chose to protest it when they decided it did not.

## Why Separate?

Despite years of protest and recent armed conflict, most colonists did not consider independence to be the goal of their resistance. There were advantages to being part of the Empire and most colonists wanted to remain a part of it. Much of this changed on August 23, 1775 when King George III made a **proclamation** before Parliament stating that the colonies were in “an open and avowed Rebellion,” that needed to be put down. The colonies were, in effect, no longer under the King’s protection. The seriousness of this development caused some to consider what had previously been unthinkable. What if the colonies were to truly break away from the Empire?

There were other reasons to consider independence, even if those reasons had not seemed reasonable before. Many colonists opposed Parliament’s insistence that it had the right to legislate for the colonies “in all matters whatsoever,” including their ability to tax them. For many colonists accustomed to governing and taxing themselves, this was a serious attack on their **British liberties**. Parliament asserting the right to tax the colonies was a particularly sour topic for colonists, as they had no representation in British Parliament. There was also little appetite for a compromise in which the colonies did send **representatives** to Parliament since the distance between them and Britain would make it difficult for any representatives they sent to truly represent the interests of those in the colonies. The resisting colonists wanted representation, but to them, it made far more sense for them to be governed by local and colonial assemblies. If successful, breaking free from Britain could grant them that opportunity.

Colonial happiness with British rule had been suffering for years due to what some colonists considered harsh and controlling treatment by Parliament. Many merchants had been displeased with the taxes imposed during the last decade and being cut off from trade completely only made things worse. Many farmers and merchants were also in debt to those in Great Britain. Either resenting their debt or sensing an opportunity to possibly have it erased, independence may have appeared more attractive as a result. Other colonists had also been angered that Parliament had passed laws allowing French Catholics brought into the Empire by the French and Indian War to keep many of their laws and customs. Meanwhile, colonial assemblies were being shut down by acts of Parliament in other places. Following the Boston Tea Party, Parliament sent 4,000 new troops to help occupy the city in response to the deliberate destruction of property. The British occupying force was large enough that it accounted for 25% of Boston’s total population afterward. Other events, such as the Boston Massacre in which 5 colonists were killed when British soldiers opened fire on a crowd of protesters, made colonists even more resentful of their occupation. Things had only gotten worse since open warfare had broken out, with instances of the British Navy bombarding the towns of Hampton, Virginia and Falmouth, in present-day Maine. As these events accumulated, some colonists began to question if there was no choice but to separate.

For others, rebellion and independence offered a different type of opportunity to rewrite the rules of society. Women like Abigail Adams were growing more outspoken about the rights of women. She wrote frequently to her husband in Congress, once urging him to “remember the ladies” as **delegates** debated independence and a new form of government. Her desire for more rights and protections for women seemed achievable in a brand-new country. **Native peoples** may have sensed some familiarity in the growing conflict between **rebellious** colonists and the British Empire. They had previously been caught in between warring European powers in North America and chose to become involved when it allowed them to protect their own interests and balance the scales of power. An American war for independence seemed, to some, to offer similar opportunities.

For some people of African descent, independence represented the opportunity to end the practice of slavery. Lemuel Haynes was not born enslaved, but experienced indentured servitude as a child and young adult. His religious upbringing and sympathy for others who had experienced this, or worse, drove his desire to see slavery end, and he increasingly wrote about this topic as conflict with Britain grew. Lemuel Haynes was among the militiamen that joined together to siege Boston after the Battle of Lexington and Concord. When he looked back on his service as a soldier, he would say that he had given his all “for the sake of freedom and independence,” but “never viewed the sacrifice too great.”

Lemuel Haynes was far from the only person of African descent who had taken up arms against the British. Peter Salem, an enslaved person living in Framingham, Massachusetts, was temporarily released by his owners to fight alongside the New England **militia** at the Battle of Bunker Hill. When George Washington assumed command of the new Continental Army, he issued an order forbidding the recruitment of enslaved people into the army. Peter Salem’s owners freed him in response so that he could continue fighting. Though fighting against Britain wasn’t a surefire way to escape slavery for all in the colonies, many people of African descent watched and listened carefully to see if supporting independence would grant them a path to freedom.

## *Common Sense*

Despite the existence of arguments for independence, the idea gained momentum slowly. The criticism of British policy by unhappy colonists was often still **conciliatory** toward the King in the hopes that he would somehow set things right. King George III declaring the colonies to be in open rebellion helped create conditions for colonists to consider independence more seriously. A pamphlet entitled *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine took great advantage of these circumstances. Thomas Paine argued that colonists in North America had been fearful of embracing independence not just because of their strong attachment to their British identity, but because they had not envisioned a better government than their current one.

- **Flaws in the British Monarchy** were holding back the colonies in Thomas Paine’s eyes. He made the case that American freedom would always be at risk under British rule. His argument made some colonists rethink the pride they had in the Empire by calling their attention to what he thought were two flaws in the English **Constitution**. He argued plainly that the monarchy and system of **hereditary** rule were unfit for preserving their liberties. Most colonists had resisted blaming their **grievances** on the monarchy, but Paine wasn’t afraid to hold the King accountable. The only way to truly preserve their liberty, he argued, was a Revolution that would let them leave behind the monarchy and form their own government.
- **A straight-forward and rowdy style** of explaining things to his readers also turned out to be an effective tool for rallying people to the idea of independence. Resistance towards Britain had gained a lot of support from everyday people over the years and the way he wrote did a better job of connecting with them than other intellectual arguments that had been made before his. He tapped into the religious values that some of his readers held by citing verses from the Bible that condemned monarchies and went beyond simply attacking the faults in British government by proposing a new one of his own. He suggested a form of **representative government** that he argued would be more capable of protecting American liberties.

Though not everyone liked every part of his proposal, it helped change the conversation from resistance to outright independence.

- **The need for foreign allies** to defeat the Empire in a war was one of the final arguments that Thomas Paine made. A war with the Empire seemed unwinnable to many. Negotiating a compromise seemed very unlikely after King George III had declared the colonies in open rebellion and some colonists felt that war would be a disaster. Thomas Paine argued that the colonies were not capable of defeating Britain without a powerful ally and that the only way to secure one was to declare independence. After all, would powerful nations like France and Spain choose to aid them if they knew the colonies would resume their relationship with Britain once fighting ended?

Members of the Second Continental Congress felt themselves being pulled more and more towards the idea of independence despite the resistance many of them had originally felt. Some of them were conflicted between the direction they felt the colonies needed to be moving in and the orders they had received from the governments that had sent them to Congress. Some of them had clear orders not to vote for or argue in favor of independence. When they read Thomas Paine's words, some ordered copies to be sent back to their home colonies. They hoped that his words would sway colonists there and that popular support for independence would encourage their governments to give delegates the flexibility to consider independence more freely.