



Big Idea 6

The People and Perspectives In Between

The outbreak of war in 1775 forced many people to choose a side, even if they did not want to. Imagine your neighbors approaching you to demand your support or accusing you of secretly sympathizing with their opponents. There could be serious repercussions for choosing to side with them but trying to stay neutral could be equally dangerous. Imagine making this decision with no idea what the outcome of war or **independence** would be. This was the reality for many people in the British North American **colonies** during the Revolutionary era.

Neutrality

There were many reasons why someone might try to adopt a neutral stance. Some people were torn between their discontent with British policy and their desire to remain a part of the Empire. They may have protested British policies over the years but still wanted to enjoy the benefits of being British subjects. Neither the **Revolutionaries** nor **Loyalists** truly represented their beliefs. Quakers were generally **pacifists** and rejected the idea of supporting Revolutionaries or Loyalists because of escalating violence between them. They refused to politically or financially support efforts that contributed to violence. Hannah Griffitts, a Quaker, decried the hostilities between fellow Americans, calling Thomas Paine “a snake beneath the grass” for encouraging Americans to turn on one another. Other colonists wished to remain neutral because they wanted no part in a war that could bring death and destruction to their families and homes. They may or may not have felt strongly about the issue of independence but the risk that war brought was too great in their eyes. In other cases, **British Americans** may not have cared deeply about what the outcome of a war for independence would be. If they lived far away from where the conflict was taking place or didn’t see a benefit to choosing, then they sometimes tried to stay out of the conflict.

Pressure and Distrust

The publication of *Common Sense* and its spread throughout the colonies helped create a larger split between Americans on either side of the independence debate. The positions of both Revolutionaries and Loyalists were hardened over the content of the pamphlet, leaving less room for compromise between them. As the debate over independence grew more heated, Loyalists and Revolutionaries both turned to different forms of persuasion to pressure undecided colonists to choose a side. **Broadsides**, newspapers, and propaganda prints called for colonists to support or oppose independence. Neighbors sometimes tried to persuade others nearby to swear oaths of allegiance or loyalty. In some cases, they threatened those who refused with severe consequences. Increasing pressure to choose sides meant that some colonists had to make the difficult choice of sticking to their beliefs or choosing the safety that came with joining the side that had more support in their area.

Both Revolutionaries and Loyalists often pressured neutral parties to choose a side. This pressure could make those in the middle feel like their safety or that of their families was at risk. They were sometimes compelled to declare their allegiance and fight for one side or the other in the hopes of preventing harm or hardship to their families. Sometimes they experienced harassment, had their property damaged, or were even thrown in jail for refusing to support one side over the other. However, these tactics could also backfire in some cases. Revolutionaries initially coerced Alexander Chesney into joining the Continental Army to prove his family were not Loyalists. He eventually deserted and joined the British army after Revolutionaries destroyed crops on his farm. Would you be willing to fight for a cause you didn't believe in if it kept your family out of harm's way?

Some colonists were lumped in with Revolutionaries or Loyalists, even if they avoided expressing support for either. Their failure to fully support either side made others suspicious of them. They could be treated as an enemy despite their efforts to stay out of the growing conflict. Revolutionaries and Loyalists both engaged in the confiscation of property from those they suspected of being their enemies, which sometimes included neutral colonists as well. Married women also risked consequences for the choices of their husbands in these situations. The legal idea of **coverture** required women to give up most of their personal rights and property to their husband following marriage. It was then their husband's responsibility to care for them and make decisions on their behalf. As a result, married women could lose their homes and possessions because of their husband's politics. Elizabeth Drinker and her husband Henry were Quakers in Philadelphia who were suspected of being sympathetic to the British for their anti-war religious views despite not siding with Loyalists or Revolutionaries. One day, the Pennsylvania government seized property from their homes, then auctioned it off to fund the Revolutionaries' war effort. Many colonists like Elizabeth discovered that even trying to remain neutral could have consequences.

Caught in the Middle

Others found themselves caught in the middle not because of their religious beliefs or status as married women, but because of their status of freedom, or tentative political and economic positions in relation to European colonial society. These things often impacted their decisions about who to support. These decisions created opportunities for greater freedom, but also came with risks. Choosing the losing side could be disastrous. No one was certain what the future would hold, so everyone had to make the best decision they could with the information they had.

- **Enslaved people** had difficult decisions to make when considering who, if anyone, to support in the debate over independence. Slavery had existed in the colonies for over 150 years by 1775, and enslaved people had struggled to find their freedom for just as long. Their ability to control their own lives had always been severely restricted by their enslavement, but the conflict between Revolutionaries and Loyalists opened up special opportunities for enslaved people to find freedom.

One of the opportunities available to enslaved people was a result of Lord Dunmore's Proclamation in 1775. Lord Dunmore was the Royal Governor of Virginia and he offered freedom to enslaved people who escaped Revolutionary owners to fight for the British. Dunmore's Proclamation would eventually be expanded by the Phillipsburg Proclamation to include anyone enslaved by Revolutionaries, even if they couldn't fight. Still, the choice to take advantage of these opportunities remained difficult. Running to the British often meant leaving family or community behind, as well as being harshly punished if caught. There was a risk that Britain would lose the war in America. If that happened, the promise of freedom made by the British military could end up meaning very little.

- **Free people of African descent** also had tough choices to make about who to support. The ideals of liberty and freedom were appealing to many free African Americans and some chose to support American independence as a result. Lemuel Haynes, for example, was bitterly opposed to the institution of slavery and became a strong supporter of American independence. He supported the idea of a new American nation in the hope that it would result in freedom for enslaved people. On the other hand, several British court cases seemed to suggest that an end to slavery might be coming closer for the empire. So free people of African descent opposed to slavery might support opposite sides while hoping for the same thing. Other free people of African descent might feel torn for the same reasons as European colonists: the desire for stability, to protect their immediate families, fear of the unknown, and more.
- Many **Native American** nations had worked to maintain a balance between the power of European nations in America that helped them to preserve their own power. The early participation of several Native nations in the French and Indian War had provided an important advantage to French military forces. Later, nations such as the Shawnee, Lenape, and members of the **Iroquois Confederacy** made an agreement with Britain at the Treaty of Easton that returned some of their native lands in exchange for their neutrality. The conflict between Revolutionaries and Britain seemed like another opportunity to balance the scales in a similar way.

However, despite the agreements that some of them made in the French and Indian War, **Native Peoples** in America had often given up more than they had gained in their relationships with Europeans over the years. The ambition of colonists often put their ways of life at risk, and they often had to consider how to try and preserve it. The decision of whether to support the Revolutionaries or Britain offered similar opportunities and risks as those they had experienced in the past. Both groups attempted to enlist their support and each Native American nation had to decide if it was best for them to ally with one of them or remain neutral in the conflict.

Failing to support the eventual winner likely meant that they would be treated unfavorably by them, even if they tried to stay neutral. The Iroquois Confederacy, an alliance between several Indian nations in New York, had existed since long before European colonists set foot in North America. They were unable to agree about whom to support. The Oneida and Tuscarora nations chose to side with the Revolutionaries, while the Mohawk, Seneca, Onondaga, and Cayuga chose to support the British. The idea of American independence turned the Six Nations against one another, just as it had done to many of the colonists.

The movement for independence created opportunity and danger alike for people living in British North America. For many, the decision of who if anyone, to support, was far from simple.