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Class: _____

The Road to American Independence

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It was a long road to American revolution and independence, filled with obstacles and ending in unexpected victory. The following text recounts this journey, starting from the beginning of English colonization in North America and ending with the final battle of the American Revolution. As you read, identify the key details of each section and take notes on what motivated the American colonists.

North America and the British Empire

- [1] In the 1600s and 1700s, Great Britain held a vast empire with colonies¹ all over the world. They established colonies to make money and gain political and military power. Each colony had its own leadership structure, but the British government was always in charge.

British explorers established colonies in North America just like they did everywhere else. Different groups of people came to colonize North America for different reasons. For example, rich investors founded colonies like Massachusetts in order to harvest natural resources and gain a profit. Other individual settlers came to the new colonies because they held certain religious beliefs that European governments would not tolerate, and they wanted to live under rulers who shared their beliefs. Places like Rhode Island were safe havens for these groups.



["Declaration of Independence"](#) by John Trumbull is in the public domain.

Life in the Colonies

Throughout the 1600s, British influence in North America continued to grow as more and more colonists flooded the region. American colonists liked having fairly independent lives and governments while still enjoying the economic benefits of being part of the British Empire.

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1. **Colony** (*noun*) a country or region under the control of another country and occupied by settlers of the controlling country

However, toward the middle of the 1700s, tensions rose between the British government and the American people.

Colonial Unrest

Beginning in 1754, Britain fought the French and Indian War² on North American soil, and soon they realized they needed some way to pay for it. In order to raise money, they passed several taxes that all the American colonies had to pay. Two of these were the Sugar Act³ and the Stamp Act.⁴ People had to pay extra taxes on basic goods like sugar, tea, and paper.

- [5] Unsurprisingly, all the colonists hated having to pay extra money for basic materials. They didn't like how Britain was using them just to collect money. They also believed the taxes were unfair because they had never elected their own representatives into the British government. They protested: "No taxation without representation."⁵ Many elites⁶ wrote articles against the British government, but some felt this was not enough. They refused to buy the taxed goods.

On December 16, 1773, a group of men dressed up like Native Americans, snuck onto a British ship docked in Boston Harbor, and dumped crates of tea into the ocean as a symbol of their unhappiness.⁷ The men were members of the Sons of Liberty, a secret society organized to protect the rights of colonists and to protest unfair taxation. The event became known as the Boston Tea Party, and it sparked more feelings of anger at Britain throughout the colonies.

In response to the Boston Tea Party, Britain passed the Intolerable Acts⁸ to punish the

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2. The French and Indian War (1754-1763), fought in North America, was part of the worldwide conflict known as the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), which pitted British and French colonies against each other. Even with the aid of Native American fighters, the French lost the war to the British, giving up all of their territories east of the Mississippi to Great Britain.
 3. Passed in 1764, the Sugar Act was meant to raise revenue to pay off Great Britain's debt, but also to replace the somewhat ineffectual Molasses Act of 1733, which had been poorly collected.
 4. Passed in 1765, the Stamp Act required any printed materials in the colonies to be made of stamped paper produced in London. It also placed a direct tax on the British American colonies that could only be paid in British money. It was repealed in 1766, but Britain then passed the Declaratory Act that same year, which stated that Parliament's authority in the colonies was the same as in Britain.
 5. "No taxation without representation" is a phrase that can be traced back to 1750 in a sermon by John Mayhew.
 6. **Elite** (*noun*) a rich or powerful person
 7. The ship and product were not random. They were owned by the British East India Company, a major English trade company. The result was the destruction of an entire shipment of tea, an expensive blow to the company and to Britain.

colonists. These laws shut down Boston Harbor, loosened behavior restrictions for British soldiers stationed in the colonies, outlawed town meetings in all of Massachusetts, and required the colonists to pay for all the tea they ruined. This was the last straw for many people.

Twelve out of the 13 colonies sent representatives to the First Continental Congress in September, 1774 to decide what to do about this mistreatment from the British government. After much debate, they agreed the best thing to do was to further boycott⁹ all British goods, so the taxes would not actually raise any money for the British government. They also agreed to petition the British king, George III, for amends to their grievances.¹⁰ However, out in the colonies, some people were already preparing to defend themselves with military force if the British continued to exercise unwanted power.

The Battle Begins

To quell¹¹ any possible rebellion, Britain sent troops to Massachusetts. The troops found out about a group of rebellious colonists who had stockpiled¹² some weapons in a small town outside of Boston called Lexington, so they went to go steal the weapons. The colonists found out about this ahead of time, and a small group of minutemen, or American civilian soldiers, met them on the way. At this small skirmish,¹³ eight minutemen died but only one British soldier was hurt.

- [10] However, as the British continued on to another town nearby called Concord, a much larger group of over 400 minutemen ambushed¹⁴ them. Two hundred British soldiers died at the hands of the colonists. The battles of Lexington and Concord in 1775 signaled the start of the Revolutionary War.

Independence at Last

Over the next year, the 13 colonies met and debated over whether they should declare their independence from Britain. The decision was difficult, for there was no guarantee they would win the war. Each colony sent representatives to the Second Continental Congress¹⁵ to decide

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8. The Intolerable Acts are also known as the Coercive Acts, passed in 1774.
 9. **Boycott (verb)** to refuse to purchase
 10. **Grievance (noun)** a wrong or other cause for complaint or protest, especially unfair treatment; injustice
 11. **Quell (verb)** to put an end to, typically by force
 12. **Stockpile (verb)** to gather or collect a large amount of something
 13. **Skirmish (noun)** a minor fight in war usually incidental to larger movements
 14. **Ambush (verb)** to make a surprise attack

how and when to officially cut ties with the British Empire. By the summer of 1776, they had made their decision.

They settled on the Declaration of Independence, written by Thomas Jefferson. This document declared that the colonies would unite as states to become their own country. It also listed the reasons for their separation, including the abuses of power they had endured for so long. Twelve out of the 13 colonies voted in favor of independence on July 2, 1776. The Second Continental Congress officially adopted the document on July 4, 1776, and the United States became independent.

However, the war with Britain raged on. The untrained, civilian American soldiers faced trained, regimented,¹⁶ and disciplined British soldiers, or “redcoats.” France sent troops to help the Americans fight for their independence.¹⁷ Finally, in 1781, General George Washington trapped British General Cornwallis in the Battle of Yorktown.¹⁸ Cornwallis surrendered, ending the war, and acknowledging that the United States was completely free of ties to Great Britain.

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15. The Second Continental Congress was a follow-up to the First Continental Congress, with many of the same representatives meeting again. They first met in May 1775 and officially disbanded in March 1781. This congress was also in charge of managing the revolution’s warfare.
 16. **Regimented** (*adjective*) very organized or controlled
 17. France agreed to help the colonists partly because of their long-time rivalry with Britain and their loss in the Seven Years’ War.
 18. Lasting from September 28 to October 19, 1781, the Battle or Siege of Yorktown was a great victory for the colonists and their French allies against the British. This major victory led to negotiations between the United States and Great Britain, eventually resulting in the Treaty of Paris in 1783 that formally ended the war.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best describes why the relationship between American colonies and Britain began to deteriorate?
 - A. Americans asked Britain to protect them by fighting the French and Indian War, but grew angry when asked to pay for it.
 - B. The British government was angry at Americans for losing the French and Indian War, and punished America with high taxes and restrictive laws.
 - C. Americans' anger grew as they were forced to pay off Britain's debts from the French and Indian War.
 - D. The British government grew frustrated with Americans' poorly held elections and took away Americans' representatives.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "American colonists liked having fairly independent lives and governments while still enjoying the economic benefits of being part of the British Empire." (Paragraph 3)
 - B. "Beginning in 1754, Britain fought the French and Indian War on North American soil, and soon they realized they needed some way to pay for it." (Paragraph 4)
 - C. "People had to pay extra taxes on basic goods like sugar, tea, and paper." (Paragraph 4)
 - D. "They also believed the taxes were unfair because they had never elected their own representatives into the British government." (Paragraph 5)

3. Which of the following best describes how the Boston Tea Party contributed to the American Revolution?
 - A. It marked the symbolic beginning of the American Revolution and was quickly followed by battles.
 - B. It demonstrated the colonists' unrest over British taxation and led to British retaliation through new unfair laws.
 - C. It was the first act of American protest against the British Empire and forced the British to lower taxes.
 - D. It created a great loss of profit for the British Empire, which finally began to take the colonies seriously.

4. How does the motto "No taxation without representation" in paragraph 5 contribute to the development of the central ideas of the text? Cite evidence from the text in your answer.

5. Which of the following statements best explains why the First Continental Congress (FCC) and Second Continental Congress (SCC) formed?
- A. The FCC formed to declare America's Independence while the SCC needed to figure out how to win the Revolutionary War.
 - B. The FCC formed to declare America's independence while the SCC decided how to organize a new lasting American government.
 - C. The FCC formed to speak out against Britain through protests and boycotts while the SCC formed to organize a new lasting American government.
 - D. The FCC formed to solve issues with Britain through protests and boycotts while the SCC wanted to break from Britain by declaring Independence.

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. What does it mean for a country to become or be independent?
2. After reading this passage, what do you think the power of protests and boycotts? Can you think of any other examples in history when these tools have helped people create change as successfully? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
3. In the context of this passage, how has America changed over time? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.