Independence and the Articles of Confederation

Inquire: What was the Purpose for Writing the Declaration of Independence?

Overview

The Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation: two more different documents could not exist. One is the poetic, rational, and classic statement of government, men’s rights, and freedoms which sets forth the argument for a people throwing off their government, while the other is the first, failed attempt at government by this new country.

The first will be universally revered and eternally remembered. The second will be criticized with disdain, quickly forgotten, and quickly replaced by, perhaps, the greatest government document ever written.

They were two vastly different documents, both written — or at least approved by — the same men, men who had high hopes for both.

Big Question: What was wrong with the Articles of Confederation, and why were they so quickly replaced?

Watch: Breaking Up is Hard to Do

In 1975, Neil Sedaka became one of only two artists to ever hit the Billboard Top 10 with two different versions of the same song — his signature song, "Breaking Up Is Hard to Do." Co-written by Neil Sedaka and Howard Greenfield Sedaka, the song hit number 1 with an upbeat version in 1962 and went all the way to number 8 in 1975, with a much slower ballad version.

As business partners, couples, bands, sports teams, and people in any other kind of relationship know, breaking up is hard to do. The more entangled you are and the longer you are in the relationship, the harder it is to break up — to divide the assets, to split the liabilities, to end the relationship.

In 1776, the Original 13 British colonies in North America decided it was necessary to end their relationship with the Mother Country, Great Britain. As we will see later in this lesson, they had fought with the British for over ten years, having disagreements ranging from taxes to expansion, from commerce and shipping to government.

In the end, the decision was made — unanimously — to “break up” with Great Britain and form their own country. This was a breakup of unprecedented magnitude; never had a group of colonies, which had been planted by their mother country, attempted to then leave it without permission. This would not be an easy
separation. Great Britain was the most powerful country in the world, with a military of unequaled strength across the globe.

To be free, the Original 13 colonies would have to raise an untrained army and fight with few resources and no navy against the number one economic and military power in the world. To be free and to win this “revolution,” the 13 rebellious colonies would need friends. How could they get friends?

By publishing a break up letter, of course! In an acrimonious divorce, both parties want to keep the friends, so both parties try to explain why they are right and the other party is wrong. In today’s world of social media, that can even involve social media posts — anything to be sure the world knows you are right.

There was no Internet in 1776, so the 13 colonies published a “declaration” which could be sent to Spain, the Netherlands, or even France, the country Great Britain had just driven out of North America at the end of the Seven Years’ War in 1763.

Breaking up is hard to do… but it is easier with friends.

Read: When in the Course of Human Events

The American Revolution

The American Revolution began when a small and vocal group of colonists became convinced the king and Parliament were abusing them and depriving them of their rights. By 1776, the colonists had been living under British government rule for more than a century, and England had long treated the 13 colonies with a degree of benign neglect. However, each colony had established its own legislature, taxes imposed by England were low, and property ownership was more widespread than in England. People readily proclaimed their loyalty to the king. For the most part, American colonists were proud to be British citizens and had no desire to form an independent nation.

All this began to change in 1763 when the Seven Years’ War between Great Britain and France came to an end, and Great Britain gained control of most North American French territory. The colonists had fought on behalf of Britain, and many colonists expected that after the war they would be allowed to settle on the land that had been taken from France, west of the Appalachian Mountains. However, their hopes were not realized. Hoping to prevent conflict with Indian tribes in the Ohio Valley, Parliament passed the Proclamation of 1763, which forbade the colonists to purchase land or settle west of the Appalachian Mountains.

To pay its debts from the war and maintain the troops it left behind to protect the colonies, the British government had to take new measures to raise revenue. Among the acts passed by Parliament were laws requiring American colonists to pay British merchants with gold and silver instead of paper
currency and a mandate that suspected smugglers be tried in vice-admiralty courts without jury trials. What angered the colonists most of all, however, was the imposition of direct taxes: taxes imposed on individuals instead of on transactions.

Because the colonists had not consented to direct taxation, their primary objection was that it reduced their status as free men. The right of the people, or their representatives, to consent to taxation was enshrined in both the Magna Carta and the English Bill of Rights. Taxes were imposed by the House of Commons, one of the two houses of the British Parliament; however, the North American colonists were not allowed to elect representatives to that body. In their eyes, taxation by representatives they had not elected was a denial of their rights.

House of Commons members and people living in England had difficulty understanding this argument. All British subjects had to obey the laws passed by Parliament, including the requirement to pay taxes. Those who were not allowed to vote, such as women and black men, were considered to have virtual representation in the British legislature; in other words, representatives elected by those who could vote made laws on behalf of those who could not. Many colonists, however, maintained that anything except direct representation was a violation of their rights as English subjects.

The first such tax to draw the colonists’ ire was the Stamp Act, passed in 1765, which required that almost all paper goods — including diplomas, land deeds, contracts, and newspapers — have revenue stamps placed on them. The outcry was so great that the new tax was quickly withdrawn, but its repeal was soon followed by a series of other tax acts, such as the Townshend Acts, passed in 1767, which imposed taxes on many everyday objects such as glass, tea, and paint.

The taxes imposed by the Townshend Acts were as poorly received by the colonists as the Stamp Act had been. The Massachusetts legislature sent a petition to the king asking for relief from the taxes and requested that other colonies join in a boycott of British manufactured goods. British officials threatened to suspend the colonies’ legislatures that engaged in a boycott and, in response to a request for help from Boston’s customs collector, sent a warship to the city in 1768. A few months later, British troops arrived and, on the evening of March 5, 1770, an altercation erupted outside the customs house. Shots rang out as British soldiers fired into the crowd. Several people were hit; three died immediately. Britain had taxed the colonists without their consent. Now, British soldiers had taken colonists’ lives.

Following this event, later known as the Boston Massacre, resistance to British rule grew, especially in Massachusetts. In December of 1773, a group of Boston men boarded a ship in the Boston Harbor and threw its cargo of tea, owned by the British East India Company, into the water. The Bostonians were protesting British policies, including the British East India Company’s monopoly on tea, which many colonial merchants resented. This act of defiance became known as the Boston Tea Party.

In the early months of 1774, Parliament responded to this latest act of colonial defiance by passing a series of laws called the Coercive Acts, intended to punish Boston for leading resistance to British rule and to restore order in the colonies. These acts virtually abolished town meetings in Massachusetts and otherwise interfered with the colony’s ability to govern itself. This assault on Massachusetts and its economy enraged people throughout the colonies, and delegates from all colonies except Georgia formed the First Continental Congress to create a unified opposition to Great Britain. Among other things, members of this institution developed a Declaration of Rights and Grievances.

In May of 1775, delegates met again in the Second Continental Congress. By this time, war with Great Britain had already begun, following skirmishes between colonial militiamen and British troops at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts. Congress drafted the Declaration of Causes explaining the
colonies’ reasons for rebellion. On July 2, 1776, Congress declared American independence from Britain, and two days later signed the *Declaration of Independence*.

Drafted by Thomas Jefferson, the *Declaration of Independence* officially proclaimed the colonies’ separation from Britain. In it, Jefferson eloquently laid out the reasons for colonial rebellion. God, he wrote, had given everyone the “rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” People had created governments to protect these rights and consented to them as long as their government functioned as intended. However, “whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government.” Jefferson then proceeded to list the many ways in which the British monarch had abused his power and failed in his duties to his subjects.

With their signing of the Declaration of Independence, the United States founders committed themselves to creating a new kind of government. Colonists’ pride in their English liberties gave way to dismay when they perceived that these liberties were being abused. People had come to regard life, liberty, and property not as gifts from the monarch, but as natural rights no government could take away.

The chain of events following the end of the Seven Years' War led proud Englishmen who believed in natural rights, limited government, and government as a social contract to become convinced that Great Britain had broken the social contract between the British government and its citizens. The colonists wanted their rights back. In 1776, the Second Continental Congress declared American independence from Great Britain.

**Reflect: How Much Tea Could a Tea Par-Tea?**

*Poll*

How much tea do you think was thrown in the harbor during the Boston Tea Party?

- 1000 pounds
- 5000 pounds
- 10,000 pounds
- 100 pounds

**Expand: The Government That Failed - The Articles of Confederation**

*Discover*

The British, of course, did not recognize the *Declaration* and continued to send troops to contain the rebellion. The war continued until 1783, so the new government was created in a wartime atmosphere. The *Articles of Confederation*, an agreement among the 13 original states, was written in 1776 but not ratified by the states until 1781. The loose "**League of Friendship**" it created reflected the founders’ reaction to the central authority of King George III.

The government under the *Articles of Confederation* gave most powers to the states, while the central government consisted only of a legislature. Above all, the colonists wanted to preserve their liberties, but the central governments’ lack of power proved to be disastrous. It could not regulate trade or keep the states from circulating their own currency. No chief executive could make real decisions and no national
court could settle disputes among states. And perhaps most importantly, the states could not efficiently conduct a war, nor pay the debts incurred once the war had ended.

By 1786, the new country was in serious economic trouble, leading states to quarrel over boundary lines and tariffs. An economic depression left both the states and their citizens in trouble; ordinary citizens, such as farmers and merchants, were deep in debt. **Shays' Rebellion**, a revolt by angry farmers in Massachusetts, symbolized the chaos in the country. Even though the Massachusetts militia finally put the rebellion down, it pointed out the central government’s inability to maintain law and order. In reaction, Alexander Hamilton of New York organized a meeting in Philadelphia in 1787. This convention would eventually throw out the Articles of Confederation and draft the Constitution.

So the freedom that the American Revolution sought to preserve created instead a government under the Articles of Confederation that could not maintain law and order. But, the initial experiment’s failure helped the founders to find a more perfect balance between liberty and order in the Constitution, later produced in 1787.

**Lesson Toolbox**

**Additional Resources and Readings**

**Taxes & Smuggling - Prelude to Revolution: Crash Course US History #6**
- A Crash Course video covering the factors leading up the the American Revolution
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eytc9ZaNWyc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eytc9ZaNWyc)

**The Constitution, the Articles, and Federalism: Crash Course US History #8**
- A Crash Course video covering the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bO7FQsCcbD8&t=58s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bO7FQsCcbD8&t=58s)

**Schoolhouse Rock - No More Kings**
- A Schoolhouse Rock video covering the Boston Tea Party and the American struggle for independence
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-9pDZMRCpQ&t=3s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-9pDZMRCpQ&t=3s)

**Lesson Glossary**

**Boston Massacre**: an incident on March 5, 1770, in which British Army soldiers shot into a crowd and killed several people

**Boston Tea Party**: an incident in December 1773, in which a group of Boston men threw tea into the Boston Harbor to protest British policies

**Coercive Acts**: acts that virtually abolished town meetings in Massachusetts and otherwise interfered with the colony’s ability to govern itself

**direct taxes**: taxes imposed on individuals instead of on transactions

**League of Friendship**: loose confederation of the states under the Articles of Confederation

**Proclamation of 1763**: British proclamation which forbade the colonists to purchase land or settle west of the Appalachian Mountains

**Shays' Rebellion**: a revolt by angry farmers in Massachusetts, which symbolized the chaos in the country in the 1780s under the Articles of Confederation

**Stamp Act**: British tax act that required that almost all paper goods such as diplomas, land deeds, contracts, and newspapers have revenue stamps placed on them
**Townshend Acts**: British tax acts that imposed taxes on many everyday objects such as glass, tea, and paint

**virtual representation**: representatives elected by those who can vote who make laws on behalf of those who cannot vote

**Check Your Knowledge**

1. Virtual representation in the British legislature was for those who were not allowed to vote for their own representatives in Parliament.
   - A. True
   - B. False

2. The Townshend Acts imposed taxes on everyday objects such as glass, tea, and paint.
   - A. True
   - B. False

3. The Declaration of Independence was created during...
   - A. the First Continental Congress
   - B. the Second Continental Congress
   - C. the Third Continental Congress
   - D. the establishment of the government


**Citations**

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