Chapter 7: The American Revolution, 1776–1786

Chapter Review

I. AMERICAN COMMUNITIES A National Community Evolves at Valley Forge

Around 11,000 men (including 1,000 African Americans) gathered in Valley Forge, drawn from all parts of the country. Also, 700 women were present. Amid the suffering from wintry weather and want fostered by greed, men from hundreds of localities found a common identity and created a “band of brotherhood” among themselves. Leaving Valley Forge six months later, Washington commanded a much stronger and united army. The struggle helped to create a national community that served as a popular democratic force, counterbalancing the conservatism of America’s elite leadership.

II. THE WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE

With vastly greater resources, British leaders expected easy victory, but found that military might was not enough to defeat the Americans, whose cause had wide popular support and who were fighting on their own, vast thinly settled ground.

a. The Patriot Forces

More than half of 350,000 fighting American men served, half in militia forces, the rest in the Continental Army. Militias were ineffective due to short terms and high desertion rates, leading Congress to expand the Continental Army, which was eventually an effective fighting force as well as a force for nationalism. Colonial social patterns were reflected in the army, with the elite dominating the officer corps and most enlisted men coming from the margins. Slaves and free blacks were recruited only reluctantly and mainly in the North; in the South, Lord Dunmore’s offer of freedom to blacks fighting for the crown only highlighted white fears of rebellion.

MHL document: Proclamation of Lord Dunmore (1775) at www.myhistorylab.com

b. The Toll of War

Although white American males preferred to serve in local militia companies, victory required a disciplined force able to stand up to the brutal assaults of the professionally trained British. Regiments of the Continental Army suffered casualty rates as high as 40 percent and over 25,000 died from wounds or disease compared to 10,000 British casualties. While there were few civilian casualties in the North and middle states, many noncombatants suffered in the South and backcountry.

MHL document: Letter from a Revolutionary War Soldier (1776) at www.myhistorylab.com

c. The Loyalists
Between a fifth and a third of the population remained loyal to the Crown, including African Americans, Indians, ethnic or religious minorities, and tenant farmers. Patriots cracked down on Loyalists whom they derisively called Tories, but as many as 50,000 fought for the king. Patriots passed treason laws and confiscated Tory property and mob violence persuaded many Tories to join the British Army or Loyalist militias. As many as 80,000 left America after the war, mainly going to Canada along with 4,000 former slaves. Many were reluctant exiles, although Benedict Arnold, the most notorious American traitor, was among them, settling in London.

d. Women and the War

As men marched off to war, women remained at home and ran the family farms and businesses. Many women eventually left their homes to join their men; several hundred women dressed as men and enlisted. While Mercy Otis Warren wrote satires in support of the Patriot cause, women such as “Molly Pitcher” and Deborah Sampson became folk heroes.

e. The Campaign for New York and New Jersey

British plans for 1776 called for attacks through New York and from Canada that would divide New England from the rest of the colonies. The British drove Washington out of New York City and pursued him as he fled into New Jersey. Washington’s victories at Trenton and Princeton salvaged morale, but he realized that he would have to avoid confrontations and pursue a defensive strategy to ensure survival of the Continental Army.

MHL map: The American Revolution at www.myhistorylab.com

f. The Northern Campaigns of 1777

In 1777 the British tried again to move inland and north through New York. Another large British force moved south from Canada, but Patriot militias harassed and then surrounded the British forces, forcing their surrender to the larger Continental army at Saratoga. American forces in Pennsylvania were less successful; having lost Philadelphia, Washington retreated to Valley Forge. Still, while the Americans could not defeat the British, neither could the British force the Americans to stop fighting and Congress, expelled from Philadelphia, continued to function.

g. A Global Conflict

The victory at Saratoga led to an alliance with France. By 1779 Holland and Spain joined the war. A wider war forced the British to withdraw troops from the mainland to protect their Caribbean colonies. Spanish forces seized Gulf Coast ports and ranged as far north as Michigan. Fear of the French navy and reinforcements to Washington’s Continentals persuaded Britain to evacuate Philadelphia. After several inconclusive battles and with French support, Washington settled into a defensive strategy to wear the British down. In the war at sea the French threatened British trade, while John Paul Jones, commanding a French ship, Bonhomme Richard, won fame in battle with the British Serapis.
h. Indian Peoples and the Revolution in the West

Although many Indians preferred a policy of neutrality, their fears of American expansion led many to side with Britain. In the West, Ohio Indians allied with the British and attacked American settlements. George Rogers Clark countered by capturing several British posts and American campaigns against the Iroquois and Cherokee destroyed villages and crops and weakened both nations. Civilians on the frontier continued to suffer from Indian raids; fighting in the West would continue unabated after the war.

i. The War in the South

By the late 1770s the British had shifted their focus to the South. Capturing Savannah in 1778 and Charleston in 1780, the British attempted to gain control over the rural South by implementing a policy of pacification. But their plundering produced angry support for the Patriots. Loyalist militias were defeated by Patriots at Kings Mountain and Cowpens. By 1781 Nathanael Greens’s Continentals and Patriot militias persuaded Cornwallis to return to Virginia seeking reinforcements, leaving the South in Patriot hands.

j. The Yorktown Surrender

In 1780 and 1781, 5,000 French under Rochambeau reinforced the Continentals, and Washington moved South to confront Cornwallis. After a French fleet denied them reinforcements, the British were trapped at Yorktown where Cornwallis surrendered on October 19, 1781. Although the British still controlled New York the war was going badly for them in Florida, the Caribbean, and Mediterranean, leading Lord North to resign and Prime Minister, forcing George III to sue for peace.

III. THE UNITED STATES IN CONGRESS ASSEMBLED

The Articles of Confederation created a loose union of autonomous states and granted limited central power to Congress. The weak Confederation was barely able to fight the war and win the peace.

a. The Articles of Confederation

Adopted by Congress in 1777, the Articles created a unicameral Congress with few powers and, most seriously, no power to tax. Disputes over Western land claims delayed ratification by all the states until 1781.

MHL document: The Articles of Confederation (1777) at www.myhistorylab.com
MHL map: Western Land Claims Ceded by the States at www.myhistorylab.com
MHL document: Congress Decides What to Do with the Western Lands (1785) at www.myhistorylab.com

b. Financing the War
Though benefiting from foreign subsidies, Congress financed the revolution mainly by issuing $200 million in paper currency, which when added to the $200 million issued by states led to runaway inflation. Secretary of Finance, Robert Morris, was able to meet interest payments on the debt only after founding the first private commercial bank in the United States, and issuing new currency.

c. Negotiating Independence

Peace negotiations began in 1782. Franklin, Jay, and Adams, fearful of French ambitions, negotiated a separate peace with Britain, leading to a series of treaties between Great Britain and the United States, France, and Spain. The United States gained independence, the promise of the withdrawal of British troops, land to the Mississippi River, and fishing rights, while promising fair treatment of Tories. While Spain regained Florida, France was forced to accept peace with no territorial concessions.

MHL map: *Territorial Claims in Eastern America after Treaty of Paris* at www.myhistorylab.com

d. The Crisis of Demobilization

Peace brought new problems. Congress had neither paid the soldiers nor delivered the officers their promised pensions and a meeting of veterans at Newburgh, New York, threatened a military coup. General Washington defused the situation; Congress paid bonuses to both officers and soldiers, and Washington, who might have become dictator, resigned his commission in December 1783, establishing military subordination to civilian authority.

e. The Problem of the West

Western land settlement raised new issues. Tens of thousands of Americans were rushing into the newly acquired Ohio River Valley. British and Spanish governments plotted to strengthen their territorial holdings and American negotiators were unable to negotiate settlements as regional interests undermined the national community. Treaties with Western Indians opening new lands for settlement were the result of intimidation and not negotiation. Three land ordinances, passed by Congress, provided for organizing Western land for settlement, self-government and eventual statehood while excluding slavery from the territory. Subsequent ordinances provided for the orderly division of land into townships, and regular land sales became a main source of revenue for cash-strapped Congress. Congress was showing an ability to deal with problems as well as organizing a national bureaucracy to govern more effectively.

**IV. REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS IN THE STATES**

Despite nationalist sentiment developed during the Revolution, most Americans’ first loyalty was to their states and local communities.

a. A New Democratic Ideology
Most states had greatly expanded the electorate, bringing rural and western farmers and middle-class artisans into legislatures. Since independence made the Tory political stance irrelevant, there was a shift to the left in politics. Many Americans accepted a new democratic ideology that asserted that governments should directly reflect popular wishes.

b. The First State Constitutions

The new state constitutions were shaped by the debates between radicals urging democracy and conservatives favoring balanced government. State constitutions fell in a range between liberal Pennsylvania and conservative Maryland but by 1780, 14 states—including Vermont—had adopted new constitutions.

c. Declarations of Rights

The Virginia Declaration of Rights became a model followed by other states, and proved a precursor to the U.S. Constitution’s Bill of Rights. Although provisions varied, all states provided some protections of the peoples’ rights in their constitutions.

d. The Spirit of Reform

New Jersey was alone in granting women the right to vote, a privilege withdrawn in 1807. The Revolution led to increased opportunities for women, though there were few legal sanctions for gender equality. Led by Thomas Jefferson, states abolished aristocratic inheritance customs like entail and primogeniture, and established religious freedom. Yet discussions of liberty raised issues many states were reluctant to confront; the Revolutionary generation was better at raising questions than answering them, leaving issues such as slavery for future resolution.

e. African Americans and the Revolution

The American victory elicited little celebration from African Americans. Thousands of African American refugees emigrated from the South at the end of the war—30,000 from Virginia alone. Many whites recognized the contradiction between a revolution for liberty and the continued support for slavery, but most went no further than Washington, who freed his slaves only in his will. Northern states began to abolish slavery; the Upper South relaxed its bans on emancipation. The result was the emergence of a free African American community with racially defined churches, schools, and other institutions. Several prominent Africa American writers—Benjamin Banneker and Phyllis Wheatley—also emerged.

MHL document: Phyllis Wheatley, On Being Brought from Africa to America at www.myhistorylab.com

V. CONCLUSION
Americans sought to resolve their conflicts by building a strong new national community, but important questions remained unanswered about the nation’s future.

Learning Objectives

Students should be able to answer the following questions after studying Chapter 7:

1. What were the major alignments and divisions among Americans during the American Revolution?
2. What were the major campaigns of the Revolution?
3. What role did the Articles of Confederation and the Confederation Congress play in the Revolution?
4. In what ways were the states the sites for significant political change?

Discussion Suggestions and Possible Answers

1. Assess the relative strengths of the Patriots and the Loyalists in the American Revolution.

   **Answer:** Although the American Patriots had broad support in the colonies, at least 20 percent of the population remained loyal to the British. The British Army was considered to be the best in the world; however, the colonial forces benefited from the vast expanse of the colonies and the local support of the population. Local militia harassed the British troops. Women also willingly took over responsibility for running the household as their husbands and sons fought for the revolutionary cause.

2. What roles did Indian peoples and African Americans play in the Revolution?

   **Answer:** Fearful of American expansion, most Indians sided with the British. Even those that preferred to stay neutral were frequently brought into the conflict and there were a number of important battles on the western frontier. African Americans fought on both sides during the war. Particularly after the British focused their efforts in the southern colonies, African Americans became key players in the war. British commanders promised freedom for all slaves who joined the British cause, and the plunder of slave property from Patriot owners heightened animosity among southern Patriots.

3. Describe the structure of the Articles of Confederation. What were its strengths and weaknesses?

   **Answer:** The Articles of Confederation created a loose union of states with very limited central authority. Key powers, such as taxation, were held by the states and laws required the assent of all 13 states to be passed. Although this plan was seen as avoiding the excesses of government that had driven them to independence, the Articles proved to be too weak to govern the newly independent nation.

4. How did the Revolution affect politics within the states?
Answer: Many state governments drastically expanded the number of people who could vote, adopting state constitutions that embraced the idea that government should be based upon the will of the people. States also adopted declarations of rights that would become the basis of the Bill of Rights.

5. What was the effect of the Revolution on African Americans?

Answer: African Americans benefited little from the revolution. Many whites recognized the contradiction between slavery and freedom, and northern states initiated plans of gradual emancipation while the Upper South relaxed laws against voluntary manumission. Those blacks that did win their freedom would form the nucleus of free black communities. In the Lower South, however, slavery remained strong.

Lecture Outline

American Communities: A National Community Evolves at Valley Forge

The War for Independence
  The Patriot Forces
  The Toll of War
  The Loyalists
  Women and the War
  The Campaign for New York and New Jersey
  The Northern Campaigns of 1777
  A Global Conflict
  Indian Peoples and the Revolution in the West
  The War in the South
  The Yorktown Surrender

The United States Congress Assembled
  The Articles of Confederation
  Financing the War
  Negotiating Independence
  The Crisis of Demobilization
  The Problem of the West

Revolutionary Politics in the States
  A New Democratic Ideology
  The First State Constitutions
  Declarations of Rights
  The Spirit of Reform
  African Americans and the Revolution
Resources (Web, Films/Video)

Web
Website that accompanies the PBS series Liberty: http://revolution.h-net.msu.edu/

Films/Video

Liberty: The American Revolution, Parts 3 through 6 from PBS provide good coverage of this material.

MY HISTORY LAB CONNECTIONS

Reinforce what you learned in this chapter by studying the many documents, images, maps, review tools, and videos available at www.myhistorylab.com.

Read and Review

Read the Documents
Proclamation of Lord Dunmore (1775)
Letter from a Revolutionary War Soldier (1776)
The Articles of Confederation (1777)
Congress Decides What to Do with the Western Lands (1785)

See the Maps
Revolutionary War: Northern Theater, 1775–1780
The American Revolution
Western Land Claims Ceded by the States
Territorial Claims in Eastern America after Treaty of Paris

Research and Explore

Read the Documents
Exploring America: Exploring the Geography of the American Revolution

Read the Biographies
Joseph Brant (Thayendanegea)
Mercy Otis Warren

History Bookshelf
Phyllis Wheatley, Religious and Moral Poems (1773)
Thomas Paine, Crisis Papers (1776)
**Critical Thinking Exercises**

Students could research and portray individuals from the Revolutionary era. The Revolutionary era figures could be asked to explain why they took the actions that they took. Major characters as well as anonymous members of occupational and ethnic groups could be selected. One student might be a Tory Scotch-Irish debtor from the backcountry of South Carolina. Another might be a slave from New York who enlisted in the New York City militia.