

For a century and a half, Britain and the North American colonies were as close as a mother country and her colonial offspring could be. What happened to alter that relationship and to create the conditions for the American Revolution? Perhaps the colonies outgrew childhood and wanted the independence that adults enjoy. Or perhaps the mother and her children suffered the type of communications breakdown so common among different generations.

Either way, the trouble between England and the colonies began with the experience of the French and Indian War. For one, the seven-year conflict caused American militiamen and British army regulars to come into contact for the first time in over a century. From divergent accents to substantially different emphases on deference and discipline, the American and English troops realized how much had changed in the New World. Moreover, the war left Britain with a tremendous debt. Why shouldn't the colonists pay some of that debt, since it had been their homes that had been protected against French incursion by the British army? To the colonists, the answer was simple: they shouldn't have to pay for it because they had no representation in the British Parliament, which levied the taxes for the colonists to pay.

In the colonial mind, to be subject to laws in which they had no voice amounted to tyranny. And tyranny was exactly what many colonists, or their parents or grandparents, had risked life and limb to escape. The colonists, even those who had not come from England, expected all the rights of Englishmen, and in particular they expected the freedom to govern themselves.

Underestimating this new colonial fixation on self-governance and still needing to make up for the shortfall in funds, Parliament tried to tax a number of imported goods, including sugar and tea. It tried to place a stamp tax on all printed documents in the colonies. And it began to enforce anti-smuggling rules that had been on the books for years but were honored in the breach.

To the surprise of the English, the colonists resisted these taxes and newly enforced laws with increasing vehemence. Eventually citizens of Boston emptied British tea into the harbor. Now angered by the insubordination of their wayward colonies, Britain responded with more oppressive acts directed specifically to isolate and punish the offending port of Boston. However, this decision only served to unite the colonies, and the First Continental Congress met in 1774 to draft a formal protest.

In 1775, Patrick Henry expressed the indignation of many who until this time had considered themselves British subjects. With his strident avowal of "Give me liberty or give me death!" Henry pleaded with colonists to place their loyalties and their lives on the line for liberty. Heeding Henry's call, the delegates to the Second Continental Congress declared the colonies' independence from England on July 4, 1776. By then, a number of colonists had already died for the patriotic cause at Lexington and Concord. With their sacrifice in mind, fifty-five men, representing the thirteen colonies, placed their signatures on the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson's immortal document and perhaps the first definition of a uniquely American freedom.

In signing, they risked not only their fortunes but their lives. Never before had colonies thrown off the rule of a mother country, particularly one as powerful as England. Yet, despite the danger, Thomas Paine expressed the spirit of optimism that infused the American Revolution: "We have it in our power to begin the world again."