American History

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Introduction

A conflict that began as a minor rebellion but ended as a war of secession from empire by thirteen of twenty-six of Britain's North American and Caribbean colonies. (Upper Canada, Newfoundland, and Nova Scotia remained loyal, as did all British colonies of the West Indies; Lower Canada was effectively occupied.) The colonists rebelled for many reasons, among which were efforts to secure greater economic freedom from England's mercantilist policies; a desire for enhanced but still limited self-government, which rapidly evolved into demands for full political independence from the crown; a movement to preserve traditional colonial liberties against more direct imperial administration; and population pressures that fed into the powerful desire by new settlers to expand into historic Indian lands in New York and Ohio, then forbidden to white settlement by Indian treaties and alliances with England.

Discussion

The rebellion grew out of the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), which, in the Treaty of Paris (1763), removed the French threat from North America, thereby reducing colonist need for British military protection. That change also gave rise to demands for Britain to lift old restrictions on further expansion into the vast interior of North America, then still in Indian lands. Imperial policy saw the colonies in larger terms of global empire: London sought an orderly frontier and an end to its American wars and thus continued to deny western expansion to the colonists, knowing full well that further settlement would bring war with frontier Indian nations. In 1763 an order was issued forbidding settlers to cross the Appalachian divide, beyond which the land was to remain in Indian hands. London's

alliances with, and perceived protection of, the Iroquois and other Indian interests chafed among the settlers as much as, or even more than, the presence of British garrisons and tax collectors (Morris, 2009).

On the other hand, the victory over France encouraged Lord North's (1732–1779) government to enforce duties on American exports it had long neglected, in order to make the colonies pay for the British garrisons that protected them. Although from the American point of view these taxes appeared onerous and the garrisons were burdensome, in fact the average Briton (also subjects of a unitary empire) paid 25 times as much in tax as the average colonist, whose imperial load amounted to about $1.20 per year. That was a fair bargain, in London's view, for having seen off the French and for securing the frontier. Finally, the irritant of the Navigation Acts was constant and deep (Alden, 2005).

Fighting broke out with the "shot heard around the world" at Lexington and Concord (April 19, 1775) in Massachusetts, a year before the formal Declaration of Independence by the thirteen colonies (July 4, 1776). Thereafter, the principal contribution made by George Washington and the Continental Army and militia was to survive, and thereby to sustain the rebellion until Europe's other major powers intervened diplomatically and militarily, for their own reasons, against England. And that is just what happened: defeat of the British under John Burgoyne (1723–1792) at Saratoga (October 17, 1777) was not a decisive military affair in itself, but it permitted Britain's more powerful enemies to recognize the "United States" and join the war (Bemis, 2008).

The most decisive battles thus actually took place on the high seas, after France and the Netherlands declared war on Britain in 1778 and 1780, respectively, and these powers brought to bear combined navies capable of threatening British commercial and strategic interests more vital than retention of the American colonies. Capping this effort was a major

victory on land, over a British army under Charles Cornwallis (1738–1805) at Yorktown (October 19, 1781).

That said, it was unlikely that Britain could have won after 1780 even had the colonists received minimal or no foreign support: London's supply lines were stretched over 3,000 miles of ocean, while the United States was just too large to effectively occupy with an eighteenth century army. After all, it had taken 50,000 troops and many units of American militia to defeat the French in Canada in the 1750s. Once England also faced major hostilities in Europe, the outcome of American independence was ordained. That is why London agreed to the Treaty of Paris (1783) on terms far more favorable to the colonists than American arms alone had won in the field or at sea (Higginbotham, 2004).

As a result of the war, the British Empire granted independence to the 13 colonies, and additionally lost to America's allies Florida, Louisiana (east of the Mississippi), Tobago, Minorca, and Senegal (Dakar), though it remained a power in the Americas through retention of the several Canadian colonies and Newfoundland and its most valuable colonies in the Caribbean. It is noteworthy that about one-third of the American population rejected separation from the crown and remained loyal to Britain. Most left, returning to England, resettling in the Caribbean, or moving (many were forcibly expelled) as United Empire Loyalists to Upper Canada and Nova Scotia, where their descendants harbored anti-Yankee sentiments for many decades (Morris, 2009).

Conclusion

The new republic treated the old Iroquois Confederacy including its own Oneida and Tuscarora's allies as defeated allies of the British, seized Indian lands, and drove most Iroquois into Canadian exile. Despite its complex of local and geopolitical origins, the American Revolution was also the first modern, political war: a conflict over fundamental

ideas about governance. Rooted in the Enlightenment, it introduced into the real world the notion of mass democracy (which only evolved slowly in America itself after 1783), an idea that agitated the French next, and much of the world over the following centuries.

References

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