

# Causes of the american revolution

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



## American Revolutionary War

What caused the American Revolution?

The American Revolution was motivated by many different reasons. The citizens living in the American colonies at the time were driven by many factors that led them to declare independence from Great Britain. Some of these factors include social, cultural, economic, and political issues, among others. However, the main cause for the American Revolution that is taught over and over in history classes in the modern day is that the colonies did not accept Great Britain's tyrannical rule and wanted independence from the British empire in order to govern themselves. While this is true, a mix of other internal and external problems influenced the war and the outcome of it. Two historians that have studied the American Revolution extensively are Bernard Bailyn and Ben Baack, and they have studied the war from an economic and political standpoint. There are many viewpoints of how and why the American Revolution was caused, but the economic and political perspectives of this particular war are not commonly studied, although they were two of the most important factors. These two opposing viewpoints have similarities in addition to their differences, but overall the most important factor concerning the American Revolutionary War was the economic restrictions Great Britain placed on the American colonies.

There are many opposing views of the causation of the American Revolutionary War. Most commonly, it is known as the war between Great Britain and the American colonies over the colonies' desire for independence from Great Britain's rule. There are various theories about the causes and

effects of the American Revolutionary War over different periods all throughout history. The best known theory about the cause of the war is that after a long period of salutary neglect, in which trade regulations for the colonies were loosely enforced and British supervision of internal colonial affairs was restricted (Wallenfeldt, Salutary Neglect), the American colonies then rejected the British government's attempts to assert greater control over colonial affairs at a later time. The British government's attempts at control were basically imposing strict and harsh taxes on the colonies.

The British Parliament continued to impose new laws and taxes on the American colonists in order to finance the heavy costs of war against other foreign countries. For example, in 1764, the British government imposed the Sugar Act, which increased the tax on sugar and other imported goods such as textiles, coffee, wine, and dyes. In 1765, the Stamp Act was the first direct tax on the American colonies: all printed materials were to be taxed including newspapers, pamphlets, bills, legal documents, licenses, almanacs, dice, and playing cards. These two acts were met with the greatest amount of resistance by the American colonists.

Bernard Bailyn is a Harvard University professor, and he has taught there since 1949. He has written many books about the American Revolution and the time period surrounding the war. Bailyn's writing has changed the way early American history has been perceived as well as emphasizing the influence of ideology and radical republican ideals on the Americans that led the Revolutionary War. He argued that British Whig ideologies had a large impact on the thinking of the leaders of the American Revolution and

the colonists strongly believed in liberty and freedom, and independence from a tyrannical government.

In 1967, Bernard Bailyn wrote *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, which was a study of the American political pamphlets and their creators during the Revolutionary time period. According to Bailyn, radical ideas about power, liberty, and fears of conspiracy by the British government to take over the colonies' freedom completely propelled the American colonies into the Revolution to gain their freedom. Bailyn's analysis concluded that the American patriots very strongly believed that the British monarchy was in fact a tyranny - the colonists had no say in how they were governed - and that they intended to take away their freedom. A central belief of the American patriots was that republicanism and liberty were not used as propaganda, but were rather real ideas that most, if not all, colonists believed in.

American colonists wanted to be able to make their own choices rather than have the British monarchy impose strict laws on them and in turn eventually lose control over their government, which they had created in the British empire's period of neglect. In this case, resistance was necessary and vital in order to secure the safety and well being of the American colonies, their freedom, and the people living there. Then, Bailyn went on to discredit Charles A. Beard's theory that the American Revolution was, in reality, a war between the social classes living in the colonies and that liberty meant nothing to the revolutionaries. In fact, these radical new ideas actually meant everything to the revolutionaries.

Bernard Bailyn also had very specific historical views. He believes that the revolutionary ideas of the American patriots were an extension of the British Whig theories from the 17th and 18th centuries. These theories focused on the protection of individual rights from a tyrannical government, such as how Great Britain was towards the American colonies. British Whig ideology was developed through many pieces of writing by various authors such as John Locke, John Trenchard, and Thomas Gordon, in addition to other members of the Whig party such as William Atwood, Robert Ferguson, and Henry Hallam. These pieces of writing about old British Whig ideology showed that ideas such as virtue, sovereignty in the people, and separation of power were also paralleled in the American Revolution (Nam, The Whig Ideology's Influence on American Politics).

The British Whig party believed that the best solution to keep a large government in check was to create a contract between the government and the people being governed in order for the state to become overall more democratic. According to these ideologies, the people being governed have to be able to find it in their best interest to sacrifice some of their individual freedoms in order for the government to secure their well-beings, which is still a theory believed in the modern day (Nam, The Whig Ideology's Influence on American Politics). As a matter of fact, the new government the American colonists set up for themselves after breaking away from the British empire was a true reflection of the influence these British Whig ideologies had over the American colonists.

*The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* showed how the American Revolution developed from British Whig ideology rather than the colonies' extensive isolation from England. The ideology of republicanism, which is defined as the ideology that is embraced by members of a republic, which is a form of representational government in which leaders are elected for a specific period by the preponderance of the citizenry, and laws are passed by these leaders for the benefit of the entire republic, rather than select members of a ruling class, or aristocracy (Marcus Hawkins, A Definition of Republicanism), was influenced by the ideas of civic virtue, corruption, "given" rights, and fear of large governmental power. Bailyn also demonstrates non-acceptance of previous accepted views about the American revolutionaries in his work. These previous views include the progressive view, that the revolutionaries acted from self-interest, and the conservative view, that the revolutionaries wanted to keep the social classes the same. Bailyn believes that the American Revolution leaders were political visionaries due to their radical beliefs about government and freedom.

The Revolution itself was driven by a "transforming libertarian radicalism", in Bailyn's own words. American political culture was influenced by the themes of 18th century radical libertarianism. The American colonists believed that power, such as in the form of the government, was an evil necessity that needed to be controlled, limited, and restricted because it was corrupting to men (Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*). Bernard Bailyn stated that "Written constitutions, the separation of powers; bill of rights, limitations on executives, on legislatures, and courts, restrictions on the right to coerce and wage war - all express the

profound distrust of power that lies at the ideological heart of the American Revolution...". In summary, the American Revolution was propelled and motivated by the American revolutionaries' deep distrust in the British monarchy and government and the fear that the British Parliament would take away the colonists' individual rights based off of old British Whig ideologies, according to Bernard Bailyn's political perspective on the American Revolution.

The second historian that had an economic viewpoint on the American Revolutionary War is Ben Baack, who is a professor at Ohio State University. He wrote the *Essay on the Economics of the American Revolution*. This sort of viewpoint of the American Revolution analyzes the war and its causes based on the economic standards in the world at the time. One economic viewpoint that Baack believes is that the colonies were pulled into a revolution due to the economic challenges they faced from the British government. Due to the colonies being a part of the British empire, they were protected from foreign invasion by the British military and in return were asked to follow regulations for foreign trade (Baack, *The Economics of the American Revolutionary War*). Once economic policies surrounding taxation came into play, the British government faced heavy backlash from the American colonists due to the economic losses they suffered as a result of these new changes.

There were two large, fundamental changes in British economic policies that lead to problems between the British government and the American colonists. The first change was about Western land. The Proclamation of

1763 and the Quebec Act of 1774 proclaimed that colonists could not settle in the isolated land between the Allegheny Mountains and the Mississippi River or trade with the Native Americans without the expressed, written permission from the British government. These new laws led to individuals, colonies, and land companies losing claims on that land, which led to a loss of revenue (Baack, *The Economics of the American Revolutionary War*). The policy was enforced to maintain the British government's control over the Western fur trade by restricting settlement areas of the colonists in the areas where the fur came from. In turn, the American colonists lost opportunities to expand their land and chances to earn more money, which infuriated them as the point of this law was to ensure that the British government would be able to keep all the revenue generated from that land.

The second change the British government imposed on the American colonists was taxation. A British victory after their war with France led to an incredibly high cost, and the government debt doubled. The British Parliament had previously placed a standing army in North America to enforce the Western land policies they had forced on the American colonists. The British government decided that because the colonies were a part of the British empire and domestic taxes in England were already very high, the American colonies should share in the debt of their government.

Due to the British government's belief about the American colonies being a part of their empire, they passed a series of tax acts on the colonies. The Sugar Act of 1764, among others, were very unpopular. Some of the most unpopular tax acts were the Stamp Act of 1765, which required stamps for a



large range of documents and other goods, was commonly imposed in England. The Quartering Act of 1765 required the American colonists to house members of the British military in their own homes and provide food and transportation for them without being compensated. The Townshend Acts of 1767 imposed taxes on imported goods and a board was put in place by the British government in order to collect the revenue generated. These tax acts were expected to gather enough money to finance the standing army in the American colonies but was less than the tax on the people in England (Baack, *The Economics of the American Revolutionary War*).

However, the American colonists were still outraged and felt that the British government was being unfair and tyrannical towards them. These tax acts led to the development of the idea of taxation without representation. The American colonists believed that they should have a say in what taxes should have been enforced and wanted representation in their government overseas.

The outrage of the American colonists led to them organizing economic boycotts. The revolutionaries discovered that economic boycotts were increasingly more effective than petition and lobbying boycotts, which were more peaceful forms of protest. A petition boycott was when a large amount of citizens signed a paper calling for reform and a lobbying boycott was the citizens directly asking Parliament for a change. Representatives from nine colonies met at the Stamp Act Congress in New York in 1765 and organized a mass boycott against imported British goods. Due to the shocking success of these boycotts, American merchants petitioned the British Parliament to repeal the tax acts. In 1766 the British government decided to repeal the

Sugar and Stamp Acts, then later on in 1770 repealed all of the Townshend Acts except for the tax on tea, and also did not re-enact the Quartering Act. In order to cement their control and power over the American colonies, British Parliament passed the Declaratory Act of 1766, which stated that the British Parliament had the full power and authority over the American colonies to make whatever laws they thought were necessary, including laws about taxation (Baack, *The Economics of the American Revolutionary War*).

However, even with the British repeals on the tax acts, the American colonists rebelled against the monarchy. The Tea Act of 1773 allowed the East India Tea Company to ship tea to America, causing American merchants to lose potential profits. A small group of American revolutionaries in Boston illegally boarded British ships and dumped out all of their tea in the harbor, which became known in history as the Boston Tea Party. The British Parliament became angry when they received word of the colonists' actions and would not tolerate that kind of behavior from their subjects under any kind of circumstance, so they decided to pass the Intolerable Acts. On September 5th, 1774, the first Continental Congress was held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and was attended by delegates, or representatives, from the colonies. The American colonists believed that the British government was continuing to take away their power due to the fact that the British monarchy was a tyranny and therefore decided to do something about it. At the Continental Congress, the delegates organized an embargo of trade with Great Britain. The delegates also decided that if Parliament did not repeal their acts, they would meet again in May of 1775 for the Second Continental Congress. In response, the British Parliament

decided to use their military as a show of force against the American colonies. In April of 1775, there was a military confrontation at Lexington and Concord between the colonists and the British military, and the Revolutionary War began (Baack, *The Economics of the American Revolutionary War*).

The delegates met within a month of this issue and resolved on a few important topics. First, they created a Continental army to protect the American colonies, and bought weapons and ammunition for the soldiers. Second, they created a Continental currency as a new monetary value for the colonies. Thirdly, they decided to allow the Continental army to raid Canada. The British Parliament was shocked at what the American colonists were doing, so the King of England told the British Parliament that the colonists formed their own government and wanted their independence from the British empire although the colonies had not formally announced it yet (Baack, *The Economics of the American Revolutionary War*).

Baack believes that there were major economic incentives for the American colonists. Avoidance of taxes from Great Britain was not a major economic incentive for independence. The taxes on the American colonists were somewhat reasonable, even though the American revolutionaries did not see it that way. The incentive might have been in the form of the rejection of British control over colonial trade (Baack, *The Economics of the American Revolutionary War*). The American colonists viewed British regulations over international trade poorly because they believed that the British government was trying to restrict their income and take the colonies' profits for their own

country overseas. Once these regulations were gone, American merchants were free to trade with the world and gain profits unrestricted, which was a major benefit to the colonies.

In his essay, Baack cites a man he refers to as "Thomas". Thomas used a counterfactual analysis to find out how the American economy would have looked like if there had been no Navigation Acts. He compared American trade under the Navigation Acts to what would have happened if the colonies had been independent after the Seven Years War. Then, he calculated the loss of consumer and producer surplus to America of goods had been shipped indirectly through England. However, he was slightly wrong based on his estimated value of British protection and bounties given to the colonies. The outcome of this analysis is that Thomas concluded that the Acts passed by the British government were a net burden of less than one percent of colonial per capita income (Baack, *The Economics of the American Revolutionary War*). He also concluded that these acts were not the direct cause of the Revolution, which were consistent with the findings of the First Continental Congress.

Other economic historians believe that the colonists cared more about the future economic costs due to their status under the British empire, such as higher taxes and restrictions on world trade further down the line. The Declaratory Act, as mentioned beforehand, showed the American colonies that the British Parliament did not want to give up their rights to tax the colonists. Colonists had protested up until 1775 using petitions, lobbying, boycotts, and even violence in order to make a change in their government

but felt like they had made no progress in Parliament, and things would not ever change. They had no representation in Parliament and the slogan “no taxation without representation” became a major propaganda line for the revolutionary cause. Baack stated that “...the economic incentive for independence would have been avoiding the potential future costs of remaining in the British empire (Baack, *The Economics of the American Revolutionary War*).”

The political, social, and cultural standpoints on the American Revolutionary War were all central to the main ideas behind the separation of the colonies from Great Britain, but the most important factor was economics.

Unrestricted trade and profits, no more harsh taxes, as well as the benefit of ruling themselves and deciding upon their own economy was incredibly appealing to the American patriots. It did not make sense for the colonies to finance Britain's reconstruction and economy after a war they had no part in, although they were technically part of the British empire. The American colonists began forming their own identity after a long period of salutary neglect from the British government, and when the British government started to impose on their newfound freedom, the American revolutionaries resisted. Declaring independence from the tyrannical British government had major economic incentives for the American colonies that could not be ignored any longer.

Although Bernard Bailyn and Ben Baack both studied the American Revolution extensively, they both have different viewpoints on how and why the American Revolutionary War was caused. Bailyn believes that the

American revolutionaries were propelled by the political tension between Great Britain and the American colonies while Baack believes that they were motivated by the world's economic factors at the time. However, they do share similarities in their perspectives. Both historians believe that the American colonies had a deep distrust in the British government, albeit for political or economic reasons. Their hatred of their government was a huge reason in why the war was caused, but the question of what was the most driving factor that prompted the revolutionary war remains. The American colonies hated the laws that the British government forced on them, such as not allowing them to settle on new land. But one thing the Americans hated more than the land laws were the laws about taxes and money. The American colonies felt detached and distant from the British empire and did not feel the need to support them after they had been ignored by British Parliament for so long. The economic reasons and incentives outweighed any other reason for the revolutionaries to start a war between America and Great Britain because they wanted their money to support America and its people, not some far off country they did not care about whatsoever.

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