

The Unification of the Thirteen Colonies Prior to the Revolutionary War

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The American Revolution came in 1776 as a result of the unity of the thirteen colonies which had been growing since the mid-eighteenth century. Soon after the colonies were established and confronted with war, Britain's mercantilist policies forced them to realize that they were not free but still ruled by a greater being, Great Britain. From thence forward, they constantly had to join together to ward off Britain's authoritative policies and try to maintain some of the freedom that they had anticipated when coming to the New World. Some events that caused the colonies to unite were the French and Indian War (Albany Plan of Union), Britain's passing of taxes to gain wealth, and the Enlightenment. In response to some of these actions by Britain, the colonies formed Committees of Correspondence, the First and Second Continental Congresses, and the Declaration of Independence which was the culmination of all of these things. Many writers, political leaders, and scholars of the time also emphasized the need for the colonies to come together as Britain continued to infringe upon their rights. Without these events and the reactions they brought about from the colonies, colonial unification would never have occurred and the colonies would not have gained the independence that they rightfully deserved.

Prior to King William's War, Queen Anne's War, King George's War, and the French and Indian War, Great Britain instituted a policy of salutary neglect in its' colonies. Britain did not enforce its' navigation laws that controlled trade and left the colonies to do as they pleased. They traded with whomever they wanted, could practice whatever religion they wanted, and they could live the way that they wanted without being under the control of English government as they were back in England. One example of this freedom was the Albany Plan of Union in which delegates from seven of the colonies developed an intercolonial government, a system for recruiting an army, and a process for collecting taxes from the colonies for defense purposes. "It is proposed that humble application be made for an act of Parliament of Great Britain, by virtue of which one general government may be formed in America, including all the said colonies...."

(excerpt from Albany Plan of Union) While this plan was not successful among the colonists, it was the first step towards unifying the colonies and getting them to come together for the common good.

Another way in which the colonies increased their unity was in the fighting of the four wars. The colonies were proud that they could come together for a common goal and that they could provide for their own defense, while the British saw their performance in the war as meager. The British thought that the colonies were unable to defend themselves and needed British troops to protect them, thus beginning the gradual confiscation of the colonies' freedom by the British. After the wars, Great Britain was in dire need of money to refurbish the government and the military. To compensate for this need, Britain decided to change its' policies towards the colonies. Parliament and King George decided that through the American colonies, they would solve their financial problems. In response to the measures to come, the colonies were forced to join together to protect their freedom and their rights as English citizens.

The first action by Great Britain that brought about resistance from the colonies was the Proclamation of 1763, which prohibited the colonists from settling west of the Appalachian Mountains. This policy came about after Pontiac's Rebellion when Chief Pontiac led an attack on colonial settlements in the west. Britain sent its' troops because they felt that colonial forces could not deal with the rebellion on their own. Britain hoped with the passing of the proclamation that they could prevent these rebellions and the hostilities between the Native Americans and the colonists. The colonists were angered because they had hoped to have access to the west after the victory in the French and Indian War. Many people, disobeying the proclamation, joined together and moved beyond the British boundaries.

Soon after the Proclamation of 1763, Britain passed a series of taxes to raise money for the government. The first of these was the Sugar Act which placed a revenue on foreign sugar and other luxuries. The second was the Quartering Act which forced the

colonists to house, feed, and provide clothing and supplies for the British soldiers. The last was the Stamp Act, which caused the most dissent. It required that stamps were placed on all printed paper in the colonies. It was the first tax in which people that used the goods were taxed rather than just merchants. In protest to this, the colonies joined together and formed the Stamp Act Congress which met in 1765. They decided that only their own elected representatives could impose taxes on the colonies. Other organizations that formed to protest the acts were the Sons and Daughters of Liberty which were organized to torment tax agents. They sometimes tarred and feathered revenue officials and destroyed revenue stamps. However, the most popular response to these taxes was the boycotting of British imports. With Britain reliant on the colonists' purchasing of its' goods, and the colonies not buying them, a lot of pressure was put on the prime minister and Parliament to reverse the acts. The Stamp Act was repealed but was replaced by the Declaratory Act which asserted that Parliament had the right to tax and impose laws "in all cases whatsoever." While some of these organizations may not have handled the situation constructively, the fact that the colonies were uniting for a common cause and were able to cause good things to happen by uniting, was significant to future events.

The next taxes to be adopted by the British were the Townshend Acts, which placed taxes on colonial imports of tea, glass, and paper. The revenue was used to pay crown officials in the colonies, positions that were originally paid for by colonial assemblies. At first, the Townshend Acts did not evoke much protest. Eventually, John Dickinson, a colonial leader from Pennsylvania, wrote *Letters From a Farmer in Pennsylvania* which said that Parliament did have the right to control commerce in the colonies but could not do so without colonial representation in Parliament or consent from colonial assemblies. This aroused a whole new protest in the colonies and more groups formed to protest this new injustice referred to as taxation without representation. The new prime minister convinced Parliament to repeal these acts but to maintain the tax

on tea which would become important in years to come. Another major event that influenced many people in the colonies that the power that Great Britain exercised over the colonies was wrong and unlawful was the Enlightenment. Leaders of this movement placed emphasis on human reason saying that reason could solve all of humanity's problems. John Locke, an English philosopher in his *Concerning Civil Government*, said "The natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but to have only the law of nature for his rule." His political reasoning led many people towards developing a nation free from the restraint and power of Great Britain.

In the next few years, outright colonial dissent was kept to a minimum. However, the colonies continued to unify and make the idea that the British officials were conspiring against them widely known. Committees of Correspondence were formed by Samuel Adams throughout the colonies in 1772. They exchanged information about Britain's activities. This was greatly important in unifying the colonies because it created a system of communication throughout. Also, it went a step further with the Virginia House of Burgesses organizing intercolonial committees in 1773. These committees were formed to increase communication between the colonies and to provide organization, structure, and unification among them.

The Committees of Correspondence eventually organized the Boston Tea Party in 1773 which caused Great Britain to impose a series of acts that greatly angered the colonies and made them lean more towards Revolution. The Coercive and Quebec Acts, otherwise known as the Intolerable Acts, were passed soon after the Tea Party in 1774. The Coercive Acts were aimed at punishing the people of Boston and Massachusetts, closing Boston's port until the destroyed tea was paid for, reducing the power of the Massachusetts legislature, allowing royal officials accused of crimes to be tried in England rather than the colonies, and expanding the Quartering Act. The Quebec Act organized Canadian lands gained from France with no representative government. While

it didn't directly affect the colonies, it angered them because they feared that the British were going to take away their representative government next. These acts caused the first step towards the decision of the colonies to work for independence.

In response to the Intolerable Acts, the colonies (except for Georgia) joined together in Philadelphia in 1774 to discuss how they should react to these threats to their liberty. This conference became known as the First Continental Congress. At this point, the colonies just wanted to maintain the relations with Great Britain that they had prior to the French and Indian War and to protest the infringements on their rights. The Congress addressed the concerns of the colonists with the Declaration of Rights and Grievances which petitioned the king to restore colonial rights and take into consideration their grievances. It also created the Suffolk Resolves which called for the repeal of the Intolerable Acts and urged the colonies to prepare an army and boycott British goods.

“The good people of the several colonies (all colonies except Georgia)...justly alarmed at these arbitrary proceedings of Parliament and administration, have severally elected, constituted, appointed, deputies to meet, and sit in general Congress, in the city of Philadelphia, in order to obtain such establishment, as that their religion, laws, and liberties may not be subverted.” (from First Continental Congress) This was the first attempt of the colonies to organize a unified movement among all of the colonies and prepare a universal army.

The king discarded the Declaration and declared Massachusetts in a state of rebellion. Soon after the fighting began, the colonies once again sent delegates to Philadelphia for the Second Continental Congress in 1775 which appointed the commander in chief and established a Massachusetts militia and volunteer units from other colonies. The colonies now officially realized the need to join together to protect their members and their people. A pamphlet written by Thomas Paine called *Common Sense* also recognized this need and called for the colonies to break political ties with Britain and to become independent states, “ Everything that is right or natural pleads for

separation. The blood of the slain, the weeping voice of nature cries, 'tis time to part." The Congress finally realized that reconciliation was not possible and the colonies must make the final steps towards independence. Patrick Henry expressed these views of the Congress in 1776 saying, "Give me liberty, or give me death." They also determined that complete colonial unification was necessary to complete their goal of creating an independent nation. Thus they declared their liberty and independence with the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. It was the result of two decades of Britain betraying the rights of its' loyal colonies and two decades of the colonies joining together to oppose it.

Unification of the colonies was what made them want to declare their independence. All of the events and reactions to the events caused the colonies to form an alliance which they used towards forming a nation free from the power of the British monarchy. They finally realized as a whole that independence was a sufficient reason to fight. Maybe it was fate as John Locke thought or maybe it was just the people leaning towards Thomas Paine's view that it was time for separation. But one thing was for sure, it never could have happened without the gradual unification of the colonies over the two decades prior to the Revolutionary War.

Bibliography

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