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Imperial Crisis

In 1754 several colonies met at Albany, New York to discuss the possibility of a formal union that would have created an executive and a council to deal with defense, Indian relations, trade and western settlement. These plans failed, the colonies were not prepared to unite. Within twenty years, they would reconsider and would even decide to overthrow the king!

We've already considered how the colonies developed and converged. The process of becoming more like each other politically, socially and economically, as well as the realization that they could never really be "English," set the stage for them to be positioned to act in concert. They now had shared values and would respond to threats in the same way.

British policies between 1763 and 1776 were the flame that lit the dynamite, and caused the colonists to reject their place in the Empire.

Market Changes

Even before the 1760s, in the 1730s and 1740s, changes in the market place began process by which colonial elites were increasingly isolated. It's no surprise that the John Hancock's, George Washington's, and Thomas Jefferson's in the colonies wondered if they would be better off as leaders of their own country.

What happened?

In the Northern colonies the old web or network of merchants was very much like a pyramid. Wealthy merchants sought to spread the risk of shipping goods in the triangle trade by involving those below them into the trade. That way they could pool capital and spread the risk among many people and several different ships. If something happened, no one was irreparably harmed. And everybody, even the lowest level merchants or small shopkeepers benefited. Of course, the lower level "owed" the elites for allowing them into the web. At election time, they knew who they depended on for their livelihood and who they had to defer to! Especially since most voting was public and by voice.

By the 1730s and 40s, as the American market grew, British merchants sought to increase their profits by reducing the costs. This required an elimination of all the levels, except for the lowest level of merchants who sold the goods. So, the British merchants and the lower merchants, eliminating the "middleman" as it were, cut the elites out.

In the Southern Colonies similar shifts occurred. In Virginia, for example, small farmers and planters depended on the large plantations to attract ships that would sail up rivers, like the Potomac and go to plantations, like Mt. Vernon, to

pick up the tobacco crop. A ship would journey for a small crop, but if a large planter could gather his, and all of his lesser neighbors tobacco into one large supply, the ship would travel and purchase the crop. The large planter, then, controlled the trade. When election time came, the local small farmers knew who to vote for, the large planter.

Again, in the 1730 and 40s, Scottish factors, basically merchants who opened local stores, began to infiltrate the South, and began to buy tobacco direct from the small farmers. The large planter was thus eliminated from the system!

So, American elites found themselves cut out from the mercantile system. They suspected that a conspiracy existed aimed at reducing their power in the colonies. In many instances, the smaller farmer and merchant benefited from the new economic relationship.

In 1760, King George III became the new monarch. George was the first Hanoverian (German) king to actually speak and act English. His predecessors had little interest in governing Great Britain, and left routine government to ministers. George III, on the other hand, wanted to participate. In this sense he seemed like a reformer intent on enforcing laws and regulations.

To the colonists, enforcing regulations, especially to end American smuggling, was unnecessary intervention.

One of George's problems was the war debt he inherited from the French and Indian War. English debt nearly doubled and enforcement of the Navigation Acts promised to bring in needed revenue.

George also wanted to avoid any further conflicts in British North America. He especially wanted to avoid another Indian war after Pontiac's Rebellion that would drive debt even higher.

In order to reduce frontier tension (remember Gov. Berkeley?) George III issued the Proclamation of 1763, which prohibited colonial settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains. He hoped to keep colonists from encroaching on native land. At the same time, George's minister, George Grenville believed that a force of 10,000 British soldiers should be kept in the Colonies to protect the settlers (or perhaps enforce the Proclamation line?). In order to offset the cost, Grenville wanted the colonists to pay for these troops, who were after all protecting them.

Grenville's two efforts, the Sugar Act (1764) and Stamp Act (1765), angered colonists. Even though the Sugar Act reduced tax rates (to make smuggling less likely) and the Stamp tax had been a fixture in England for years, the colonists opposed both. Through intimidation, every potential stamp collector was forced to resign before the act was even enacted.

In 1767, a new minister, Charles Townsend, passed a series of new acts, called the Townsend Acts.

Much of the debate over all these actions revolved around who had the ability to regulate trade, collect duties and tax. The colonists generally believed that Parliament could regulate trade but that their own colonial assemblies reserved the right to levy taxes. External duties (which were buried in the sale cost of items and were passed on to consumers) might be acceptable, but colonists viewed a direct internal tax on an item as “taxation without representation.”

Some colonists, especially Sam Adams’ Sons of Liberty, became more radical in their response to the English, while many others practiced “non-importation.” In other words, they boycotted English imports.

Though the taxation issue had inflamed people, other tension was present. The British soldiers who were to patrol the frontier often ended up in coastal urban areas, like Boston. Obviously, they were not protecting frontier settlers. When not on duty, many took second jobs as laborers to supplement their low army income. Colonists were thus deprived of these jobs, especially working class people. Street fights between off duty soldiers and colonial ruffians became more frequent.

Violence flared in Boston in March 1770. A group of soldiers guarding a customs house was threatened by a mob of colonists and fired, killing five of the crowd.

The soldiers were tried for murder and were defended by John Adams. Why would Adams defend them? He did believe they were entitled to a vigorous defense. Adams also wanted them acquitted and he believed that he was the only (best) lawyer that could. Why would he want them acquitted? The soldier’s conviction would demonstrate that there was justice within the empire, if Adams could get them off, this would raise a cry similar to, “no justice, no peace.” The colonists would realize that the system was against them and that the “murders” of colonists would not be punished. Indeed, only two of the soldiers received minor punishments.

After the Boston Massacre, there was a lull in activity for a few years. In 1773, however, the East India Company faced collapse due to a glut of tea, in part because the colonists bought tea illegally from the Dutch to avoid paying the British taxes. A new minister, Lord North, decided to LOWER the tax on tea and planned to sell the tea direct, cutting costs by cutting out the middlemen, and making the tea even cheaper.

Apparently, the colonists did not want cheap tea and to avoid it be auctioned, dressed as Native Americans and threw nearly 350 crates into Boston Harbor.

The British responded with Coercive acts (1774), also known as intolerable Acts. These were followed by the Quebec Act.

In September of 1774 the colonies sent delegates to the First Continental Congress. Their intent was not initially to rebel, but to seek redress. Events, by now moved quickly and when the British tried to arrest colonial leaders and seize a cache of arms a real shooting war began.

The Southern colonists had little involvement in many of the events occurring in Boston, but were increasingly sympathetic with New England during the late 1760s and early 1770s. When Virginia's last royal governor, Lord Dunsmore, issued an emancipation proclamation freeing those slaves that fought against the revolution and 2000 slaves accepted the offer, Southerners realized that they too faced British "tyranny."

American elites had decided to rebel. But they needed the common person to risk his or her life in the fight. How to persuade the average person that the benefits of independence were worth the risk of death? In the next lecture, we'll see that the ideology developed to justify revolt also addressed the benefits of independence.



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